

THE USE OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL IN
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DRAMA

by

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Abstract

An interesting feature of post-1956 British drama is the concern of many playwrights to explore problems of contemporary relevance from an historical perspective. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine the use of historical situations and historical settings in six selected plays of the period--one each by Robert Bolt, Peter Shaffer and John Osborne and three by John Arden--and to show that John Arden best understands the problems posed by the dramatic use of historical material.

Such a topic invites any number of approaches, none of which is necessarily superior to another. One could examine the history plays in terms of the thematic concerns prevalent in the non-historical dramas of the various authors, for instance. Or one could study the political or ideological orientations as revealed in the critical and non-dramatic writings of the playwrights and then relate such concerns to similar considerations in their history plays. In either case, the result would be relevant to our study of the use of historical material. However, because the topic is concerned primarily with the dramatic use of such material, and because the works of four playwrights are under consideration, neither approach is employed. Instead, the method is constituted principally of in-depth studies of individual plays. The aesthetic and thematic aims of the authors are given full

consideration, of course, but so far as possible these aims are related to the plays at hand rather than to broader and hence less manageable considerations.

Common to the six plays is a decided break with the familiar fourth-wall conventions of naturalistic or realistic drama. As this study shows, however, the use of overtly theatrical devices or conventions, like the use of historical material itself, is neither new to drama nor is it a viable substitute for thematic evasions on the author's part. Bolt's A Man for All Seasons and Shaffer's The Royal Hunt of the Sun provide convincing illustrations of this point. Conversely, a playwright's conscientious attention to such matters is insufficient to compensate for dramaturgical deficiencies. Osborne's Luther and Arden's Left-Handed Liberty prove that thematic thoroughness does not necessarily result in viable historical drama.

However, Arden's Armstrong's Last Goodnight and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance illustrate that a happy combination is possible, from both an historical and dramatic point of view. These plays suggest that a playwright's success with the use of historical material is best achieved if he is conversant with both the academic aspects of the period under consideration and the vast array of artistic conventions by which the various issues may be exploited to great dramatic effect. In other words, Arden shows that intelligent historicism and theatrical craftsmanship

must be molded in such a way that neither dominates or submerges the other and in which neither can fairly be evaluated independently of the other. In so doing, Arden demonstrates that an historical approach remains a valid--and often exciting--venue by which problems of contemporary relevance can be explored.

INTRODUCTION

The use of historical situations or historical settings in the drama is as old as the art form itself. Moreover, its persistence in contemporary British drama is indicative of a continuing shared interest on the part of playwrights and playgoers alike. There remains for the student of drama, then, the critical problem of determining what criteria might be used to evaluate the aesthetic worth of such plays as well as assessing the relative artistic stature of the dramatists who write them. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine in some depth selected plays by Robert Bolt, Peter Shaffer, John Osborne and John Arden and to show that the last named, Arden, best understands the use of historical material in relation to its dramatic possibilities.

Naturally, the choice both of dramatists and plays is necessarily restricted. John Whiting (The Devils) and Ann Jellicoe (Shelley), for instance, have written plays dealing with historical subjects, but they are not included in this discussion. Moreover, as we shall see, both Osborne and Arden have written plays relevant to this category but which receive only cursory treatment.

There are two reasons for such selectivity. In the first place, purely practical limitations of space preclude the possibility or desirability of discussing every play which is rel-

evant to the topic. More important, the scope of the topic itself demands the examination of a more or less comprehensive cross-section of plays and playwrights. Hence, the inclusion of one playwright and the omission of another does not necessarily imply a qualitative judgment on the part of this writer. The same is true in regard to individual plays.

For the most part, the plays are fairly representative of the various uses of historical material in contemporary British drama. Bolt's A Man for all Seasons, Shaffer's The Royal Hunt of the Sun, Osborne's Luther and Arden's Left-Handed Liberty, Armstrong's Last Goodnight and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance are of widely divergent aesthetic values, but all have attracted critical attention or enjoyed commercial success, or both. Moreover, in these plays the authors employ--with varying degrees of success--forms and techniques which are at variance with the more familiar fourth-wall conventions of naturalistic drama. Episodic structures, mime, music and songs, the admixture of poetry and prose, direct addresses to the audience and candidly theatrical (or non-illusionistic) stage images characterize the plays as a group, whatever the differing artistic ends of the individual playwrights. This kind of similarity within diversity assists in the drawing of comparisons and contrasts.

The fact that the plays constitute--at least for the purposes of this paper--a reasonably manageable group, it is still

necessary to find a suitably definitive term by which that group may be designated. The plays all embody historical situations or settings, but the absence of any clear-cut definition of what constitutes a "history play" raises critical problems--initially, at least. Though E.M.W. Tillyard, in his Shakespeare's History Plays, confidently differentiates between the tragedies and histories, the Elizabethan world-view as revealed in the drama of that period is sufficiently remote from our own to discourage arbitrary analogies with the views and drama of our own time. Furthermore, however familiar we may be with the philosophical or intellectual trends of the twentieth century, different playwrights have different opinions as to what trends merit priority in dramatic terms. For this reason criteria which might ultimately suffice to define a twentieth century or, more precisely, a mid-twentieth century, "world-view" can be only tentatively deduced.

Ronald Peacock suggests a definition, but in terms of contemporary history plays it is also unsatisfactory. Taking a broad view of dramatic history, he discerns "well-marked types," with the history play as a tentative adjunct:

Four in especial may be clearly distinguished, recurring with great persistence through the centuries and in widely separated cultures: tragedy, comedy, romance, and allegory, using this term to cover all didactic drama. A fifth should perhaps be added: the historical play as "dramatized narrative", though in Shakespeare's elaboration it is not so much a separate type as an amalgam of two or more of the others. They are all represented in Shakespeare, significantly enough.¹

Peacock's definition is no definition at all in that he does not offer criteria by which the historical play might be distinguished from the other types, while his reference to Shakespeare's histories does little to clarify the matter.

Even a playwright's choice of subject matter is an arguable criterion, particularly in relation to contemporary plays. Eric Bentley suggests that

a glance at history plays that have had success of any sort will reveal that they are not about the great figures of history taken indiscriminately, but only about those few, like Julius Caesar, Joan of Arc, and Napoleon, whose names have become by-words. Another paradox: only when a figure has become legendary is he or she a good subject for a history play.²

Serious qualifications intrude here. Arthur Miller's The Crucible has enjoyed considerable success, but it can scarcely be argued that John Proctor, the central figure, was a "legendary" figure before Miller dramatized the Salem witch hunts. Similarly, the central figures in Brecht's Mother Courage and Joan Littlewood's production of Oh What a Lovely War are historically anonymous. Does this mean, as Bentley seems to contend, that such works may not be designated as history plays? The question is particularly relevant in respect to two of Arden's plays: Armstrong's Last Goodnight and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance. The former deals with a minor and largely unknown Scottish diplomat and the latter with personages who are entirely fictitious. Must these plays, too, be designated as something other than

historical dramas?

In terms of this thesis, however, such questions are to a large extent academic. It is perhaps significant, however, that M. H. Abrams, in A Glossary of Literary Terms, offers no definition of such plays according to genre, while G. B. Tennyson, in "A Drama Glossary," refers to historical drama in starkly simple terms: "Broadly, any play about an historical event."³

Actually, the absence of a precise definition is in many ways advantageous. All of the playwrights discussed in this thesis offer their own views as to the significance of the various historical contexts. Consequently, a pragmatic approach is desirable: we are free to evaluate their achievements in terms of their own aesthetic expectations before attempting a comparative evaluation. In view of the diversity of their thematic concerns, this is only fair. Such an approach is also advantageous in respect to the playwrights' relationship to their more distant predecessors. Comparisons are both useful and inevitable, of course, and the nature of the topic demands that comparative judgments be made. However, before they can be meaningful, due consideration must be given the different aesthetic and historical orientations of our contemporary playwrights. A pragmatic approach considerably facilitates that consideration.

Within the context of this thesis, then, "history play"

refers to any play in which the author uses an actual historical situation or an historical setting. Regarding the criteria by which the use of such material is evaluated, the individual aims of the playwrights are given full consideration.

A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

"The bare fact is," wrote Kenneth Tynan in 1954, "that, apart from revivals and imports, there is nothing in the London that one dares discuss with an intelligent man for more than five minutes."⁴ Such, at least in Tynan's view, was the deplorable state of British drama in the early 1950's. Moreover, more recent evaluations of that period essentially confirm his assessment. Katharine Worth notes that the realistic dramas of the period had become "stale and tired,"⁵ while Frederick Lumley asserts that

Playgoing had become dull, it was a safety-first theatre where passions were hinted at rather than experienced. Revivals were the order of the day, the star system dictated the choice. It was a theatre of stale naturalism; it was an apathetic theatre unaware that the world it was supposed to reflect was there no longer--it had become a drawing-room museum.⁶

What such evaluations reflect, of course, is impatience with the conventional fare of the period: Terence Rattigan's drawing-room melodramas and Noel Coward's genteel satires, as well as the usual run of detective stories, musicals, and revues.

With the production of Osborne's Look Back in Anger in 1956, however, the situation changes somewhat. In this and subsequent plays by Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, Shelagh Delaney, Bernard Kops, and John Arden (to name but a few), fashionable drawing-rooms are replaced by seedy boarding houses, public housing, and squalid kitchens or bed-sitters. The Oxbridgian accents of Rattigan's or Coward's well-bred characters are now supplanted by, or co-exist with, cockney and rural dialects, north country slang, and lower-class colloquialisms. In short, a significant shift of emphasis--in terms of subject matter, setting and language--seems to have taken place. More important, dramatists in ever increasing numbers appeared to regard the theatre as being something more than a place for irrelevant, escapist entertainment.

Naturally, much more than an interest in lower social classes is involved here. Diverse thematic concerns and a variety of dramatic structures and stylistic devices characterize the new drama. Pinter's plays, for instance, are quite different from Wesker's, in terms of both content and language. Also to be taken into account is the possible extent of non-British influences. This factor is particularly relevant to history plays. As we shall see, the aesthetics and plays of Bertolt Brecht were becoming increasingly well known in England. His interest and use of historical situations and settings, his desire that the theatre combine entertainment with ideas

of contemporary political or social relevance, the astonishing variety of dramatic techniques employed in his plays--all are worthy of attention.

Of course, the selection of a play or a specific date as indicative of a "renaissance," is necessarily arbitrary and often misleading. In the first place, there is the danger of implying that plays written previous to or after the dividing point, and whose settings or characters are not characteristic of the "new" drama, are somehow inferior. T. S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party(1949), The Confidential Clerk(1953) and The Elder Statesman(1958) are largely set in upper middle-class milieus, but they can scarcely be equated, in terms of quality or seriousness of intent, with the works of Rattigan. Secondly, there is a danger that works most commonly associated with a new movement will be regarded as somehow typical of the respective authors--regardless of how different in terms of form or content, his (or her) subsequent plays might prove to be. Osborne is a case in point. In spite of the variety and number of subsequent achievements, his name is still most commonly associated with Anger--despite his assertion in 1961 that he finds that play "rather old-fashioned" and that it "embarrasses" him to read it.⁷

Nonetheless, even the most unsympathetic and cautious critics agree that a new emphasis and vitality typify the

British Drama in 1956, and later. George Wellwarth, who is generally hostile to the new British plays, notes that

To critics fed so long on the post-Pinerotic pap of the West End drama, the plays of the new English dramatists necessarily seem masterpieces. Unfortunately, one is forced to suspect that much of this enthusiasm is attributable to thankfulness for boredom relieved and for national sensitivities assuaged.⁸

Allardyce Nicoll, while urging caution in using such terms as "turning-point," "break-through" or "revolution" to describe Anger, nonetheless admits that

Osborne's play shows a vigorous drive which distinguishes it from most other preceding works of a like kind; obviously, too, it strikes a new note in concentrating upon Jimmy Porter's uninhibited egoism.⁹

With such reservations in mind, we might now examine the significance of 1956 in terms of historical drama.

Actually, the date provides, from a purely practical standpoint, a convenient chronological division. All the history plays discussed in this thesis were written, performed and published after 1956. Within the context of this thesis, then, the term "contemporary" defines, with some precision, the chronological limits of the topic.

The year 1956 is useful in a more important sense. It is significant, for instance, that so many important playwrights have written, since that date, so many history plays. The shift from fashionable drawing-rooms to less comfortable

surroundings was accompanied by a shift from contemporary to historical settings. Moreover, as we shall see, the four playwrights under consideration have achieved success, in one form or another, in both categories. Hence, the advent of contemporary history plays can be viewed--at least from a 1968 perspective--as but one manifestation of post-1956 dramatic developments.

