

Quince's Questions and the Mystery of the Play Experience

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Dramatic semioticians are aware of the ripples they are causing in the classrooms and workshops across the country. Some kind of analytic tool has long been needed to enable us to talk about what an audience perceives on the stage, how it perceives it, and how the perception is translated into a conception. Though he would hate to be called a semiotician, John Russell Brown was right to emphasize years ago that a play-reader is a different animal from a playgoer and that his perceptions will therefore very likely be different. More recently, Patrice Pavis was right to remind us that the relationship between text and performance is not one of simple implication, but rather what he calls 'dialectical,' whereby the actor comments on and argues with the text (146); and some years ago I found myself suggesting that Shakespeare's text prompted a 'controlled freedom' of improvisation for his actor (Styan 199). In other fields, Keir Elam and others are right to find our ways of regarding the use of scene and costume, space and light, as too impressionistic: we need to know more of how these features are defined by conventional patterns, social behavior, or aesthetic rules.

Above all, it needs to be said how important it is to understand the theatre as a *process* of communication, one which insists that the audience makes its contribution to the creation of the play by its interpretation of the signs and signals from the stage, where everything seen and heard must acquire the strength of convention. Norman Rabkin, another Shakespearian, summed up the matter when he urged that we must learn to talk about 'the process of our involvement rather than our considered view after the aesthetic event' (27).

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The former emphasis of literary and dramatic criticism on what the words 'say' and not on how they say it has often rendered our thinking about plays and performances misleading or irrelevant, and those of us who determined to train our students to use their eyes and ears found ourselves improvising some kind of 'play computer' designed to help us to look in the right places. The right places were increasingly on the stage itself where textual signals were to be interpreted by the players, and in the auditorium where final responses to the play in performance could be found and examined. The problem was to do this without destroying the fabric of the play, without (to use Wordsworth's tidy phrase) being guilty of 'murdering to dissect.'

Nevertheless, while we assert the importance of understanding the process of drama and performance, some of the ripples we have caused are those of distrust. It would be dishonest of us not to acknowledge that there is a considerable concern with the speed with which semiotic analysis and performance theory is moving into the campuses of North America. At bottom, the question being asked is whether it is sensible to jettison fifty years of dramatic criticism, or what claimed to be dramatic criticism. At the very least, should the precious college years not be spent in reading and performing the plays themselves? The controversy is a little reminiscent of the time when the old 'new criticism' took hold in the 1940s and 1950s (and, incidentally, did so much harm to the study of drama and theatre, with which the new criticism could not cope). In my own university, students are conscious of a certain pressure to give time to semiotics lest they be left behind in the race, and complaints are being heard about intellectual blackmail.

This paper is first, therefore, a modest plea for us to respect our limitations. Like all the human sciences, economics, sociology, anthropology, history, linguistics, psychology, and no doubt other semi-sciences, semiotics must always fall short of its goals. In the case of a creative and performing art like drama, to try to reduce to rule an art form that is so unpredictable, always growing and changing, so infinitely variable, must be frustrated, especially when so few dare claim to be masters of the medium and its best products to begin with. It will never be easy to propose a theory about Shakespeare's signs and signals when we are still a long way from knowing what his plays are capable of. This must also be true of a less romantic playwright like Racine. The history of poetic criticism is strewn with the dead who have tried to number the streaks of Samuel Johnson's tulip (*Rasselas*, Book X).

I should spell this out more clearly, and perhaps we could agree to identify four pitfalls that await the novice semiotician of the drama and the theatre.

PITFALL I. SEMIOTICS MAY TRY TO MAKE A SCIENCE OF ART.

We are alerted to this by such devices as the numbering of paragraphs (as, 'Pitfall 1, Pitfall 2', etc.) and the listing of precedents in the best legal manner, as if what someone has said before somehow confirms what is being said now (a besetting sin among critics, one that I have already committed three or four times in this paper alone). Samuel Beckett saw the funny side of it when he had Lucky list his authorities in *Waiting for Godot*: Puncher and Wattmann, Testew and Cunard, Popov and Belcher. We do not blench at turning to

algebraic abstractions elements in the play that are themselves abstractions to begin with, creating only a shadow of a shadow, a skeleton of a skeleton. Some, like Wilfred Passow, find it the "duty" of theatre research "to try every conceivable approach to analyze presentation" (238). Others, like Patrice Pavis, are less sure: "Whatever the system of notation used, it is readily acknowledged that the notation of the performance simplifies it to the point of impoverishment" (111).

