



Producible
Interpretation

*EIGHT
ENGLISH
PLAYS
1675-1707*

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I

The Concept of Producible Interpretation

BY “producible interpretation” we mean a critical reading that a director could communicate to an audience in performance. Not all “valid” literary readings can be made to work in the theatre. Conversely, some readings whose critical or historical validity may be questioned have proved highly effective in performance. Ernest Jones’ Oedipal interpretation of *Hamlet*, for instance, is certainly producible, as Olivier has demonstrated.

We have written this book as a response to our own dissatisfaction with much of the dramatic criticism published in recent years. Criticism has been chaotic in its aims and methods, and contradictory in its conclusions. The resulting interpretations often seem remote from theatrical reality, past or present. Our particular concern is with late seventeenth-century English drama, but the problems we are responding to are unrelated to country or period. The bulk of this book is devoted to eight detailed analyses of particular plays, but those analyses have been written to illustrate the application of a critical method. This book—like the critical method that it embodies—has grown out of our attempt to answer a disturbingly basic question: What should an interpreter of drama undertake to accomplish?

WAYS OF WRITING ABOUT DRAMA AND THEATRE

As a means of defining the particular nature of this book, we would like to contrast its method and object with those of several other sorts of critical and scholarly writing about drama and theatre. At least nine sorts of work can usefully be distinguished.

Prescriptive directions to authors. In its original guise, this mode is so thoroughly out of vogue that one tends to forget it, but since such prominent examples as Aristotle's *Poetics* and Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* are so often cited in other sorts of criticism, some acknowledgment of this one seems in order. Neither Aristotle nor Dryden would have been comfortable with the suggestion that he was "prescribing": Aristotle's procedure is inductive; Dryden's, speculative. But de facto, both are telling playwrights how good plays are to be made. In the postromantic world prescriptive criticism remains in permanent ill repute, though one can find a few dramatic cookbooks addressed to student playwrights. A glance at such tomes will tell you the obvious: the novice can be cautioned against fundamental error, but cannot really be told how to write a good play.

The most interesting writing directed at authors is broadly theoretical, addressed to larger questions of the nature and point of theatre, and the kinds of theatrical effect to be sought. Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), Brecht's *Short Organum* (1948), and Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) are manifestoes asking—with radically different programs—for a basic reorientation of our theatrical enterprise. In all three cases, the ultimate concern is with altering the nature of the interchange between performers and audience, reducing spectator passivity, demanding involvement and response from the audience. Handke's *Offending the Audience* (1965) is an extreme instance of such theory carried into practice. We raise these examples as evidence that prescriptive criticism is far from dead, but with the arguable exception of Brecht, most such theoreticians have little relevance to what they dismiss as "classic" theatre.

Literary analysis treats the printed playscript as an isolated ar-

tifact. Only the extreme frequency with which such criticism is practiced makes it seem anything but bizarre. Well over 90 percent of the criticism of plays published today is of this sort—written as though plays were poems. At this date we hardly need to claim that plays should be treated as plays: the argument has been a commonplace for thirty years.¹ Widespread lip service to this principle has, however, produced little change in practical criticism. No kind of article on drama is to be found in current journals more frequently than that which purports to explain a play by identification of a hitherto undiscovered "central theme." We would not for an instant deny the excellence or usefulness of many strictly literary studies. A great deal is to be learned from Norman Holland's *The First Modern Comedies* (1959) or Rose Zimbardo's *Wycherley's Drama* (1965) or from a host of articles about particular plays. But if the critic does not inquire whether the reading proposed could be communicated in performance, he is ignoring a crucial point in the validation of an interpretation of a play. A critic who is treating a play strictly as a text ought to say so. Lacking such a disclaimer, any interpretation seems to us implicitly to claim producibility, and ought therefore to be judged by that criterion. We should, however, point out certain definite advantages enjoyed by textually-oriented criticism. First, writer and reader can both examine the evidence: a printed text is available to both parties in a way that live performances are not. (Movies or television versions of plays are less vulnerable to this objection.) And second, a playscript is a bundle of potentialities, and a production is not only a completion of one of those potentialities but also a suppression of the others. In one way the words are more alive on stage, but in another, deader, because more determined.²

Drama history generally traces trends in plays through a partic-

1. Some of the most widely-cited examples are Raymond Williams, *Drama in Performance* (1954; rev. ed. New York: Basic, 1968), and J. L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960).

2. We are indebted to Eric Rothstein for suggesting that we acknowledge this important point.

ular chronological period. The basis of comparison may be generic features (as in Hume's *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century*, 1976), treatment of subject matter (Loftis' *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding*, 1959), or ideological analysis (Staves' *Players' Sceptres: Fictions of Authority in the Restoration*, 1979). A more limited sort of study may claim merely to characterize a given kind of play in a limited period (Fujimura's *The Restoration Comedy of Wit*, 1952, or Rothstein's *Restoration Tragedy*, 1967). Drama history can be written with attention to the theatrical circumstances that shaped and affected the plays—or not. A book like Volume V (1660–1750) of *The Revels History of Drama in English* (1976) illustrates the problems of combining texts and background. The four authors—Loftis, Southern, Jones, and Scouten—provide erudite but entirely disjoint accounts of intellectual background, theatre buildings, acting companies, and plays. For the drama historian, no problem is so pressing as the discovery of how to integrate study of practical theatre background with analysis of play texts.

Theatre history usually signifies study of theatre buildings, company management and finances, and acting style. At its best, theatre history is a sophisticated historical discipline, recreating performance circumstances from scrappy and scattered records. At its worst, it amounts to no more than sodden description of particular productions from readily available sources. Critics all too often dismiss the theatre historian as a maker of lists and a scavenger for unnoticed facts. The question, obviously, is what the facts are to be used for. To reconstruct the finances of the United Company in the 1680s is hardly an end in itself. But if such a reconstruction ultimately leads us toward an understanding of why the company adopted the repertory policies it did, then this bit of esoterica may be a key to helping us understand some quite puzzling developments in drama history. Likewise physical reconstruction of the stages used in the 1670s may seem uninteresting to the critic bent on understanding Wycherley's outlook; but his plays were written with very specific staging possibilities in mind, and to ignore the effect of his stage on what Wycherley chose to do can make the critic look very foolish in-

deed.³ Except in textbook form (Brockett's *History of the Theatre* and its ilk), theatre history has rarely presumed to encompass drama. Logically, this need not be so. The best account of Wycherley would probably be one starting with a thorough study of the King's Company, its theatres, repertory, actors, and audience. But whether theatre history co-opts criticism or criticism learns to use theatre history hardly matters: either will serve to advance our understanding of the plays.