Of course it might be argued that Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral (1935) and the less impressive verse dramas of Christopher Fry in the late 1940's are indicative of a similar trend in earlier decades in that both playwrights make use of historical situations or settings. On the other hand, it is significant that Eliot's subsequent plays are set in contemporary surroundings while Fry's use of historical settings exerted little or no influence on his contemporaries.¹⁰

Turning, now, to the choice of settings exercised by Bolt, Shaffer, Osborne, and Arden, diversity--as opposed to unity--seems to characterize the selections. They range from Plantagenet England to sixteenth century Scotland, Germany, and Peru to Victorian England. However, they do have one thing in common: all are located in a relatively distant past. Such an observation might seem minor, but it is indeed relevant if we ask: how chronologically distant must a setting be before one can designate it as "historic"? Are we justified, for instance, in describing as an history play a drama that deals

with recently-deceased (or even living) personages? The question is intriguing but it must remain--for the moment at least--unanswered. In the first place, none of the plays under discussion fits such a category. More importantly, the absence of a comprehensive definition of what constitutes a history play makes it largely irrelevant, at least within the context of this thesis. Actually, the question is best left untackled until we examine, in some detail, those plays which are more commonly assumed to be of an historical genre.

Turning, now, to the sequence in which the playwrights are discussed, the relative brevity of the period under consideration is kept firmly in mind. No attempt is made to impose a chronological order. Because all of the dramatists are still living (and presumably still writing) and because all have written dramas of a non-historical nature, such a sequence would serve little purpose. Rather, the order of discussion is determined by the broader demands of the topic itself.

FOOTNOTES INTRODUCTION

- 1 Ronald Peacock, The Art of Drama (London, 1960), p. 190.
- 2 Eric Bentley, "Preface" to Bertolt Brecht's Galileo, trans. Charles Laughton (New York, 1960), p. 12.
- 3 G. B. Tennyson, An Introduction to Drama (New York, 1967), p. 120.
- 4 Kenneth Tynan, "West End Apathy," Tynan on Theatre (Pelican, 1964), p. 31.
- 5 Katharine Worth, "The Angry Young Man," Experimental Drama, ed. William A. Armstrong (London, 1963), p. 147.
- 6 Frederick Lumley, New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama: A Survey Since Ibsen and Shaw (London, 1967), p. 255.
- 7 John Osborne, "That Awful Museum," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (Feb. 1961), pp. 214, 216.
- 8 George Wellwarth, The Theatre of Protest and Padox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama (New York, 1965), p. 197.
- 9 Allardyce Nicoll, "Somewhat in a New Dimension," Contemporary Theatre, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, 4 (London, 1962), p. 79.
- 10 It must also be pointed out that playwrights commonly associated with the pre-1956 era continued to write. Rattigan's Ross (1961), based on episodes in the life of T. E. Lawrence, and Fry's Curtmantle (1961), which deals with Henry II, fall within our period under consideration. Stylistically, however, these plays could have been written ten or twenty years earlier.

CHAPTER I

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Common to the playwrights under consideration is the desire that their historical dramas be relevant, in one way or another, to contemporary life. However different their philosophies or dramaturgical approaches may be, they nonetheless reveal a shared sense of purpose on this point. Of course, such an observation may seem irrelevant in that common sense would seem to pre-suppose such a goal on the part of any serious dramatist and that, in any case, such a goal is by no means peculiar to the writers of history plays.

The pertinence of such an observation becomes apparent, however, if we briefly recall certain tendencies in the nineteenth century theatre. As Martin Meisel points out, many history plays of the period

were not concerned to give immediacy and familiarity to the past, but to create a remote and splendid world, shining by contrast with the present, and evoked by every scene and costume, every syllable and sentiment of the highly artificial, highly impassioned language spoken on the stage.¹

In regard to such plays, Shaw wryly observed that the

only way to write a play which shall convey to the general public an impression of

antiquity is to make the characters speak blank verse and abstain from reference to steam, telegraphy, or any of the material conditions of their existence.²

Shaw felt that, in addition to falsifying history, the content of such plays was largely irrelevant in terms of the realities and issues of contemporary life--a situation he sought to remedy by writing history plays of his own. As Meisel points out, his aims differ from those of the average nineteenth century dramatist in two important ways.³ In the first place, he seeks to dramatize the historical issues rather than the "private passions" of a particular historical moment; secondly, he seeks to imbue the historically distant past with the immediacy and familiarity of the present.

In a somewhat different context, the writings of Bertolt Brecht reveal similar aims:

The field has to be defined in historically relative terms. In other words we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too.⁴

Shaw and Brecht insist, in short, that the historical context be defined, rather than romanticized or falsified, and they demand that the context be relevant and understandable from a contemporary perspective.

More recent critics express similar concerns. Kenneth Tynan, stressing the importance of the historical context, notes that

A play set in the past needs much fuller documentation than one set in the present; we cannot understand it unless we know the broad social context in which the action is laid.⁵

Emphasizing the context's contemporary relevance, John Gassner insists that "The past remains the past, whereas it is the business of the playwright to make it the present."⁶ Though such views are reminiscent of Shaw and Brecht, it is not important that we account for them in terms of such eminent predecessors. What they do reveal is a certain continuity of attitudes or critical expectations regarding the use of historical material in twentieth century history plays. Moreover, inherent in such views is the implication that historical dramas continue to be written that fail to satisfy such criteria. With this distinction in mind, we may now examine the achievement of Robert Bolt, a playwright who attempts to render meaningful a sixteenth century situation in terms of twentieth century life.

Bolt, an admirer of Camus, sees man's position in the universe as essentially "existential." In a prefatory essay to A Man For All Seasons he notes:

...we no longer have, as past societies have had, any picture of individual Man (Stoic Philosopher, Christian Religious, Rational Gentleman) by which to recognize ourselves and against which to measure ourselves; we are anything. But if anything, then nothing, and it is not everyone who can live with that, though it is our true present condition.⁷

It is this sense of "nothingness," according to Bolt, that accounts for man's willingness to locate himself in something larger than himself--that is, in society.

But, as Bolt is well aware, man's position in society, as well as the existence of different kinds of societies gives rise to serious problems--some of which are potentially lethal. Hence, in The Tiger and the Horse (1961) he dramatizes the attempts of contemporary individuals to deal with the problem of nuclear disarmament. However, Bolt feels that such an approach (i.e. contemporary characters in contemporary situations) is fraught with dangers for the playwright because of the inevitable divisions of political opinion within a contemporary audience:

...the minute you mention the bomb, you've lost the audience. They go off on their own line of thinking because it's a problem they've got to solve in all kinds of political ways, only they don't know how. Another way to put it is that any mention of the bomb swamps the play.⁸

How, then, can the playwright dramatize the problem of individual man's conflict with his society in a manner that will not alienate his audience? Bolt's solution in A Man For All Seasons (1962) is to locate the action in the historically distant past. He dramatizes the refusal of Sir Thomas More, a staunch Catholic, to accede to the demands of Henry VIII in respect to Papal authority. The advantage of utilizing such a situation, according to Bolt, is that

a very few people give a tinker's cuss whether

or not the sovereign of England is the supreme head of the Church of England insofar as the law of God allows. This is a very dead letter indeed for all but a very small minority of people.⁹

Relatively free from immediate involvement (political, religious, or emotional), the audience is thus in a homogeneously receptive position to concentrate on what Bolt feels to be the core of the drama, the dilemma of a man whose inner "self" is threatened by the untenable demands of external forces.

The author is careful to impress upon the audience the contemporary relevance of More's dilemma. He does this by means of the Common Man, a character of variously changing roles whose direct addresses to the audience relate pertinent historical information and provide interpretive comments. His function, Bolt informs us, is "to draw the audience into the play," while his qualities of character are meant to represent "that which is common to us all." (Seasons, p.xix) In order that we do not overlook the intended thematic relevance of his presence, the Common Man himself announces, in the opening scene of the play, that

The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the
Common Man....Like all other centuries. And
that's my proposition. (I, pp.3-4)

The author also attempts to deal intelligently with the historical forces that serve to define his sixteenth century setting. The task is difficult in that Bolt seeks to establish, in dramatic terms, the historical context of Sir Thomas More's

dilemma and ultimate martyrdom while at the same time keeping More as the focal point of dramatic interest. The protagonist's complex problem is to a large extent brought about by events which are ultimately beyond the control of any one man. He is inextricably involved in a situation that encompasses the internal politics of England, the diplomatic fencing between England and Spain, the conflict between corrupt and reformatory factions within the Church--all of which, in one way or another, are related to the question of Papal supremacy, a question that Luther had already taken into his own hands. In short, More is but one figure in a Europe convulsed by reformatory and revolutionary forces. Bolt's task is to render significant the moral choice of this solitary individual, a choice based on individual conscience, while at the same time constructing the larger frame of reference within which this choice is made.

On the whole, it must be conceded that Bolt does provide such a framework. Regarding English politics, we learn that bribery and personal greed are very much a part of regular political procedures. Advising the opportunistic Richard against aspiring to a political career, More warns that

in office they offer you all sorts of things. I was once offered a whole village, with a mill, and a manor house, and heaven knows what else--a coat of arms I shouldn't be surprised. Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one. (I, p.8)

We also learn that the civil peace of England is at stake.

Because Henry and Catherine have failed to produce a male heir to the throne, civil war is a distinct possibility. Cardinal Wolsey, reminding More of the Yorkist wars, warns:

Let him die without an heir and we'll have them back again. Let him die without an heir and this "peace" you think so much of will go out.... (I, p.22)

Wolsey also informs us that the Church itself is not in the best of spiritual health:

Very well then...England needs an heir; certain measures, perhaps regrettable, perhaps not-- (Pompous) there is much in the Church that needs reformation, Thomas--(More smiles) All right, regrettable! Now explain how you as Councilor of England can obstruct those measures for the sake of your own private, conscience. (I, p.22)

Bolt similarly draws our attention to the international implications of Henry's desire to divorce Catherine. Because she is of the Spanish royal house, Spanish interests are at stake and the periodic appearances of Signor Chapuys, the ambassador, serve to remind us of that fact. In addition, we are made aware that the Pope's refusal to grant the divorce may have been to a large extent determined by the presence of Spanish troops in Rome, a factor that does not escape the attention of Henry:

Am I to burn in Hell because the Bishop of Rome, with the King of Spain's knife at his throat, mouths me Deuteronomy? Hypocrites! They're all hypocrites! Mind they do not take you in, Thomas! (I, p.56)

Nor does Bolt evade the moral complexity of the problem.

Because Catherine was the widow of Henry's brother and because it was contrary to Church dogma for a man to marry his brother's wife, special Papal dispensation was necessary before Henry could marry her in the first place. More voices the crux of this aspect of the problem when he talks with Wolsey:

A dispensation was granted so that the King might marry Queen Catherine, for state reasons. Now we are to ask the Pope to-- dispense with his dispensation, also for state reasons? (I, p.21)

The problem is further complicated for More when Henry hints that his own conscience deserves consideration in this matter. Quoting Leviticus to illustrate that his marriage to Catherine was wrong in the first place, he asserts:

It was a sin, Thomas; I admit it; I repent. And God has punished me; I have no son.... Son after son she's borne me, Thomas, all dead at birth, or dead within the month; I never saw the hand of God so clear in anythingIt is my bounden duty to put away the Queen, and all the Popes back to St. Peter shall not come between me and my duty! How is it that you cannot see? Everyone else does. (I, p.54)

Such is the difficult situation in which More finds himself, both morally and politically. It is also dangerous and--for the playwright--potentially dramatic.

The situation is also, it must be added, potentially melodramatic, and Bolt attempts to avoid rendering it as such.

(Historical fact helps him here) Though More does not publicly assent to Henry's decision to divorce Catherine and though he

stresses to Wolsey that

when statesmen forsake their own private
conscience for the sake of their public
duties...they lead their country by a
short route to chaos. (I,p.22)

he nonetheless plays the practical politician and accepts, after the fall of Wolsey, the office of Chancellor. His position, he feels, is tenable so long as he is not required to make public his private feelings on the matter of the divorce.

