

## *Duncan, Dreary Davids and the Drama*

I have not written for a while, since I have been reading literature. Dramatic literature, that is: from Camus (good) to Sartre (bad).

I thought I'd say something about Arden. Early Arden is really good, bright, hard: I mean *Left-Handed Liberty*, *Ironhand*, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (all historical plays); but these were written before he got caught up with that D'Arcy termagant, when his plays become rather silly, with bits of woolly angry leftism jamming up the dramatic sense. The theatricality (base word) was still there; but he didn't really know what his plays were about dramatically. (The distinction between drama and theatre being important if we are concerned to retain any sense that drama is part of literature.) But, then, no one much knows what plays are about now: except Stoppard who knows his plays are about nothing; and Bennett who knows his plays are about nothing much.

I would say that no one has known what their plays are about since, say, 1965. Osborne did in *Luther*, Bolt did in *A Man for All Seasons*, and Miller did in *The Crucible*: for they were about "conscience". But Tynan said (complaining about Bolt since he could hardly go back on his passion for Osborne, at least not yet), rightly, that Bolt probably didn't care much whether More was Catholic, Protestant or a Ranter. Which raised the question of what all this empty conscience was about.

Later playwrights answered the question by having their actors fight, rape and eat each other to the sound of drums, improvised speeches and coruscating laughter at the decline of the British Empire (as well as self-pitying tears at the decline of Arts Council funding). If I were to speculate idly I would say that something bad happened to the water supply in around 1935, which is the date after which all playwrights were born who proved liable to engage in the sort of double-think which is standard fare in any Blue Methuen playbook of the seventies. This can be summarised as a creed: "Er, I am against the system, which is violent; but, er, here is my play, which is violent." This is certainly the creed of the brutal Bs (Brenton, Bond and Barker) and, suitably twisted with additional rancour and slyness, the creed of all the dreary Davids (Hare, Mercer, Storey, Edgar). If we compare the vacuity of the mixture of pseudery and spartishness which has dominated drama since the seventies to what existed before, we can only marvel at how the levels of satire and criticism (as well as literary quality) have dropped off since 1956. This is a famous date in drama, for it was the year Tynan spoke. And we know he did not speak in vain. Jonathan Griffin published a historical verse drama in 1957 called *The Hidden King*. It had a story as good as anything written on the old Shakespearian theme of true kingship. But all that could be heard from the critics was the silence as they listened to the clatter of the kitchen sinks.

To take one instance of how wrong everyone nowadays is about older drama, and especially verse drama, which is always treated as if it were a cul-de-sac called Christopher Fry, there is the case of Ronald Duncan. His play *This Way to the Tomb* (1946) is staggering: better than Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, using Eliot's poetic language to more powerful effect than its originator did. The play is in two parts: the first, "The Masque", a poetic depiction of the stages of the martyrdom of St Antony, is already so perfect and miraculous and complete that one imagines the second part must be unnecessary. But then, on reading "The Anti-Masque", one finds all the subtlety of the first part used like a lance to shatter the speculum modernitatis depicted in the second: for in this second part there is a poetic display, in subfusc verse, of the chat-show hosts, young girls and food-sellers who cluster around the tomb to celebrate the historic anniversary of the saint's death, without having any idea about why they are there. All of our contemporary "celebrity" culture is mocked in this play: and using the very effective *verfremdungseffekt* which Eliot used for the knights' apology in *Murder in the Cathedral* and which he himself originally derived from the epilogue of Shaw's *Saint Joan*.

Shaw's Joan, Eliot's Becket and Duncan's Antony all mock modernity with sanctity: but the last is the greatest of the three. *This Way to the Tomb* is one of the masterpieces of English creation in the 20th century. But I don't think anyone knows. It is as good as Calderón.

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