Instructions for performers can be either notes provided by the author to explain how a play is to be staged and to what ends (Shaw's for *Arms and the Man* or records of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble rehearsals) or similar guidance provided by a director for his or her actors. In the latter case communication is usually oral rather than written; but in principle it could be written, however much that goes against the norm of directorial practice. Directors are often more skilled in eliciting an effect from their actors than in explaining—even ex post facto—what that effect is. Critics tend to be deeply suspicious of all such information. ("New Critics" long worried about falling foul of the "intentional fallacy"; even today there is a widespread feeling that the text is sacrosanct and that it must be considered autonomous.) Directorial pronouncement is suspect to literary critics because directors inevitably and necessarily make myriad decisions for which there is no textual warrant. To cast Tartuffe as a scrawny little fellow against a big, bluff Orgon can work beautifully in the theatre,⁴ but without textual authority most critics are at best uncomfortable about treating such points of casting as a significant part of interpretation. Such timidity is deplorable. Plays come to life only in performance, and to insist upon analyzing them in terms of text alone is methodological cowardice. Our particular interest in "instructions for performance" lies in the usefulness of such material

3. As witness the embarrassingly ill-informed criticisms of so redoubtable a theatre person as Harley Granville-Barker, *On Dramatic Method* (1931; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), Chapter 4 ("Wycherley and Dryden").

4. Indeed, this actually runs counter to Molière's text ("Gros et gras," I.v.234). But had Molière been writing for a different actor he would presumably have described Tartuffe differently. Few directors would care to be bound by physical description, nor should they be.

in judging designed potentialities. The heart of actual production is choice: the more conscious the critic is of possible choices and the effects of those choices, the better.

Reviews. Reviewing is a critical mode rarely held in high estimation. Most newspaper reviews are little more than the subjective responses of an allegedly trained viewer, writing to inform potential customers what they would see and whether they would enjoy it. The brevity of most reviews militates against much explanation of the reviewer's judgment and ideological position. The inevitably and unfairly hostile review is a commonplace of the form. Reviewers are prone to talk about what they think should have been done, often without regard to whether (or how) it could have been done, and with little concern for what the production actually tried to do. A more interesting sort of "review" is that to be found in *Theatre Journal*, published long after the production has closed and devoted to a broader kind of evaluation. The audience for such a review is not potential patrons but directors, performers, and scholars interested in the theatrical potentialities of playtexts. Properly executed, such a review should ask what the production tried to do; whether the aim was reasonable; how it tried to achieve those aims; and how well the aim was fulfilled.⁵

Records of performance, by which we mean several things. A promptbook, a detailed descriptive review, a phonograph recording, a videotape recording—all are records of a sort. We would suggest that some of the most interesting drama criticism could be written by directors, explaining what they found in a text, why they made the choices they did, and how they tried to achieve the effects they wanted. Beyond such relatively conventional "records," we need to consider the feasibility of semiological nota-

5. Consider, for example, the Opera Factory production of *The Beggar's Opera* (London, February 1982), notorious for its nudity and punk rock interpolations. Most newspaper reviewers contented themselves with denouncing the production for ahistoricity and bad taste, without asking why David Freeman chose to do what he did, or considering whether the production succeeded on its own terms. Both of us disliked the production (hardly a surprising reaction from theatre historians), but found it highly effective.

tion.⁶ How are we to "preserve" a performance in such a way that it remains accessible to analysis? An elaborate promptbook/score has its uses, though we lack the system of notation to render such relative intangibles as style and tempo universally accessible. A videotape solves a lot of notational problems, but imposes the limitations of the medium, and it freezes for us only a single representation, thereby losing the spontaneous variation of live performance. Records of performance are a particular concern for anyone who agrees (as we do) with the semiologists' argument that ultimately the best dramatic criticism will encompass the totality of text, theatre history, and actual performance. We do not at present possess adequate records of performance even of present-day productions.

Performance analysis. We included reviews in this survey of possibilities, trivial though most of them are, because they represent the principal form of attention to performance. But whereas a review is almost always appreciative or judgmental, concerned principally with a particular production, performance analysis should seek to identify and explain meaning and impact and is in no way debarred from extensive investigation of the text being communicated in performance. Few "literary" analyses of playtexts refer even in passing to production history, or treat the actuality of performance as a way of getting at a higher truth than the dead words of the script on the page. What we need is analysis attentive equally to the script and its realization. Almost all worthwhile performance analysis to date has concerned avant-garde plays or experimental and controversial productions of a few older ones. Such theatre journals as *The Drama Review* and *Performing Arts Journal* regularly publish extended analyses of recent performances. At present a camel will pass through the eye of a needle more easily than an analysis of the Guthrie *Beggar's Opera* or the National Theatre *London Cuckolds* will find its way

6. Some of the possibilities and problems are well discussed by Patrice Pavis in "Reflections on the Notation of the Theatrical Performance," *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of the Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), pp. 109–30.

into the pages of *Philological Quarterly*. Dare we hope that “scholarly” journals in “literature” will start to understand that an article analyzing *The School for Scandal* or *Man and Superman* on the basis of an interesting recent production may have more validity than one analyzing the language or meaning of the script in antiseptic isolation? Such prejudices aside, the principal obstacle to performance analysis remains our lack of more than the barest rudiments of a method and vocabulary for analyzing theatrical performance. Even more daunting is the formidable practical problem of collecting the evidence necessary to a serious analysis of performance. Videotape is preferable to scattered comments in eighteenth-century newspapers, but even when available it is not a panacea. For the present, performance-oriented criticism remains a utopian ideal. Consequently, we are principally concerned here with a more limited and accessible kind of criticism, namely—