Though aware that political enemies are suspicious of his true feelings and anxious to bring them into the open for the sake of their own personal advancement, More plays the role of the cunning lawyer. Warned by his son-in-law, Roper, of the selfish opportunism of his enemies, More refuses to take a religious or moral stand:

...I'm not God. The currents and eddies of
right and wrong, which you find such plain
sailing, I can't navigate. I'm no voyager.
But in the thickets of the law, oh, there
I'm a forester. I doubt if there's a man
alive who could follow me there, thank God.
(I, p.66)

The law, however, is subject to change, and when an act of parliament requires an oath of allegiance which acknowledges Henry's claim to be head of the Church of England, there are fewer thickets in which More can hide. But here, again, More uses his cunning and takes refuge in silence. When his friend Norfolk questions him in respect to Henry's move, More simply replies:

I'll answer that question for one person,

only, the King. Aye, and that in private,
too. (II, p.90)

But silence alone is not enough. Imprisoned and then brought to trial on blatantly trumped-up charges of treason, More is condemned to death. At any time he can take the oath and save himself, but this, to More, would amount to relinquishing that one small part of his "self," his conscience, that gives meaning to human life and human integrity. It is only when a verdict of guilty appears inevitable that he does publicly state his private views:

The King in Parliament cannot bestow the
Supremacy of the Church because it is a
Spiritual Supremacy! And more to this the
immunity of the Church is promised in Magna
Carta and the King's own Coronation Oath!
(II, p.159)

Such, in short, is Bolt's representation of More and of the society in which he moves.

But is it a just representation, in terms either of the historical milieu or of More himself? Some commentators seem to think so. Gladys Veidemanis, noting the numerous historical issues touched upon, feels that it is "a play that repays close study, especially by college-bound seniors"¹⁰ and Terence Rattigan, stressing that ideas should never be subordinated to character, is delighted to find that

the Sir Thomas More play is not ideological at
all. I think it's very, very fair.¹¹

Even a cursory examination of the play, however, reveals

grave deficiencies in Bolt's presentation of More and of his society. Despite his studious attention to historical issues, the issues seem artificially yoked to the story of More, the man of conscience. As Tynan notes,

A hint, now and then, is lightly dropped that More's obduracy was not only a crafty individual challenge to Tudor law but a social and political threat to the whole process of the English Reformation. Once dropped, however, these hints are rapidly swept under the carpet and forgotten.¹²

Tynan is essentially correct in his evaluation of this aspect of the play. As noted earlier, references are dutifully made to internal politics, the need for reform in the Church, the threat of civil war, the realpolitik of diplomacy and religion, but nowhere do we find More actually confronting these issues or considering the implications of his own actions. As M.W. Fosbery notes, we are given "odd scraps of knowledge,"¹³ but these are not realized in dramatic terms.

Moreover, we might add, when important views are put forward they are usually presented in such a way as to enhance the integrity of More while detracting from the integrity of those who oppose him. Though Henry advances his own quite valid arguments as to why More should support him (I, 54-55), we learn that his subsequent sudden departure from More's household is motivated by nothing more important than a desire to go dancing with Ann Boleyn (I, p.59). And when More is not on stage, his

detractors are presented in such a way as to all but canonize More by contrast. The first act, for instance, closes with a conspiratorial meeting between Cromwell and Rich for the purpose of plotting More's downfall. We are exposed to Cromwell, the conniving villain, rather than Cromwell, the statesman, a man who may very well have excellent reasons why More should be disposed of.

That is not to say, of course, that sinister intrigue and self-aggrandizement were not common to the politics of the day, nor that they should not be presented on the stage. What is important here, however, is that they appear to be presented in order to evade important issues while at the same time enhancing More's moral stature. The result is gross distortion, and the play suffers because of it.

Evasiveness is also obvious in the characterization of Sir Thomas. We are constantly assured throughout of his scrupulous honesty and integrity both in his public and private life. He cares for his family, cares for his king, and cares for his God. Early in the play we see More with wife Alice and daughter Margaret praying together, and a stage direction dutifully assures us that this is a matter of routine, (I, p.15). Furthermore, we are made aware that More's illustrious opponent, Henry, is aware of his integrity. In response to More's inquiry as to why his support is required, Henry replies:

Because you are honest. What's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest...There are those like Norfolk who follow me because I wear the crown, and those like Master Cromwell who follow me because they are jackals with sharp teeth and I am their lion, and there is the mass that follows me because it follows anything that moves--and there is you. (I,p.55)

If such truly is the state of Tudor England (which is debatable), then we cannot help but agree that More is a saint among more or less sinful men.

Accepting, for the moment, Henry's political analysis, we might now inquire as to what--precisely--this saint stands for, and why. It is here, however, that Bolt fails us. Though we are made aware that More is an orthodox Catholic (he refuses Roper to marry his daughter until he relinquishes his temporary embracement of Lutheranism), Bolt does not probe the innermost workings of his protagonist's mind or soul. Because the play is (ostensibly) about the struggle of an individual to preserve a sense of "self" in face of changes with which he cannot agree, it is essential that we understand just what constitutes this "self." As Tynan notes, we are "entitled to know what his ideas are and how he arrived at them."¹⁴

Bolt, however, evades the issue. To Wolsey, as noted earlier, More emphasizes the sanctity of private conscience, even at the expense of public duty (I, p.22), but nowhere do we find More considering the possible consequences of such a view.

Moreover, the possibility that many oppose the doctrine of Papal Supremacy as a matter of private conscience is not given dramatic consideration. Though Henry speaks of his own conscience in respect to this matter, there is no meaningful debate with More. Bolt merely slips the issue in as a matter of historical record and then leaves it at that.

When directly confronted with the possibility that the Papal Supremacy doctrine leaves much to be desired if there happens to be a bad Pope on the throne, More merely asserts:

The Apostolic Succession of the Pope is--(Stops, interested)...Why, it's a theory, yes; you can't see it; can't touch it; it's a theory....But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I believe it, but that I believe it...I trust I make myself obscure? (II,p.91)

The problem here is that not only does More make himself obscure to Norfolk, who confronts him with the issue, but to the audience as well, and nowhere is this view clarified in terms of the larger context of the play's action. Even when More finally makes public his private beliefs (II,p.159), they remain no more than flat assertions which remain only tenuously connected with important historical issues. In fact, More's assertions are not only flat but uninteresting as well. In the absence of dramatic argument, we are apparently meant to accept them at face value. As Fosbery puts it:

Mr. Bolt ignores the demands of the material, because he does not find it necessary to

provide More with any opposition of equal dynamic force. Mr. Bolt...assumes that More is a Saint: which in turn suggests that Mr. Bolt is at heart unconvinced.¹⁵

Bolt, in other words, must arbitrarily present, rather than examine, More's views because there is an underlying suspicion that his views might not bear intelligent examination.

Even those critics who find much to praise in the play inadvertently add weight to the validity of Fosbery's assessment. Veidemanis, for instance, notes that

More is on stage in almost every scene, a visible indictment of those around him who so readily accede to King Henry's lightest command.¹⁶

while J.C. Trewin feels that Bolt has written one of the few contemporary "portrait-plays"¹⁷ likely to last. Both Veidemanis and Trewin agree that More's central position is due to his morally exemplary character--but, like Bolt, neither scrutinizes the validity of More's moral stance.

On the whole, then, More's position remains saintly, although obscure, to the end, and we are apparently meant to accept it as such. Unfortunately, Bolt does not provide us with any weighty reasons as to why we should accept More on such terms, unless, that is, we agree with Henry that, aside from More, the fabric of the nation is easily divisible into self-seeking opportunists, greedy jackals and fickle masses. However, there is no valid reason why we need accept that proposition either.

It may be argued, of course, that Bolt is interested more in his protagonist's attempt to maintain his convictions in the face of adversity than the nature of the forces that threaten him. Moreover, it might be added, the great diversity of the opposition, including the kindly persuasiveness of his own family, necessitates over-simplification on the author's part. But such arguments (or rationalizations) prove unsatisfactory. After all, the relative quality of More's moral stance can only be assessed in terms of the quality of the opposition. Similarly, the historical relevance of More's convictions can only be appreciated in terms of the historical forces (religious, political or social) which serves to define them. Bolt is evasive in both cases.

An unfortunate result of such evasiveness is that the play exudes the more uninteresting aspects of melodrama. More seriously, Sir Thomas himself emerges as somewhat of a bore. His self-deprecating witticisms and the clever verbal thrusts with which he parries his opponents' arguments do engage our attention throughout. And we appreciate the fact that his safety (and the safety of his family) is dependant upon his evasiveness or silence in regard to important issues. But in the final analysis More emerges as a moral abstraction rather than an individualized human being, something which neither the author's verbal skill or plot manipulations succeeds in concealing.

Ignored by Bolt are those aspects of More's life and

character which would considerably enhance the significance of his moral decisions. E. B. Cotterill, in an introduction to The Utopia of Sir Thomas More, draws attention to a side of More's character that contrasts sharply with Bolt's:

The contrast between More's intellectual convictions (if such they were) and his religion (if such we may call it) is most easily discernible in the astounding difference between the truly Christian liberty, toleration and charity described and apparently warmly recommended by him in his Utopia and his own attitude towards those who differed from him in matters of dogma. Not only are his invectives against Tyndale and Luther as fierce and abusive as the diatribes of Milton against Salmasius, but it is undeniable that, even if he did not himself light martyr fires, he consented publicly thereto. That he, as Chancellor, merely acted as executor of the law which condemned heretics to the stake seems to me a defense of no validity....And his own words testify against him.¹⁸

E. E. Reynolds, on the other hand, notes that during his imprisonment Sir Thomas "even hinted at the possibility of reaching an understanding with the Lutherans and their doctrine of justification by faith."¹⁹ While it would be impertinent to suggest that Bolt make use of such interesting and seemingly contradictory aspects of More's character, the information does draw our attention to the author's essentially static and ultimately uninteresting portraiture. He reveals the protagonist's moral stance, but he fails to provide even a retrospective glance as to how or why he arrived at it.

Bolt's failure to provide an adequate sixteenth century context presents serious obstacles to our acceptance of the play's relevance in terms of contemporary life. That Bolt clearly wishes us to make such a connection is evidenced by his use of the Common Man ("Old Adam"). As Veidemanis points out, he represents the compromiser, "the individual who satisfies self-interest, and preserves his own skin at all cost."²⁰ As such, the character's thematic relevance is clear enough. Less satisfactory is his attempt to implicate the audience in the action.

That the device largely fails Bolt is well aware, but he attributes this failure to the fact that the spectators do not identify the Common Man (and hence themselves) with universal aspects of human nature; rather, they view him as "that mythical beast, The Man in the Street." (Seasons, p.xix) Actually, Bolt's rationalization here is less than satisfactory. After all, the man in the street is as good a representative as any of human nature in general, even if the street itself is located in Tudor England.

The real reason for the failure of the Common Man device is much more serious: it is based not on the misconception of his role that Bolt attributes to the audience, but on weaknesses inherent in the play itself. Bolt makes clear that the Common Man must ultimately be numbered among More's more illustrious

antagonists. Though he serves Sir Thomas in the roles of boatsman and steward, he also serves as his jailer and executioner. When, in his role of jailer, he refuses to allow the visit of More's family to be extended a few more minutes, More exclaims: "Oh, Sweet Jesus! These plain, simple men!"

(II, p.147) The implication here is that, despite orders from higher authorities, the Common Man should feel free to disobey his orders when matters of simple charity or mercy arise.

Taken further, however, Bolt also seems to be implying that the Common Man, whatever his role, should actively side with More in his struggle. This intention on Bolt's part becomes even more transparent when the Common Man later reappears as foreman of the jury and ultimately as More's executioner. It is clear that Bolt wishes us to assume a complicity between the Common Man (and hence ourselves) and the powers that condemn Sir Thomas to death.

What is not clear, however, is why the Common Man should support More. After all, Bolt's conscience is kept under wraps throughout the play, even from the audience. And when he finally does clarify his true beliefs, he merely declares, rather than explains, them. Is there any reason, then, why the Common Man or anyone else should accept More's declarations at face value? In order to do so, one must first accept Bolt's implicit assumption that More is a saint among sinners and that a mere

declaration of faith should be enough to send the agents of decency scurrying to his aid. Bolt does not examine the possibility that, in all honest conscience, there might be as many valid reasons to oppose More as to support him. Nor does he invite the audience to explore or contemplate such possibilities.

