

# Manfred Jahn

## A Guide to the Theory of Drama

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This tutorial is mainly based on Manfred Pfister's *The Theory of Drama* (first German edition 1977; English translation 1988). It offers a toolbox of basic concepts and shows how to put it to work in the analysis of plays. Now converted to PDF format, this update incorporates table-of-contents bookmarks, revised graphics, and some recent references.

**Tip: use Shift-Ctrl clicks to open links in a separate browser tab.**

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### 1. Text and performance

**1.1.** In a bookshop, you will find the drama section next to the fiction and the poetry sections. But does that mean that a play is a type of text just like a novel or a poem? Generally, while accepting that a play can be read as a literary text, most theorists today assume that the true nature of a play lies in its becoming a "play in performance", in which the characters' parts are enacted by actors. The play's text or *playscript* is often seen as a guide to a performance, comparable to a blueprint, a musical score (Krieger 1995: 78), or even a recipe for baking a cake (Searle 1975: 329). As for the role of the audience, audience reactions such as laughing or crying are not only integral parts of a performance but also have an immediate feedback effect. All this is reflected in Pfister's basic definition.

- A **play** is a narrative form mainly designed to be staged as a public performance. A performance is *multimedial* because it consists of both auditory and visual elements.

**1.2.** Because plays and novels "tell stories" there is a family resemblance between them, and for this reason the theory of drama and the theory of narrative texts cover a good deal of common ground. Indeed, whenever possible, the following account will borrow from the inventory of concepts established within what is now known as *narratology*. See Jahn (2021a) for an introduction to prose-text narratology, as well as Richardson (1987; 1988; 1991), Jahn (2001), McIntyre (2006), Nünning/Sommer (2008), Fludernik (2008), Weidle (2009), Brütsch (2017), also the substantial

German language studies by Korthals (2003), Muny (2008), Claycomb (2013), Weber (2017), and Horstmann (2018).

**1.3.** Regarding the criterion of public presentation and reception, two exceptions have to be noted: closet dramas and private showings.

- A **closet drama** is a play that is primarily designed to be read. Often these plays are identified as *dramatic poems*. Examples: Milton, *Samson Agonistes*; Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*; Byron, *Manfred*; Browning, *Pippa Passes*; Barrett Browning, *The Seraphim*; Mann, *Fiorenza*.
- As to **private showings**, a related example comes to mind: the seclusive Bavarian king Ludwig II had a habit of ordering entirely private performances of Wagner's operas – much to the composer's annoyance.

**1.4.** Just as the reception of a play is a collective public experience, staging a play is a collective collaboration involving many people including producers, directors, designers, choreographers, musicians, and, of course, actors.

- A **director** is the person in charge of staging a play, developing the concept of the production, and of conducting the rehearsals; also the person generally responsible for and credited with a production, typically designated his or her production. (Note, however, that, like conducting, directing is a relatively recent, ie, 20C, profession.)
- A **producer** (also: theater manager) is usually responsible for managing the financial aspects of a production, the hiring of actors etc. A good producer "has the genius to recognize a potentially great piece of theatre as well as find the finance for it to be put on" (Lathan 2000).
- A **stage manager** is in charge of the concrete performance event, especially of overseeing and coordinating all backstage activity.

**1.5.** It is quite an enlightening exercise to compare the narrative techniques available to a playwright as opposed to those available to a novelist (or, for that matter, a film director). Commonalities and differences obtain in (1) modes of reception, (2) themes and subjects, and (3) media limits and affordances. Here is a tentative overview.

- Commonalities. What novels and plays have in common is that they are both narrative genres. The narrative world of plays (also known as *diegesis*) is not distinct in principle from any other narrative world. Plays have a story and a plot ([7.2](#)), and even if they do not literally "tell" their story, its *tellability* is a dramatic criterion as well as one of novels. Moreover, as Chatman (1990: 9) points out, plays have the double chronology of all narrative presentations (the duration of the performance and the duration of the reception). They also admit of the usual temporal manipulations (flashforwards, flashbacks, and other anachronies, [N5.2](#)).
- Differences. The main difference between the two genres is that novels (and playscripts) are read by readers while plays are multimedial performances taking place in front of audiences. Other distinctive features are a matter of stylistic options rather than sharp distinctions in kind. For instance, it is easier for the novelistic narrator to be *omniscient* and *omnipresent*, to supply information on historical backgrounds and locations, to present authoritative and summary accounts, to filter the story through the point of view of one or more characters, and to express a character's secret inner life. There are dramatic equivalents to these, but they generally rely on specific conventions such as the soliloquy, *alter-ego characters* etc. Often these are less natural than the novelistic forms.

See Goffman (1974: 149-155); also Jahn (2021a), especially the sections on authorial narration ([N3.3.5](#)), point of view/focalization ([N3.2](#)), narrative modes ([N5.3.1](#)).

The reader may wish to skip the following sections on major approaches to drama, repeating an account presented in an earlier essay (Jahn 2001). Feel free to jump to [2.1](#).

## 1.6. Schools of drama theory

Historically, it is useful to distinguish three types or schools of drama theory: Poetic Drama, Theater Studies, and Reading Drama. As the following brief survey will show, they constitute the dialectic stages of a Fichtean thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle. Each school, from its specific point of view, has strong views about what counts as true, false, interesting, important, or unimportant; and their followers belong to distinct "interpretive communities" (Fish 1980). In the following paras, these schools are summarily described by listing their main tenets, their favorite interpretive strategies, their keywords and catchphrases, and their agendas.

**1.6.1. Poetic Drama** prioritizes the (printed) dramatic text. Reading the dramatic text is seen as a uniquely suitable and rewarding experience, particularly when viewed against the shortcomings of theaters, actors, and actual performances. Only the careful reading of a play brings out the work's full aesthetic quality and richness.

- *Interpretive strategy*: close reading (Brooks 1947).
- *Agenda*: Dislike of actors, audiences, and theatrical institutions (expressly including the Renaissance public theaters).
- *Catchphrases*: Poetic drama, dramatic poetry, drama as literature, theater in the mind, "inferior to the original".
- *Testimonial*:

I hardly ever go to the theater ... although I read all the plays I can get. I don't go to the theater because I can always do a better production in my mind. ... Is not *Hamlet*, seen in the dream theatre of the imagination as one reads, a greater play than *Hamlet* interpreted even by a perfect production? (Eugene O'Neill, qtd. Redmond 1991: 57-8).

**1.6.2. Theater Studies** is an approach that privileges the performance over the text. According to this approach, a play's text has no independent existence whatsoever. See Styan (1975) for a programmatic exposition, Hornby (1977) for a critique of the Poetic Drama approach, Levin (1979), Taylor (1985), Hawkins (1985) [all on the text vs performance issue as related to Shakespeare], Horstmann (2018) [ uses the term *theater narratology*].

- *Interpretive strategy*: Analyzing a performance as the product of theatrical conditions; the sociology of drama; stage codes and stage semiotics; stage histories of plays; the dynamics of collaborative authorship.
- *Agenda*: Establishing a distinct discipline; attacking Poetic Drama for finding faults in plot construction that viewers are unlikely ever to notice.
- *Catchphrase*: A play's "coming to life" in performance.
- *Testimonial*:

Before introducing the plays in this volume to the reader, I should like to make some brief observations on dramatic writing and my own particular attitude toward it. Although the dramatist may also be a man of letters, capable of producing novels, poems, essays, criticism, I believe that drama is not simply a branch of literature but a separate little art, with its own peculiar values and technicalities. (And one day, if I am spared, I hope to deal with this subject at some length, if only as a protest against the nonsense often offered us by literary professors and lecturers who write about the drama without understanding the Theatre.) I hope that the plays in this volume can be enjoyed by a reader, but I must stress the fact that they were not written to be read but to be played in theatres, where if properly produced and acted they come alive. A play that has never found a theatre, actors, audiences, is not really a play at all. A dramatist is a writer who works in and for the Theatre. (It is a significant fact that all considerable dramatists play an active part in the first productions of their plays, and never accept the legendary role of the wistful little author whom everyone in the playhouse ignores.) If there are any Cézannes of the Theatre, working throughout a whole lifetime, misunderstood and neglected, I for one have never heard of them. A dramatist must have actors and audiences in order to realise himself: thus he must come to terms with the Theatre of his time. (Priestley 1948: vii)

Many theorists comment on the fact that analysis of performance is a notoriously difficult undertaking. An opening night of a play is unlike that of the final performance, a performance cannot be stopped in its course, there are no pages to turn back to or to skip, references and interpretations are both difficult to document and difficult to verify (should all such references be based on a video recording?). Consider the following skeptical comment by Laurence Lerner:

I do believe that Shakespeare's plays are really plays, and take on their life in performance [...]. But it was hard to know how to act on this belief. [...] There are two kinds of theatre-centred criticism. There are the attempts by scholars to write about the great actors of the past: these are often fascinating, but I have never found that they tell us anything about Shakespeare. There is even something ghostly about a discussion of the acting of Garrick or Kean or Booth, dead before the critic ever went to a theatre. Then there are press notices of plays: but are these not too ineluctably fixed in the here and now – or rather the there and then? Do we care what Miss Spinks was like as Hermia, or Mr Binks as Theseus, in a performance we barely remember or never saw? (Lerner 1967: 14)

**1.6.3. Reading Drama** is an approach which holds that the Poetic Drama and Theater Studies schools are based on unnecessarily biased positions. Instead, Reading Drama assumes an ideal recipient who is both a reader and a theatergoer – a reader who appreciates the text with a view to possible or actual performance, and a theatergoer who (re)appreciates a performance through his or her knowledge and re-reading of the text. The text is accepted both as a piece of literature and as a guide to performance; the movement from "page to stage" is considered equally important as that from "stage to page" (Berger 1989). Like a director, the reader of a play's text must be one "who is able to bring the numerous explicit and implicit signs and signals inherent in the literary text to life in his imagination" (Pfister 1988: 13). Programmatic texts: Ubersfeld (1977) [a study entitled *Lire le théâtre*], Elam (1980), Pfister (1988 [1977]), Scolnicov and Holland, eds. (1991) [a collection of essays entitled *Reading Plays*], Scanlan (1988) [a study entitled *Reading Drama*; author claims that "The richness of drama is most fully experienced when the reader is simultaneously aware of the structural and performance dimensions of the play" (p. iii)], Berger (1989) [excellent discussion of the Theater Studies vs. Reading Drama debate, illustrated with reference to "Shakespeare on Stage and Page"]. More recent (German language) studies include Korthals (2003), Muny (2008), and Weber (2017).

- *Interpretive strategy*: performance-oriented textual analysis or "stage-centered reading", "imaginary audition and visualization" (Berger 1989: 28); examination of the playscript's "actability" and "realizability"; comparing the reading of plays to the reading of novels. Example: Goodman and Burk 1996 on Churchill's *Top Girls*.
- *Agenda*: partial rehabilitation of the text as a piece of literature; cross-disciplinary exchange between critics, theorists, and theater practitioners.
- *Catchphrase*: virtual performance (Issacharoff 1989: 4; Alter 1990: ch. III.3).
- *Testimony*:

*Krapp's Last Tape* shares the formal ambiguity of all dramas: it is at once a text to be read and reread and a guide for live performance. [...] Indeed, the reader's awareness of a potential performance partially constitutes the text's meaning; if we are to make sense of the play, we must read with especially active visual imagination (Campbell 1978: 187).