Production analysis. By this term we mean interpretation of the text specifically aimed at understanding it as a performance vehicle—“reading with a directorial eye,” if you like. While heavily grounded in textual analysis, such criticism will be undertaken on the principle that what should emerge is a sense of multiple possibilities in actual performance. Production analysis should draw freely on theatre history and drama history. Particular productions will be studied for what they can tell us about the potentialities of the script, but the critic is in no way limited to what has been staged. The results will sometimes resemble instructions for performance, but practically speaking they will be no more than a preliminary hint to the director, necessarily lacking the detail required for actual execution of a performance. *A production analysis is a series of architect’s sketches, not the blueprints that would be necessary to bring any one of them to actuality.* The object is to clarify possible meanings and effects, primarily for readers, critics, and theatregoers, secondarily for the interested director. The result should be improved understanding of the performance potentialities of the play at issue.

Table 1.1
Kinds of Criticism

Kind	Subject	Method	Audience
directions to authors	principles of playwriting	speculation; empirical survey; a priori deduction	playwrights; secondarily critics
literary analysis	playtexts	analysis of structure, characters, content, etc.	readers of plays
drama history	playtexts	usually generic	readers of plays
theatre history	buildings, finances, performers	documentary history	historically-minded theatregoers; scholars
instructions for performance	playtexts visualized for performance	various	directors, actors, secondarily theatregoers
reviews	particular performances	description/judgment	potential theatregoers
records of performance	particular performances	various	directors, performers, critics
performance analysis	text and particular performances	analysis of actual performances	directors, actors, critics, readers, theatregoers
production analysis	text and particular productions	visualization of performance possibilities	directors, actors, critics, readers, theatregoers

SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Only very recently have critics started to consider producibility a touchstone for the evaluation of interpretations of plays. We agree with John Styan’s dictum: “Criticism which ignores theatrical experience is peripheral, even irresponsible.”⁷ Michael Booth has gone so far as to argue that “no interpretation of

7. *Drama, Stage and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 241.

Shakespeare or any other dramatist is valid unless it is proved workable in performance; that is, unless it can be clearly communicated to the audience by the actors and the staging."⁸ We are in considerable sympathy with this position, though ultimately it seems too extreme. Plays are printed and read, and in that form they can legitimately be interpreted as printed literature. But certainly the first question to be asked of any interpretation is *Does it claim to be communicable in performance?* Underlying this fundamental question are several problems of definition and method of which the critic trying to write production analysis should be aware.

Is theatre communication?

John Styan takes the position that "a play must communicate or it is not a play," and considers "*Does it work?*" the "ultimate question" for the critic.⁹ We entirely agree that theatre is communication: to say otherwise is to abandon any claim for its meaning and significance. But *what* is communicated in performance? Reading literary criticism, one might suppose that plays exist as vehicles for some sort of central meaning, often defined by such critics as a comment on a "theme." This simplistic assumption has been widely if belatedly challenged in recent years.¹⁰ Styan protests against the idea that a play "conceals a message which an audience has a duty to perceive." Thomas Whitaker cautions against any attempt to "try to extract from a play its apparent statement, its 'imitated' action, or its presented world, and call *that* the 'meaning.'"¹¹ That plays can be didactic is clearly true—from Lillo's *The London Merchant* to Hochhuth's *The Deputy*. But in very few good plays does "statement" outweigh the world presented. A writer desirous of making abstract statements should

8. "Theatre History and the Literary Critic," *Yearbook of English Studies*, 9 (1979), 15–27; quotation from p. 20.

9. *Drama, Stage and Audience*, pp. 1–2.

10. See particularly Richard Levin, "Some Second Thoughts on Central Themes," *Modern Language Review*, 67 (1972), 1–10, and *New Readings vs. Old Plays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979).

11. Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience*, p. 241; Whitaker, *Fields of Play in Modern Drama* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 24.

be able to find forms better suited to the purpose than drama. Or as George Kaufman says, if you have a message to deliver, send a telegram.

A play can communicate ideas, attitudes, moods. More broadly, one might say that a "way of seeing" is proffered to the audience—ideology, if you will. Every play has an ideology, but a great many plays (especially those written for the commercial theatre) do not venture beyond the commonplace, and ideology has little to do with their effectiveness in the theatre. Ideology becomes important when it challenges or significantly reinforces that of the audience. When a play relies largely on formulas, asking what it communicates is usually a sterile exercise; the critic can more profitably inquire what sorts of response it tries to elicit from the audience. To expand on this point: not all communication involves significant content. A play demands both intellectual comprehension and emotional response. Shaw is heavily tilted toward the former; O'Neill, toward the latter. Feydeau demands no comprehension; his plays aim simply to amuse. To agree that theatre is communication does not commit us to a procrustean demand for message/meaning; nor should it inhibit us from studying subjective and variable response in the audience.

We must not refuse to recognize, however, that a significant part of the meaning is added in performance.¹² The point remains surprisingly controversial. Gareth Lloyd Evans has recently attacked Ralph Berry for views "disturbingly similar to Tyrone Guthrie's assertion that the text is nothing but a blueprint until the director completes, with major and vital creativity, the final edifice."¹³ Guthrie's "nothing but a blueprint" shortchanges the verbal potency of plays as literary texts. But as Peter Brook has justly said, nowadays the director is inevitably "responsible" for what comes across in the theatre. "He cannot avoid this. An actor reads the lines out loud. How? At once a thousand choices

12. For a useful discussion, see Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), Chapter 3.

13. Gareth Lloyd Evans, review of Ralph Berry, *Changing Styles in Shakespeare* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), in *Theatre Notebook*, 37 (1983), 38–39.

are before him. Does he read tonelessly? Does he give the sense with no 'expressive' colour? Does he use the intonations of realistic speech? Does he use a special voice? Does he move towards song? . . . An actor who speaks must also be seen. How will he appear? How will he be dressed? . . . None of these questions can be ducked."¹⁴ As Berry comments: "In itself, this passage disposes of the 'straight' Shakespeare argument." Berry elaborates with the useful example of *Measure for Measure*, a play whose point and import turn almost entirely on Isabella's response (not specified by Shakespeare) to the Duke's proposal: "In determining this action the director determines the provisional meaning of the play." But even when what the director does is outrageous and wrongheaded, no real damage is done. Peter Hall says: "If I do *Macbeth*—as I did—in red rugs, I make a fool of no one but myself. *Macbeth* is still there at the end—staring at me. I have done nothing to *Macbeth*." Or as Berry interprets: "The text remains."