PITFALL 2. IT TENDS TO ABUSE LANGUAGE IN THE NAME OF COMMUNICATION.

I cannot be alone in finding that reading semiotics constitutes one of the most unhappy reading experiences we have. It is tempting to quote a few lines, but I deem this unnecessary. Whole paragraphs, whole pages build one abstraction upon another to add up to a rarer and rarer meaninglessness, the higher blather. Much of the time it is simply a case of bad writing, an insensitivity to language that ill becomes a dramatic critic. At its worst, it can be an academic smoke-screen thick with jargon and coinages. A word will be especially favored if it ends in *-ality* or *-icity*, like *theatrality* and *theatricity*, *corporality* and *motoricity*, *gesturality* and *iconicity*, *spatiality* and *facticity*. Whole dictionaries have been written to deal with the flood of new meanings. Each of us, of course, will have his own aversion: I have a personal dislike for *global* when 'everywhere' will serve, and for *didascalía* where we used to say 'stage directions.' Then, if there's no possibility of a word in English, we turn to the French, where, surprisingly, it is just as likely to be a coinage.

PITFALL 3. IT CAN EVADE THE EXPERIENCE OF DRAMA WHILE SEEMING TO CONFRONT IT.

It is possible to read many pages, even whole chapters and articles, which never mention a play or a player, a playwright or an artist, as if the actuality of drama and theatre, the actual business of performance, might at a touch destroy a house of cards. There is a kind of purity in this position, but in adopting such a distant manner, dramatic semiotics may well deny its own concern for the teaching, practice, and appreciation of the art of drama, encouraging its students to turn away from the stage. It has always been easier to talk about characters without mentioning players, and to discuss drama without acknowledging the theatre: such has been the practice in departments of literature for years. It would be a pity if departments of drama and theatre now fell into such an old trap. Keir Elam has lately pointed out that each theatrical signal "has (or supposedly has) an 'aesthetic' justification" (43) and it is still our duty to avoid a cop-out and discover what the signal contributes to the aesthetic experience.

PITFALL 4 (AND THE WORST). IT MAY PRESUPPOSE KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT IS AS YET UNKNOWN.

The fundamental business of getting to grips with a creative work has not necessarily been accomplished merely by assembling for analysis the signs and codes and systems that seem to be most appropriate to the case in hand. Such

a practice may leap over the unknowns of the great dramatic moments, perhaps the real source of a particular experience in the theatre, when it is these very unknowns that we essentially seek to know. Who can account for the pleasure we take in watching tragedy? Or explain Johnson's notion that if delusion be admitted, it can have no certain limitation? Or the phenomenon remarked by Jacques Copeau, that as soon as his stage filled with actors it disappeared? It may be that traditional Anglo-American pragmatism, with its deep distrust of the higher blather and its vague ideological approach to the arts, will still carry some validity. With all the notation in the world, our chief task remains as before: to assess how a play 'works' (one jargon word I'll allow).

As I was writing, I found myself concocting a devilish examination for those who would presume too far in offering to analyze what goes on in performance. The question might go like this:

Identify the signs, codify the elements of theatrical communication, and attempt a simple dramatological analysis of the following problems:

1. When Oedipus proposed marriage to Jocasta, a woman many years his senior, how did he not suspect that she might be his mother?
2. Identify the mixture of laughter and fear induced in the audience by the stage direction in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, "Exit pursued by a bear." Can a bear be tragicomic?
3. When the totally incompetent policeman Dogberry is put in charge of the apprehension and trial of the criminals in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, why does the audience feel reassured that their victim Hero will come to no possible harm?
4. How can we tolerate three acts of Norwegian rain as it falls on the melancholy scenes of Oswald's decline to imbecility in Ibsen's *Ghosts* without being told whether his mother gives him the poison or not?
5. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, how can we laugh uncontrollably at the appearance of Jack Worthing dressed in mourning for his brother?
6. Is it possible to explain why, in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, we deplore, rather than applaud, the sale of the orchard to Lopahin, when his wretched ancestors, as serfs, had given their blood for its survival?

