Rehabilitating Realism

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In "Constructing the Subject," Catherine Belsey accuses what she calls "classic realism" of complicity in "reinforcing the concepts of the world and of subjectivity which ensure that people 'work by themselves' in the social formation" (51)--in other words, of being a tool of industrial capitalism whose epoch has coincided with its own. It is a view embraced by a number of recent feminist theatre critics who present realism, to borrow Jill Dolan's phrase, as a "conservative force that reproduces and reinforces dominant cultural relations" (*Feminist Spectator* 84). In offering audiences a "seamless illusion," it is argued, realism precludes interrogation, portraying an arbitrary but self-serving orthodoxy as both natural and inevitable. As such, the realist text becomes tainted and counterproductive, of use only to those who would endorse a bourgeois hegemony with its consequent enshrinement of domus, family and patriarch. Yet is this "case" against realism as strong or as self-evident as its proponents would have us believe? In the following paper I would like to review some of the principal charges that have been levelled against the form--and the dangers inherent in, what seems to me to be, a type of ahistorical thinking.[1]

The mystification of the author and his or her "apparent absence from the self-contained fictional world on the stage," has been urged as evidence of realism's connivance in the status quo, the argument being that such anonymity perpetuates the view that what is being seen is the thing itself, free from authorial subjectivity. Yet how, precisely, are we to understand the playwright's disappearance? If we turn back to the heyday of "realism" on the Edwardian stage and to the initial reception of plays by Bernard Shaw or Harley Granville Barker--as close to villains as the new dispensation

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provides--the most common complaint of critics and audiences alike was that *all* characters spoke just like their authors. Indeed, the same can be said for Oscar Wilde in the 1890s, whose minutely observed, if highly stylized, dramas fall within Belsey's realist net. Contemporary reviewers and cartoonists portrayed Wilde as puppeteer or ventriloquist--an *obvious* manipulator not only controlling but *seen* to control his stage characters and world.[2]

Then again if we are in each case experiencing an 'illusion of unmediated reality' how do we explain the discernible differences between realist authors? What methods of streamlining experience--i.e. mediation--make it possible for us to distinguish the works of Wilde, Shaw and Granville Barker from one another, or indeed from those of Ibsen, Chekhov, or feminist contemporaries like Githa Sowerby and Elizabeth Baker? The issue is elided by Belsey who snatches back with one hand what she gives with the other, acknowledging the author's presence after all as a "shadowy authority" and "source of the fiction." There is, in other words, a mediating force both at work and, equally importantly, observably at work. The exigencies of the realist form as defined by Belsey are such, however, that the subjected subject "reader is invited to perceive and judge the 'truth' of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation" (52). Why, given Belsey's admission that 'truth' is a relative term, must the reader see the play's world as coherent and non-contradictory? Because, the argument goes, an 'autonomous' author perceives it as such. Yet turn-of-the-century plays like Shaw's *Widowers Houses* (1892), Granville Barker's *The Madras House* (1910) and Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (1912) were calculated, their authors claimed, to lay bare the contradictions of capitalism by exposing the logical (if profitable) absurdities of the worlds whose surfaces they so carefully set forth. This is not to ignore the possibility that "too much furniture, or walls that are too tight, [can] create the effect of an unchangeable world, a 'fated' world" (States 90); it is merely to insist that realist theatre does not *necessarily* present a coherent or unassailable view of society. It is rather a tool, or variety of tools, for shaping social perception. In the hands of turn-of-the-century feminists, (and here Susan Kingsley Kent's general comments on the vocabulary of early feminist discourse are apt) "the language of fact and concrete reality was meant to expose, by contrast, the emptiness of idealized depictions of womanhood and the marital state" (*Sex and Suffrage in Britain* 85)--to challenge in other words concepts of the world and of subjectivity which ensure willing participation in the maintenance of the existing social formation.

