DRAMA
AN INTRODUCTION

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AN INTRODUCTION

G. J. Watson

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For my brothers and sisters
Mary, Nora, Margaret, Gerard,
Robert and Richard

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Foreword

This *Introduction* rightly reminds us that drama is a communal act, the representation of crucial actions by living people on a stage in front of an audience. The history of drama goes back to remote origins: it is related to the myths and legends of a people; it has to do with such things as fertility cults; and it can be a powerful expression of religious worship. Such a history is inevitably complex. There have been periods of intense activity, impressive achievement, such as those when the great Greek dramatists, the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comic writer Aristophanes, enriched the life of the Athenians and subsequent audiences up to those of our time, or when the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, nobly headed by Marlowe, Shakespeare and Jonson, gave the English language memorable expression in a vast variety of plays. Ben Jonson's remark that Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time is a test to apply to all other dramatists as well: do they last the course? Have they still an impact upon a modern audience; does their presentation of human action — and inaction — at crucial moments in the lives of the characters they create still excite us, move us, enrich us, cause us to reflect? The answers to such questions are, perhaps, surprisingly often, yes — surprisingly to those who have not realised the power of literature to make specific situations and responses to them universal.

Great drama, as Dr Watson shows us so effectively in this book, has its lasting immediacy. He has selected plays from different periods of history, from different cultures, to illustrate the nature of dramatic art in the English language, and so he considers the Greeks, the Elizabethans, the comic dramatists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while also examining the treatment of society in more recent authors

such as the Norwegian Ibsen, the American Arthur Miller, the Russian Chekhov. He comments on contemporary writers — the Nigerian authors Soyinka and John Pepper Clark, for instance, and various Australian dramatists as well as on the dramatists of the earlier part of this century who, in Yeats's case, cast the Irish legends and, in Synge's and O'Casey's, the life and language of the Irish countryside and city, into an exuberant vitality of language. And Dr Watson also shows us the techniques of the theatre employed by the Anglo-Irish dramatist Shaw and the German Brecht in compelling audiences to think for themselves, to look at contemporary conventions critically. More than this, he turns our attention to the new and often apparently difficult plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, explaining some of the reasons why they write their particular kinds of play.

This *Introduction*, then, is one that shows us the vast scope of drama, that suggests ways of studying it, that stimulates us by conveying the author's sense of enjoyment in considering the power of drama to move all of us, however different our backgrounds and interests, to express — by concentrating upon particular situations — the variety and yet the universality of human experience.

Stirling, 1982

A. N. Jeffares

Introduction

This book is aimed at students working for 'A' level examinations, and should also be useful for first-year university students of English.

The book attempts to sharpen the student's sense of the special nature of drama as a genre, and of its variety and power. It offers detailed critical appreciation of the nature and effectiveness of dramatic methods within a number of great plays, selected from a range of different cultures and historical periods. It proceeds on the principle that the student will derive a livelier critical understanding of major terms — tragedy, comedy, poetic drama, naturalist theatre, and so on — by working outwards towards them from individual plays, rather than by working inwards from the abstractions of general theory. The plays have not been chosen at random, but to invite comparison and contrast of different theatrical methods and dramatic strategies. At the same time, each dramatist is seen in relation to his social and cultural context.

A brief bibliography is appended.

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