Almost every theoretician reminds us that the communication process (and the meaning involved) is rendered more complex by its transmission through performer to audience. One of the major deficiencies of almost all theories of drama is failure to deal with audience diversity and the inevitable disparateness of audience response. This failure extends, curiously, even to recent semiotic criticism, which devotes vastly more attention to defining and recording signs than to the process by which an actual audience decodes them.¹⁵ Even Patrice Pavis, for us the most useful and stimulating of recent semiologists, tends to treat text and performance as the object of analysis, their reception as a given.

14. Peter Brook, "Production: total responsibility of a director," *Birmingham Post*, 17 April 1964; cited by Berry, p. 10.

15. For a number of stimulating contributions to semiotic study of drama and theatre see "Drama, Theater, Performance: A Semiotic Perspective," special issue of *Poetics Today*, 2, no. 3 (Spring 1981). Even semioticians are having trouble dealing with both text and performance. Thus Cesare Segre treats dramatic texts as a particular kind of narrative while Frank Coppieters—in a welcome departure from text-centered criticism—adopts a radically audience-oriented point of view and deals with audience perception basically as an empirical phenomenon. We cannot feel comfortable with either extreme.

We are not about to advocate wholesale importation of reader-response criticism (duly adapted for drama) as a panacea, but in response to Styan's query "*Does it work?*" we are inclined to ask *How can we tell?* Dryden's *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1671) was popular in the theatre—but according to contemporary testimony the audience went to salivate over what Dryden thought he was satirizing. Did the play "work"? In one sense, yes; in another, not at all.

What is unproducible?

An interpretation which cannot be put on stage in such a way that it is understood by a reasonable number of audience members is unproducible. Of course there are variables both in performers' skill and in audience receptivity. What fails with one actor or for one audience may work on another occasion. Most unproducable interpretations are the result of ingenious explication undertaken without regard for the practical realities of theatrical performance. Abstract propositions are extraordinarily hard to put across in performance—unless the text makes them flagrantly explicit, or the director resorts to banners with caption explanations. When a critic asserts that *King Lear* is an answer to the question "What is Man?" or that *The Country-Wife* expounds "the distinction between illusion and reality," the director generally despairs of any help from that quarter. How is the cast to send the audience out of the theatre thinking about illusion and reality? Plays tend to be about people, and audiences react on that basis. Until a play is as overtly abstract as *Waiting for Godot*, the audience is unlikely to start thinking about extrapolative abstractions. The critic may dream them up, but experienced performers will tell you that abstractions are nearly impossible to communicate without explicit statement—and not always easy even then. And stating them is one thing; making them meaningful and interesting to an audience, quite another.

We should not forget that even authorial interpretation may not prove communicable in performance. Brecht's *Mother Courage* is a notorious example of a play in which audiences have persistently identified with a character the author meant to pillory—

and kept right on doing so, even after Brecht rewrote the piece to blacken his unwanted heroine.¹⁶ In this extreme case the interpretation declared "correct" by the author proved impossible to communicate successfully in performance.

Reading versus seeing

The difference between reading and seeing a play can hardly be overemphasized.¹⁷ The reader controls the pace at which he proceeds. He can stop to think; go back and reread a passage; turn back to Act I to check a detail or hunt down a possible discrepancy. He can pause to daydream; can impose the set, cast, and performance style of his choosing; or can resolutely ignore everything but the words. The theatregoer has none of these options, and his experience is thereby both richer and more limited. He sees what is put before him, and he cannot lift his eyes from the page (or push a button) to stop the play while he thinks. The many choices of characterization and sympathy left to the reader are made by the director, like them or not. Theatregoing is an experience—one usually designed to engender an immediate response that is largely beyond the control of the spectator, though his personal predilections may play a large part in governing that response. Reading is an altogether more self-controlled enterprise, and one which invites both fantasy and ratiocination. The responses of the reader are naturally less governed and controllable than those of the theatregoer, and the range of reasonable interpretive responses concomitantly wider.

As an example of criticism better suited to the reader than the theatregoer we would offer Aubrey Williams' *An Approach to*

16. Such failure to control audience response is by no means limited to the theatre. Richardson's revisions of *Clarissa* show him struggling to make the rapist Lovelace hateful to a multitude of readers who persisted in finding him attractive.

17. We should add that readers seldom "see" even what the author specifies by way of stage movement and theatrical effects. For a vivid reconstruction of "Shakespeare's direction of his plays" from the speeches and stage directions of his plays, see Ann Pasternak Slater, *Shakespeare the Director* (Brighton, England: Harvester, 1982). Slater makes especially good use of stage directions from "bad" quartos, but what she can pull out of familiar folio texts is also extremely revealing.

Congreve (1979). Williams presumes an "audience" both explicitly Christian and decidedly inclined to extract moral edification from its entertainment. We can hardly deny that anyone so minded can moralize practically any text—from *The Miller's Tale* to *The Country-Wife* or Molière's *Dom Juan*. But how many theatregoers of 1693 saw *The Old Batchelour* in anything like the terms of Professor Williams' discussion? Outcry at the time about "The Bawdy Batchelour," not to mention the howls of the Reverend Jeremy Collier, suggest that some part of the audience reacted to the play's obvious bawdry. Of course this by no means invalidates Williams' reading: Congreve's detractors may have been misreading him. But in our view the play could not have been staged to elicit Williams' reading—unless the audience was as exegetically-minded as Professor Williams would have us believe. Lack of Christianized response to comedy from Congreve's audience (except in denunciations) seems to us to argue strongly against such a hypothesis.