Nor should we be quick to simplify the role of the reader/audience in realism. The audience is not some sort of monolithic tabula rasa unwittingly acquiescing to its inscription by an author who exercises "singular authority

over the construction of meaning" (Dolan, "'Lesbian' Subjectivity" 42). An audience is a collection of members, each one informing as well as being informed by a work. We need to generalize less about its response, and investigate more closely its gender, class and economic composition in order to determine how meaning is generated. Once again, if we turn our attention to the reception of realist works at the turn of the century, we find, as might be expected, different groups of spectators reading the same 'reality' in predictably different ways. Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (1912), a powerful piece concerning the struggle between a despotic factory owner and his strong-willed daughter-in-law was praised by Emma Goldman and Marjorie Strachey as a political tract arguing the case for female empowerment.[3] Indeed, the radical Women's Freedom League saw Sowerby's depiction of the industrial North as a "hell, created by the arrogance of men," concluding that although it did not deal specifically with suffrage issues, "no play has ever been written that in the truest, strongest sense was so really a 'Suffrage' play" (*The Vote* 20 July 1912). Yet mainstream male critics continued to construe the work as being 'about' trade and industry, hence its appeal to a "business nation." For the *Daily Telegraph* (12 March 1912), the *Era* (23 March 1912) and the *Saturday Review* (30 March 1912), old Rutherford was as much victim as oppressor. A similar divergence, this time along class rather than gender lines, is documented in initial responses to Edith Lyttelton's *Warp and Woof* (1904), an exposé of the luxury dress trade by an author who was herself in 'Society.' The working-class *Clarion* joined Mary Macarthur of the Women's Trade Union League in seeing the play as an unblinking condemnation of 'real' conditions of labour, while society papers such as *Vanity Fair* protected their readers by insisting that Lyttelton had in fact "libelled . . . the unfortunate butterflies of Mayfair and Belgravia" (16 June 1904).[4] The tendency of each piece to conform to the predispositions of opposed sub-audiences is symptomatic of a broader problem facing reception studies. The converting imagination is a potent and active force in creating significance--in realist, no less than in expressionist, epic, symbolist, or absurdist theatre. When, where, how, and to whom any play is performed are all factors constitutive of meaning; they signficantly complicate matters of style and structure and we ignore them at our peril.

Realism is also condemned for "illusionism", a concept Belsey tells us is "self-explanatory." It is not. From the perspective of Brechtian orthodoxy, the theatre of illusionism is that which shows the structure of society represented on stage as incapable of change by society represented by spectators, the maintenance of an on-stage illusion (that which is something other than itself) lulling a passive audience into social and political quiescence. Yet defined this way, and allowing for historical positioning, can realism be said to be more essentially "illusionistic" than other forms of drama? The contrast Dolan

draws, for example, between Brecht's "exercise in complex seeing" (good) and the "seduction of the illusionist [i.e. realist] text" (bad) sounds remarkably like Shaw's claim in the 1890s that his own keen-eyed "realism" (good) could correct the unthinking complicity of "romantic [i.e. illusionistic] drama" (bad). As Bert States has noted of productions of Brecht, an observation that holds true for Shaw as well, "It is not the stage illusion that is undercut, or even the illusion that the stage represents a certain kind of 'Nature'; what is undercut is simply the conventional system of current theatre" (*Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* 95). Furthermore, and I quote States again, "the 'arbitrary' mode of representation does not, in itself, assure the basis of a 'critical' theatre. It may, indeed, have been the best kind of theater for Brecht's project, but this is a little like saying that iambic pentameter was the best kind of language for Shakespeare's. Brecht's theatre, like Shakespeare's, is what he left us and one can draw no conclusions about its form being the best or the correct one for his and similar projects" (97). Push Brecht into a period like our own, in which audiences have come to expect, rather than be unsettled by, his bag of alienation tricks and you have the spectacle of *Mahagonny*'s structural 'disruptions' amusing wealthy audiences at New York's Metropolitan Opera. One is as likely today to encounter elements of Brecht's "epic theatre" (now become "culinary theatre") on Broadway or in London's West-End as in alternative performance spaces or fringe venues. Nor can we ignore the fact that realist theatre developed as a radical, low mimetic response to the glittering make-believe world of society drama, which was seen to be, to quote Dolan's critique of realism, "prescriptive in that it reifie[d] the dominant culture's inscription of traditional power relations between genders and classes" (*Feminist Spectator* 84). In brief, realism was championed as a means of challenging the ideological assumptions imbedded in melodrama and the well-made play.