These and a thousand other theatrical mysteries have one factor in common, one which haunts all performance theory: they all arise from the hardly explicable act of drama itself. They arise from the strange urge on the part of the actor and the spectator during performance to share an experience, and it is this bond between stage and audience that supplies the key to our interpretation of the text at the moment when it is transcended by performance. Now notions of the relationship between stage and audience go back to classical times. Certainly it was always in Shakespeare's mind that his audience should "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts," not only in *Henry V* but in every play he wrote, and notions of a 'theatre contract' attributed recently to Klaus Lazarowicz and others are to be found in some form or other in every major commentary that has offered a view of the phenomenon of drama.

In the English tradition, it is amusing to read how concerned was John Dryden in 1672:

to raise the imagination of the audience, and to persuade them, for the time, that what they behold in the theatre is really performed. The poet is then to endeavour an absolute dominion over the minds of the spectators; for, though our fancy will contribute to its own deceit, yet a writer ought to help its operation.

Unfortunately, in *The Conquest of Granada*, from whose Prefatory Essay I take this passage, Dryden tried to help the fancy with an over-abundance of drums and trumpets and stage battles, together with extravagant heroes and all the tropes and figures of an inflated rhetoric.

Samuel Johnson's defence of Shakespeare in 1765 turns on a series of astonishing paradoxes:

—It is false, that any representation is mistaken for reality; that any dramatic fable in its materiality was ever credible, or, for a single moment, was ever credited.

—If the spectator can be persuaded that his old acquaintance are Alexander and Caesar . . . he is in a state of elevation above the reach of reason.

—The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.

—It will be asked, how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to a drama.

—The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more.

We are rather more romantic than this in the twentieth century. When Meyerhold discussed the productions of *The Death of Tintagiles* and *Pelléas and Mélisande* in Moscow in 1907, he claimed that "a performance of Maeterlinck is a *mystery*," italicizing the word and using it in the sense of a religious rite. The idea of a bond between actor and spectator then fired his imagination, and he went on to discuss what happens when the actor is "left alone, face to face with the spectator." Words seemed to defeat him when he stated that, as a result of the friction between "the actor's creativity and the spectator's imagination," there is a union of "souls," of "unadulterated elements," so that "a clear flame is kindled" (53; 62).

We have continued to indulge in mysticism in our own time. Jean Giraudoux wrote enigmatically of the theatre as something more than simple "communication": for him it was close to "communion." A play is received by an audience, he thought, like an act of love, instinctively (Fowlie 21-31).

The British director Tyrone Guthrie, to whom Stratford, Ontario, owes a great deal, falls back on the concept of 'ritual':

I believe that the theatre makes its effect not by means of illusion, but by ritual. People do not believe that what they see or hear on the stage is 'really' happening. Action on the stage is a stylized re-enactment of real action, which is then imagined by the audience.

Indeed, he likened an audience to a congregation in a church where participation in the ritual should leave it “rapt, literally ‘taken out of itself’, to the extent that it shares the emotion which the priest or actor is suggesting” (350).

Anne Barton had a comparable explanation for the way medieval drama worked, and claimed that “While the performance lasted, audience and actors shared the same ritual world, a world more real than the one which existed outside its frame” (Righter 21). When, more recently, Wilfred Passow reminded us that “a performance must be considered as a collaboration between actors and audience” and went on to use such slippery words as “cooperation,” “collusion,” and “participation” (237), he was being no less romantic and mysterious.

I for one cannot explain it. When an actor seems to act out my thoughts and feelings, we share some unpredictable act of giving and taking. All we can agree, perhaps, is that there must be a real actor and a real audience, both actual and not merely implied. Thereafter, no formal approach to text or performance will truly touch the enigma, no amount of ‘semantization’ of the dialogue, the ‘didascalía,’ or the ‘scenic elements’ like bodies, setting, props, and costumes. The target must be the total performance, visual and aural, manipulating human space and time, working as performance in its due process in conditions of theatre. If the uncomfortable and distracting word ‘mystery’ seems to close out rational discussion and even inhibit the use of semiotics, it nevertheless points to the aesthetic element we should attend to and not ignore.