Of course, we can sympathise with More because of the hardships suffered by himself and his family and because of the fabrication of lies that are used to trap him. But in the final analysis it is clear that Bolt--true to melodramatic tradition--uses these misfortunes to divert our attention from more important matters. It is not surprising, then, that the audience can remain comfortably aloof from the dramatic action, despite the efforts of the Common Man to draw it in. Actually, there is nothing of importance to be drawn into because Bolt reduces the struggle between More and his society to an uncomfortably melodramatic conflict between the forces of good and evil. The presence of the Common Man fails to conceal this weakness at the heart of the play.

Of course, the play does contain merits. The epic narrative flows smoothly and though Bolt's examination of the many historical issues often proves superficial, he does display a certain technical proficiency in introducing them on to the stage. Moreover, he is successful in creating the atmosphere, if not the substance, of Tudor England. Language assists him here.

He makes extensive use of Elizabethan imagery²¹ and he notes: "I was guaranteed some beauty and form by incorporating passages from Sir Thomas More himself." (Seasons, p.xvii)

The merits, however, fail to conceal serious flaws and we are forced to agree with Fosbery's assessment: "The trouble is the play involves us neither in 1535 nor in 1960."²² Bolt, in short, fails to accomplish his most important objectives. Of course, there are difficulties inherent in the topic itself, particularly if its content is meant to be meaningful from a contemporary perspective. The drama concerns a man who defies authority (the king), but he does so only in order that he may continue to give allegiance to another authority (the pope). The fact that an aura of corruption hovers about both sources of power adds dramatic interest to the situation. It also raises legitimate questions in respect to the basis on which a decision will be made. Bolt, however, fails to exploit the dramatic possibilities, while his refusal to clarify the nature of important issues ultimately exhausts our patience and our interest.

In summary, then, we can say that Bolt, in A Man for All Seasons, reveals an essentially superficial approach to historical material. While the fluid staging, serviceable prose and direct addresses to the audience may temporarily divert our attention from this superficiality, it soon becomes

apparent that they are also used (perhaps unconsciously) to conceal an emptiness at the heart of the play. The Common Man, for instance, proves useful in providing narrative continuity, but too often we feel that his direct addresses are but contrivances to imbue the play with a meaning or relevance that is simply not there. Similarly, Bolt's language helps establish the atmosphere of the period, but when it becomes apparent that substantial issues are to be evaded it merely sounds pretentious.

In short, then, we cannot become meaningfully involved in Bolt's view of the Tudor era and we may well ask if his simplistic approach to More and his historical milieu has not served to make the sixteenth century remote not only from the twentieth century but from life itself. Philip French, in his review of the film version of Seasons,²³ raises a question which is relevant to the play itself: "To what extent is it more than a thinking nun's Sound of Music?"²⁴ The answer must be: not very much.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER I

¹ Martin Meisel, Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre (Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 372-373.

² "Notes to Caesar and Cleopatra," The Works of Bernard Shaw, IX (London, 1930), p. 204.

³ Meisel, p. 372.

⁴ "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York, 1964), p. 190.

⁵ Tynan Right and Left: Plays, Films, People, Places and Events (New York, 1967), p. 90.

⁶ John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times (New York, 1963), p. 487.

⁷ Robert Bolt, "Preface," A Man for All Seasons (New York, 1962), p. xi. Subsequent references will be to this edition--hereafter cited in the text as Seasons.

⁸ From an interview with Tom S. Driver, "Seeing Man as Man," Christian Century, LXXIX (May 2, 1962), 576.

⁹ From an interview with Richard A. Duprey, "Interview with Robert Bolt," Catholic World, CXCV (Sept. 1962), 368.

¹⁰ Gladys Veidemanis, "A Play for All Seasons," English Journal, LV, 8 (1966), 1006.

¹¹ "Rattigan: Talks to John Simon," Theatre Arts, LXVI (April 1962), 74.

¹² Tynan Right and Left, p. 30.

¹³ M.W. Fosbery, "A Man for All Seasons," English Studies in Africa (Johannesburg), VI (1963), 165.

¹⁴ Tynan Right and Left, p. 27.

¹⁵ Fosbery, 169.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER I

16 Veidemanis, 1007.

17 J. C. Trewin, "Two Morality Playwrights: Robert Bolt and John Whiting," Experimental Drama, ed. William A. Armstrong (London, 1963), p. 124.

18 E. B. Cotterill, "Introduction," The Utopia of Sir Thomas More, trans. Ralph Robinson (New York, 1966), p. xli.

19 E. E. Reynolds, Sir Thomas More (London, 1965), p. 28.

20 Veidemanis, 1007.

21 In an interview with Tom Milne and Clive Goodwin the author complains that the critics apparently did not notice the presence of about 120 images of the sea, fishing and navigation: "Robert Bolt," Theatre at Work: Playwrights and Productions in the Modern British Theatre, ed. Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler (London, 1967), p. 66

22 Fosbery, 165.

23 Visual splendor and excellent acting, with Paul Scofield in the title role, fail to conceal Bolt's shallow approach to the historical issues.

24 Philip French, "Displaced Politics," London Magazine, VII, 4 (July 1967), 82.

CHAPTER II

THE ROYAL HUNT OF THE SUN

Interestingly, Peter Shaffer, in The Royal Hunt of the Sun, explores more fully those aspects of Catholic Christianity that Bolt so assiduously brushes aside in A Man for All Seasons. Shaffer's play is, in fact, a refreshing antidote to Bolt's because it deals with precisely the same period in history and it holds up for our scrutiny those aspects of Catholicism about which Sir Thomas (or rather Bolt) is so stubbornly reticent.

Like Bolt, Shaffer is explicitly concerned that his play be of relevance to the present. He points out that in the process of composition he stripped away much material that seemed to obstruct this relevance:

...gradually it evolved, rather like one of those series of drawings by Picasso which start with very literal, minutely realistic rendering of the subject and then gradually strip and simplify it until you are left with only the bare essentials. I started out with a history play; I hope I have ended with a contemporary story which uses history only as a groundwork to the expression of its theme. ¹

Like Bolt, too, Shaffer makes use of a narrator who participates in the action and directly addresses the audience.

In terms of staging, however, Shaffer's approach is of far wider scope. Though Bolt speaks of his own "overtly theatrical means of switching from one locale to another" (Seasons p. xix), the drama is conveyed primarily--and in conventional manner-- by the dialogue. Shaffer, on the other hand, seeks to explore the stage's theatrical possibilities in a more ambitious way:

My hope was always to realize on stage a kind of 'total' theatre, involving not only words but rites, mimes, masks and magic. The text cries for illustration. It is a director's piece, a pantomimist's piece, and of course an actor's piece, almost as much as it is an author's.²

What Mr. Shaffer says, in short, is that the text of his play cannot fairly be discussed independently of the spectacle that embodies and/or embellishes it, which is fair enough so far as it goes. However, if we concede that the text of Royal Hunt (or any other play for that matter) "cries for illustration," we can also fairly point out that the illustration "cries for a text," and if this demand is not fulfilled to our satisfaction we can, with impunity, feel free to inquire as to why this is so. This, in turn, involves an examination of the text on its own terms, as well as an assessment of the suitability of the theatrical means by which it is conveyed.

Consider, first, Shaffer's choice of subject, the subjugation of the Inca empire by Catholic Spain. It must be admitted that it seethes with dramatic and/or theatrical

possibilities. The very "foreignness" of the subject, in terms of time and geography, make it susceptible to the kind of "total" theatrical treatment employed by the author and, for the most part, he is entirely justified in employing it. The display of the rites, masks, magics and the like of an extinct culture is both compatible with the subject matter and is of undoubted appeal to a modern audience, while such events as the scaling of the Andes and the massacre of some three thousand Peruvian Indians assuredly invite the mimetic and balletic staging that Shaffer demands. In fact, in an age such as our own in which a multi-media approach is making a profound impact on all the arts, it is to Shaffer's credit that he seeks to exploit the innumerable possibilities in terms of the dramatic arts. It would be pointless to quarrel with him on this point and we can leave the matter at that for the time being.

Turning now to the theme and the characters whom the author employs to dramatize it, we are immediately aware that the play consists of much more than a pageant or series of animated historical tableaux. The theme, Shaffer points out, is "the search for a definition of the idea of God" while the play itself, he goes on, is "an attempt to define the concept of God...."³ The dramatic sparks resulting from the clash between Peruvian pagans and Spanish Catholics serve to illuminate this search while the confrontation between Atahualpa

and Pizzaro serve to embody it in humanly individual terms. Regarding these two leaders, Shaffer notes that

The play is about the relationship, intense, involved and obscure, between these two men, one of whom is the other's prisoner: they are so different, and yet in many ways--they are both bastards, both usurpers, both unscrupulous men of action, both illiterate--they are mirror images of each other.⁴

Though Pizarro's ultimate conversion is an historical fiction, Shaffer's description of the two men is essentially accurate.

The task that the playwright sets for himself is indeed challenging. Though Shaffer says that the play is "about" these two men, Pizarro and Atahualpa must nonetheless be portrayed, in one way or another, as representative of their respective cultures if the clash between them is to be of meaningful interest--both in dramatic and historical terms. That Shaffer does take such criterion into account is evident throughout the text, and it is to the text that we may now direct our attention.

Consider, first, the role of Pizarro. Though Shaffer's sympathies are clearly with the Incas and strongly against the Spaniards, he must portray Pizarro in such a way as to illustrate the inferiority of the Spanish approach to religion while at the same time preparing us for his ultimate conversion to Atahualpa's creed. On the other hand, in the interests of fairness the Spanish approach must not be depicted in consistently

negative terms if this conversion is to be of more than passing interest.

Before his confrontation with the Inca, Pizarro reveals himself to be a product of the Spanish-Catholic system while at the same time an alien within it. Though his service with Balboa had helped to eradicate the stigma of his bastardy and remove the threat of poverty, he is still--when the play opens--a bitter, self-seeking individual. When De Soto asks him why he bothers to brave again the dangers of the New World when he can live in relative comfort in Spain, he replies:

Spain and I have been strangers since I was a boy. The only spot I knew in it is here--this filthy village. This is Spain to me. Is this where you wish me comfort? For twenty-two years I drove pigs down this street because my father couldn't own my mother? Twenty-two years without a single day of hope. (I, i, 7)

On the other hand, Shaffer is careful to reveal that Pizarro is motivated by something more than a desire for riches on a grandiose scale: he also hungers for immortality. Referring to the indifferent "world" Pizarro exclaims:

Well now its going to know me. If I live this next year I'm going to get me a name that won't ever be forgotten. A name to be sung here for centuries in your ballads, out there under the cork trees where I sat as a boy with bandages for shoes. (I, i, 7)

We also learn from Pizarro that his bitter experiences have produced a philosophical frame of mind which is, for the most part, cynical. He dismisses such abstraction as "glory" and "honor"

as "Dungballs," especially as they relate to military life. His life in the army has taught him that "Soldiers are for killing: that's their reason." (I,ii, 10)

Pizarro reveals a similar attitude towards institutions of any kind, including the Church. For the benefit of Martin, the young recruit, he notes that they are of temporal significance only:

Look boy: know something. Men cannot stand as men in the world. It's too big for them and they grow scared. So they build themselves shelters against the bigness, see? They call the shelters Court, Army, Church. They're useful against loneliness, Martin, but they're not true. They're not real, Martin. Do you see?
(I, ii, 10)

Pizarro, as Alan Seymour notes, is "a kind of Beckettian pessimist."⁵

However, Pizarro uses such institutions for something more than refuges from loneliness. Though in the service of the court and army (and indirectly the Church), he uses them for his own selfish ends. Moreover, he assumes that everyone else is of the same attitude and when penetrating Inca territory he successfully inspires his followers with appeals to their own self-seeking motives:

Follow the pig-boy to his glory! I'll have an Empire for my farm. A million boys driving in the pigs at night. And each one of you will have a share--juicy black earth a hundred miles a piece--and golden ploughs to cut it! Get up you God-boys--March!
(I, vii, 24)

The subsequent slaughter of three thousand unarmed Indians reveals

that he is willing to accomplish his ends by any means--however cruel.