But realism it is contended, is essentially unhealthy. For Roland Barthes, an early champion of Brecht, a realist or representational sign "effaces its own status as a sign, in order to foster the illusion that what is being perceived is reality without its intervention" (Eagleton 136). A 'healthy sign' on the other hand, is one which makes manifest its arbitrariness; it does not pretend to be 'natural', but rather "in the very moment of conveying a meaning, communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well" (Eagleton 135). But can it be said of realist theatre, now handmaid to Ideology, that it seeks to 'naturalize' both itself and the ideologically complicit worlds it produces. Isn't it rather the case that it is centred in the perception of itself as artificial reproduction; it is applauded for the virtuosity of its artifice, for the very reason that it is not what it shows. Surely only the most naive believe that realist theatre is a "mirror that truthfully records an objective social portrait;" (Dolan, "'Lesbian' Subjectivity" 42); what it records are versions of social

relations mediated by a set of inherently arbitrary conventions. So at the time of its first performances, the "accentuated realism" of Granville Barker's *Voysey Inheritance* (1905) could be seen by critic Dixon Scott in terms of "the bright veracity of the streets of shops in harlequinade." Elaborating, Scott goes on to observe that while

> offering itself to us as a simple 'slice of life' [*The Voysey Inheritance*] is really impaled, all the time, on the most fantastic toasting-fork of criminal pathology and fairy-tale finance. And so, although the characters' reactions to the prongs are observed with the most scrupulous fidelity and reproduced with the most wonderful skill, though they wear unquestionable top-hats and smoke real cigars, they still affect us as uncanny creatures. . . . The mechanism that skewers them spitting each of them in turn until we have the entire row displaying each his special squirm, is every bit as arbitrary as Carnaby Leete's rapier, as recondite as his political intrigues. (*Men of Letters* 145)

One of the paradoxes of stage realism at its most extreme is that its material exuberance encourages audiences to admire the painstaking business of its illusion making. Accordingly, audiences who applauded the Trafalgar Square set of Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women!* (1907) were appreciating the virtuosity (i.e. the artificiality) of a tableau. They would not, one presumes, have gone to Trafalgar Square to applaud the "real" thing. The effect is predicated on the experience of estrangement, which Brecht claimed to be, in its widest sense, not so much "a matter of special techniques, but a bringing-to-consciousness of a normal procedure of everyday life" (Gray 68) in such a way that it is reconceived "as something strange, new, as a successful construction, and thereby to some extent as something unnatural" (qtd Gray 68).

Nor can it be said of realist theatre that it invariably "naturalizes the social relations imposed by dominant ideology" (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 106). Theatricalizing workrooms, drapers' establishments, law offices and (yes) drawing-rooms can have the effect of making visible traditionally invisible processes of capitalist production, exposing the usually hidden workings of an oppressive system, such staged revelations calling into question existing ideology's 'naturalized' view of the world, each one a call to action. In *The Perfect Wagnerite* Shaw likened the top hat of the capitalist shareholder to the Tarnhelm Alberich uses in *The Rhinegold* to render himself invisible to the workers he enslaves. They can feel his oppression--in Alberich's case the lashes of an unseen whip--but are unsure of its source (434-35). Shaw's *Plays Unpleasant*, were designed, he maintained, to strip invisibility from latter day

Alberichs, revealing a systemic evil concealed from audiences of mid-century melodrama.[5] Indeed, Shaw's curtain call speech after the first performance of *Widowers Houses*--a lecture on the evils of capitalism lest any of his viewers should miss the play's point--is similar to the Epilogue Brecht added to the *Good Person of Setzuan* after its Viennese premiere, urging audiences to go out and change the world if they didn't like the play's conclusion.[6]

It has also been claimed that realism is distinguished by "narrative which leads to closure." In an oft-quoted passage breath-taking in the vastness of its generalization, Belsey asserts that

> classic realist narrative . . . turns on the creation of enigma through the precipitation of disorder which throws into disarray the conventional cultural and signifying systems. Among the commonest sources of disorder at the level of plot in classic realism are murder, war, a journey or love. But the story moves inevitably towards closure which is also disclosure, the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself. (53)