I have now adopted the role of what Roland Barthes would call a ‘semioclast,’ and this may be a naughty moment to look at the way Peter Quince is used by Shakespeare to have his little metatheatrical joke with his audience about its curious participation in his comedy of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Quince was a carpenter by trade and by conviction, and an unusual example of an Elizabethan director and an early dramaturg. He seems to support Johnson’s contention about delusion and its odd effect of having no certain limitation. It could also be that, through Quince, Shakespeare was declaring his own interest in theatrical semiotics. Like the Greeks, he always had a word for it, and it may be that some of his answers are to be found in a wood near Athens.

You will remember that Quince’s Men plan to produce the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe, but are faced with some ponderous problems of performance. It is nearly at the mid-point of the play (III.1) when the mechanicals begin their rehearsals in good earnest, long after Shakespeare himself has overcome his own problems of creating magic in the moonlight. Bottom is evidently worried by the possible reception of Pyramus and Thisbe, and particularly by the way the ladies in the audience may take it:

There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please. First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself; which the ladies cannot abide.

Luckily the matter is quickly resolved: they will write a *prologue* to say that Pyramus did not *really* kill himself. And Bottom adds, “for the more better

assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am *not* Pyramus but Bottom the weaver: this will put them out of fear." If that is a questionable conclusion, Shakespeare has reminded us that Quince and Company are only actors, all the spirits of Prospero who will melt into thin air.

Then Snout, not usually known for his intelligence, makes a good, logical point: "Will not the ladies be afeared of the lion?" After further deep debate, the only solution they can think of is *another* prologue for Lion:

You must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck, and he himself must speak through, saying thus, and to the same defect: "Ladies," or "Fair ladies—I would wish you," or "I would request you," or "I would entreat you, not to fear, not to tremble: my life for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No: I am no such thing: I am a man as other men are."

It is comforting, even surprising, to know that Snug is a man as other men are, but a whole play made up of prologues is unthinkable. When does a convention cease to be a convention? At some point, drama must be done and be seen to be done.

Unhappily, the next dramaturgical difficulty is more subtle, but also one of the imaginative suspension of disbelief. Shakespeare's lines may speak for themselves:

QUINCE—But there is two hard things: that is, to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for you know, Pyramus and Thisbe meet by moonlight.

SNOUT—Doth the moon shine that night we play our play?

BOTTOM—A calendar, a calendar! Look in the almanac. Find out moonshine, find out moonshine.

QUINCE—Yes, it doth shine that night.

BOTTOM—Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber window, where we play, open, and the moon may shine in at the casement.

QUINCE—Ay. Or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine.

Quince raises a fundamental question for the theatre. To imitate reality, do you try for realism, hoping for Mother Nature's cooperation, even in an English summer? Snout the slow-witted and Bottom the over-confident are here the realists: "Look in the almanac. Find out moonshine." But Quince is not so sure of Bottom's realism—he must have tried putting on a play with the new realism before. He comes up with a more reliable method, the new symbolism: someone must come in "to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine." That sounds more reasonable, although in the event, as you will remember, Starveling makes a rather thick-headed Moonshine, so heavily symbolic with a thorn-bush and a lantern and a little dog and a stool to stand on, that the muddle he gets into is a hopelessly realistic one.

However, it is almost necessary to be reminded of the basic joke, that the play itself had been solving similar problems for two acts with no trouble at all. How did it do it? The Elizabethan audience did not doubt for a moment that it

was only at a play. If only Quince had been able to slip into Shakespeare's audience and see the opening scenes! Perhaps Pirandello's Quince would have asked his questions of the playwright himself. But wait: even if we agree that the spectators are always in their senses, is this true of a character? Is a character in a play supposed to know that he is in a play? This is altogether a new proposition, one advanced by Lionel Abel in his stimulating book, *Metatheatre*, where he argued that Hamlet is a character "with an acute awareness of what it means to be staged" (57-58). If we can be persuaded that our old acquaintance are Alexander and Caesar, we may accept the idea that Quince was aware of himself as an inferior Shakespeare. Of course, Hamlet was concerned from the start about how the plot was going to work out, and at the end he dies before he knows ("I cannot live to hear the news from England," he says). What a pity Hamlet did not have Quince's freedom to adapt his own play: he could have brought in Fortinbras earlier and the play could have ended happily.