Consider also Berger's recipe for *imaginary audition*:

We practice imaginary audition when, in a dialogue between A and B, we imagine the effect of A's speech on B; listening to A with B's ears, we inscribe the results of this audit in the accounts we render of B's language. But we can also [...] listen to B's language with B's ears. [...] As readers we join B [...] in monitoring his speech acts. This perspective converts B's speech to continuous self-interpretation or -interrogation [...]. (Berger 1989: 46)

**1.6.4. Composing Drama.** This is the present author's excursion into a play's audiovisual composition processes and the possible feedback on textual analysis. Basically, the approach proceeds from a simple model of audiovisual components, sets up a "Dramatic Composition Device", and treats

external and internal modes of focalization as integral units of composition. Special attention is paid to the presentation of dreams, visions, and memories. Of course, this is not an established part let alone "school" of drama theory, yet. See Jahn (2021c) for the original exposition.

## 2. Dramatic Communication

**2.1.** Story-telling is a form of narrative communication that usually involves several levels. In Figure 1, each level comes with its own set of addressers and addressees (senders and receivers). See Pfister (1988: 4), Chatman (1990), Jahn (2021a: 2.3), Fludernik (2008: 265) [for a performance-oriented refinement].

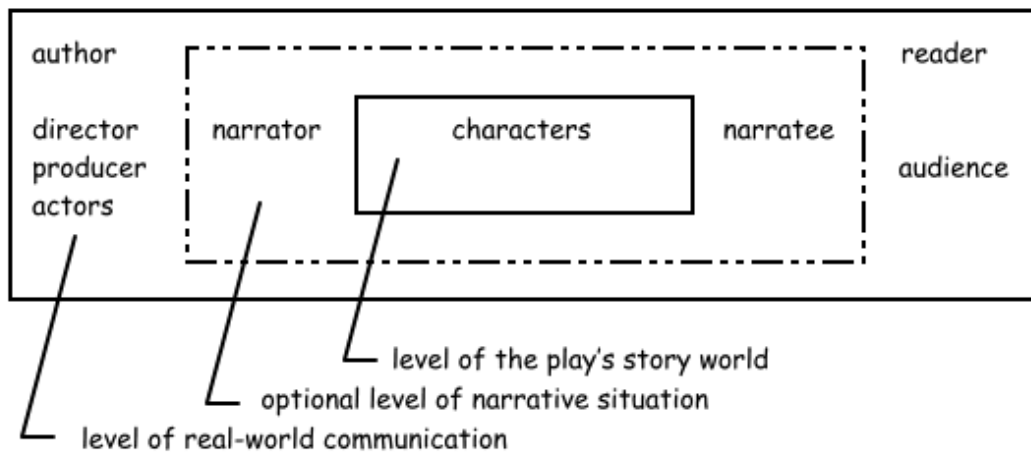


Fig. 1. Levels of dramatic communication.

- The **level of real-world communication** is the outermost level designating the communicational space in which an author (dramatist, playwright) writes the text of a play. This text is used by a director, in collaboration with a producer, actors, composers, etc, to design and stage a performance. In a sense, the playwright is the primary author, while the director and his/her team of collaborators are secondary authors. Addressees on this level are the readers of the play's text and the members of the audience in an actual performance. The level is a real-world or nonfictional level because all agents involved are real persons.
- The **level of narrating** (or of **fictional mediation**) is an optional intermediate level which is activated in *epic drama* only (see 2.2. below, also [ch6](#)), ie in plays that use a narrator acting as the teller, historian or commentator (examples are Shakespeare's *Pericles* and Shaffer's *Amadeus*). Communication at this level has its own here and now as well as its own line of action. Since narrators are fictional addressers, their counterparts are present or absent fictional addressees or *narratees*, even though sometimes it is the audience itself that is asked to assume the role of the narratee (explicitly so in *Amadeus*).
- The **level of the play's story world** (or of **fictional action**) is the level on which the characters communicate with each other. As has been recognized in speech-act theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1974), talking constitutes a special kind of act – a speech act. Hence a distinction can be made between verbal action (speeches, dialogues, etc) and nonverbal action (mime, gesture, movement, etc).

Real-life persons can occupy more than one positions in this model. Many playwrights (Albee, Ayckbourn, Pinter) double as directors. Perhaps the most famous contemporary writer-director-designer-choreographer-performer in the British theater scene is Steven Berkoff.

As in the narratological model and its treatment of embedded narratives ([N2.4](#)), additional levels have to be used to capture the structure of a play-within-the-play (such as occurs in *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*).

**2.2.** The distinction between plays that do or do not use the level of narrative mediation leads to the distinction between epic and absolute drama (Pfister 1988: ch1.2.3):

- An **absolute drama** is a type of drama that does *not* employ a level of fictional mediation; a play that makes *no* use of narrator figures, chorus characters, story-internal stage managers, or any other epic elements (to be specified in more detail below). The audience witnesses the action of the play as if it happened absolutely, ie, as if it existed independently of either author, or narrator, or, in fact, the spectators themselves. Example: *Hamlet*, and many others. For Pfister, absolute drama is the prototypical form of drama.
- An **epic drama**, in contrast, is one that makes use of epic devices such as those listed above, mainly a narrator or teller figure. It is epic in the sense that, just like in prose fiction, there is a visible and/or audible narrator figure whose presence creates a distinct level of communication (the intermediate level shown in [2.1](#)) Example: Shakespeare, *Pericles* (Gower is a heterodiegetic narrator); Shaffer, *Amadeus* (Salieri is a homodiegetic narrator). Epic drama is closely related to Brecht's conception of an *epic theater*.

**2.3.** Even though, in ordinary circumstances, the terms person, character and figure are often used indiscriminately, modern theorists generally make an effort to be more distinct and accurate.

- A **person** is a real-life person; anyone occupying a place on the level of nonfictional communication. Authors, directors, actors, and spectators are persons.
- A **character** is *not* a real-life person but only a "paper being" (Barthes 1975 [1966]), a being created by an author and existing only within a fictional text, usually on the level of action. Example: the character Hamlet in the play by Shakespeare.
- An **actor** is the person who, in a performance, impersonates a character or a narrator.
- **figure** Also a type of being created by a fictional text. Often the term is used just as a variation of *character*; however, some theorists use it with specific reference to the narrator (on the level of fictional mediation). For instance, Gower is a narrator figure in Shakespeare's *Pericles*.

By way of exercise, pick any play you know and place all of its real and fictional agents into the functional slots of the model sketched in Figure 1. Make a suggestion as to how to deal with historical plays, ie when a play's protagonist is also a historical person (as in Shaffer's *Amadeus*).

### 3. Basic technical terms

Note, for a comprehensive glossary of technical theater terms, consult Peter Lathan's [School Show Page](#).

**3.1.** The main divisions within a playscript or a performance are acts and scenes:

- **act**: a major unit of a play or part of the dramatic text. Many classical plays are divided into five acts; most modern plays have two, to allow for an intermission. Usually, an act consists of a sequence of smaller action units called scenes. Other popular formats are three-act plays and one-act plays.
- **scene**: an action unit within an act. Usually, transition from one scene to another involves a new stage situation and a fresh episode, marked either by a change in time and/or location or by characters entering or going off stage. A **French scene** (so-called after the practice of 17C French classical drama) is defined purely by a new combination (or *configuration*, Pfister 1988: 5.3.3) of characters.

In critical practice, acts and scenes are usually referred to as I.1, IV.3 (alternatively, 1.1, 4.3) etc (read: Act 1, Scene 1 etc). See Wallis and Shepherd (1998: 91-97) for a discussion of character distribution patterns and a French scene analysis of *The Tempest*. Also Pfister (1988: 6.4.2).

**3.2.** Characters and setting are the main *existents* (Chatman 1978) of dramatic fiction. There are two terms that specifically refer to setting-related features:

- **set:** the objects and the backdrop making up a stage scenery (eg, a table, a couch, three walls of a room). In a playscript, the set is usually described in an initial block stage direction.
- **properties/props:** generally, the set of moveable objects needed by the actors. In a technically oriented or *actorly* playscript, the disposition of these objects is sometimes described in a textual section called property plot. While many props are simply realistic decoration, some serve as characteristic attributes (a pearl necklace, a pipe, a crown), some propel or motivate action (a bottle of whiskey, a sword, a gun), and some may have a richly symbolic value (a mirror in *Richard II*).

**3.3.** Focusing on the playscript, we can see that it subdivides into two types of text: primary text and secondary text (terms coined by Ingarden 1931: ch30):

- The **primary text** of a playscript consists of the speeches of the characters, including prologues and epilogues. A prologue is an introductory speech; an epilogue is a concluding speech.
- The **secondary text** of a playscript consists of all textual elements that do *not* belong to the primary text; specifically, the play's title, subtitle, historical notes, dramatis personae, stage directions, speech prefixes etc.

In the terms introduced by Genette (1997 [1987]), secondary text elements such as prefaces and postfaces, dedications, the title, the dramatis personae, textual notes etc are **peritextual elements** (situated on the periphery of the text).

**3.4.** Here are the main elements of the primary text:

- **speech:** an utterance of a single speaker, either within a dialogue, a monologue, or an aside.
- **dialogue:** a sequence of conversational *turns* exchanged between two or more speakers or *interlocutors*. The more specific term **duologue** is occasionally used to refer to a dialogue between exactly two speakers.
- **monologue:** a long speech in which a character talks to him- or herself. Often, only one character is on stage during a monologue, in which case one also speaks of a **soliloquy** (from Latin *solus*, 'alone'). Monologues and soliloquies serve a number of dramatic functions: they foreground the monologist/soliloquist; they provide a transition (or bridge) between scenes; they open a source of information and exposition; and they let the audience know something of the private thoughts, motives, and plans of characters. Typically, they are also "great speeches" that constitute a play's dramatic high points, especially in Shakespeare. For this reason, they are sometimes compared to operatic arias.
- **aside** A remark that is not heard by the other characters on stage. There are three types of asides: monological, dialogical, and *ad spectatores*.
  - A **monological aside** is a remark that occurs in a dialogue, but is not meant to be heard by any of the speaker's interlocutors (it is monological because it is basically a self-communication). Example:

*King.* But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son –  
*Hamlet.* [Aside] A little more than kin, and less than kind.  
*King.* How is it that the clouds still hang on you? (I.2.65)

King Claudius's two turns are actually consecutive. He does not hear Hamlet's sarcastic *sotto voce* [lowered voice] comment.

- A **dialogical aside**, in contrast, is a remark that is addressed to a specific hearer, but is heard by nobody else present (ie, by nobody but the intended hearer).
- An **aside ad spectatores** is addressed directly to the audience (bypassing the convention of the invisible fourth wall, see [5.5](#) and Pfister 1988: 4.5.3.1). Example:

[Now, enter, at head of stairs, SIR THOMAS MORE.]

STEWARD. That's Sir Thomas More.

MORE: The wine please, Matthew?

STEWARD: It's there, Sir Thomas. (Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons*)

The Steward's first speech is an aside *ad spectatores*, identifying the character who has just entered. Asides *ad spectatores* are typical of epic drama (see section [6](#)).