Both readers and playgoers tend to see what they are predisposed to see. If, for example, you want to find a moral center for *The Country-Wife*, an obvious solution is to hail the marriage of Harcourt and Alithea as the "right way" for this society, and Alithea as a high moral norm for the play—as Norman Holland has done.¹⁸ For the reader in the reflective solitude of his study, brooding over the play and pondering its implications, this is by no means an unreasonable idea. The theatrical experience of the play, however, is quite different. Harcourt and Alithea are thin and peripheral characters compared to Horner and the Pinch-wives. To stage the play to make them memorable, let alone normative, would be extremely difficult.

Producibility versus validity

By "valid" we mean that an interpretation is (a) compatible with the plain verbal sense of the text, and (b) in accord with known facts about the author and the original performance conditions. D. W. Jefferson's "comic" interpretation of Dryden's he-

18. Holland, *The First Modern Comedies*, Chapter 8.

roic plays, for example, seems to us at odds both with the plays (from which he concentrates on a few selected passages) and with Dryden's critical commentary on them.¹⁹ Without very strong evidence indeed we would not be prepared to believe that Otway wrote satires on the Tory party, or that Etherege saw his comedies as moral treatises. Common sense does have a place in criticism.

Not all producible interpretations are valid. The eighteenth-century productions of *Venice Preserv'd* in which Pierre became a heroic opponent of government tyranny were evidently highly effective in the theatre, but their republican ideology was radically at odds with the original Tory purport of the play in 1682. (In this case substantial cutting was necessary to make the script suitable to the changed ideological purpose.) For the literary critic, validity in the sense of conformity to the author's basic concept of the play (if apparent) is a significant criterion in assessing an interpretation. For the director, it is much less an issue.

Consider Shadwell's *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688), an adaptation of Terence's *The Brothers*. The play traces the fortunes of two brothers, one given a liberal "city" education, the other raised in the country. The country brother quickly proves to be a booby and a gull. We soon learn that the town brother, though advertised as a model of moral rectitude, has a bastard by a mistress he has cast off, and has just seduced a lawyer's previously innocent daughter. He sweet-talks his new mistress for three acts, until he finds a wealthy heiress to marry, at which point he both swears that the lawyer's daughter is sexually innocent and pays her father £1,500 (easily \$50,000 in current buying power) to drop the matter—i.e., to shut up. Our hero then marries the heiress, solemnly assuring her that he is a reformed character. What are we to make of this? Is Shadwell satirizing the corruption and hypocrisy of the "town" mores? Or is he—as the text says—holding the town brother up as a model of gentlemanly reform and good

19. D. W. Jefferson, "The Significance of Dryden's Heroic Plays," *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, 5 (1940), 125–39.

behavior? Given what we know of Shadwell, the original production circumstances, and other plays of the time, we would be rash to imagine that he did not take this offensive bilge quite seriously. For the audience of 1688 the philandering was normal (at least in plays), the generosity and reform at least technically admirable. But suppose Brecht were to have hit on this play (instead of *The Recruiting Officer*) as a vehicle for displaying exploitation by the ruling classes. Without changing a word Brecht could stage the play to make it a searing indictment of the gentry's callous disregard for the humanity of the lower classes, a revealing illustration of the amorality of the money ethic, and so forth. And it would work. Indeed, almost any other production concept would be very hard to sell to an audience today.

Let us try to summarize our position on some thorny issues. A producible interpretation may not be historically valid, though any stageable interpretation possesses a certain de facto legitimacy for the theatre. Hamlet could certainly be played as a homosexual, remote though this appears from Shakespeare's view of his play, or anything implied by the text. We are dealing with three distinct concepts here. A *producible interpretation* is not necessarily *historically valid*; a *valid interpretation*, however, should be producible, unless the critic has specifically disavowed the applicability of his reading to actual performance. For the theatrical critic, a valid interpretation is a producible one.

Audience diversity

If we are to analyze "meaning" in terms of audience understanding, or a play's "impact" on an audience, then one of our crucial problems is to define and comprehend that audience. Uniformitarian assumptions are convenient but unsound.²⁰ To assert

20. We may have our pick in this period. According to K. M. P. Burton, the Restoration audience was a coterie consisting principally of "courtiers, hangers-on, and prostitutes" (*Restoration Literature* [London: Hutchinson, 1958], p. 63); Aubrey Williams suggests that what Restoration "playwrights and audiences had most in common" was "a shared upbringing and schooling in the basic doctrines and precepts of the Christian religion" (*An Approach to Congreve*, p. 1). Of course, upon reflection one may conclude that there is less contradiction in these positions than one might at first suppose.

uniformity in politics, morals, humor, and world view in members of the London audience of the 1980s would bring immediate derision upon the dimwitted proposer of such an idea. We see no reason to suppose that the audience was any less heterogeneous in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²¹ A basic principle for the serious critic must be recognition of audience diversity.

Not all writers of comedy in the Carolean period—nor, we may suppose, all members of the audience—despised the country, approved of fornication, sneered at cast mistresses, and believed fervently in the Tory view of the Exclusion Crisis. As soon as we start to say that libertines were admired and fallen women despised in the late seventeenth century, we are adopting a set of blinders that will prevent us from reading a play like Aphra Behn's *The Revenge* (1680) at all accurately.

To admit the pluralism of audience values at all times debars us from easy appeals to "what the seventeenth-century audience would have thought." How then are we to analyze "meaning" as a contemporary audience understood it, especially given the relative dearth of audience testimony from the period at issue? This is not a problem to be lightly dismissed. To cling to simplistic generalizations (the court wit coterie, etc.) is irresponsible. To abandon the case as hopeless is equally so—an abdication of responsibility that exaggerates the difficult into the impossible. Serious study of audience composition and response is still in its infancy, and belongs more to performance analysis than to production analysis, but the critic should at least refrain from imposing false generalizations in defense of tidy interpretations. The audience member with violent moral objections to adultery will respond to *The Country-Wife* quite differently from the earl of Rochester, or from someone able to treat stage adultery as a lark or a joke. For the objector, production choices are irrelevant and will not work: the subject automatically irritates or offends, re-

21. For a discussion, see Robert D. Hume, *The Rakish Stage* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1983), Chapters 1 and 2.