So Quince's questions are fundamental to the nature of theatre, and I would suggest that, although some plays are more obviously metatheatrical and self-conscious, and some less so, there never has been a period when a good playwright did not exploit his audience's pliability, its readiness to believe. It is said that man is the only animal which can feel sympathy or see a joke; add to this that man is the only animal who goes to the theatre. Perhaps these things are connected. But what do we find when we get there? An extraordinary world indeed. For people hardly ever kill their fathers and marry their mothers, or consult witches before deciding a course of action. Why commit a robbery over a piece of paste jewelry? How can someone die of a wound oozing tomato ketchup? Yet these things we are asked to accept in the name of drama.

There are many stories of honest citizens who have been quite confounded by the world of the theatre. When Tom Jones took Partridge to see Garrick playing Hamlet, he asked him which actor was best. Tom was surprised to get the reply, "The King, without doubt." But did he not admire the great Garrick in the scene with the Ghost? "Pooh," said the honest Partridge, "I could act as well myself if I'd seen a ghost." When Irving was playing Henry VIII at the Lyceum, a lady was so impressed with the realism of the performance that she offered her own baby to replace the property Princess Elizabeth. The great man replied that there was one small problem: he anticipated that the production would run for some time, and since the baby would grow, it might be necessary to provide another at short notice, if she had no objection. And Barry Jackson of the famous Birmingham Rep told the story of an actor who was supposed to burn his hand on a hot stove. He did this so realistically that a lady in the audience was heard to say, "What a thing to leave about on the stage!"

In all these instances we are into the ambiguous world of the theatre. T. S. Eliot believed that man could not stand very much reality. In the theatre man seems to choose very little reality and prefers to be involved in the decision-making. Thus the playwright often begins, not by asking us to imagine that we are in Verona or Troy, but first by reminding us that we are in a theatre. The conditions of the Elizabethan theatre were such that the spectator did not

think himself anywhere else, although, with the Chorus in *Henry V*, he was ready to call upon his "imaginary forces." In one way or another all drama issues an open invitation to make-believe, and, taking this Chorus as my cue, I will review two or three instances in the drama of the last 400 years to show the phenomenon at its most outrageous.

The Chorus which opens and runs throughout *Henry V* also ends it, quite artificially with a formal sonnet, so that in fact it provides a kind of *frame* for the whole play. In one sense, all drama is in a frame which separates the real world from the stage and joins them: the playhouse itself is a frame. But framing a play was a specifically Elizabethan device, one which always called for an unusual degree of licence. Inside the frame the inner play is always at another remove from reality and serves to make the audience more conscious. The best-known early frame play is *The Taming of the Shrew*, although we are accustomed to seeing this shorn of its frame (and Shakespeare's ending may have been lost), so that it is often reduced to the slight story of Katherine and Petruchio. The subject of the inner play is the marital relationship and "what duty wives do owe unto their husbands," but it is presented as the dream of Christopher Sly, a drunken tinker, which lends a delicious ambiguity to the drama. Like any male chauvinist, he swallows what Kate says about wifely duty, and when he wakes up promptly demands that the page-boy who has been pretending to be his wife should serve her turn: "Undress you and come now to bed," he says (ii. 117). He expects her to behave just like Kate, now properly tamed, and "do him ease." He is not to know, poor man, that his beautiful wife is only "a great lubberly boy." We knew it, but then the Elizabethan audience also knew that the actress playing Kate was only a boy as well. So much for the duties a wife may owe her husband.

There is much more to say about the era of boy-actresses in England. If any further proof were needed that this was a time of true metadrama, the presence of boys playing girls, with the resultant sex-change games, provide it. When a boy dresses in skirts, the whole masquerade is a species of puppet-show with the audience pulling the strings.

The prime example is *As You Like It*, which sports a boy actor dressed as the girl Rosalind who then pretends to be the boy Ganymede who then pretends to be the girl Rosalind. We should notice that, once Rosalind is in doublet and hose, we are constantly reminded of it: she is always complaining. Then the worst happens—her beloved Orlando arrives in the forest, and she hasn't got a thing to wear. When Celia tells her that some ecological vandal has been abusing the young plants with pinning poetry to the trees and carving 'Rosalind' on the barks, Rosalind's first response is, "Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose?" Now any other girl would have slipped quickly back into her skirts, fixed her hair, and made the best of it. Not so our Rosalind. For one thing, the rules say that you cannot change back to your old clothes until Act V. For another, the sex games were about to begin.