- **implied stage direction:** an indication, in a character's speech, of some property or behavior that should be perceptible to the audience. For instance, "I'll shave off my beard" implies, even in the absence of an explicit stage direction, that the speaker has a beard. Implied stage directions are particularly important in Shakespeare because (a) in Shakespeare's time there was no precedent for stage directions as we know them today, (b) most people who bought an original copy of the text had seen the play and remembered its characters and action, and (c) there was no need to describe the scenery because the playhouse of the period (the Globe Theater) provided a standard backdrop. See section [4](#), below. Examples:
  - *Catesby*. The king is angry: see, he gnaws his lip. (*Richard II* IV.2.27)
  - *Gloucester*. By the kind gods, 'tis most ignobly done/ To pluck me by the beard. (*King Lear* III.6.34)

### 3.5. And here are the main elements of the secondary text:

- **dramatis personae:** the list (cast) of characters. This is a peritextual element usually accompanied by a brief explicit characterization indicating role, social status, etc (as in "*JELLABY, a butler, middle-aged*" [Stoppard, *Arcadia*]). Often the characters are simply listed in their order of appearance, but other arrangements are also frequent. For instance, the *dramatis personae* may reflect the hierarchy of an aristocratic society, listing the king and his relatives first, then the dukes and duchesses, then the common citizens, and then the beggars and clowns.
- **speech prefix, speech heading:** the name of the speaker, introducing a speech. This is the dramatic equivalent of *attributive discourse* or *speech tags* in narrative theory ([N8.2](#)).
- **stage direction**, also **didascaly** (sg) or **didascalialia** (pl) (after the Greek and French terms, cf Issacharoff 1989: ch3): a descriptive or narrative passage of secondary text (usually set in *italics*), either (a) describing set, scenery, props, costumes, characters, or (b) recounting events and the behavior of the characters (such as their movements). For narratological definitions of the terms *description*, *scene*, and *report* see [N5.3](#). In performance, a stage direction can normally be translated into a property or a physical action. Stage directions that cannot be so translated, or are obviously addressed to the reader only are called **autonomous stage directions** (Issacharoff 1989: 20). On the widely varying practice of authors to use long or short, strictly prescriptive or merely suggestive stage directions, see Pfister (1988: 2.1.3). For a very detailed typology of stage directions, see Aston and Savona (1991). Generally, the authority of the stage directions is a controversial issue (Carlson 1991). Examples:
  - *Sitting at the table, facing front [...] a wearish old man: KRAPP. Rusty black narrow trousers too short for him. [...] White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair. Unshaven.* (Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* 9) [A set of descriptive stage directions at the beginning of a play. Note that the (omitted) verbs of the elliptical sentences are either *be* or *have*.]
  - *KRAPP remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table.* (*Krapp's Last Tape* 9) [A narrative stage direction, recounting a character's non-verbal action.]
  - Carlson (1991: 40): The play [Shaw's *Candida*] ends with the famous stage direction clearly communicable only to the reader: "They embrace. But they do not know the secret in the poet's heart". [An autonomous stage direction.]



**3.6.** Note that stage directions may either be *readerly*, catering to the needs of ordinary readers, or *actorly*, catering to the needs of theater practitioners. Today, most printed playscripts are readerly versions, whose secondary text describes stage and action from the point of view of the audience and generally avoids technical jargon. In contrast, the acting editions published by Samuel French are dedicated actorly texts, containing terms like *stage left*, *upstage right*, *downstage center* etc, often abbreviated as SL, USR, DSC, etc – these are directions which assume the point of view of an actor facing the audience. See [5.4](#) for a sketch of these predefined acting areas.

**3.7.** Analyze the following introductory stage direction:

*There is a party at the Conways, this autumn evening of 1919, but we cannot see it, only hear it. All we can see at first is the light from the hall coming through the curtained archway on the right of the room, and a little red firelight on the other side. [...] And now HAZEL dashes in, switching on the light. We see at once that she is a tall, golden young creature, dressed in her best for this party. [...] With all the reckless haste of a child she [CAROL] bangs down all this stuff, and starts to talk, although she has no breath left. And now – after adding that CAROL is an enchanting young person – we can leave them to explain themselves.*  
(Priestley, *Time and the Conways*)

Question 1: Is this a readerly or an actorly stage direction? [A. Readerly, very much so, but cp author's claim in [1.6.2](#).]

Question 2: Who is the speaker of the stage directions? Write a brief essay discussing the communicative status of stage directions, presenting an argument that upholds our model of narrative communication, and the distinction between absolute drama and epic drama. [Some answers provided in Issacharoff 1989: ch3; Carlson 1991; Suchy 1991; Jahn 2001 (argument for a playscript-specific narrator)].

## 4. Shakespeare

**4.1.** William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was a contemporary of Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe, author of 37 plays, some longer narrative poems ("Venus and Adonis", "The Rape of Lucrece") and 154 sonnets. The plays are traditionally subdivided into comedies (*Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, etc), histories (*Richard II*, *Henry IV* (2 parts), *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, etc), and tragedies (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*). Historically, the plays are partly Elizabethan plays (written in the reign of Elizabeth I, 1533-1603), partly Jacobean (James I, 1603-1625).

**4.2.** Shakespeare's plays were performed in basically three types of locations: (1) public theaters (such as the Globe Theater, located outside the City limits of London), (2) private theaters (such as the Blackfriars, in central London), and (3) various special-occasion venues (public townhalls, royal residences, etc).

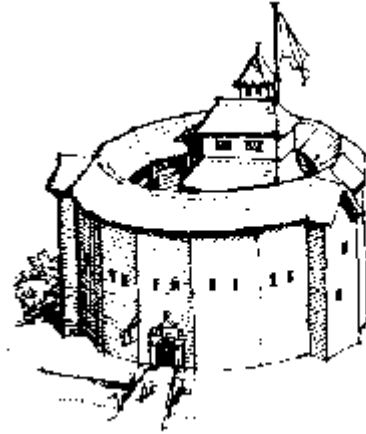


Fig. 2. Artist's impression of the original Globe.

- **The Globe Theater** was the playhouse for which most of Shakespeare's plays were originally written. Built in 1599, it burned down in 1613, was reopened in 1614, and finally demolished in 1644 when the Puritans ordered all theaters closed. (They were reopened in the Restoration period, from 1660 onwards.) Architecturally, the Globe was a roughly circular (or, to be more precise, polygonal) building with an internal *tiring house* construction partly overshadowing the stage. The stage itself (an *apron stage*) projected out into a central courtyard which was open to the sky. The Globe was owned by a professional company called the Lord Chamberlain's Players, later (from 1603, the beginning of the Jacobean period) the King's Men. Shakespeare was a shareholder, the company's main playwright, and an occasional actor. A modern reconstruction of the Globe, the New Globe, was opened in London in 1997; it is a major tourist attraction today (Mulryne, Shewring, and Gurr 1997; more details on this in 4.3, below).
- The **Blackfriars Theater** was located in a former monastery building in central London. Its stage did not project out into the audience in the manner of an apron stage, there was no standing room, and the performances were not dependent on daylight or climatic conditions. Entrance fees were much higher than those charged in the Globe, and the performances were mostly upper-class festive events.

In the eyes of the city authorities, the Globe playhouse had a relatively low reputation; it was considered a dangerous environment which encouraged uncontrolled mixing of people from all classes and casts of life, including prostitutes and pickpockets. Many critics believe that the diverging interests of the Globe Theater's heterogeneous audience are actually reflected in Shakespeare's choice and treatment of themes, characters, and language.

## The Globe Playhouse 1599–1613

A Conjectural Reconstruction  
by C. Walter Hodges

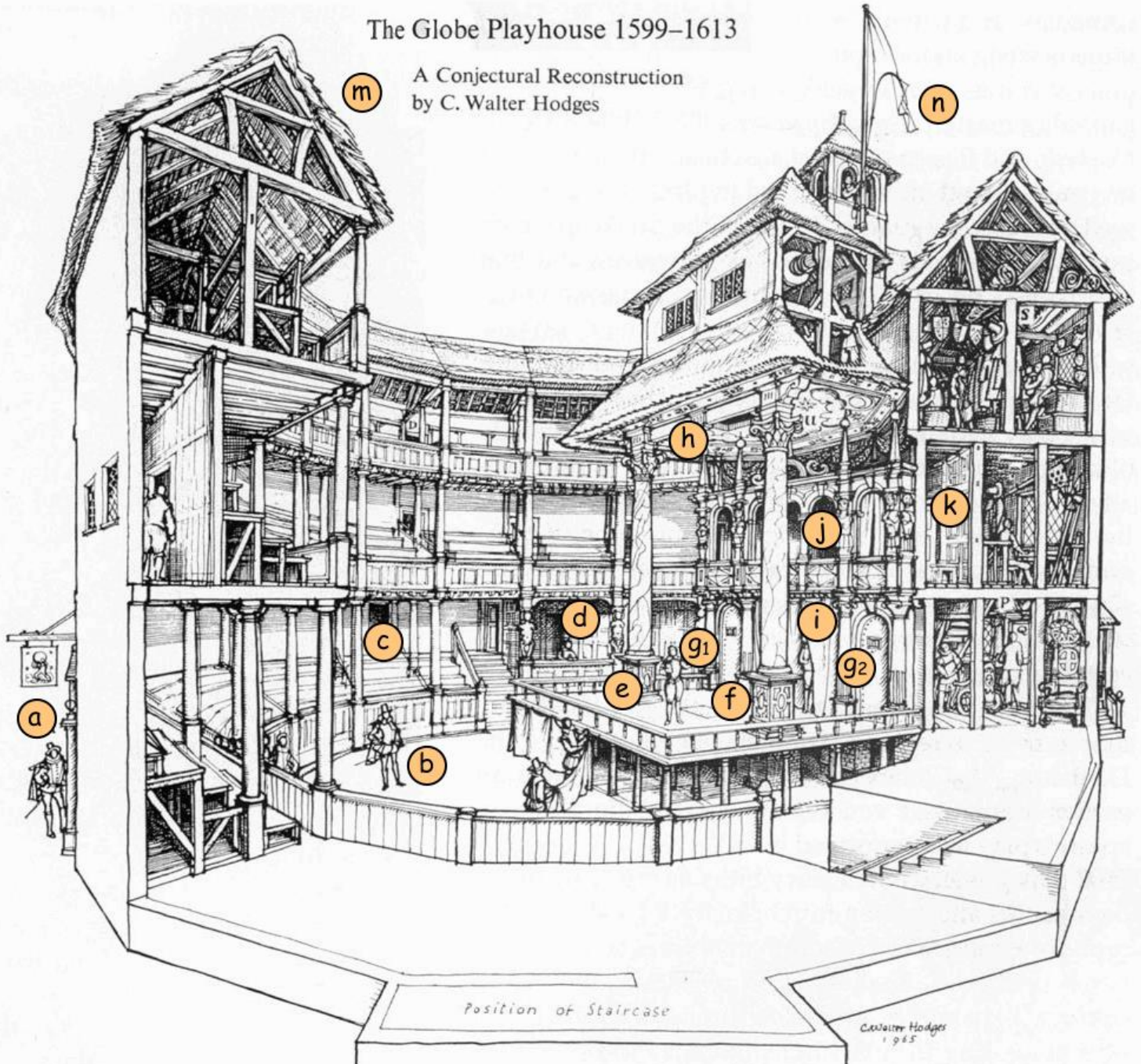


Fig. 3. Hodges's drawing of the Globe.

**4.3.** We will use Walter Hodges's famous "conjectural reconstruction" as reprinted in Harrison (1966: 126) for a virtual tour of the Globe. See [this link](#) for a more sophisticated interactive tour and a series of documents on the staging of Shakespeare's plays.

- The sign over the entrance shows Hercules (or Atlas) carrying the globe on his shoulders – an allusion to the name of the house as well as to the Elizabethan theater's claim to present a mirror image of the world ("hold the mirror up to nature", Hamlet says in III.2).
- Basic entrance fee is a penny, entitling the spectator to use the standing room in the open *Yard*. People standing in the *Yard* are called *groundlings*. For comparison, a quart of beer (1.1 liters) cost 2 to 3 pennies. Today's entrance fee to the New Globe's *Yard* is something like GBP 15.
- Spectators who are willing to pay an extra penny are entitled to a seat in one of the galleries (the *twopenny rooms*).