This definition of 'closure', however, is so broad that while it applies to much realist theatre, it can be said to be equally true (or false) of an arc of dramatic action shared by playwrights from Sophocles--whose *Oedipus* surely stands as the model of such narrative--to the contemporary work of playwrights as diverse in technique and political sympathies as Steven Berkoff and Timberlake Wertenbaker. More seriously, such a definition negates the possibility of cumulative experience, arguing that because a so-called "order" is restored at the end of a play, the work's overall visceral and cerebral meaning is erased. It would deny the significance of a play's process, the possibility that a spectator may not feel or think the same way about 'order' at the end of a work as at the beginning. Applied to realism as a form, such generalizations have resulted in an inability to distinguish between reproduction and reinforcement; consequently we hear that to "show" something in realist terms is to confirm its inevitability to uncritical and politically resigned spectators, a claim some feminist theatre critics have used to maintain that "closure in a realist play" invariably "chokes women to death" (Case 43). If this is so, what do we make of a veritable realist play like Elizabeth Baker's *Chains* (1909), in which a female character actively rejects imprisonment in the matrimonial cage whose social and economic underpinnings are made obvious. Remaining enigmatic and unplaced, she does not disappear like a chameleon into the play's environment but actively removes herself from the stage sitting-room at

the play's end, a profoundly symbolic departure from a realist setting that ". . . says in effect, 'It will all end here'" (States 69).

I am not of course defending every realist play; as practiced much realist drama (like much pre, modern and postmodern theatre) warrants challenge from feminists. What I am arguing is that while dramatic and theatrical styles may be developed or adopted to naturalize or challenge particular positions, dramatic forms are not in themselves narrowly partisan. Indeed, historically those forms of theatre that have most actively endorsed the authority of Church and State--the medieval morality play and Stuart masque come immediately to mind--have been both hieratic and emblematic. More recently, Brecht's own brand of politicized theatre has come under attack by playwright/novelist Gunter Grass. In *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* Grass recasts Brecht as a 'privileged court jester," "a man of the theatre serene and untroubled" (xxxiv-xxxvi) who, in the face of the workers' uprising of 1953, does not turn the theatre to political account but instead turns political rebellion into state-sponsored epic theatre. On the other hand, a number of now inherently tainted realist plays were, in their own day, seen to offer so profound a threat to entrenched regimes that they were banned by state censors. The point is surely that while genres or styles--realism has been claimed as both--may not be politically neutral, they are capable of presenting a range of ideological positions; the issue is not so much formal as historical, contextual and phenomenological. To condemn writers simply because of the forms in which they work is to indulge in a system of analysis shaped by melodramatic assumptions of "good" and "bad"--the possiblity of silencing (women) writers because they do not "write right" is a danger to which feminist critics should be particularly alert.

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Notes

1. This paper developed out of brief observations made in my book, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester UP: 1992), and was presented as part of the Women and Theatre Programme at the ATHE Conference, August 1991.

2. See for instance Joel Kaplan's "A Puppet's Power: George Alexander, Clement Scott and the Replotting of *Lady Windermere's Fan*," *Theatre Notebook*, May 1992.

3. See Goldman's observations in *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* and Strachey's review in the *Englishwoman* 1912, vol. 14.

4. In the words of the *Clarion, Warp and Woof* "formulates an awful charge against the conditions of society which permit . . . a state of affairs" in which employees "are made the slaves of the exacting demands and the thoughtless selfishness of the fashionable world, whilst the wretchedness of their lives (with the terribly long working hours) lays them open to the worst forms of temptation as the readiest means of relief" (10 June 1904). Mary Macarthur was quick

to use the play as "a peg to hang propaganda articles on and a means of enlisting interest for the struggling Dressmakers' Union" (Hamilton 48).

5. Before warning his readers that "my attacks are directed against themselves, not against my stage figures" (27), Shaw explains that he used the dramatic power of *Plays Unpleasant* "to force the spectator to face unpleasant facts. . . . [especially] those social horrors which arise from the fact that the average homebred Englishman, however honorable and goodnatured he may be in his private capacity, is, as a citizen, a wretched creature who, whilst clamoring for a gratuitous millennium, will shut his eyes to the most villainous abuses. . . ." (25-26)

6. According to Eric Bentley, Brecht added the Epilogue as a result of "misunderstandings of the ending in the press" on that occasion (*Bertolt Brecht: Parables for the Theatre* 108).

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