First, Rosalind has to be chased by another boy actress in the person of Phebe, with revealing results. The more Rosalind tries to shake Phebe off and into the arms of Silvius, the more she clings:

Sweet youth, I pray you chide a year together;
I had rather hear you chide than this man woo. (III. v. 64-5)

Second, since Orlando cannot recognize her as long as she wears the wrong outfit, she must try to train him a little in the ways of a lover. To do this, the boy actor (R₁) turned Rosalind (R₂) turned Ganymede (R₃) pretends to be Orlando's idea of Rosalind (R₄), to the point where she attempts a mock marriage in which she plays bride, groom, and parson (R₅, R₆, and R₇) all three. Rosalind tells Celia how to be a parson:

ROSALIND—You must begin, 'Will you, Orlando'—

CELIA—Go to. Will you, Orlando, have to wife this Rosalind?

ORLANDO—I will.

ROSALIND—Ay, but when?

ORLANDO—Why now, as fast as she can marry us.

ROSALIND—Then you must say, 'I take thee, Rosalind, for wife.' (IV. i. 116-124)

You may ask why Orlando doesn't submit to this assault of so many passionate Rosalinds. It is because all he sees is what we see—two young men in doublet and hose holding hands. And because all he knows is what the Elizabethan audience knows—that they really are two young men in doublet and hose holding hands. Orlando may be forgiven for laughing, and we for believing that Rosalind will never get anywhere that way.

It seems impossible for us to recreate, or even imagine, the kind of experience the Elizabethans had when they went to the play. In her book *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, Anne Richter suggests that after *Hamlet* realism sets in and that thereafter we are well on the way to Ibsen and the gloomy fjords of naturalism. I would demur. Again and again a captive audience proved to be too vulnerable to ignore. If there is an explosion of metatheatre in Shakespeare's comedies, in the sparkling drama of the Restoration the physical circumstances of playing continued perfect for playing theatre games and stepping in and out of character. It is quite symptomatic that all Restoration plays are framed by prologue and epilogue, but the exuberant spirit of the drama goes deeper. The Restoration playhouse was among the smallest in history, and its audience tiny by modern standards. I am also among those who still believe that this audience was homogeneous—they knew each other, and going to the play was like flinging a party for your closest friends. To top this, most of the first actresses were ladies of the evening. A perfect situation for the setting up of a whole mountain of Chinese boxes in the name of dramatic make-believe.

The young actresses of the Restoration had a direct contact with the audience that had the extraordinary effect of both framing the play and making their activities in the comedy an extension of their real lives. Here is the heroine of Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* on her first entrance:

To confine a woman just in her rambling age! take away her liberty at the very time she shou'd use it! O barbarous aunt! O unnatural father! to shut up a poor girl at fourteen, and hinder her budding: all things are ripen'd by the sun; to shut up a poor girl at fourteen!

Not to be outdone, her maid on the other side of the stage provides the echo: "Tis true, miss, two poor creatures as we are!" Self-advertisement had never

been taken this far before. And in Wycherley's next play, *The Country Wife*, here is Margery Pinchwife herself with her opening line:

Pray, sister, where are the best fields and woods to walk in in London?

On the surface, this is the ignorance of a country wife on her first visit to town, but not very far beneath the surface the line exchanges an outrageous wink between the gentlemen in the audience and the actress, originally the pert and popular Mrs. Elizabeth Boutel, an implied or real wink which rocks the whole action of the play.

You may think that it is only the girls of the Restoration stage who can slip in and out of their parts. The leading man also has the facility of opening and closing the gap between himself and his audience. In *The Country Wife*, the hero is one Horner, a rake and a wit, first played by Charles Hart. He is aesthetically ambiguous on several counts. He is out to trick the ladies, but Margery is out to trick him, so that we laugh with him and at him. We find him 'wicked' with the same mixture of shock and affection that we might apply to a naughty little boy. And this ambivalence is present in his role from the outset, for it is Horner himself who must speak the prologue to the play. He acknowledges that the audience is just as happy backstage as in the pit:

We set no guards upon our tiring-room.
But when with flying colors there you come,
We patiently, you see, give up to you
Our poets, virgins, nay, out matrons, too.