- d. In the lower galleries, both to the left and to the right of the stage, are the *Lord's Rooms*, for members of the aristocracy and other VIPs.
- e. The stage itself is situated on a raised platform. In the middle of it, there is a trap-door leading down to the *hell*.
- f. The space underneath the stage – the *hell* – is hidden from view by boards or lengths of cloth.
- g. There are two main stage doors (g1 and g2) through which the characters enter or exit.
- h. The tiring house construction is partly connected to the Globe's back wall, and partly supported by two pillars in front (often integrated into a play as trees, masts, or hiding places). On top of the tiring house is a *hut* containing pulleys and other machinery for letting down ('flying in') or pulling up ('flying out') objects or people (for instance, Ariel in *The Tempest*). (The *fly floor* is usually also a feature of modern stage designs.) The ceiling of the tiring house shows painted representations of the sun, moon, clouds, and planets.
- i. Between the two doors, there is another opening, a *discovery space*, possibly suggesting a night chamber, a sickbed room etc. It was the only space that could be concealed by a curtain – an interesting feature in view of the role of the curtain in later stage designs (5.1).
- j. There is also a first-floor chamber plus balcony one level up. This is used both as an occasional acting area as well as a space for the musicians.
- k. At the back of the tiring house are the tiring rooms as well as store rooms for props, wardrobes, etc.
- m. The roof as shown in Hodges's drawing is thatched. The story goes that the Globe burned down in 1613 because the reed caught fire. When the Globe was rebuilt it was fitted with a shingled roof.
- n. The playhouse flag was flown to indicate either that a performance was in progress or about to begin. Color-coding may have been used to advertise the play's genre (history, tragedy, or comedy). Performances usually began at 2 p.m. The main seasons in London were autumn and spring. In other words, the playhouse was closed for most of the year.

Compare the dimensions in Hodges's "conjectural reconstruction" with the ground plan as used in the New Globe. The building's outer diameter is exactly 100 feet, and rather than having 16 sides, it has 20.

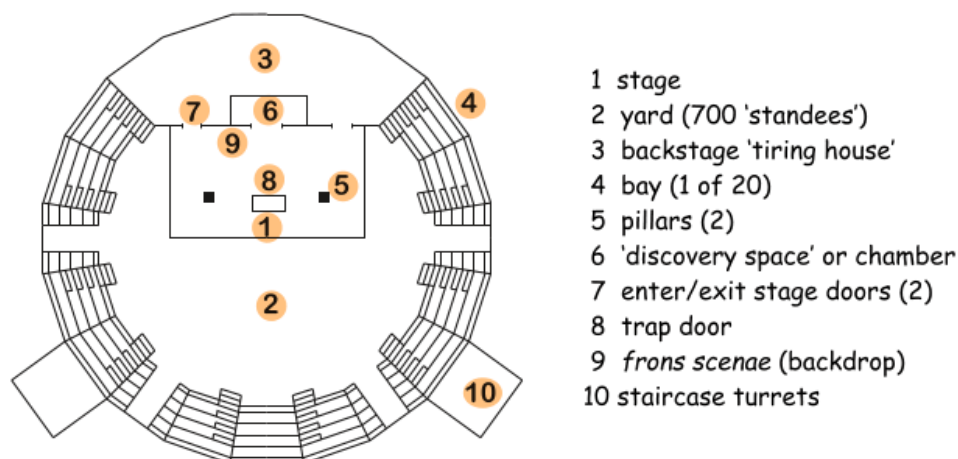


Fig. 4. New Globe ground view.

Figure 4 lists some of the additional terms used in the design of the New Globe. If you have plenty of time and patience you can also try your hand at building a 1/150 scale cardboard model available from <http://www.sgc.umd.edu/model.htm>.

#### 4.4. Observe the following reflection of the Globe architecture in Shakespeare's plays.

- **good acoustics and close contact.** As shown in the drawings above, distances were small. The actors did not have to shout to make themselves understood, and they were in visual contact with their audience. (While this effect strongly promotes audience involvement and participation, see [7.9](#) for a potential downside to this. Or, question, can you already see one for yourself?)
- **No curtain; fast moving action.** There were no breaks between scenes; a change of scene was indicated by one set of actors exiting through one of the two stage doors, while the next scene's characters entered through the other. No change of location had to be signaled because the tiring house facade provided a general scenery that was suitable for practically all occasions.
- **passee-partout scenery** (from Fr. *passee-partout* 'master key'). The doors, the trap-door, the balcony area, the pillars, the curtained chamber, and the tiring-house façade provided a highly functional backdrop that could represent all kinds of scenery. With no extra props or decoration, the stage could suggest the deck of a ship, a town hall, a street, a royal court, a forest, a battlefield, a graveyard, the walls of a castle – in short, practically anything. Examples:
  - In *As You Like It*, Orlando sticks a love-poem on a tree.
  - The ghost of Hamlet's father calls out to Hamlet from "beneath".
  - Stage direction: *Enter Julia above at a window.*
  - Othello suffocates Desdemona in her bed.
  - From the battlements of a castle, Richard II talks to the commander of a rebel force.
- **verbal decor/word scenery:** a setting created in words; an indication, in a character's speech, of the current location, season, time of day, etc. Verbal decor complements the functionality of the Globe stage, avoiding the necessity of elaborate scenery. Note the functional use of props *and* verbal decor in the following example:

*Enter Banquo and Fleance with a torch.*  
*Banquo.* How goes the night, boy? (*Macbeth* II.1)

#### 4.5. The following paragraphs will briefly touch on sources, genres, and printed texts.

**4.5.1.** Shakespeare's sources. None of Shakespeare's plays was an original play in the modern sense of the word. Shakespeare and his contemporaries favored classical and familiar stories whose didactic and entertainment value was well established. Shakespeare often combined multiple sources, using both current translations of classical authors like Plautus, Seneca, Plutarch (*Lives*), Ovid (*Metamorphoses*), Ariosto (*I Suppositi*, *Orlando Furioso*), Boccaccio (*Decameron*), and Chaucer as well as contemporary authors like Spenser (*The Faerie Queene*) and Sidney (*Arcadia*). The main source for his English *histories* was *Holinshed's Chronicles*. See Bullough (1957-73) [7 vols, an authoritative account], Evans (1978c) [brief overview].

While Shakespeare was an adaptor of sources, no one can say that his plays lack originality. Rather, his originality lies in his ability to flesh out characters, his use of extremely expressive language, the way in which he translates an existing story into a new one, and the way in which he is able to transform action lines of epic dimensions into compact and effective plays.

**4.5.2.** Shakespeare's dramatic work is traditionally (and rather arbitrarily) divided into three main genres: comedies, histories, and tragedies.

- **comedies, histories, and tragedies** were the three genres used by Heminge and Condell for their arrangement of the plays in the first complete edition (the *first Folio* of 1623).
- **romances:** a category used by modern critics and editors (eg, the Riverside Shakespeare) for serious or *problem comedies* such as *Measure for Measure*, *Pericles* and *The Tempest*.

- **Roman plays:** a subgenre of tragedy dealing with the lives of classical Roman characters (*Julius Caesar*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*).

None of these categories are what one would call watertight or exclusive: for instance, in their titles, some of the histories are explicitly identified as tragedies (*Richard II*), and some are comedies (*Henry IV*, part I).

**4.5.3.** Early and modern Shakespeare editions. On average, Shakespeare wrote two to three plays per year. It was only when a play had completed its current production run that a text was printed which could be sold in the streets. Normally, the projected printing of a play was officially registered with the Stationer's Company and listed in the Stationer's Register:

- **Stationer's Register:** all 16C and 17C printers were members of the Stationer's Company and registered their printing projects. The Stationer's Register is the first institutionalized form of copyright protection. Though not a wholly reliable source, the Stationer's register is an important source for dating the plays (Lloyd Evans 1978: 62).

Single plays were usually printed in small-size *quarto* booklets; the first edition containing 36 of Shakespeare's plays (only *Pericles* was missing) was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death.

- **quarto:** a book format produced by taking a sheet of printing paper and folding it twice. This yields four sections which, when printed on both sides, yields eight pages of text. Normally the printer needed about 7 sheets for a short play, 14 sheets for a long one. The asking price for a quarto was one shilling (12 pence); so, seeing a play at the price of one or two pennies was much cheaper than buying the text). Most of the quartos are *good quartos*, ie, were carefully printed from either the author's manuscript or a *promptbook* (a specially prepared acting copy noting moves, cues etc). There are also some pirated versions or *bad quartos* that were illicitly printed on the basis of an actor's recollection of the text, or even on the basis of a memorizer's or stenographer's notes (Day 1963: 1.277-8).
- **folio:** the folio format is created by taking a large sheet of printing paper and folding it once. This yields two pages per side, or four pages per sheet. The folio format is roughly double the size of the quarto format. The Folio format was used to produce more substantial books such as the collection of all of Shakespeare's plays. The asking price for the First Folio was one pound (20 shillings), a considerable amount of money at the time. Today, the asking price for one of the few surviving folio copies would be astronomical.

**4.5.4.** To the 21C reader, the original early editions are full of spelling mistakes and inconsistencies, even though such judgments are clearly relative. While many 19C editors notoriously overdid correction, emendation, and wholesale rewriting of passages, the modern scholarly approach is to treat the sources with great respect, and to follow the scrupulous demands of textual criticism:

- **textual criticism:** a method of establishing an authoritative version of a text by documenting and weighing all textual evidence, by studying the transmission of the text, its printing history etc. With Shakespeare, the general strategy is to pick either a good quarto or a folio version of the play as the *control text*, and to keep the number of editorial changes to a minimum. All modern editions are accompanied by a host of editorial notes (the *textual apparatus*) and explicatory annotations (Evans (1978b)).

**4.5.5.** In Shakespeare's time, most of the people who bought a text had seen the play in the Globe, so that the text basically served as a reminder of what the performance had been like (Pfister 1988: 14). For this purpose, the text of the speeches (ie the primary text) was quite sufficient. Contemporary readers automatically remembered and re-imagined the performance, the backdrop of the Globe, the props, the costumes, and so on. They did not have to be told by any detailed stage directions what the characters were doing in a particular situation; also, much of the nonverbal action was reflected in

implied stage directions (3.4). Interestingly, this mode of re-imaginative reading comes very close to the Reading Drama approach sketched in 1.6.3. As Harrison points out,

It is indeed a revelation to read a familiar play for the first time in a Quarto or Folio text. The reader finds himself at once in the atmosphere of the Globe Theatre. Most plays in the original texts have no scene division; many even have no act division. There are none of those place headings which editors have added [...] These were not noted in the original text because in the Elizabethan theatre there was no scenery and little physical indication of a change of locality. (Harrison 1966: 82)

**4.5.6.** All plays (including the printed versions) were subject to censorship, especially with regard to political, religious, and moral aspects. Plays could be censored for treason, heresy, and blasphemy, and sanctions included the closing of playhouses or the deletion of offending words or scenes (for instance, the famous deposition scene in *Richard II* was omitted from the Folio edition [Lloyd Evans 1978: 294]). No women were allowed on stage prior to 1665, and all female roles had to be impersonated by boy actors. The main censorship authorities were the city administrators of London (who tended to obstruct the public playhouses on moral grounds), the Lord Chamberlain (the person in charge of matters of royal entertainment) and the monarch's privy council (the Queen herself is known to have been a supporter of the theater companies). Interestingly, there was no ban on obscenity or violence – if there had been, very few of Shakespeare's texts would have survived uncensored.

