



'The Play's the Thing': A Polemic

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‘the play’s the thing’

—a polemic—

Colette Brooks

“so many images, for instance, of men, are formed simultaneously in the human mind, that the powers of imagination break down, not indeed utterly, but to the extent of the mind losing count of small differences between individuals (e.g. colour, size, etc.) and their definite number, and only distinctly imagining that, in which all the individuals, in so far as the body is affected by them, agree . . . this the mind expresses by the name man, and this it predicates of an infinite number of particular individuals”

—Spinoza, *The Ethics*

Though other literary forms wax and wane, the novel, short story, diary, epic and such forever suffering favor or oblivion at the hands of the reading public, plays, it seems, are always out of fashion; unread by all but the very few, those generally drama students, *sui generis*, indefatigable by definition. It is possible to account for this lack of readerly interest by holding, as many have, that plays are not primarily literary objects at all and thus cannot exert the kind of imaginative claims that inhere naturally in real literature; but this argument simply cedes the point to those who would discredit dramatic literature in any case. It is perhaps more promising to grant the legitimacy of plays as literature, by fiat, and turn the inquiry to our reading practices themselves; to determine whether there is something inherent in the way in which we read, think about, talk about and teach drama that causes our powers and imagination to falter at the point at which we approach the individual play. If this is so, the layman’s lack of affinity for the form should come as no surprise.

Traditionally, as a look at the distinguished critical texts of various eras suggests, the dramatist's work has been treated in its *entirety*, the whole oeuvre or canon considered at a stroke, often in a single chapter. Individual plays have been seen as constitutive of a larger web of significance, whether cultural or canonical, related either to other concerns or simply to other works. (Newer approaches, such as the intertextual, present the impulse in more modern dress.) We have taken this wide-angle, macroscopic view to be so natural, so befitting the subject, that it seems perverse or idle even to point it out, much less question its continued efficacy. Yet it is possible that this reluctance to take a work on its own terms, or to confine exploration to just what those terms might prove to be, is causing us to lose sight of the plays as *distinct* theatrical entities; to lose sense of the individual contours of the works as we search only for those qualities that they share. We may be developing, in consequence, generations of skilled exegetes who cannot, in this fundamental sense, read plays *fully*; who cannot find that imaginative reality intrinsic to the text that each good play possesses, *in vitro*, a reality that no director, actor or production alone can provide. Without such respect for the specific, no larger theme or view can have resonance, and without such feeling for the individual play, in manuscript, no production can truly be appreciated.

Not surprisingly, the macroscopic view we adopt towards the writer's work as a whole finds its corollary in the global approach invariably taken to the individual play itself. Two decades after Susan Sontag put the pox on interpretation, to say nothing of the years that have passed since Aristotle gave us our first formalist breakdown of the drama, plays are still widely viewed as having an almost vehicular relationship to *meaning*, that vague cargo that attaches to various works and moves freely from one art form to another. Read in this way plays are easy prey to distillation and paraphrase, strategies that serve to distance the reader from the work itself, offering instead an abstract stripped of texture, weight and specificity. What this kind of reading fails to reveal, what it obscures as surely as if veiled by design, is the *theatrical topography* of the play—that moment-to-moment formation of image, *gestus*, and idea that constitutes each particular text. What we need to recover, as readers, is this sense of imaginative movement through the work, the play itself the only horizon at hand. We may need to attend to the impulses of the plastic and visual arts in order to revivify our sense of the dimensionality of the text. It is certainly of note that this approach most resembles the work done, moment by moment, in rehearsal.

What is at issue, ultimately, is whether a truly theatrical imagination can be cultivated in those who first encounter the theatre by way of its literature, and much is at stake. The interest lost at this level is not likely to be recouped at any later point; high school students and others who hate to *read* plays are not going to become the ardent theatregoers of the future. Those, however, who are taught to search out the theatricality of the text, to find in a traditional play unsuspected imaginative dimensions, stand to become responsive and genuinely educated audiences who possess the

capacity to take pleasure in the theatre, in all its guises, and to value the work of the entire theatrical ensemble of which the writer is, finally, only one element. The prospect is not unimaginable.

Colette Brooks is a critic and dramaturg, currently teaching at Columbia University.