His next line is half in and half out of the play, as he introduces the ugly little man who has just entered on the other side:

A quack is as fit for a pimp as a midwife for a bawd; they are still but in their way both helpers of nature.

Another wink to the audience, and with that he steps back into the play proper: "Well, my dear doctor, has thou done what I desired?" (which was to spread the rumor that he was an eunuch, the better to deceive the husbands.) So Horner moves into his play by slow degrees, and before we know it, we have been drawn into his notorious conspiracy.

This period and the eighteenth century were the great age of the aside, that electrifying device that can set a whole theatre by the ears. Insignificant in reading and thus often ignored in literary criticism as a frivolous appendage, it is always of major effect in performance and central to the mechanism of a scene. And it has the power to grant that ironic double vision which persuades the spectator that he is not only watching the play, but also *having a hand in creating it*. In the best play of the Georgian theatre, Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, the asides are brilliant enough to give the impression that the pace of the scenes is faster than it is, and that we are watching two plays at work simultaneously without missing a shade of meaning. Recall the first stiff interview between Kate Hardcastle and her stuttering lover Marlow:

MARLOW—In the age of hyp-hyp-hypocrisy, there are few who upon strict enquiry do not - a - a - a -

KATE—I understand you perfectly, sir.

MARLOW—Egad! and that's more than I do myself!

They unblinkingly play the game of polite conversation, trotting out one cliché after another. Each is thinking what a hypocrite the other is, ironically underlining the actual subject of this appalling conversation, which is all about—hypocrisy! The result is a parody of every embarrassing exchange between the sexes there has ever been, and we are party to both what they are saying and what they are thinking. The aside defies analysis.

If the great age of the aside is the eighteenth century with its smaller theatres, the essential spirit of outer and inner drama continued to flourish vigorously in the popular domestic drama of the nineteenth. It is enough to cite the curious emergence of the villain of melodrama. He was always immediately recognizable by his opera hat, black cloak, thick moustache, and confident swagger. But he also had the habit of shaking his fist at his hissing, delighted audience, and if this was not enough he would brandish his legs. In one and the same person he supplied all the basic ingredients of both sex and violence. John Hollingshead has left a famous description of one such Victorian villain at work, Bill Sykes in that well-known play *Oliver Twist*. Sykes's big moment came with the death of Nancy:

Nancy was always dragged round the stage by her hair, and after this effort, Sykes always looked up defiantly at the gallery . . . He was always answered by one loud and fearful curse, yelled by the whole mass like a Handel Festival Chorus. The curse was answered by Sykes dragging Nancy twice more round the stage, and then, like Ajax, defying the lightning. The simultaneous yell then became louder and more blasphemous. Finally, when Sykes, working up to a well-rehearsed climax, smeared Nancy with red ochre, and taking her by the hair . . . seemed to dash her brains out on the stage, no explosion of dynamite invented by the modern anarchist, no language ever dreamed of in Bedlam, could equal the outburst. (Sherson 13)

Then, when poor Nancy was no more, Bill would step briskly out of the scene in the traditional manner, and take his bow to an equally deafening roar of applause. Was the Victorian audience so childlike that it could laugh and cry, hate and adore, all in one breath?

We would be wrong to think of the twentieth century as the age of realism. It is true that there was a time when the golden rule was, 'Thou mayst not break asunder the fourth wall!' When the comedian Hay Petrie was playing Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Old Vic in 1924, a gentleman in a private box gave a belated laugh and the actor had the temerity to wink at him; it created a small sensation among the critics, and one thought it the most important thing that had happened at the Old Vic during the past year. But we may have been deceived by the photographic world of the cinema screen which by an accident of history coincided with the best of the realistic movement. The truth is that no sooner had *The Wild Duck* and *The Seagull* and other assorted birds flown into view than the great names of the modern theatre wanted to shoot them down. Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, and Genêt lead a long procession of playwrights who demand the former freedom of the

theatre to swing between the world of the play and the world of the audience. The twentieth century has been marked by a great rush of creative theatre to the head, and today we are probably more at home with Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, Peter Weiss and Peter Handke, than with Ibsen and Chekhov.