For an example, consider the case of *Othello*. In the quarto edition of the play the speeches are liberally dotted with religious oaths and expletives – expressions like "Sblood" [God's blood], "Zounds" [God's wounds] etc. These exclamations were all removed from the text of the 1623 Folio edition, whose editors evidently feared being accused of publishing foul language and profanities.

Censorship was formally abolished in Great Britain in 1968; today it is largely a matter of self-regulation. Judging from recent productions, basically "anything goes".

**4.6.** Shakespearean language is a variant of Early Modern English, whose main characteristics, from today's point of view, are variability and flexibility. Both characteristics are probably due to the period's lack of authoritative dictionaries (the first true dictionary, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* did not appear until 1755).

- **word formation:** new words are coined spontaneously and in great numbers. For instance, "You can *happy* your friend, *foot* your enemy, speak of a *fair* (a beautiful woman) or a *he* (man)" (Abbot 1966).
- **pronunciation:** (1) Shakespeare's verse are full of metrically motivated contractions: words like *e'er*, *e'en*, *ne'er*, *o'er* (= ever, even, never, over; pronunciation as in *air*, *Ian*, *nair*, *or*). (2) Metrical expansion occasionally yields a stressed syllable in scansion (eg, *discovered* = 0101 [0 = unstressed, 1 = stressed syllable]) (Levin 1978: 10). (3) A number of polysyllabic words had different stress patterns than they have today; for instance, the word *condemn* was stressed (scanned) 10. (4) Words like *prove/love* and *find/wind* were rhymes. See the poetry section for a more detailed discussion of scansion, contraction, expansion etc (P1.4, P1.11).
- **grammar:** the most striking grammatical feature of Shakespeare's language is that questions and negations often appear without the auxiliary *do*-construction that is obligatory today ("Goes the king hence?" "I like him not" etc). The subjunctive form was still in common use: "Take Anthony Octavia to his wife" (*Anthony and Cleopatra* II.2.129) (cp today's "God save the Queen").
- **thou:** the historical form denoting the second person singular (today's *you*). Whenever *thou* is used, it triggers an inflected form of the verb as in *thou art*, *thou didst*, *thou climb(e)st* etc. In object case position, *thou* becomes *thee* as in *of thee*, *to thee*, *I love thee*. The possessive form is *thy* as in *thy book*, *thy kingdom come* (note subjunctive case). If the following word begins with a vowel *thy* becomes *thine* as in *know thine enemy*.

For addressing a single person, a Shakespearean character can use either *you* or *thou*. *You* in Early Modern English counts as a polite form, whereas *thou* can transmit three basic connotations which variously signal, uphold, modify or manipulate pragmatic (speaker-hearer) relationships:

- the **intimate** or **affectionate thou** is normally used among friends and lovers;
- the **condescending thou** is used to address servants or subjects;
- the **contemptuous thou** is used as a knowingly offensive form of address towards strangers or enemies.

**4.7.** In Shakespeare's plays, situational conditions and pragmatic circumstances can be interestingly complex. A speaker can address a hearer using *thou* in one situation and *you* in another. Imagine, for instance, a courtier talking to the king. Normally, the appropriate form would be the respectful *you*. But if the courtier is John of Gaunt, head of a powerful aristocratic family, old, wise, and near his death, somebody who feels ill-treated by the king and perhaps wants to make it obvious that the king is young, inexperienced, and irresponsible, then it is not so surprising to find him addressing the king as follows:

Since thou dost seek to kill my name in me  
I mock my name, great king, to flatter thee (*Richard II* II.1.86).

**4.8.** Verse vs. Prose. Shakespeare's plays are predominantly written in verse, and editors usually number a play's lines to allow references such as IV.3.112 (= act 4, scene 3, line 112). The standard type of verse employed by Shakespeare is the blank verse:

- **blank verse:** an unrhymed iambic pentameter line, as in Hamlet's "To be or not to be, that is the question".

Note the following important deviations from this standard scheme: (a) many of the plays include songs which use their own type of meter and rhyme scheme; (b) sometimes the text shifts from blank verse to a sequence of heroic couplets (ie, rhymed iambic pentameters); (c) a single heroic couplet may also signal the end of an act or scene; (d) the later plays make increasing use of prose passages. As in the case of *thou* vs *you*, the use of blank verse vs prose and of blank verse vs rhyming couplets is usually motivated by pragmatic factors that merit close stylistic analysis. See, eg, Brockbank's (1976: 185) note on *Coriolanus* II.3.111-123.

## 5. The picture-frame stage

**5.1.** In the previous section, we argued that the Globe theater stage exerted a strong influence on many aspects of Shakespearean drama – duration of a performance, verbal decor, passepartout scenery, etc. Continuing this line of inquiry, we will now examine in how far the architecture of the modern stage (usually called a *picture-frame stage*) exerts a similar influence on modern drama. The transition from the 16-17C Globe theater stage to the modern picture frame stage is best illustrated by using two (highly simplified) models (cp Pfister 1988: 20).



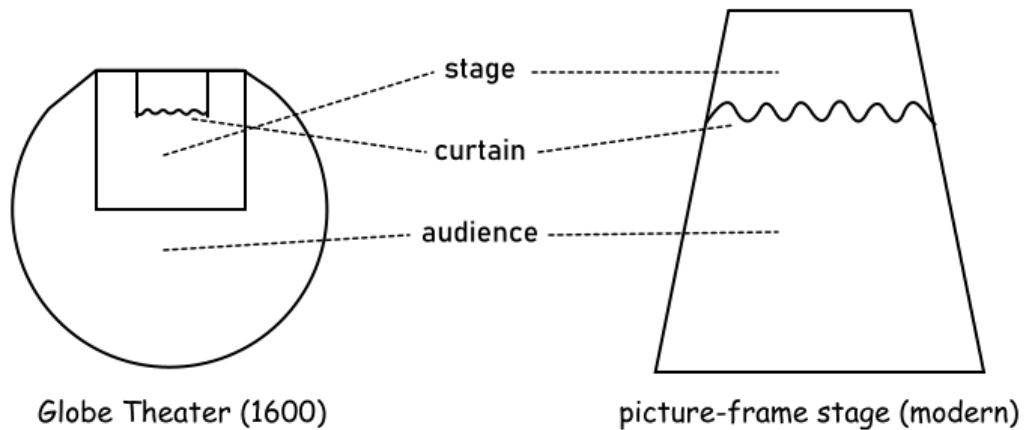


Fig. 5. From Globe to picture-frame.

Take Figure 5 to be an invitation to conduct a mental experiment. Imagine a cartoon sequence that transforms the shape of the Globe into the shape of the picture-frame stage (cp Lloyd Evans 1978: 83). Suggestions: (1) move the Globe's apron stage to the back of the auditorium; (2) transform the circular shape of the Globe auditorium into a foreshortened rectangle; (3) let the Globe's small curtain become more substantial and place it at the border between stage and audience. Done.

**5.2.** The transition from the Globe architecture with its apron stage and its ready-made scenery to the picture-frame stage and its variable set begins, even in Shakespeare's time, with the work of **Inigo Jones** (1573-1652), an English architect. Jones's main achievement was to craft highly elaborate scenic detail, facades, perspective paintings, and other types of backgrounds to stage sophisticated *masques*:

- **masque/court masque:** a brief dramatic representation celebrating a current occasion or a classical event; a "spectacular entertainment, which combined music and poetry with scenery and elaborate costumes" (Hartnoll 1995: 531). Players often wore masks, and the occasion usually ended in a ceremonial dance in which the courtiers joined the actors. On the Globe Theater stage, masques were usually integrated into longer plays, either as individual scenes or as little *plays within the play* (eg in Shakespeare's *Tempest* and *As You Like It*). Autonomous masques became particularly popular during the reign of James I. Many of the court masques were written by Ben Jonson and staged by Inigo Jones. Jonson's masques usually carried an educational and ethical message, some were even cautiously critical of current ethics and manners. Basically, however, they were a form of institutionalized flattery, aimed at a single special spectator: the king.

**5.3.** In overview, the main contrasts between the two stage constructions are as follows:

- In the Globe, the players played (more or less) in the midst of the audience; on the picture-frame stage there is a curtain and a ramp, which form a dividing line separating stage and audience.
- This dividing line is emphasized by the fact that during a performance the stage is illuminated while the audience is in darkness. Hence the eye-to-eye contact between actors and audience that the Shakespearean stage encourages is almost impossible under the standard conditions of the modern stage.
- Finally, the modern curtain has the important function of hiding the changing of the scenery between acts or scenes, making it possible not only to use very sophisticated types of scenery but to do so without undermining the dramatic illusion.

**5.4.** The picture-frame stage has a number of clearly defined acting areas that are often referred to in the stage directions.

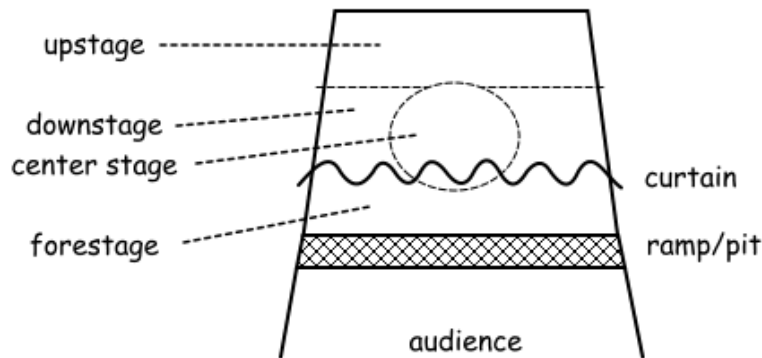


Fig. 6. Typical acting areas.

- **upstage:** the area at the back of the stage (distant from the audience).
- **downstage:** the area close to the audience.

The terms upstage and downstage refer to the fact that many stages are (or were) angled ('*raked*') downwards. Hence *up* actually means in the back, and *down* means close to the ramp. Consequently, *to upstage somebody* means to play so well as to push another actor from a position of interest (a downstage or center-stage position) into the background (an upstage position) – this is also commonly known as "stealing the show". As Lathan (2000) points out, "in most modern theatres it is the audience seating that is raked, not the stage". Exercise: indicate the location of a stage direction such as *upstage left* (USL) in the drawing above ([3.6](#) for help).

- **center stage:** the central area of the stage, usually, the space holding the main focus of interest.
- **forestage:** a special part of the downstage area located between the curtain and the ramp. This is normally used by actors for taking their bows or *curtain calls*; but it is also a possible acting area for prologue and epilogue speakers.
- **pit:** a sunken area between the ramp and the auditorium, usually for accommodating an orchestra.

**5.5.** The picture-frame stage lends strong support to a specific type of play: the realist play.

- **the realist illusion:** the picture-frame stage supports and encourages realist plays that create the illusion that the audience is witnessing not a scene in a play, but a scene from real life. Although still requiring a certain amount of "willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 1983 [1817}: vol. 2, p. 6), the realist illusion is an illusion of absoluteness, autonomy and independence (hence also the term *absolute drama* [[2.2](#)]).