Concept of Producible Interpretation

regardless of how it is presented. We can analyze the affective response apparently sought by play or production; we can study whatever actual audience responses are available to us; we cannot claim to dictate a "correct" response to the audience.

Producible then versus producible now

The popularity of historical criticism (claiming to recover meaning as perceived by an author's contemporary audience) has encouraged a widespread belief that the "original" meaning of plays is now unrecapturable in the theatre. Topicalities often do lose their significance. *Venice Preserv'd* could not be staged today to "mean" what it did as a comment on Whigs and the Popish Plot for the audience of 1682. Those plays—including *The Wives Excuse* and *The Beaux' Stratagem*—that protest the lack of a divorce law can try to appeal to modern views of women's rights, but the impact of their protest against a specific injustice is inevitably diminished. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suffers from the same difficulty. But perhaps because plays are art, not life, good ones often retain a surprising theatrical viability long after they have lost the topical interest that was a prominent part of their original appeal. Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671) held the stage decades after its butts had vanished into oblivion. Sir Robert Howard's *The Committee* (1662) was a repertory staple for a century, though the puritan sequestration committee it retrospectively satirizes must have been a dim memory by the 1690s.

Critics with uniformitarian assumptions have often cited the beliefs and values of that ubiquitous "seventeenth-century reader" (or playgoer) as justification for all sorts of assertions about what seventeenth-century plays allegedly meant and how they would have been taken. We may certainly agree that the attitude of the New York or San Francisco audience of the 1980s toward Catholics is very different from the attitude predominant in the London audience in 1680 during the Popish Plot hysteria. This difference will clearly affect reactions to *The Spanish Fryar*. We believe, however, that Dryden's play makes its attitude toward Catholics quite sufficiently explicit for audience comprehension.

attractive protagonist and not directing it elsewhere rarely commends itself to performers. What to do with the end is certainly a problem. If this is not a case of Degeneration Rewarded, then what is it? Professor Zimbardo seems quite uncomfortable with the end and gives it minimal attention, a solution more readily open to the critic than to the director.

The issue of reward is even more sharply posed by Percy G. Adams in one of the best articles ever published on the play.²⁶ Adams points out that Manly either "rapes" Olivia (copulates with her while pretending to be Fidelity) or lies in claiming that he has slept with her. Critics have tended to skim over the point, but in the theatre a director would have to make a decision. The text is ambiguous, but "the plain dealer" is one kind of person if he rapes Olivia and an entirely different kind if he does not." Neither reading is flattering, but a director must adopt one of them. A Manly-as-hero production would presumably minimize the damage by having him merely lie. A production bent on showing him up can display him, as Adams suggests, "adjusting his rumpled clothes." Rewarding the "plain dealer" with Fidelity (who has sat outside and wept during the crucial moments) can hardly be anything but brutal irony.²⁷ The ending is generally treated as "conventional," but given what it follows critics seem surprisingly complaisant about it.

Virginia Ogden Birdsall, also writing in 1970, swung back to

26. "What Happened in Olivia's Bedroom? or Ambiguity in *The Plain Dealer*," *Essays in Honor of Esmond Linworth Marilla*, ed. Thomas Austin Kirby and William John Olive (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 174-87.

27. Eric Rothstein offers us an alternative response in a personal letter. "I think Manly 'rapes' Olivia, if you want to call that 'rape,' and that the audience is delighted (as with other bed tricks in comedies) by the revenge, and that Manly is all the more the hero as the result of action rather than railing. . . . Why would *anyone* think it wrong to screw Olivia? or cuckold Vernish? or humiliate both of them by making this known?" There is a good probability that the gallants in the audience of 1676 did respond this way, though we would argue that *The Plain Dealer* invites a more complicated kind of judgment than most "bed trick" comedies.

the old Manly-as-hero view, but with a difference.²⁸ Declaring that "Manly is himself at no time being satirized by Wycherley," she argues that we are not to laugh at him as an unrealistic idealist, but to pity him for his inability to cope with a corrupt society. The reading is plausible, though ineffectuality is hard to make attractive, and little in the text makes Manly easy to play for pity—he is too abusive, both verbally and physically. This reading at least makes sense of the ending, but we would have to regard its producibility as questionable.

Is Wycherley alluding to Dryden or Molière?

At least two recent critics have suggested that "outside" allusion is a key to understanding Wycherley's satiric aims in *The Plain Dealer*. Perhaps the most ingenious account of Manly is Cynthia Matlack's.²⁹ In essence, she argues that Manly is a deliberate parody of Dryden's Almanzor in *The Conquest of Granada* (1670-71). Some of the parallels were first pointed out by John Harold Wilson: both are intensely masculine, fierce fighters, rugged individualists, rough and blunt, devoted to honor, intolerant of sycophants and courtiers, very much in love, and deceived by villains.³⁰ All very true. But did Wycherley write with Almanzor consciously in mind? Did he hope or assume that the audience, unprompted, would see and respond to the parallel? (We have no evidence that any member of the seventeenth-century audience did in fact see the resemblance and interpret the play in light of it.) Did Wycherley assume that the play could "work" even for an audience that failed to see this alleged connection? We doubt that Wycherley would have attempted specific parody without making it explicit. Matlack's reading is in fact simply a variant on the Chorney school. The audience of 1676 might well have

28. Birdsall, *Wild Civility*, Chapter 7. Following quotation from p. 161.

29. "Parody and Burlesque of Heroic Ideals in Wycherley's Comedies: A Critical Reinterpretation of Contemporary Evidence," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 8 (1972), 273-86.

30. *A Preface to Restoration Drama* (1965; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), p. 161.

recognized the "heroic" nature of Manly's ethos, whether played straight or as a comic target. But to see *The Plain-Dealer* as aimed specifically at Dryden, or as necessarily a burlesque, is unconvincing.