Pizarro, then, reveals a complex personality. He is self-seeking, bitter, cynical and cruel. Conversely, he wishes to transcend the temporal reality which, he believes, completely circumscribes man's secular and spiritual existence. He wants immortal "fame," and though he is contemptuous of abstractions, he aspires to "glory." His longing for something other than material sustenance is often revealed in such a way as to indicate that he is a disillusioned idealist badly in need of a prophet:

When I was young, I used to sit on the slope
outside the village and watch the sun go down,
and I used to think: if only I could find the
place where it sinks to rest for the night,
I'd find the source of life, like the beginning
of a river. I used to wonder what it could be
like. Perhaps an island, a strange place of
white sand, where the people never died. Never
grew old, or felt pain, and never died. (I, x, 32)

Shaffer does not presume upon the audience to accept Pizarro's statements at face value. His cynicism and disillusionment, for instance, are revealed within the wider context of Pizarro's Spanish-Catholic culture. The court, with its own greedy aims, is represented by the royal overseer, Estete, who continually reminds Pizarro of the Crown's right to a share in the booty, while Valverde, a fanatical friar, is a standing reminder to Pizarro (and the audience) that the Catholic Church is interested in Peru for other than spiritual

ends. Referring to the gold-bedecked captive Indian, Felipillo, Valverde succinctly states (or inadvertently reveals) the nature of the Church's involvement in Peru:

Look at him. This is a heathen. A being condemned to eternal flame unless you help him. Don't think we are merely going to destroy his people and lift their wealth. We are going to take from them what they don't value, and give them instead the priceless mercy of heaven. He who helps me lift this dark man into light I absolve of all crimes he ever committed. (I, i, 5)

The Court and Church, in short, provide no meaningful alternative to the way of life pursued by Pizarro; indeed, they are willing accomplices in the Peruvian treasure hunt.

However, Shaffer attempts to avoid depicting such institutions as all bad. De Soto, in the service of both court and army, is of gentle disposition and possesses reasonable intelligence. As for the Church, Seymour points out that the play

allows its Christians to rationalize fully their arguments and gives full play (through a slightly less militant friar) to the 'good' and positive side of their Christian beliefs.⁶

The friar in question here is de Nizza, whom Shaffer describes in a stage direction as "a man of far more serene and intellectual maturity than Valverde" (I, i, 8). He reveals a kindly attitude in respect to the Indians and, in contrast to Valverde, he is anxious to avoid bloodshed. Despite Seymour's observation, how-

ever, de Nizza is quite within the orthodox theological ranks represented by Valverde. He is incapable of appreciating the virtues of the Incan way of life, and when Pizarro asks him if hunger should be regarded as a "right," he replies:

Of course, it gives life meaning. Look around you: happiness has no feel for men since they are forbidden unhappiness
All men are born unequal: this is a divine gift. And want is their birthright. Where you deny this and there is no hope of any new love; where tomorrow is abolished, and no man ever thinks 'I can change myself', there you have the rule of Anti-Christ.
 (II,iv,52)

In view of such "positive" theologizing, it is not surprising that Pizarro is a cynical non-believer.

Turning, now, to Atahualpa, we find that Shaffer's problem of characterization is similar to, though the reverse of, that posed by Pizarro. Here he attempts to portray an individualized human being in the context of an ideal, rather than intellectually and spiritually debased, society, with the difference that Atahualpa is both the spiritual and secular head of that society.

This society is, as the more perceptive Spaniards observe, essentially contented. Personal wealth (and hence covetous greed) are virtually unknown and the laborers sing happily while they work (I,vi,19). Comparing this society with that of his homeland, Pizarro notes:

...it's not difficult to shame Spain. Here shames every country which teaches we are

born greedy for possessions. Clearly we're
made greedy when we're assured it's natural.
But there's a picture for the Spanish eye!
There's nothing to covet, so covetousness
dies at birth. (I,vi,20)

This harmonious secular life, we also learn, is characteristic of the society's approach to spiritual matters. Because material needs are for the most part satisfied by the natural elements, the Inca's theology is based, rather sensibly, on reverence for the most obvious manifestation of nature's power--the sun. Sins, such as they are, are viewed as "crimes against the laws of the sun" and Inca priests confess their flocks in terms of that theological base. The Inca leader is regarded as a living representative of the sun's power on earth, a source to which he will return upon death, and the fact that the sun is visible (as opposed to the invisible god of Christianity) is, for Atahualpa, reason enough to dismiss the complex metaphysics of Christian theology:

A God cannot be killed. See my father. You
cannot kill him. He lives for ever and looks
over his children every day. (I,xii,37)

In short, the Inca way of life is ideal because both its secular and spiritual aspects are inseparably integrated with the rhythms of nature.

Because Shaffer wants to "humanize" the contrast between the disparate cultures, however, it is necessary for him to individualize the character of Atahualpa. Consequently, the Inca

leader displays human qualities (or faults) that are common to mankind in general, and the Spaniards in particular. In his role of pope-king he reveals a pride that is indicative of an attitude of superiority:

I am the vassal of no man. I am the greatest
prince on earth. Your King is great. He has
sent you across the water. So he is my brother.
But your Pope is mad. He gives away countries
that are not his. His faith is also mad.
(I,xii,37-38)

It is also made clear that Atahualpa's hands are by no means clean in respect to the manner in which he gained his preëminence. Though a bastard, he usurped the position from his half-brother and had him killed. When questioned by Pizarro regarding this matter, his only answer is:

I was the rightful God. My sky Father shouted
"Rise up! In you lives your Earth Father,
Huayana the Warrior. Your brother is fit only
to tend herds, but you were born to tend people!
So I killed him, and the land smiled. (II,v,54)

Because neither Pizarro nor the audience is witness to this divine confirmation, we can only accept Atahualpa's claim at face value, if we accept it at all. In fact, it would appear that the Inca's claims are as open to question as those of the Catholic popes--at least as described by Valverde. The result of our skepticism, however, is that we direct our attention to the quality of life in the respective societies, and here we observe, with Pizarro, that the Inca way is clearly superior. Not only are Atahualpa's subjects contented under his rule, but they apparently do not,

much to the horror of Valverde, dispute his supernatural pretensions:

CHIEF: He is Son of the Sun. He needs no mother.
He is God. (I,iv,138)

Into this harmonious milieu Pizarro leads his expeditionary force, and it is the contrast between the two ways of life that constitutes the main dramatic interest of the play. The catalyst that crystallizes the conflict is gold, a commodity to which--in the eyes of most Spaniards--the Incas are puzzlingly indifferent. Holding Atahualpa as ransom, the land's art treasures are ransacked and melted down in barbarous manner, while even fear for their own lives does not prevent the Spaniards from quarrelling amongst themselves. Vastly outnumbered, the Spanish are in a most dangerous situation, and Atahualpa's refusal to guarantee the lives of the troops (because of the senseless slaughter of his own warriors) reduces Pizarro's strategy--should he release his prisoner--to a basis of goodwill or faith.

Interestingly, it is "faith" of any kind that Pizarro has never been called upon to exercise before, at least not in such a dangerous context. Despite pressure from his compatriots, Pizarro is reluctant to succumb to the prevalent (though not unanimous) opinion, espoused by Valverde and Estete, that Atahualpa be executed. Valverde rationalizes the military and spiritual situation in a way that defies parody:

My son, listen to me. No promise to a pagan need bind a Christian. Simply think what's at stake: the lives of a hundred and seventy of the faithful. Are you going to sacrifice them for one savage? (II,x,71)

Though clumsily articulated, Valverde does have a point--at least from a military standpoint. By killing Atahualpa, the Indians will be leaderless and hence less of a threat to the Spanish presence.

However, by this time Pizarro is interested in much more than either gold or military matters. He is attracted to the Inca way of life and is impressed by the personal qualities exhibited by Atahualpa. The relationship between them develops from a kind of detached mutual respect to one of warm, personal friendship. The outcome is that Pizarro is won over by Atahualpa and, in the latter's role of priest, he is "confessed" by him. (II,xi,77).

But Pizarro is powerless to prevent the execution of the Inca. Tried by a hastily assembled Spanish court on charges that are patently absurd (usurping the throne, fratricide, idolatry, and polygamy), he is found guilty and sentenced to burn. In order to escape corporeal destruction and hence be all of a piece when the sun resurrects him, Atahualpa accepts Christian baptism in exchange for the privilege of being garroted.

As Pizarro is well aware, much more is at stake than the death of Atahualpa. A way of life faces virtual destruction.

Atahualpa's subjects watch in amazement, disbelief and, finally, despair as the basis for their faith and beliefs remains coldly lifeless under an indifferent sun. The play closes with Pizarro mournfully singing to the dead Inca:

See, see the fate, O little finch,
Of robber birds, O little finch. (II,xii,81)

Such, in short, is the outline and substance of Shaffer's play.

As we have seen, the material is rich in dramatic and theatrical possibilities, and it is clear that Shaffer attempts to exploit it in such a way as to avoid melodrama. But close examination of the text reveals deficiencies that mar the play as a whole, and it is to these deficiencies that we must now direct our attention.

Consider, first, Shaffer's treatment of Pizarro. The most serious defect here is rather serious in that it is not dramatic at all, at least for the first part of the play. As Ronald Bryden notes, much of the play is really no more than a "staged novel" in that it is not until the second half that any conflict is presented in dramatic terms.⁷ There is sound basis for Bryden's judgment on this point. For the most part Pizarro, before meeting Atahualpa, engages in philosophizing on the flimsiest of pretexts. He describes his family background, his years of poverty, past military experiences, as well as his views on everything from the affairs of state to his individual spiritual emptiness, to anyone, it seems, who happens

to be around to listen. Of course it is necessary to convey this information, in one way or another, but too often Pizarro's monologues (which is the only way to describe them) are rather undramatically motivated and it often appears that he is curiously indifferent to the identity of the listener. He talks at (rather than with) the young recruit, Martin, in terms indistinguishable from those he employs when speaking with de Soto, his second-in-command and a seasoned soldier. Of course, such characteristics can be attributed to a facet of character, emphasizing his sense of isolation from, and perhaps indifference to, many of the people around him. On the other hand, too often the situations for his philosophizing appear to have been indifferently contrived and our attention easily wanders.

Moreover, Pizarro's philosophizing becomes tediously repetitious. Seemingly endless references to his bastardy smack more of self-pity than self-reliance, and Shaffer's apparent inattention to interesting motivation draws attention to the fact that we have heard it all before. On the whole, then, Pizarro is far too talkative. Indeed, he is a veritable chatter-box when compared with Bolt's Sir Thomas More, who cannot be persuaded to say anything of importance.

Another defect that draws attention to the tedium of Pizarro's soap-boxing is the language itself. Harold Clurman notes that the play contains "good writing only insofar as it

is not bad"⁸ while Seymour, more exasperated, complains:

...Pizarro in much of the first stretch is a bore, uttering Reader's Digest platitudes which the audience and, one has to assume, the author seem to imagine are epigrammatic profundities.⁹

Random examples will serve to illustrate Seymour's point:

At my age things become what they really are.
Gold turns into metal. (I,i,7)

Men cannot just stand as men in this world.
(I,ii,10)

"Fame is long. Death is longer....(I,x,30)

Everything we feel is made of time. (I,x,31)

Shaffer's language, in short, falls woefully short of the demands of his subject. As Martin Esslin notes, "the language is efficient, but smacks of purple passages in a public speech."¹⁰

Regarding Shaffer's characterization of Atahualpa, the author fares better. For the most part, we see the Inca in situations that are fundamentally dramatic. His "philosophy" is elicited from him by the Spanish invaders; consequently, his speeches are more satisfactorily motivated. As for the problem of the language barrier, that too is of no real consequence. The presence of an interpreter (Felipillo), Atahualpa's facility for learning a foreign tongue, and the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief in the matter of linguistics assist the playwright in this matter. And though Atahualpa's language is scarcely more interesting than Pizarro's, at least we see and hear less of him.

At times, however, Shaffer seems to patronize his subject. Atahualpa is understandably contemptuous of Christian theology, but his ridicule of Catholic rites often sound uncomfortably childlike. Referring to God's role in Catholic communion, he notes:

First he becomes a biscuit and then they eat him (The Inca bares his teeth and laughs soundlessly) I have seen this. At praying they say 'This is the body of our God! Then they drink his blood. It is very bad. Here in my empire we do not eat men. My family forbade it many years ago. (II,iv,49)

Shaffer seems too willing to elicit a cheap laugh at the expense of the Catholics, but he does so in a way which also serves to diminish our respect for the Inca creed. After all, Atahualpa's claim to godhead is scarcely more credible than Christ's or the pope's, and his rise to power was accomplished by means that would do credit to any villain-king in European history. Moreover, though the Inca way of life is, by European standards, relatively simple, its apparent harmoniousness would seem to indicate a high degree of political sophistication on the part of its ruler. Shaffer, however, seems to equate simplicity with simple-mindedness (perhaps unconsciously) and gives the impression of underestimating the intelligence of the Inca as well as the audience.