Assuming that the stage represents a room, audience and stage are separated by what is called an *invisible fourth wall*:

- **invisible fourth wall:** the spectators' perceptual illusion that they can look into a room through an invisible (or transparent) fourth wall. This does *not* mean that the characters, for their part, are supposed to be able to see the audience – for them the fourth wall remains as opaque as the other three walls. As Goffman (1974: 5.5) points out, the convention of the invisible fourth wall is a culturally determined feature of modern Western drama. The original stage scenario of classical Greek and Roman drama used open (outdoor) spaces mainly.

Compare this (a) to the conditions in the Globe theater which thrives on the visual contact between actors and audience [4.4], and (b) to the conception of *epic drama* (below), which makes an attempt to subvert the realist illusion.

## 6. Epic drama and epic theater

**6.1.** Although realism is an important stylistic force in 19 and 20C drama (Ibsen, Hauptmann, Shaw, Pinero), many authors and directors consider the theater of illusion a restrictive and paralyzing invention. There are several ways of escaping from the restrictions of purely absolute drama. An obvious one is to reactivate the convention of a play-internal narrator figure. The anti-illusionist countermovement culminates in Brecht's *epic theater* and its radical *alienation effects*, which undermine the illusion potential of the picture-frame stage (5).

- **narrator:** a mediator situated on an intermediate level of fictional communication (2.1), typically also the prologue speaker or epilogue speaker, ostensibly telling, summarizing or commenting on the story that is/was enacted in the play. The play's action may be suspended while the narrator speaks, and in this case, his/her speeches constitute a narrative pause (as in prose fiction, cp N5.2.3).
- **alienation effect:** Bertolt Brecht's term for a wide variety of anti-illusionist dramatic techniques. For instance, alienation may require actors to emancipate themselves and begin to speak "out of character", to comment on or criticize their roles (Pirandello), and to use asides ad spectatores. Furthermore, the theatrical apparatus (machinery, stage hands, etc) may intentionally be made visible; sound and light effects may go against rather than strengthen the dramatic illusion; the auditorium itself may be used as an acting area or as backdrop scenery. Often, the curtain is not used, the lights are left on, and members of the audience are invited onto the stage and to play or sing along.

**6.2.** There is one type of drama in particular that foregrounds the epic element of self-reflexivity (reference to itself):

- **metadrama:** a "drama about drama" (Hornby 1986: 31); a dramatic form that explores the notion that life imitates art (drama) rather than the other way round (Aristotle's assumption). Often, metadrama uses a theatrical location as a setting, and a rehearsal or a play-within-the-play as part of the action. Examples: Schnitzler, *Der grüne Kakadu*; Stoppard, *The Real Thing* (1982); Frayn, *Noises Off*. The basic idea is well expressed by Jacques in *As You Like It* II.7.140: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players / That have their exits and their entrances". The metaphor is also known by the Latin term of *theatrum mundi* (world-as-theater).

**6.3.** While realist drama *consistently* appeals to the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, epic drama makes *temporary* use of epic elements or alienation techniques only. In other words, realist drama is a pure form, whereas epic drama is a composite form, mixing illusionist and anti-illusionist elements. Very few plays can manage without any make-believe at all, although Peter Handke's *Insulting the Audience* (1966), a play whose action consists entirely of a group of actors doing precisely what is announced in the title, is a useful counterexample (Pfister 1988: 248). Normally, an epic play's narrative level forms a mediating and exposition-oriented frame in which realist elements (such as the play's proper action) are embedded. In his preface to *A Man For All Seasons*, an avowedly epic drama, Robert Bolt passes the following instructive comment on the dangers of overdoing the Brechtian alienations:

Simply to slap your audience in the face satisfies an austere and puritanical streak which runs in many of his [Brecht's] disciples and sometimes, detrimentally, I think, in Brecht himself. But it is a dangerous game to play. [...] Each time it is done it is a little less unexpected, so that a bigger and bigger dosage will be needed to produce the same effect. If it were continued indefinitely, it would finally not be unexpected at all. The theatrical convention would then have been entirely dissipated and we should have in the theatre a situation with one person, who used to be an actor, desperately trying to get the attention – by

rude gestures, loud noises, indecent exposure, fireworks, anything – of other persons, who used to be the audience. [...] When we use alienation methods just for kicks, we in the theatre are sawing through the branch on which we are sitting. (xvii-xviii)

**6.4.** Examples. As an exercise, identify and comment on the epic characteristics of the following excerpts, mainly incipits (beginnings).

**6.4.1.** A metadramatic/narrative prologue.

*Enter GOWER.*

To sing a song that old was sung,  
From ashes ancient Gower is come,  
Assuming man's infirmities,  
To glad your ear and please your eyes.  
It has been sung at festivals,  
On ember-eves and holy-ales;  
And lords and ladies in their lives  
Have read it for restoratives.  
The purchase is to make men glorious;  
Et bonum quo antiquius, eo melius.  
If you, born in those latter times,  
When wit's more ripe, accept my rhymes,  
And that to hear an old man sing  
May to your wishes pleasure bring,  
I life would wish, and that I might  
Waste it for you, like taper-light.  
This Antioch, then, Antiochus the Great  
Built up, this city, for his chiefest seat;  
The fairest in all Syria – (Shakespeare, *Pericles*)

Gower, actually a historical poet, a contemporary of Chaucer, introduces himself as a narrator figure (level of fictional mediation), identifies the story's genre (interestingly calling it a "song"), comments on its didactic purpose and its original addressees, points out that it is based on a popular story, and generally tries to collar the audience's attention and benevolence (so-called *captatio benevolentiae*). The passage concludes with Gower providing some verbal decor ("This [is the city of] Antioch"), which serves as a transition to the ensuing scenic action. On the whole, the passage is an epic frame providing both metadramatic comment and exposition. (Excerpted from Jahn 2001.)

**Q.** Gower's lines are clearly different from those used in the play's ordinary dialogues – (a) in what way, and (b) for what purpose? **A.** (a) Rhymed iambic tetrameters instead of unrhymed iambic pentameters (4.8); (b) to create a tonal contrast; to highlight the speaker's role as a narrator and commentator.

**6.4.2.** Nondiegetic music as commentary.

*ELEANOR and KATE stay in the hall. ELEANOR helps KATE with her outdoor clothing. They talk, but their dialogue is drowned by a sudden fortissimo burst of choral music. Mozart's Requiem: from 'Dies Irae' to 'Stricte Discussurus'.* (Peter Nichols, *Passion Play*)

**6.4.3.** Use of lighting effect.

SALIERI [*Singing*]

Appear – Posterity!

[*The light on the audience reaches its maximum. It stays like this during all of the following.*]

[*Speaking again*] There. It worked. I can see you! (Shaffer, *Amadeus*)

**6.4.4.** Alienation effects: an actor reflecting on role, costume, and staging.

*When the curtain rises, the set is in darkness but for a single spot which descends vertically upon the COMMON MAN, who stands in front of a big property basket.*

COMMON MAN: It is perverse! To start a play made up of Kings and Cardinals in speaking costumes and intellectuals with brodered mouths, with me.

If a King, or a Cardinal had done the prologue he'd have had the right materials. [...] But this!

Is this a costume? Does this say anything? It barely covers one man's nakedness! A bit of black material to reduce Old Adam to the Common Man. (Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons*)

#### 6.4.5. Aside ad spectatores by a first-person narrator.

*TOM enters dressed as a merchant sailor from alley, stage left, and strolls across the front of the stage to the fire-escape. There he stops and lights a cigarette. He addresses the audience.*

TOM: Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. To begin with, I turn back time. [...]

The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic.

In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings.

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. (Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*)

#### 6.4.6. Identify and categorize the drastic anti-illusionist elements contained in the following passage. As was argued in 6.3, even the most dedicated of epic plays cannot use epic elements all of the time. What is the function and/or effect of this mixture of anti-illusionist and illusionist elements?

*No curtain.*

*No scenery.*

*The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light.*

*Presently the STAGE MANAGER, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and three chairs [...]*

*When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks.*

STAGE MANAGER: This play is called *Our Town*. It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by A.... (or: produced by A....; directed by B....). In it you will see Miss C....; Miss D....; Miss E.... [...]

*[He approaches the table and chairs downstage right.]*

This is our doctor's house – Doc Gibbs's. This is the back door.

*[Two arched trellises, covered with vines and flowers, are pushed out, one by each proscenium pillar.]*

There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery. [...]

So – another day's begun.

There's Doc Gibbs comin' down Main Street now, comin' back from that baby case. And here's his wife comin' downstairs to get breakfast. [...]

Doc Gibbs died in 1930. The new hospital's named after him. (Wilder, *Our Town*)

## 7. Action analysis

### 7.1. Although *action* is a more or less self-explanatory term, let us try to give it a precise definition.

- **action:** the sum of events or action units occurring on a play's level of action. Sometimes it is possible to distinguish the primary story line from other external events that take place before the beginning or after the end of the play.

### 7.2. The terms *story* and *plot* were originally introduced by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1976 [1927]). Since we are here assuming that drama is a narrative form, story and plot are applicable to drama, too (Pfister 1988: ch6). Actually, one should perhaps distinguish *three* action-related aspects: (i) the sequence of events as presented in the play's text or performance (= order of presentation); (ii) the chronological sequence of the action units (= story); and (iii) the action's causal structure (= plot).

- **story:** the chronological sequence of events. Story analysis examines the chronological scale and coherence of the action sequence. The basic question concerning story structure is "What happens next?" Forster's example is "The king died, and then the queen died". Note, however,

that a play need not present its story in strict chronological order. A play's text may easily begin with action unit M, execute a flashback to G, jump forward to P, etc (example: Priestley, *Time and the Conways*; Churchill, *Top Girls*; Pinter, *Betrayal*);).

- **plot**: the logical and causal structure of a story. The basic question concerning plot structure is "Why does this happen?" Forster's example is "The king died, and then the queen died of grief". Texts can have widely differing degrees of plot connectivity: some are tightly plotted or have **linear plots** (Scanlan 1988: ch7]) where everything ties in with everything else (the characters want to fulfil dreams, go on a quest, realize plans, inhibit the plans of others, overcome problems, pass tests etc); others have **mosaic plots** (Scanlan 1988: ch7), ie, are loosely plotted, episodic, accident-driven, and possibly avoid causal plotting altogether.

To illustrate, fairy tales are usually tightly plotted following the pattern *A does X because B has done (or is) Y*. – The Queen is jealous *because* Snow-White has become more beautiful than she is. So she orders a huntsman to kill her. But the huntsman does not do it *because* he takes pity on Snow-White (*because* she's so beautiful). . . etc. Forster (1976 [1927]); Bremond (1970); Rimmon-Kenan (1983: ch. 1); Pavel (1985); Ryan (1991).

**7.3.** General summaries or *synopses* normally present a plot-oriented content paraphrase. For a detailed story analysis, it is advisable to work out a story's timeline so that all main events can be situated in proper succession and extension. Generally, a timeline model is a good point of departure for surveying themes and action units; it also helps visualize events that are presented in scenic detail as opposed to events that are skipped or merely reported. A timeline model can also show up significant discrepancies between story time and performance time (*story time vs discourse time* in narratological terms, [N5.2.2](#)). Pfister (1988: ch6, ch7.4.3); Genette (1980: ch1-3).

Figure 7, below, presents the discourse/performance timeline of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (with the numerical values on the horizontal axis indicating line numbers in the Faber edition). The play's story takes place on Krapp's 69th birthday, and the first significant piece of action is that he retrieves the annual diary tape recorded on his 39th birthday (30 years earlier). Krapp's main goal seems to be to revive an almost forgotten memory of a love scene, whose account he replays three times.