Equally questionable, in our view, is the idea that the play should be interpreted with one eye on a quasi source in Molière. Peter Holland states unequivocally that the first scene "establishes from the beginning the parodic distance of *The Plain-Dealer* from *Le Misanthrope*. Molière's play is recalled so that Wycherley can mark his distance from it."³¹ We have all sorts of problems with this breezy assertion. Exactly how is *Le Misanthrope* "recalled" to the audience's attention? Critics since Langbaine have generally concluded that Molière's play served as "the initial impulse" for *The Plain-Dealer*, an assumption we would not dispute.³² But the play does not announce itself as a translation or adaptation, either in the prologue or later in published form on the title page or in the dedication. The character names are entirely different. Molière's play (1666) had not previously been translated or adapted on the English stage, and no English translation had been published. Many members of a modern academic audience would have read or seen it, but in 1676 what proportion of Wycherley's audience would have been familiar with the play, let alone drawn the connection unaided? No doubt a literary critic can learn something from the comparison, but we would argue that in performance *The Plain-Dealer* must be considered entirely on its own terms.

Does the 1676 cast imply satire of Manly?

In a very helpful discussion of the impact of the cast on the original production, Holland brings up Thomas Davies' 1784 comment associating Manly with Pinchwife in *The Country-Wife* (p. 185). The attraction of such cross-association is obvious, but so are the dangers. In this case Davies wonders why Michael

31. *The Ornament of Action*, Chapter 6. Quotation from p. 187.

32. John Wilcox, *The Relation of Molière to Restoration Comedy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1938), p. 94.

Mohun was not cast for both parts. But suppose Charles Hart (the original Manly) had also taken Pinchwife? This would prove nothing at all, unless we had overwhelming evidence that he stuck rigidly to a single "line." Repertory companies cast parts as best they can, not always to ideal advantage. Critics have pointed to Almanzor and Pinchwife as hints for Manly—but one can just as well look to Alexander (in *The Rival Queens*), Aureng-Zebe, Brutus, Mosca, Nero, and a flock of Hart's other roles. The more skilled and varied the actor, the less use the critic will find a study of roles in determining what any one of them was like.

A somewhat different sort of problem is raised by Holland's comment that "the juxtaposition of heroic Hart and comic Haines [Lord Plausible] hints at ridicule. No audience could have forgotten the famous story of Haines' mocking Hart during a performance of Jonson's *Catiline*" (p. 187). As far as we are aware, this "famous story" was first published in an obscure pamphlet in 1701. It concerned an incident that occurred in a single performance, probably in 1668, and no later than 1672. How many members of the audience in 1676 would conclude that Haynes—in a role in which he was typecast—was presented as a hint that Manly is "a bubble ripe for bursting," as Holland would have it? Haynes was perennially in trouble, and his employment with the King's Company was intermittent. To assume that any significant part of the audience would recall an incident at least four and probably eight years earlier seems more than a little farfetched, and to say that Haynes' presence as Plausible was "inevitably . . . a hint" of ridicule seems hard to justify. Moreover, as soon as either cast member dropped out, the hidden message would be lost.

What does the audience "learn"?

One of the most interesting and sophisticated readings of *The Plain-Dealer* to date, and as literary criticism perhaps the most convincing, is Peter Holland's, which concentrates on miscommunication and misinterpretation within the play. Using the ambiguities and contradictions that have confused or annoyed other

critics, Holland assumes that the ambiguity is functional, designed to frustrate the audience. The point, in Holland's view, is that by the end "*The Plain-Dealer* has taught the audience that judgement is a fraud, that there are few means by which we can guarantee knowledge and none at all by which we can talk about it" (p. 202). In our opinion, this is an excellent illustration of a plausible and ingenious literary reading that is virtually unproducibile. *The Plain-Dealer* shows us Manly, Freeman, Olivia, Vernish, Fidelia, the Widow Blackacre, et al., and an audience is going to respond to the fortunes of these characters. Holland's reading focuses on the judgmental processes of the viewer (or really the reader)—but how is a production to force the audience to make the leap to abstraction and conclude that "judgement is a fraud"? Indeed, such a conclusion is appropriate principally to a production that tries—against theatrical logic—to play the "inconsistencies" decried by literary critics. Holland's reading is a gallant attempt to make "literary" sense of the play, but neither the "humours character" nor the "satiric scourge" interpretation suggests that judgment is particularly difficult, let alone fraudulent. Dryden's praise for *The Plain-Dealer* as "one of the most bold, most general, and most useful Satyres which has ever been presented on the English Theater" does not suggest any doubts about the judgments it calls for.³³ Holland's reading is, in fact, peculiarly modern, born of 1970s doubts about the very possibility of meaningful communication.

Our skepticism about the producibility of Holland's interpretation is reinforced by what seem to us inconsistencies of method. Holland is naturally concerned with "authority" as the audience perceives it in the play. Fair enough, but just what counts as "the play"? Holland opens his analysis with a consideration of "confusion over the identity of the speaker of the dedication and prologue. Author, actor, and character are intertwined; the audience is dubious about the relative authority of

33. "The Authors Apology for Heroique Poetry; and Poctique Licence," prefixed to *The State of Innocence* (1677).

the various voices" (p. 171). True for the reader, no doubt, but in a book that claims attention to performance, this is a shocking lapse in method. Dedications were not spoken in the theatre, and indeed Wycherley is unlikely to have written the dedication by the time of the premiere. The dedication is illegitimate evidence; the prologue, questionable. Holland here muddles the very reading/performance distinction he so rightly insists upon.

Reflecting on this little survey of *Plain-Dealer* criticism, we would like to stress four points on which production analysis and literary criticism differ in practice. First, the "inconsistencies" or multiple interpretive possibilities that bedevil the literary critic are meat and drink for the production analyst. Second, the literary critic is at least de facto much freer to deal selectively with his text. Ignoring "what happens in Olivia's bedroom" may do the critic scant credit, but many have done so. Such selectivity merely renders a production analysis ridiculous: the contriver has to take a position on choices necessary to any production. Third, the supposed allusions and comparisons (Almanzor, Alceste) that critics freely introduce are much harder to justify in production analysis, where one must ask how, in a performance, the audience might be induced to make such a jump. Fourth, the abstract lessons devised by literary critics are the very devil to get across to an audience in a theatre.