This latter problem is related to what seems to be a conflict of purpose at the heart of the play. Shaffer's professed theme deals with the search for a definition of "the

idea of God," but he also insists that the play is "about two men." The difficulty here is to integrate the two, and this Shaffer attempts to do.

In a peripheral kind of way, Shaffer's characterization of Pizarro reflects this conflict. Though a "godless" man, he is concerned (as he never tires of telling us) with existence, immortality, and other subjects indicative of an interest in spiritual matters. But he is also very much a man of action and, as Wilfred Sheed notes:

...one character cannot bear such a weight of meaning. Pizarro's conquest of the Incas, like the whole conquistador bloodbath, required a daring and an extroverted vitality that simply doesn't sit with this wistful, troubled philosopher.¹¹

Furthermore, though Pizarro is converted to the Inca creed, when we examine the other possible alternative, Spanish Catholicism, we find that there is little to choose from. The Spanish court is insufferably greedy, while the Church--at least as represented by Valverde and even de Nizza--espouses a theology that would alienate any humane, reasonably intelligent believer in Christianity. De Nizza is gentle, ineffectual, and--in the final analysis--narrowly orthodox, while Valverde is fanatically zealous and plainly stupid. With friends like these, it is clear that the Church needs no enemies, and Pizarro's "conversion" would seem to be a foregone conclusion from the beginning.

Shaffer's characterization of Atahualpa also reflects

the conflict of purpose at the heart of the play. Here he is dealing with a man who is a god (or so he believes), but Shaffer wants Pizarro (and us) to accept him on human terms as well. Consequently, Atahualpa displays universally recognizable human qualities while his claims to divinity, dubious though they are, seem reasonable enough in that apparently none of the Indians questions those claims. Moreover, Atahualpa's subjects are happy, and this is enough to discourage the philosophically troubled Pizarro from pursuing the matter further.

Almost completely absent, however, is any meaningful grappling with what may be termed the spiritual dimension---and this, after all, is supposed to be, by Shaffer's own admission, the principle thematic concern of the play. Of course Shaffer touches upon certain aspects of this dimension but, like Bolt, he prefers not to pursue their implications in any meaningful way. The Catholic "idea of God" is presented in such a way as to invite our perfunctory dismissal while the Incan "idea of God" commands our immediate respect--or at least Pizarro's.

Missing from both, however, is any sense of the mystery or, if you like, the irrationality at the heart of any religion. Moreover, Shaffer attempts to conceal this omission by overtly theatrical means which are, in the final analysis, really no more than a bombardment of our senses. Consequently, we are suspicious that Shaffer is incapable of dealing with, or

consciously evading, questions that merit our attention.

And what are these questions? One relates to the godhead of Atahualpa. His theology is flatly asserted throughout the play and the usurping of the throne and the murder of his half-brother are casually brushed over because he plainly believes, and dies believing, in his own godhead. No problem arises if we are to consider Atahualpa's function as exclusively that of a god. But Shaffer explicitly invites us to view him in human terms as well, and Atahualpa's relationship with Pizarro is firmly developed on a man-to-man basis. However, when a man-to-man dialogue raises the question of the great Inca's godhead, it is quickly glossed over and the conversation turns to herdtending, politics, bastardy, and dancing (II,v). Shaffer is careful to omit any information that might tarnish Pizarro's image of a being who represents a happy integration of the real and ideal, the human and the divine, the man and the god.

The unhappy result, however, is that rather than emerging as a man-god, Atahualpa emerges as neither. This is unfortunate because we begin to doubt whether the playwright has any real confidence in his subject. After all, if the Incan civilization truly is superior, surely metaphysical probing will not blind us to the superior quality of Incan life--whatever its spiritual or theological roots. On the contrary, such probing would undoubtedly heighten our interest in that life. As it is, however, we are expected to take at face value assertions that are entirely

worthy of dramatic exploitation and left with the despiriting impression that the play is--in Sheed's words--a "sad case of waste."¹² Of course, Shaffer attempts to compensate by providing a visually and auditorily stunning assortment of rituals, chants, dances and the like, but they eventually serve to remind us of, rather than divert us from, the dramatic emptiness at the centre of the play.

Another question that Shaffer attempts to evade relates to the metaphysical basis of Catholicism. Though the Catholics display incurable greed, zealous fanaticism, and intellectual stupidity, their principle spokesman (de Nizza and Valverde) are true believers and they do reveal a considerable amount of courage in braving the dangers of the New World. Unfortunately--and this may have been unintentional on Shaffer's part--their courage does not seem to be accountable for except in terms of either pecuniary greed or intellectual incompetence, or both. Though the "positive" aspects of Catholicism are presented, they are presented in an ineffectual way by an ineffectual mind (de Nizza's). As a result, the Catholic "idea of God" is not really in evidence at all. Consider de Nizza's role, for instance. He attempts to explain to Atahualpa the Christian concept of love (II,iv), but his explanation is couched in terms that are baffling to the Inca and boring to the audience. Furthermore, even the possibility of meaningful discussion is precluded by the entrance of the

first gold procession. Perhaps Shaffer intends irony here (i.e., gold speaks louder than words), but a suspicion lingers that perhaps he is attempting to substitute visual splendor for intelligible or intelligent debate.

This apparent evasiveness can be at least partially accounted for in terms of the author's historicism. Shaffer cites William Prescott's The History of the Conquest of Peru, first published in 1847, as the source of his original inspiration and his historical material.¹³ Pizarro's "conversion" is an historical fiction, of course, and Shaffer takes the usual artistic liberties with chronology. But for the most part the events depicted in Royal Hunt correspond to those described by Prescott. However, Shaffer also seems to have made indiscriminate use of at least one of the attitudes expressed in that work, and here the superficiality of his historical approach becomes apparent.

Consider, first, one of Prescott's assessments of the Peruvian way of life:

Where there is no free agency there can be no morality. Where there is no temptation there can be little claim to virtue. Where the routine is rigourously prescribed by law, the law, and not the man must have the credit of the conduct. If that government is best which is felt the least, which encroaches on the natural liberty of the subject only so far as is essential to civil subordination, then of all governments devised by man the Peruvian has the least real claim to our admiration.¹⁴

It must be emphasized, of course, that Prescott does provide a largely sympathetic account of that civilization and that he was attempting to describe it in terms understandable to mid-nineteenth century American readers. But Shaffer does not appear to have made such a distinction. He extracts the essential attitude embodied in that passage and attributes it, in somewhat different contexts, to his sixteenth century spokesman for Catholicism, de Nizza.

Consider, now, two of de Nizza's speeches. Speaking of the ostensible absence of love in the totally-regulated Incan society, he notes:

It is not known in your kingdom. At home we can say to our ladies: 'I love you', or to our native earth. It means we rejoice in their lives. But a man cannot say this to the woman he must marry at twenty-five; or to the strip of land allotted to him at birth which he must till till he dies. Love must be free.... (II,iv,50)

Later he expresses his repugnance to that way of life:

When I first came here I thought I found Paradise. Now I know it is Hell. A country which castrates its people. What are your Incan's subjects? A population of eunuchs, living entirely without choice. (II,x,71)

What Shaffer does, in effect, is ascribe what can be loosely described as a nineteenth century laissez-faire attitude to what was one of the most highly structured and rigidly controlled institutions in existence in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church.

Naturally, Shaffer may intend irony here. After all, our attention is directed by Estete, the court spokesman, to the authoritarian side of Spanish life: "If you serve a King you must kill personal ambition." (I,v.16) The author may also intend humour. It is mildly amusing, for instance, to hear a chaste priest speak with such enthusiastic conviction about love and marriage. And his hostile reference to "eunuchs" raises interesting questions relating to his own chastity. Finally, we have no reason to doubt that theological spokesmen of the period did not express the sentiments, if not the substance, embodied in de Nizza's views.¹⁵

But the curious thing about Shaffer's approach is that, in the final analysis, he provides only a nineteenth century perspective in reverse. At issue here is not the author's freedom to make use of such a reversal, for reasons of irony or otherwise. As we shall see later, Arden fully exploits the dramatic possibilities here. What Shaffer does is simply hold up to ridicule popular nineteenth century political assumptions regarding the Incas, and he does so without really establishing the significance of such an approach from a mid-twentieth century perspective. Consequently, the play seems dated and we feel that it could well have been written in 1847 (by an Inca sympathizer, of course), even though Shaffer strives to write "a contemporary story which uses history only as a groundwork

to the expression of its theme."¹⁶ Unfortunately, the "ground-work" seems related more to the nineteenth century than it does to Incan Peru or contemporary life. It may be argued, of course, that Pizarro's pessimism and despair have obvious affinities with strong intellectual currents in twentieth century life and that a contemporary perspective is in evidence. However, such qualities of mind are the monopoly of no particular period in history, while Pizarro's somewhat immature philosophizing discourages us from accepting him as a man whose spiritual dilemma is of universal significance. The fault here, of course, must be attributed at least partially to the author's inept characterization rather than his choice of subject.

Consider, now, the author's "theatricality." Integral to the purely textual content are the means by which that content is conveyed:

Why did I write The Royal Hunt? To make colour?
 Yes. To make spectacle? Yes. To make magic?
 Yes--if the word isn't too debased to convey
 the kind of excitement I believed could still
 be created out of 'total' theatre. (Royal Hunt p.v)

Because he employs the term "total theatre," his concept inevitably invites comparison with that of Antonin Artaud, despite Frederick Lumley's contention that Shaffer "has never claimed to be a disciple, and whatever the merits of Artaud's theories might be, they are not the exclusive and only ones."¹⁷

Writing in the 1930's, Artaud, in The Theatre and Its

Double, reveals an intense hatred of the superficial psychologizing and the fourth-wall conventions of bourgeois drama (and melodrama). In its place he advocates plays which will explore themes of archetypal or mythical proportions (such as the conquest of Mexico), themes which he feels defy intellectual or psychological analysis because they will take fully into account immutably irrational elements inherent in human nature. Necessary to this, he feels, is a theatre in which the audience may be totally surrounded by the action or spectacle and a drama in which language will be used not primarily as a vehicle for the articulation or intellectualization of consciously held ideas, but rather as a form of ritualistic incantation that will serve to jolt or awaken the unconscious feelings or emotions of the audience.¹⁸ To accomplish this he calls for men in the theatre "who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe."¹⁹ Such, in necessarily brief summary, is Artaud's approach to the theatre.

In Royal Hunt we find both those aspect of the theatre that Artaud sought to destroy and those he sought to champion. Shaffer's theme is (potentially, at least) of mythical or archetypal proportions in the Artaudian sense, while his use of an episodic structure, colourful spectacle and direct addresses to the audience indicate a decisive break with fourth-

wall conventions. On the other hand, his use of language is conventional enough; even the ritualistic chants are compatible with a realistic portrayal of the Incan way of life. Alan Seymour notes this dichotomy in Shaffer's approach:

Technically, Peter Shaffer's epic falls into two distinct parts: an Artaudian ritualism of choreographic movement, music, chanting and song with the colours of lighting, costume and setting playing their part; and a conservative use of dialogue as in the old debate plays of the Shavian era.²⁰

Naturally, we need not expect an author to fulfill the aesthetic expectations of another theorist or artist, contemporary or otherwise, but it is interesting to note that both Artaud and Shaffer use the word "magic" to characterize their approach to spectacle. For the most part, Artaud wishes the spectacle to be an important manifestation of the metaphysical aspects of the theme. But Shaffer, as we have seen, seeks to avoid any meaningful examination of what may be termed the spiritual dimension of either Catholicism or the Incan creed. He shows us (mainly) abuses of the former and merits of the latter, but nowhere does he attempt to grapple with the deeper divisions and similarities. Consequently, his use of spectacle amounts to little more than the providing of local colour or period atmosphere. We are induced to indulge ourselves sensually, but this indulgence is not really calculated to enlarge our understanding of important thematic considerations. Of course, local colour and period

atmosphere are legitimate aspects of any history play, but too often we suspect that Shaffer provides them, in spectacular fashion, to divert our attention from his own failure to attend to important matters.