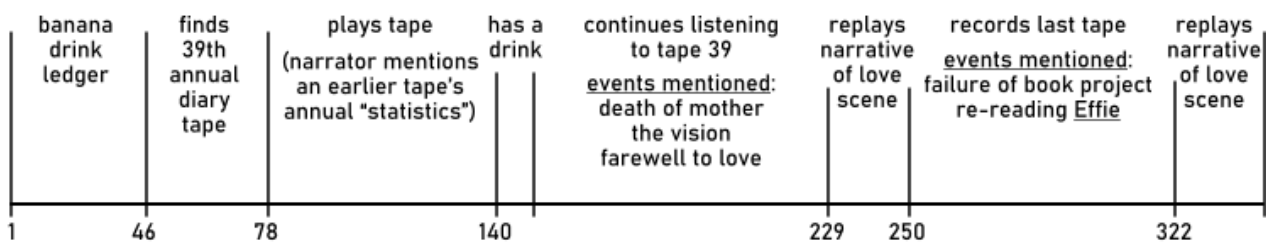


Fig. 7. Timeline of *Krapp's Last Tape*.

**7.4.** Although the temporal relations in *Krapp's Last Tape* are far from simple, more complex visualizations may be needed for plays whose scenes are presented in *anachronic* order, or epic plays that have a narrator whose narrative act has a time line in addition to the play's actual story line. In certain experimental forms of drama, one sometimes encounters split scenes that simultaneously show events either occurring at the same time or at totally different points in time (examples: Nichols, *Passion Play*; Pinter, *Betrayal*).

**7.5. Freytag's triangle** (or **pyramid**) is a well-known two-dimensional timeline model which attempts to represent the general structure of a classical five-act tragedy (as established by Horace 50 BC). Freytag (1965 [1863]); Sternberg (1993 [1978]: 5-8); Pfister (1988: 6.4.3.1).

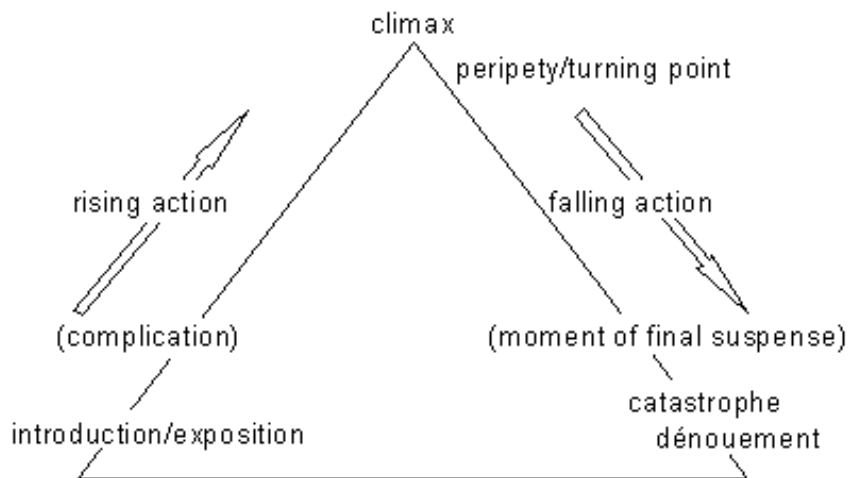


Fig. 8. Freytag's triangle.

Abrams (1964) illustrates Freytag's triangle using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an example: "the rising action (or what Aristotle called the complication) begins with the ghost telling Hamlet of his murder, and continues with the conflict between Hamlet and Claudius, in which Hamlet, despite setbacks, succeeds in controlling the course of events. The highest point of the rising action, the climax, comes with the proof to Hamlet of the king's guilt by the device of the play within the play, Act II, scene 2. The falling action begins with the *turning point*, or Hamlet's failure to kill the king while he is at prayer. From now on the antagonist, Claudius, for the most part controls the action until the tragic catastrophe, at which point occurs the death of the hero" (Abrams 1964: 72). Holman (1977: 174) adds: "The latter part of the falling action is sometimes marked by an event which delays the catastrophe and seems to offer a way of escape for the hero (the apparent reconciliation of Hamlet and Laertes). This is called the *moment of final suspense* and aids in maintaining interest."

**7.6.** The terms of Freytag's triangle can be put to excellent use when one is asked to describe a scene's or an episode's structural position. Here are some additional structural concepts:

- **point of attack:** the event chosen to begin the play's action (Pfister 1988: 7.4.3.2 [term originally coined by Archer 1912]). There are three main options: (i) a play beginning at an early point of attack or **ab ovo** (literally, 'from the egg') typically begins with a state of equilibrium or non-conflict; (ii) for a beginning **in medias res** ('in the midst of things'), the point of attack is set in the middle of a conflict or even close to the climax of the action; and (iii) for a beginning **in ultimas res** ('with the last event'), the point of attack occurs after the climax and near the end.
- **exposition:** the introduction of time, place, characters and background of the play's action. Exposition analysis deals with the questions of how, when, and to what extent the recipient is informed about the play's background and its existents. Although the exposition is usually expected as an isolated block situated at the beginning of a play (this is the place it has in Freytag's pyramid), Pfister suggests that one should distinguish a type of "isolated exposition in the initial position" (Pfister 1988: 3.7.2.2) from an "integrated exposition", which, distributed in "a number of smaller units" (Pfister 1988: 88) across the whole text, successively and cumulatively informs the recipient about the play's background (time, setting, etc).
- **dénouement:** the final resolution of the plot(s), leading to the play's *closure*.

- **closure:** the type of conclusion that ends a text. Tightly plotted texts often have a *recognition scene* (in which the protagonist finally recognizes the true state of affairs), and in the course of the *dénouement* the conflict is usually resolved by marriage, death, or some other aesthetically or morally satisfactory outcome. Many modern plays lack closure, however, are open-ended, simply stop, or conclude enigmatically and ambiguously.

**7.7.** Open and closed forms of drama. Classical drama builds on plot patterns that develop "out of a transparent initial situation based on a [...] comprehensible set of facts" and lead "towards an unambiguous solution in the end" (Pfister 1988: 241). In the terms proposed by Volker Klotz (1975), plays that present an "unambiguous solution in the end" exemplify a *closed form* of drama, while plays that lack typical closure patterns are, reasonably enough, *open forms*. Most prominent among the open forms are naturalist and documentary plays, Brecht's epic theater, and the drama of the absurd. Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836; first performance 1913) is usually cited as the prototypical example of an open form. Pfister (1988: 6.4.3.1, 6.4.3.2).

**7.8.** The main defining feature of a *tragedy* is that its protagonist dies in the end:

- A **tragedy** is a serious play whose protagonist dies in the end. A **fall-of-princes tragedy** is one that treats the tragic downfall of a prince (*prince* here used as a generic term that covers kings and queens as well); a **domestic tragedy** is one that presents the unhappy fate of a more common person; a **revenge tragedy** is propelled by the motif of revenge (the first play of this kind is thought to be Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, 1586). *Hamlet* is a fall-of-princes and a revenge tragedy; *Othello* is a domestic tragedy.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (384-322 BC) describes a tragedy's protagonist as a valuable character, somebody who has both strengths and weaknesses, most importantly, somebody the spectators can empathize or identify with. The tragic hero's downfall is usually caused not only by adverse circumstances but also by his/her misassessment of a situation (**hamartia**), usually combined with a certain amount of overconfidence (**hubris**). Co-experiencing the protagonist's tragic fate, the spectators feel "pity and fear", making it possible for them to (a) deal with these emotions in real life, and (b) cleanse their minds of them, producing the famous effect of **catharsis** or purging. In sum, a tragedy stages a character's downfall to allow the spectators a purifying vicarious experience.

**7.9.** A comedy shares many structural aspects of a tragedy (such as exposition – climax – denouement), but does not end in a catastrophe. Typically, but not necessarily, it also contains a variety of humorous elements. Hence,

- **comedy:** a humorous play with a happy ending. More generally, a play with a nontragic ending.

There is a typical comedy plot pattern that has become known as Benson's Law:

- **Benson's Law:** Boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl (qtd Scanlan 1988: 45).

An important subtype of comedy is the farce:

- **farce:** a type of comedy capitalizing on broadly humorous elements such as stereotyped characters (the mother-in-law, the inept do-it-yourselfer, the upper-class twit), accidents, mishaps, disguises, mistaken identities etc. The genre goes back to the Roman dramatist Plautus, 254-184 BC. Usually, a farce's characters are placed in unexpected or improbable situations that bring out their weaknesses, and this makes us laugh. Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is a Plautine farce freely borrowing plot elements from Plautus's *Menaechmi*. One of the standard modern farces is Brandon Thomas's *Charley's Aunt* (1892). Farces in other media include TV sitcoms such as *Roseanne* and *Cheers*. Modern mainstream authors of farces include Harold Pinter (psychological farce), Alan Ayckbourn (*Bedroom Farce*), Joe Orton (anarchic farce: *What the Butler Saw*), Caryl Churchill (political farce: *Serious Money*), and Tom Stoppard. Alan Ayckbourn, in particular, has perfected the subgenre of the *black farce* (Preface to *Joking Apart and Other Plays* [London: Penguin, 1982, p. 7]; Watson 1981: 24): although not culminating in outright tragedy, a black farce shows suffering characters trapped in serious existential and



psychological problems. See Page (1983); Cornish and Ketels (1986); Zapf (1991) [survey of modern farce types].

Finally, a very popular, seasonal type of low comedy is the (Christmas) pantomime:

- **pantomime** or **Christmas pantomime**: a type of low comedy whose action and characters are based on familiar legends, fables, fairy tales, or other popular stories. Pantomimes usually include dances and songs, cross-dressing, speaking animals etc. Typically, pantomimes are appreciated as a type of family entertainment, and audience participation – singing along, hissing the baddies, warning and encouraging the goodies – is strongly invited.

For two interesting cases of plays mistakenly (?) perceived as pantomimes, consider the reception notes to Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* (1913), and the reviews of the 1998 revival of the *Merchant of Venice* at the New Globe. This is Shaw, complaining about a deteriorating first performance: "[T]he [...] playgoers did not know what to make of it. At first they settled down to a Christmas pantomime, with low comedians and a comic lion, and began to laugh very good-humoredly. Then they suddenly found their teeth set on edge [...]" (*Collected Plays*, vol. 4, ed. Max Reinhardt, London 1972, p. 649). On the *Merchant*, see the *Theatre Record* reviews (18.11: 687-91): "[Shakespeare's] plays are very popular there [the Globe], but half the time they are like the summer equivalent of Christmas pantomime. The audience is never so happy as when it can boo, hiss, cheer or roar with laughter" (p. 689, Alistair Macaulay). See also [4.4](#).

**7.10.** Plot and characters. Often, plot is associated with the actions of protagonist and antagonist, or with certain groups of characters. For instance, Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* involves two courtship plots, the Claudio-Hero plot, and the Beatrice-Benedick plot. Very basically – the scheme can easily be refined – the two plots involve the following action units:

#### **Claudio-Hero plot**

1. Claudio and Hero fall in love and agree to marry.
2. Complication: a villain plans an intrigue against Hero.
3. The conspiracy succeeds; the marriage falls through.
4. Hero fakes her own death.
5. The conspiracy is found out.
6. Hero is rehabilitated and revives.
7. Happy ending.