CODA: THE OBJECTS OF DRAMATIC CRITICISM

The glaring inadequacy of most literary criticism applied to drama results from the longstanding assumption that there is *an* interpretation to be found. Many critics who would deny ~~that~~ they believe any such thing have in fact written as though they accepted such a premise. A playscript is by definition a vehicle designed for completion in performance, and the chances that only a single, "ideal" interpretation is appropriate are remote indeed. Recent trends in literary criticism suggest that future critics may be much less dogmatic. Deconstructionists and reader-response critics are now prepared to allow for multiplicity of meaning even

in poems. This is a healthy trend, though the justifications offered by these cognitive nihilists take us dangerously far in the direction of complete anarchy.³⁴ Even more than poems and novels, plays invite critical pluralism, and we must agree with Gerald Rabkin that the application of deconstructionist criticism to drama is overdue: "Questions of textuality, intertextuality, demystification, hermeneutics . . . have profound implications for the study of theatre."³⁵ The first step would seem to be willingness to deal with the special problems posed by works written for performance.

Who would claim that music is best left on the page? To anyone who argues that the performer inevitably puts his own imprint on the work, changes it, twists it in directions not specified on the page, there is a simple answer: Exactly. That's what it's there for. If we could imagine a player piano that could take the text of *As You Like It* or *King Lear* and render a letter-perfect "performance," the results would be as lifeless and boring as a machine-punched player piano performance of the "Moonlight" Sonata.

Drama criticism should not be tied entirely to performance. Many plays never get revived, and any one production is inevitably limited by the very choices that give it performance validity, even if the performance itself is magnificent. "How was it done?" is an interesting question. "How could it be done?" is usually more fruitful. As the late Daniel Seltzer pointed out, the "real problem" in relying on actual performance "is that performance, while by nature unlike an act of literary criticism, always has one of the same results: *it cannot avoid implying a point of view.*"³⁶ A

34. For a sensible attempt to mediate between the claims of "radical pluralists" (Derrida & Co.) and the objections of "critical monists" (Hirsch, Wellek et al.) see Paul B. Armstrong, "The Conflict of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism," *PMLA*, 98 (1983), 341–52.

35. Gerald Rabkin, "The Play of Misreading: Text/Theatre/Deconstruction," *Performing Arts Journal*, 7 (1983), 44–60. Quotation from p. 46.

36. "Shakespeare's Texts and Modern Productions," *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Norman Rabkin (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 89–115.

director must do one thing and thereby conceal other possibilities. The great virtue of production analysis is that it leaves us free to explore multiple possibilities.

Dramatic criticism comprises two basic activities: analysis of the script (production analysis) and analysis of actual performance of the script (performance analysis). The connection between production analysis and performance analysis is real, and so is the difference. Performance analysis enjoys the distinct advantage of dealing with actuality, with a production complete in all its details, with the experience of the real thing. Of course, the advantage is also a disadvantage: the critic is stuck with what the performance gives him. The production analyst is far freer to pursue hypothesis and speculation, to envision interpretive possibilities. Both approaches deal with such matters as "concept," dominant mood, effect of casting choices, style, tempo, intensity, energy/violence level, impact of scenery and costumes. Both must grapple with the slippery problem of "dominant idea." Is there one? If so, what? How is it communicated?

Legitimate performance analysis requires answers to at least four basic questions. (1) What does the text say? (2) What is the production concept—i.e., the view of characters and events presented? (3) What reaction does the production try to elicit from the audience? (4) Does the production succeed in its apparent aims? Production analysis is much less tied to the specifics of any single performance or concept. The writer of production analysis has a choice: whether (a) to concentrate on the multiplicity of possible choices, treating the text as an empowering agency, or (b) to present discrete, coherent interpretations in which all the choices are made. Our procedure in this book comes much closer to the latter. For each play we have sketched out two or three sharply different productions, striving to give a sense of the range of performance possibilities. Consequently our production concepts (e.g., "pathetic vehicle" versus "pessimistic satire" for *Venice Preserv'd*) should be regarded as paradigmatic rather than prescriptive, and readers must remember that in practice a director might legitimately opt for a middle way. Obviously, future critics

will find other production concepts for the plays we analyze in this book: we regard this as a healthy and desirable state of affairs. Good plays should be susceptible of a variety of different production concepts—this is the premise of our book—and to analyze or produce a play in one way does not in any sense invalidate another interpretation or production concept.

Production analysis and performance analysis must both deal with an experience (whether potential or actual), not just with a message to be decoded. John Styan speaks of the “emergent meaning” in drama, as opposed to the “immanent meaning” found in poems.³⁷ The literary critic who sticks firmly to text falsifies that text by treating it without regard for what it is—a performance vehicle. Our hope in writing this book has been to encourage a production-oriented dramatic criticism, a criticism that is neither limited to the text nor dependent upon the availability of actual performance.

37. Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience*, p. 27.

2

The Production Process

Second Player. So it gets us money, 'tis no great matter.

The Rehearsal (1672), p. 5.

THIS CHAPTER is a bridge between critical theory and the specific analyses presented in the remainder of the book. Our aim is to sketch the original production circumstances for the late seventeenth-century plays we are about to discuss. For some readers this chapter will function as a reminder of the theatrical practicalities that impinge on the drama; for others, it will have to serve as a capsule introduction to the performance conditions in which these plays came to the stage. For most of the substance we can claim no originality, but we have tried to let its discussion serve as a way of bringing recent research to the attention of both sorts of readers. The Introduction to Part I of *The London Stage* remains the best general account of the background for the late seventeenth century, but a gratifying amount of new research has been done in the twenty years since its publication.

Despite this new scholarship, the evidence from which we have to work remains scrappy and unsatisfactory. Few were plays chosen? How were they cast? What went on during the re-

1. For a recent overview, see Robert D. Hume, “English Drama and Theatre 1660–1800: New Directions in Research,” *Theatre Survey*, 23 (1982): 71–100.