A serious consequence of this is that we are tempted to regard Pizarro's "conversion" as a somewhat frivolous affair, motivated not by serious intellectual or spiritual considerations, but by his attraction to the more superficial characteristics of the Peruvian way of life. Hence, there is ample justification for Robert Brustein's assessment:

...at the same time that he is fashioning cruel Artaudian myths, he is mentalizing, psychologizing, and sentimentalizing these myths. Underneath the tumult and the swirl lie a very conventional set of liberal notions about the noble savage, the ignoble Catholic, and the way brotherly love can bridge the gulf that separates cultures. By the end of the play, in fact, the whole brutal struggle has degenerated into a fraternal romance between a lissome young red-skin and an aging lonely paleface....²¹

It may be argued, of course, that Pizarro feels alienated from the Spanish way of life and that he is not a Catholic in any meaningful sense of the word. However, Shaffer explicitly states that the principle theme concerns "the search for a definition of the idea of God."²² Consequently, this search must begin and end somewhere. Despite the author's efforts to the contrary, however, the search both begins and ends with the "liberal notions" described by Brustein. The presence of balletic movements, colourful rituals, hauntingly beautiful songs

and chants and spectacular costumes fails to conceal this damaging defect.

On the whole, then, we can say that superficiality characterizes Shaffer's use of historical material. Of course, critical opinion is by no means unanimous on this point. Henry Hewes, for instance, praises Shaffer's "penetrating insight" and feels that in Royal Hunt the author "touched upon the profound essences that underlie historical events."²³ Conversely, Nathan Cohen harshly dismisses the play as "vulgarized nonsense."²⁴ Actually, there are elements of truth in both assessments. Shaffer does touch upon ugly historical realities but, as we have seen, he is exasperatingly evasive. The result is that we fail to appreciate the significance of Pizarro's conversion within its sixteenth century context or from a twentieth century perspective. We then direct our attention to the theatrical means by which he attempts to render significant his material and discover that such means ("total theatre") are used to conceal, rather than reveal, matters essential to our understanding of the dramatic action. This leads to charges of "vulgarization" and the like. We can generously concede that such was not Shaffer's intent, but as the play now stands it is difficult to describe it in kinder terms.

In examining Bolt's Seasons in relation to Shaffer's Royal Hunt, we find many qualitative differences. Bolt's language, for instance, provides a pleasant contrast to Shaffer's

drearily turgid prose, while the philosophizing (such as it is) of Bolt's characters is considerably more lucid and sophisticated than the muddled perorations in Royal Hunt. Unfortunately, the difference here cannot be ascribed merely to the diverse personality traits and intellectual capacities of the protagonists. From a purely practical standpoint, the dry wit of Sir Thomas proves considerably more entertaining than the patronizingly immature humour ascribed to Pizarro or Atahualpa. Of course, the theatricality of Royal Hunt does generate a certain amount of excitement, but as Brustein points out:

...without spectacular theatricality, the play amounts to very little; it may be total theatre but it is strictly fractional drama; and being exposed to Peter Shaffer's meditations on religion, love, life, and death for three solid hours is rather like being trapped in a particularly active wind tunnel with no hope of egress.²⁵

Despite such differences, however, the playwrights do reveal a basic similarity of approach to historical material. Both appear conversant with their respective periods or settings, but they sentimentalize their subjects and they fail to provide adequate historical contexts--contexts which are necessary to our understanding or appreciation of the issues involved. Hence, the issues themselves remain vague or ill-defined. The unhappy result is that we are discouraged from taking them seriously or regarding them as relevant to contemporary life. Moreover, both attempt to conceal, or divert our attention from, such defects by overtly theatrical means. Despite rather studied

efforts to the contrary, in short, Bolt and Shaffer have written melodramas which pretentiously exude aspirations of a much higher order.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER II

¹ From an interview with John Russell Taylor, "In Search of a God," Plays and Players, XXII (Oct. 1964), 22.

² Peter Shaffer, "Author's Notes," The Royal Hunt of the Sun: A Play Concerning the Conquest of Peru (New York, 1965), p. viii. Subsequent references will be to this edition --hereafter cited in the text as Royal Hunt.

³ Shaffer, "In Search of a God," p. 22.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alan Seymour, "Royal Hunt of the Sun," London Magazine, IV, 4 (Oct. 1964), 63.

⁶ Seymour, "Royal Hunt," 62.

⁷ Ronald Bryden, "Ruin and Gold," New Statesman, July 17, 1964, p. 96.

⁸ Harold Clurman, "Marking Time," Nation, Nov. 22, 1965, p. 397.

⁹ Seymour, "Royal Hunt," 61.

¹⁰ Martin Esslin, "Brecht and the English Theatre," TDR, XI, 2 (Winter 1966), 70.

¹¹ Wilfred Sheed, "The Stage," Commonweal, Nov. 19, 1965, p. 215.

¹² Sheed, "Stage," 215.

¹³ "In Search of a God," 22.

¹⁴ William H. Prescott, The History of the Conquest of Peru: With a Preliminary View of the Civilization of the Incas, I (New York, 1905), p. 157.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER II.

15 Philip Ainsworth Means, Fall of the Inca Empire: And the Spanish Rule in Peru 1530-1780 (New York, 1964), confirms the views held by Shaffer and Prescott in regard to the ignorance of the clergy who accompanied Pizarro's expedition.

16 "In Search of a God," 22.

17 Lumley, New Trends, p. 282.

18 Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York, 1958), p. 46.

19 Artaud, p. 32.

20 Seymour, "Royal Hunt," 60.

21 Robert Brustein, "Familiar Peru, Exotic Brooklyn," New Republic, Nov. 27, 1965, p. 45.

22 "In Search of a God," 22.

23 Henry Hewes, "Unsentimental Journey," Saturday Review, May 29, 1965, p. 31.

24 Nathan Cohen, "Mortal Messengers on Broadway," National Review, Jan. 11, 1966, p. 37.

25 Brustein, "Familiar Peru," 45.

CHAPTER III

LUTHER

John Osborne has written plays other than Luther that deal with historical subjects. A Subject of Scandal and Concern deals with the 1842 trial of George Holyoake, the last man to be imprisoned for blasphemy in England. Though the play is of interest in regard to Osborne's development as a dramatist, the play was written for television and need not concern us here. Another, A Patriot for Me, is based on a true incident in the history of the pre-1914 Austro-Hungarian Empire and concerns the experiences of a homosexual army officer who is coerced into betraying military secrets. Though of more ambitious scope than the television play, there is valid reason for its exclusion from this discussion. Here Osborne is concerned more with problems created by society's attitudes toward homosexuality than he is with the historical context of the dramatic action. Of course, we can deduce that context from the proceedings, but in the final analysis it is the social forces, as opposed to broader historical considerations, that serve to define the theme. In Luther, on the other hand, the author attempts to provide a broad historical context. In so

doing he reveals aims that are comparable to the other playwrights under consideration, however much he may differ from them in other respects.

Osborne is fairly specific in regard to his aims in Luther, as well as sensitive to the artistic dangers involved:

It's difficult to pinpoint just how Luther started. It's been brewing over a long period. I wanted to write a play about religious experience and various other things, and this happened to be the vehicle for it. Historical plays are usually anathema to me, but this isn't a costume drama. I hope that it won't make any difference if you don't know anything about Luther himself, and I suspect that most people don't. In fact, the historical character is almost incidental.¹

As we have seen, Bolt and Shaffer also deal with religious experience and "other things"--presumably the broader historical context of that experience--and they also attempt to render them relevant and intelligible from a contemporary perspective.

Though Osborne states that the central protagonist's historical character is "almost incidental," there is reason to believe that his source is Erik Erikson's Young Man Luther,² a fascinating psychological study that includes generous excerpts from Luther's own writings. Many situations in the play correspond to those described by Erikson, while many of Luther's speeches appear to be transcriptions of those documented in the study. Gordon Rupp, in an article entitled "Luther and Mr. Osborne,"³ cites Erikson as the author's source. Vera Denty, a psychologist, does not cite any specific account, but confirms that the play

is based on "considerable research."⁴ In short, we can safely assume that historical authenticity is one of Osborne's concerns, even if he regards it as "incidental" to the drama.⁵

In this respect, his play differs from Seasons, where the author ignores or rigorously subordinates historical data in the interests of thematic clarity, and Royal Hunt, where Pizarro's conversion is an historical fiction. Osborne's approach to historical material, then, differs somewhat from that of Bolt or Shaffer. This difference must be kept firmly in mind when comparing the respective plays. On the other hand, Osborne's theatrical approach is similar. The play is episodic in structure, makes use of overtly theatrical stage images and employs a narrator to convey essential information:

At the opening of each act, the Knight appears.
He grasps a banner and briefly barks the time
and place of the scene following at the audience,
and then retires.⁶

With such distinctions in mind, we may now turn to the play itself.

Osborne is careful to ensure that we understand the nature of Luther's religious beliefs in relation to his personal background. In a conversation between Hans, Luther's father, and Lucas, a family friend, we learn that the father resents his son's decision to enter a monastery (I.i). He had wanted Martin to become a lawyer, to marry and--by extension-- to adopt the lower middle-class way of life which he has striven so hard to attain. On the surface, Hans' values appear familiarly bourgeois

and we readily withhold our sympathy. However, we soon learn that something more is involved. His sense of loss is aggravated by tragic antecedents:

How can I say that? I do say it, that's how.
Two sons to the plague, and now another.
God's eyes! (I,i.15)

Hans, in short, has lost another son--figuratively speaking at least.

Next we see Martin himself, not with his father but in relation to his new "brothers" at the monastery. The singular nature of his personality is immediately revealed at the confessional. Whereas his "Brothers" confess to sins of a rather trivial and prosaic nature--such as kitchen breakages, mistakes in singing and minor omissions in ritualistic routines--Martin's mind soars in an imaginative and poetic way. Recalling a dream, he exclaims:

I was fighting a bear in a garden without flowers, leading into a desert. His claws kept making my arms bleed as I tried to open a gate which would take me out. But the gate was no gate at all. It was simply an open frame, and I could have walked through it, but I was covered in my own blood, and I saw a naked woman riding on a goat, and the goat began to drink my blood, and I thought I should faint with the pain and I awoke in my cell, all soaking in the devil's bath.
(I,i,19-20)

In a sense, just as Martin is separated from his real brothers by death, so he is separated from his new "brothers" by the qualities of his own mind.

We also learn that Martin is in physical torment, due to constipation, and that he views his spiritual state in a way that recalls his father's: "The lost body of a child, hanging on a mother's tit, and close to the big body of a man, and I can't find it." (I,ii,24) Just as Hans feels he has lost a son, so Martin feels himself to be lost.

The result of this feeling on Martin's part is an over-zealousness in the pursuit of his religious duties. Brother Weinand draws his attention to the disruptive aspects of this zeal, but Martin can only reply: "It's this, just this. All I can feel, all I can feel is God's hatred." (I,ii,28) Our suspicion that perhaps Martin feels the same way towards his father is confirmed when we see them together for the first time. After celebrating his first Mass, he pointedly asks "Father, why do you hate me being here?"--a question that serves to ignite bitter recriminations between the two. Hans accuses Martin of "running away" from himself and his responsibilities, while Martin hurls a few accusations of his own:

You disappointed me too, and not just a few times, but at some time of every day I ever remember hearing or seeing you, but, as you say, maybe that was almost no different from any any other boy. But I loved you the best. It was always you I wanted. I wanted your love more than anyone's, and if anyone was to hold me, I wanted it to be you. (I,iii,43)

Martin also informs Hans (and us) how his mother had also disappointed him and this, taken with the death of his brothers, completes the unhappy picture of estrangement.

Osborne's portrait of Luther and his ambiguous attitude toward both family and church is dramatically interesting and--if we accept Erikson's study--historically accurate. He successfully illuminates the interrelationship of Luther's physical discomfort, psychological torment and familial alienation with the spiritual ferment which later is to shatter the relative unity of Catholic Christendom. Furthermore, Osborne also prepares us for the coming rupture. In addition to showing us the uneasy relationship between Martin and his monastic superiors, he permits Hans, in colorful Osbornian language, to proffer a speculation that his own son is to fulfill. Quizzing Brother Weinand about dissidence within the Church, he asks:

...but wouldn't you say that one bad monk,
say for instance, one really monster sized,
roaring great bitch of a monk, if he really
got going, really going, couldn't he get his
order such a reputation that eventually, it
might even have to go into--what do they call
it now--liquidation. That's it. Liquidation.
Now you're an educated man, you understand
Latin and Greek and Hebrew-- (I,iii,31-32)

The causes and process of this "liquidation" are dealt with in the following acts.