#### **Beatrice-Benedick plot**

1. Benedick and Beatrice profess *not* to love each other.
2. Their friends conceive of a plan to make them fall in love.
3. Benedick is deceived into believing that Beatrice loves him.
4. Beatrice is deceived into believing that Benedick loves her.
5. They fall in love.
6. Complication: no happy ending is possible until Hero (Beatrice's friend) is rehabilitated.
7. The conspiracy against Hero is found out.
8. Hero is rehabilitated.
9. Happy ending

**Q.** In extreme reduction, both plots illustrate which "law"? **A.** Benson's Law ([7.9](#)).

**7.11.** So far, we have been looking at characteristic action patterns as defining features of certain types of plays. Of course, it is also possible to recognize similar patterns on a smaller scale and hence to identify tragic and comic episodes, respectively. While the mixing of comic and tragic episodes was considered a stylistic flaw in classical drama theory, Elizabethan and later English drama is famous for its effective use of *comic relief* and *tragic relief*:

- **comic relief**: a comic episode in a tragedy. This can either have the function of retarding the primary action (usually creating additional suspense) and/or of creating a momentary reduction

of a play's tragic impact. Example: the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*, strategically placed before the play's catastrophe.

- **tragic relief:** a tragic (or near-tragic) episode in a comedy. Tragic relief often has the function of allowing the spectators to empathize with a protagonist or to give them some breathing space between particularly hilarious scenes.

The definitions given here imply (a bit too narrowly, perhaps) that there can neither be tragic relief in a tragedy nor comic relief in a comedy. Do feel free to use a slightly broader definition if you come across a case that demands it.

## 8. Characters and characterization

**8.1.** Characterization describes the ways and means of creating the personality traits of fictional characters. The general template question is "Who (subject) characterizes whom (object), in which manner and in what social context, as having which properties". For a general introduction, see Chatman (1978: 107-133); Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 59-70); Pfister (1988: ch5); Margolin (1989); Bonheim (1990: ch17); Fokkema (1991); Nieragden (1995); Schneider (2000); Culpeper (2001) [the latter two are cognitive approaches towards character], Eder (2008) [a study on characterization in film, but well applicable to drama].

**8.2.** Basically, characterization analysis makes use of four main sets of features. First, we can ask whether the characterizing subject is the narrator or a character, so that we can set **narratorial** against **figural characterization**; second, we can ask whether the characterizing subject characterizes himself/herself or somebody else, which lets us distinguish between **self-characterization** and **other-characterization**;<sup>1</sup> third, we can ask whether personality traits are attributed by a descriptive verbal statement or implied in somebody's behavior, which allows us to juxtapose **explicit** and **implicit characterization**; and fourth, we can analyze how characterization may be affected by contextual factors such as a private or a public setting and the presence or absence of the characterized object. All of these features can be integrated into the multi-part mind map shown in Figure 9 (which is a much-simplified but more explicit version of Pfister's famous tree diagram [1988: 184]).

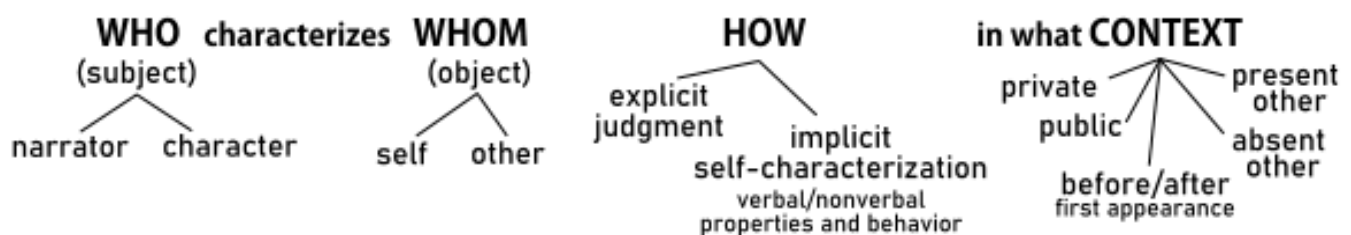


Fig. 9. Characterization in drama.

**8.3.** Specifically, an explicit characterization is a verbal statement that attributes a trait or property to somebody, either oneself or somebody else. Usually, an explicit characterization is a descriptive statement which identifies, categorizes, individualizes, and evaluates a person. Characterizing judgments can refer to external, internal, or habitual traits as in "John has blue eyes, is a good-

<sup>1</sup> 'Self-characterization' and 'other-characterization' replace the terms 'auto-characterization' and 'altero-characterization' used in previous versions of this document (Pfister's original terms are 'self-commentary' and 'commentary by others'). For the subject slot, Pfister's original terms are 'figural' and 'authorial characterization', the latter covering characterization options attributable to a play's implied or real author (Pfister 1988: 184, 194). Among the authorial options listed by Pfister are telling names and descriptive statements in stage directions. In our present account neither the author nor the implied author is considered to be a characterizing subject, and explicit characterization in stage directions is assumed to be a characterization attributable to the special narrator of the playscript (cp Jahn 2001: 672).

hearted fellow, and smokes a pipe".<sup>2</sup> See Srull and Wyer (1988) for a theory of character attribution in social cognition, especially their use of the concepts 'identification', 'categorization', and 'individualization'.

Explicit characterization may be marked by face- or image-saving strategies, wishful thinking, or other "subjective distortions" (Pfister 1988: 184) – similar to what one finds in lonely hearts ads, letters of applications etc. Characterization statements are also affected by contextual circumstances such as social setting, addressee-oriented pragmatics, and general "strategic aims and tactical considerations" (again Pfister 1988: 184). Moreover, explicit judgments can be uttered publicly or privately (ie in a dialogue or in a monologue), before or after a target character's first appearance, and in his or her presence or absence. For instance, one can see the problem of truthfully characterizing a dictator to his face. The following snippet from Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* presents a similar case.

POTHINUS. I have to say that you have a traitress in your camp. Cleopatra –  
 THE MAJOR-DOMO [*at the table, announcing*] The Queen! [*Caesar and Rufio rise*].  
 RUFIO [*aside to Pothinus*] You should have spat it out sooner, you fool. Now it is too late.  
*Cleopatra, in gorgeous raiment, enters in state. [. . .] Caesar gives Cleopatra his hand, which she takes.*  
 CLEOPATRA [*quickly, seeing Pothinus*] What is *he* doing here?  
 CAESAR [*seating himself beside her, in the most amiable of tempers*] Just going to tell me something about you. You shall hear it. Proceed, Pothinus.  
 POTHINUS [*disconcerted*] Caesar – [*he stammers*].

The passage illustrates what happens when a public and explicit other-characterization needs to be adjusted depending on whether the target character (the 'other') is present or absent. Pothinus tells Caesar that Cleopatra is a traitress, which is fine as long as Cleopatra is not present. As soon as she enters, Pothinus understandably finds it very difficult to continue.

**8.4.** An implicit characterization is a self-characterization in which somebody's physical appearance or behavior is indicative of some characteristic trait. For instance, characters and narrators may characterize themselves by behaving or speaking in a certain manner. Nonverbal behavior may self-characterize somebody as, for instance, a skillful chess player, an alcoholic, a coward. Verbal behavior (eg use of jargon, slang, dialect, or sociolect), may self-characterize the speaker as having or lacking a certain educational background, belonging to a specific social class, and more generally as being truthful, evasive, or ill-mannered. Like explicit characterization, implicit characterization is affected by contextual circumstances such as a public or a private environment.

**8.5.** A narrator can be a figure in the primary text (as in epic drama, see [2.2](#) and [6.1](#)), in which case s/he can act as a homodiegetic narrator (first-person) or a heterodiegetic narrator (third person) ([N1.10](#) for definitions); and/or s/he can be the narrator of the stage directions (ie the writer of the secondary text). Naturally, all stage directions and their narrator vanish when the text metamorphoses into a performance. Examples:

1. TOM: I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. (Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*; see [6.4.5](#) for fuller quotation)
2. [Stage direction] *He is a small, thin, ridiculous man who might be any age from thirty to fifty-five. He has sandy hair, watery compassionate blue eyes, sensitive nostrils, and a very presentable forehead; but his good points go no further.* (Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion*)

**Q.** Describe the types of characterization used in these items.

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<sup>2</sup> There may be some confusion potential here. "John is a smoker" alludes to a behavioral feature, but it remains an explicit characterization because it is made in a verbal statement. In contrast, when John is presented as smoking in the scenic action he is characterizing himself implicitly.

**A.** Item 1 is an explicit narratorial self-characterization (homodiegetic narrator); item 2 is an explicit narratorial other-characterization in a stage direction (heterodiegetic narrator). Both narrators also characterize themselves implicitly: Tom presents himself in the role of a player-director; in the largely autonomous stage-direction (3.5) of the Shaw passage the narrator flaunts his common-sense judgment but also shows his lack of concern for giving practical directions.

**8.6.** All explicit characterizations are always also implicit self-characterizations because the way one characterizes somebody – other people as well as oneself – always also implicitly characterizes oneself. In 8.7 we quoted two narratorial examples, the following is a figural one:

JERRY: You're an educated man, aren't you? Are you a doctor?

PETER: Oh no; no. I read about it somewhere: *Time* magazine, I think. (*He turns to his book*)

JERRY: Well, *Time* magazine isn't for blockheads.

PETER: No, I suppose not. (Albee, *The Zoo Story*)

Jerry explicitly calls Peter an "educated man". Peter remarks that he is a reader of *Time* magazine, apparently without meaning this to be understood as a self-characterization (but it is). Jerry correctly points out that Peter's being a reader of *Time* actually supports his prior explicit other-characterization. Peter agrees, but at the same time his nonverbal action – *turns to his book* – indicates his unwillingness to be drawn into a conversation. Ignoring the hint, and continuing the dialogue, Jerry indicates that he does not care. It is the undercurrent of these implicit self-characterizations that anticipates the power struggle that develops between the two characters in the further course of the play.

**8.7.** How much a character knows about himself or about others is an important aspect of his or her characterization. One can be well informed or badly informed, know everything or nothing, be fully aware of something or partially aware of something. There is a saying "knowledge is power"; to know nothing about what one is expected to know is to be ignorant (to be an *ignoramus*). There is also the additional question of whether one's lack of knowledge is to be blamed on oneself or on others. Rather than assess a person's knowledge in absolute terms, one can also compare it to the level of knowledge of others, specifically comparing characters vs. characters, and characters vs audience. Comparing different parties' levels of awareness, we may encounter **congruent awareness** or **discrepant awareness**. (Pfister 1988: 3.4.1). Discrepant awareness, in particular, results from a party's **superior** or **inferior awareness**, all useful terms.

**8.8.** Even though the audience may start out on a state of inferior knowledge, it usually does not take long for them to learn the characters' goals and secret plans. The title and the genre of a play may also contribute essential information. Frequently, the accumulating audience awareness is the basis for creating comic or tragic effect. For instance, the audience may know that the person whom somebody addresses disrespectfully is actually the King in disguise. In contrast, **analytical drama** (such as *Oedipus Rex* and *The Mousetrap*) relies on the fact that the viewers, just like the characters, are left uncertain or ignorant about essential parts of the plot.

**Dramatic irony** usually results from an audience's superior awareness. As Holman (1977: 171) puts it, "The words or acts of a character in a play may carry a meaning unperceived by himself but understood by the audience". A character says and means one thing, but the audience has reason to suspect (or already knows for certain) that a different interpretation is much more appropriate – either in the sense that what the character says is totally off the mark, or that it unwittingly anticipates a tragic outcome (hence also the term *tragic irony*). Examples:

- Othello on Iago: A man he is of honesty and trust (I.3.280)
- Othello on himself: If it were now to die,/ 'Twere now to be most happy (II.1.183)
- Othello on Desdemona and himself: Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come again. (II.3.90)

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