Eighteen ninety-six was the year of *The Seagull* and of *Ubu-roi*. Alfred Jarry epitomized self-conscious theatre in his person. A familiar figure in Montmartre, he always carried a pair of loaded pistols, wore old trousers tucked in his socks like a cyclist, went about in a pair of carpet slippers with the toes out, and wore an erect phallus with a little velvet cap (no doubt to spare the feelings of the ladies). The consequence of all this was that it was hard to stay away from his play. The now-familiar setting was aggressively unreal: on the left in a wintry scene with snow was painted a large bed with a chamber-pot beneath, and on the right palm trees with a boa constrictor and a gallows from which hung a skeleton. This was no doubt Jarry's idea of a *universal* (a 'global'?) setting. Pere Ubu had a pear-shaped head with a huge stomach and a nose like an elephant's trunk with a bowler hat on top of all. Nothing wrong with that, you may well think, but when he became King of Poland he carried a toilet brush for a sceptre. Some of the props in *Ubu* have now been codified, but is that enough? *Ubu roi* played to a full house made up of Jarry's friends, but even so, the first word of the dialogue (*merdre*, or 'shit' with an 'r') produced an uproar which lasted fifteen minutes. Since the same word was repeated no less than 35 times in the course of the play, the audience went home exhausted (if they got home at all).

In 1921 came the play to end all plays, completely collapsing the barriers between the stage and reality. Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was not only a play within a play, but also a play without. In the famous Paris production of Georges Pitoëff at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1923, the actors entered in their everyday clothes through the audience itself, breaking the nineteenth-century rule that actors should know their place. And when they climbed on the stage, there was nothing on it. Although at this time the surrealist movement was in full swing, nobody had thought of being as surrealistic as that. Then when it was the moment for the six characters to enter, they were lowered to the stage in an old cage-lift, a stage elevator previously used for scenery. Paris went wild. The required response to seeing six actors lowered in an old stage elevator was, 'Look, they're lowering six actors in an old stage elevator.' It was a disarming way of saying at the outset that the play was not going to deal in illusion, but simply show how it was done, and Pirandello was honored by the French government.

The breach with the tradition of illusion was complete, but it was a time for complete breaches, and bursting out of the frame served all the more to frame the play everywhere it occurred. Max Reinhardt alarmed the London audience watching his celebrated production of *Oedipus Rex* by having a huge crowd of supers, made up of battalions of drama students and boy scouts, surge through the auditorium of Covent Garden, up the aisles and down a gangway built over the seats. If Greek decorum was conspicuous by its absence, the audience was overwhelmed, and *Punch* carried a delicious drawing of the terrible predicament that awaited any unfortunate spectator who should arrive late only to be swept down the aisle by a forest of Theban spears. Try to codify that.

For Pirandello, life itself, like the drama, was illusory. All drama is predicated on a magic 'if,' and perhaps the imaginative 'if' of the theatre and the unpredictable 'if' of real life are not too far apart. If Cleopatra's nose had been larger, he wondered, who knows how it might have changed the course of history? Nor is there any need to return to Cleopatra: Pirandello looked into his own soul and noted in horror that "Someone is living my life, and I don't know a thing about him." When the German director Erwin Piscator turned his loud-speakers and his searchlights on to his audience, he believed he had turned the theatre into a play-machine, with the playhouse itself "made to dissolve into the shifting, illusory space of the imagination."

All this is heady stuff, because in the last analysis there is no barrier between the actor and his audience, and a good performance will always complete the imaginative circuit of the theatre, the electricity flowing between the stage and the spectator and back again. Quince's little problems about how to prove that the Lion was only Snug the joiner, and how to bring moonlight into the playhouse when the sun was shining, were fundamental, and yet no problems at all. Pirandello and his trick of projecting the modern consciousness as a piece of theatre, Brecht and his elaborate devices to involve an audience by the paradox of alienation, Genêt and his cynical symbolist games of mock ritual and role-playing—all were manipulating reality, as any good drama must, in order that the audience should see with fresh eyes. Good theatre implies that, as we sit together in the audience, I'm in your play and you're in mine, which all goes to prove that convention, if convention be admitted, has no certain limitation.

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