In contrast to the more personal and private approach of Act One, Osborne stresses, in a Decor Note, that the physical

staging in the next act should reflect a fundamental shift of emphasis:

...the physical effect from now on should be more intricate, general, less personal; sweeping, concerned with men in time rather than particular man in the unconscious; caricature not portraiture, like the popular woodcuts of the period.... (Luther p. 46)

Osborne, in effect, wishes to depict Luther in terms of the broader religious, political and social context of the period. First, we hear a long sales-pitch by Tetzel, a Catholic inquisitor and indulgence-vendor:

Not only am I empowered to give you these letters of pardon for the sins you've already committed, I can give you pardon for those sins you haven't even committed....but which, however, you intend to commit! (II,i,49-50)

Tetzel, by word of his own mouth, effectively reveals the extremities of corruption currently festering within the Church.

Next, we see Luther in conversation with the kindly Staupitz, Vicar of the Augustinian order, and learn of his brilliant career as a scholar and of his discomfort with the state of churchly affairs. Martin still zealously fulfills his religious obligations but, as Staupitz points out, he pays exaggerated attention to the rules in part to "make the authority ridiculous (II,ii,53). Moreover, we learn that Martin has been preaching against corruption and he admits to Staupitz that he had concluded one sermon "by saying how does it happen that Christ had twelve apostles and eighteen

of them are buried in Germany?" (II,ii,57) Naturally, the authorities (both secular and religious) who profit by exhibiting holy relics are somewhat disturbed by such questions, especially when they are publicly asked.

The third scene shows Martin sermonizing, before nailing his 95 theses to the Church door, and here we hear the heart of the theological doctrine which is ultimately to divide Catholic Europe:

No man is just because he does just works.
The works are just if the man is just. If
a man doesn't believe in Christ, not only
are his sins mortal, but his good works.
This I know; reason is the devil's whore,
born of one stinking goat called Aristotle,
which believes that good works make a good
man. But the truth is that the just shall
live by faith alone. (II,iii,63)

The passage is important because angered as Martin is by the obvious abuses of religious power (as illustrated by Tetzl), it demonstrates that his real concern is with the metaphysical basis of that power. As Katharine Worth correctly points out,

Such obvious abuses as Tetzl's selling of indulgences are not allowed to call forth his worst anger; he uses them as a springboard to attack the whole idea of 'work holiness', proclaiming in its place his cardinal doctrine, 'The just shall live by faith.'⁷

The point is worth stressing because it illustrates Osborne's attempt to imbue his play with an intellectual and spiritual dimension quite lacking in Seasons and Royal Hunt. Despite their efforts to the contrary, Bolt and Shaffer fail to grapple

with theological problems on any but a melodramatic level: "good" men conflict with "wicked" adversaries. Osborne, on the other hand, squarely faces the complexity inherent in such problems. Consequently, our attitude to Luther remains somewhat ambivalent. However much we may sympathize with his attacks on corruption, his assertion that reason is the "devil's whore" and his proclamation of faith, as opposed to work, holiness, raise the conflict above the restrictive and ultimately uninteresting confines of melodrama. Disturbing questions immediately spring to mind. Luther's doctrine opens the way to a new individualism, but what are its limits, if any? His assertions seem to undermine the authority of any kind of institutionalized religion, but what, if anything, does he propose to put in its place?

Osborne does not evade these issues and in subsequent scenes we become uncomfortably aware that perhaps Luther's adversaries have considered the matter as fully--if not more so--than Luther himself. He is questioned by Cajetan, the Papal Legate, who is both clear-sighted and articulate, and though he is firmly within the papal camp he, too, is aware of the shortcomings of the Catholic Church. He is General of the Dominicans but refers to their selfish self-centredness; the Franciscans he describes as a "grubby, sentimental lot, on the whole, and mercifully ignorant as well." (II, iv, 70) Granted, such candidness may only be a political ploy used to catch

Luther off-guard, but his intellectual astuteness serves to draw Luther's (and our) attention to the real issue, which is of a metaphysical, as opposed to merely political, nature.

Unlike the petty Tetzels, Cajetan understands the real dangers of Luther's doctrine. Correctly foreseeing the possible destruction of Church unity, he asks Martin what he will build in its place. Martin's reply is metaphorically colorful--but vague and evasive:

A withered arm is best amputated, an infected place is best scoured out, and so you pray for healthy tissue and something sturdy and clean that was crumbling and full of filth. (II,iv,72)

Though Martin's heart is undeniably in the right place, we wonder if prayer alone is capable of filling such a large order.

Cajetan is also aware of the political (as opposed to religious) implications of Luther's thought:

Why, some deluded creature might even come to you as a leader of their revolution, but you don't want to break the rules, you want to make them. (II,iv,73)

Moreover, Cajetan is aware of the possible unpleasant consequences for the average, individual man should the seemingly timeless unity of faith be shattered: "Men would be cast out and left to themselves for ever, helpless and frightened." He then predicts that division now will lead to countless divisions in the future:

You know, a time will come when a man will no longer be able to say, "I speak Latin and am a Christian" and go his way in peace. There will come frontiers, frontiers of all kinds--

between men--and there'll be no end of them.
(II,iv,73-74)

Martin's reactions throughout this interview are interesting. He is, by turns, physically uncomfortable, hysterical, and mentally distressed. Though Cajetan himself proposes no concrete solutions, Luther gleans no comfort from the omission. In fact, he reveals a longing for the protection and, presumably, the approval of Papal authority when he requests that the matter be referred to the Vatican (II,iv,74).

The next scene shows Leo X contemptuously dismissing Luther's somewhat obsequious written appeal while preparing to go hunting. The tone of the letter sounds suspiciously taunting and, in view of Luther's consistently ambiguous attitude toward authority of any sort, we are inclined to agree with Leo's assessment that he is a "Cunning German bastard!" (II,v,77)

His appeal rejected by Leo, Luther must recant or continue to pursue his rebellious course. The last scene of the act shows him burning Papal decretals and delivering an abusive attack on the pope. Despite this decisive defiance, however, Luther is spiritually uncertain:

My God, my God do you hear me? Are you dead?
Are you dead? No, you can't die, you can only
hide yourself, can't you? Lord, I'm afraid.
I am a child, the lost body of a child. I am
stillborn. Breathe into me, in the name of
Thy Son, Jesus Christ, who shall be my protect-
or and defender, yes, my mighty fortress,
breathe into me. Give me life, oh Lord. Give
me life.
(II,vi,80)

Luther has become--more or less--a man of action, but he is still the Luther of earlier days: a child in search of a father, racked by physical pain and spiritual doubt, and not at all confident of the wisdom of his actions.

It is this aspect of Luther--his uncertainty--that has been overlooked by certain critics. Wellwarth, for instance, complains that it is easy for Luther to feel rebellious and indignant "when society is represented by such as (sic) John Tetzel."⁸ What Wellwarth overlooks is the fact that Tetzel is not society's sole representative. The kindly Staupitz and the astute Cajetan, who raise a few valid questions of their own on behalf of the established order, are just as "representative" as Tetzel. In any case, despite his contempt for the likes of Tetzel and Leo the real basis of Luther's rebellion is essentially doctrinal or metaphysical--and his own uncertainty on this point gives the play a dramatic tension overlooked by Wellwarth.

Taylor also seems to misunderstand the nature of Luther's dissent. He notes that "Luther and Cajetan never really interlock so that one answers the other; their 'dialogue' turns out, in fact, to be two monologues skilfully intercut"⁹ Taylor has a point here if we concede that the dialogue seems unnecessarily abstract. Cajetan speaks of "divisions" but these divisions are not illustrated in concrete terms; consequently, Luther's replies must also be rather abstract. But surely the

real point is that Luther is unable to parry Cajetan's verbal thrusts because he is himself uncertain. As Elliot points out, Luther is essentially

a protagonist wrestling more with his own
intangible conscience or with the idea,
of the Church than with personal antagonists.¹⁰

Though the abuses of power perpetrated by Tetzel and Leo invite Luther's wrath, they are nonetheless peripheral to the metaphysical basis of his dispute. And, as we shall see, the problem is never resolved to Luther's complete satisfaction.

The three scenes of the third act reveal the consequences of Luther's actions. Questioned by Von Eck at the Diet of Worms, Martin maintains his stand:

Unless I am shown by the testimony of the
Scriptures--for I don't believe in popes
or councils--unless I am refuted by Scripture
and my conscience is captured by God's own
word, I cannot and will not recant, since to
react against one's own conscience is neither
safe nor honest. (III,i,85)

Next we see that the divisions forecast by Cajetan have been realized. Certain princes have supported Luther against the Pope while the peasantry, in turn, have seen fit to rebel against the princes. A knight, carting the bloody corpse of a peasant, explains the situation:

Oh well, I suppose all those various groups
were out for their different things, or the
same thing really, all out for what we could
get, and more than any of us had the right
to expect. They were all the same, all those
big princes and archbishops, the cut rate

nobility and rich layabouts, honourable this
and thats scrabbling like boars around swill
buckets for every penny those poor peasants
never had. (III,ii,88)

Consistent with his earlier dialogue with Cajetan, Luther is
baffled by what has taken place and in spite of his own re-
bellious stand against Rome, he cannot accept the same gestures
from the lower orders--however just their cause:

Christ! Hear me! My words pour from Your
Body! They deserved their death, these
swarming peasants! They kicked against
authority, they plundered and bargained all
in Your Name! Christ, believe me!
(TO THE KNIGHT) I demanded it, I prayed for
it, and I got it! Take that lump away!
Now, drag it away with you! (III,ii,91)

Though Martin himself has also "kicked against authority" in
Christ's name, we become brutally aware that he has established--
in his own mind at least--rather orthodox limits as to whom
should do the kicking and how far it should be permitted to
extend. "Christians," he evasively maintains, "are called to
suffer, not fight." (III,ii,89)

Martin also learns the extremes to which his doctrine
can be extended in regard to purely theological matters.
Martin undermined Church authority by appeals to Scripture
but the Knight raises a rather perplexing question:

Why, none of it might be any more than poetry,
have you thought of that, Martin. Poetry!
(III,ii,90)

Martin's reactions to all this are strongly reminiscent of those

displayed in the earlier scene with Cajetan. Visibly distressed, he must fight to maintain his composure throughout the interview. He advances no concrete solutions for the problems at hand, aside from prayerful appeals to heaven.

Even now Martin is racked by doubt and uncertainty, and we are continually reminded of the ambiguity of his motives. Married to a nun, he notes that "At least my father will praise me for that." (III,ii,91) When questioned by Staupitz regarding his decision to reject the demands of the Diet of Worms, he confesses that "I listened for God's voice, but all I could hear was my own." (III,iii,101) Moreover, the play ends on this note of uncertainty. Cradling his infant son in his arms, he meditates on the past and future and expresses "hope" that he shall see Christ some day.

For the most part, Osborne is faithful to the complexities of Luther's personality and the paradoxical aspects of his beliefs. The defiant rebel and horrified reactionary, the strong man and the weak child, the brilliant scholar and the somewhat ignorant politician: all combine in Osborne's portrait.

Predictably, this portrayal has met with critical misunderstanding and disapproval. Surveying the various reactions, John Rosselli notes that "some people complain that Osborne catches the individual rebel but misses the religious reformer."¹¹ Eric Keown, for instance, feels that although Osborne catches

the integrity and inflexibility of Luther he fails to convey the "blazing power" of a man who accomplished so much.¹²

Laurence Kitchin, on the other hand, objects to the play's ending, with its "atmosphere of tired domesticity, in the stereotype of a famous old man happily married."¹³ Underlying both appraisals, however, is the vague and perhaps unconscious assumption that Luther should be melodramatically "heroic" from beginning to end--in short, a man of decisive action and well-defined ideas.

However, this is precisely the kind of treatment that Osborne seeks to avoid. In the first place, Luther is spiritually uncertain. Moreover, he is politically naive. To depict him merely as powerful reformer with definite programs would serve to oversimplify both his character and his beliefs. Regarding the "tired domesticity" of the ending--that, too, is perfectly consistent, both dramatically and (incidentally) historically. Luther is both attracted to and repulsed by his father--and by extension his father's way of life--and throughout his subsequent career the "lost child" motif of his spiritual quest is never far from his mind. Consequently, we must agree with Gascoigne's observation:

Osborne has found the true and perfect ending to one of his plays. It completes his theme and accords with contemporary pictures of family life in 'the first parsonage.'¹⁴

Despite the generally satisfying overall "shape" of

Luther, as well as Osborne's interesting portraiture of the central character, the play does have serious defects. These defects, in fact, are at times grave enough to obscure the play's real strengths. On the whole the weaknesses stem not from any conscious omissions on the author's part, but from his inability (or refusal) to convey in effective dramatic terms much information that is relevant to the theme. The result is that Osborne is accused of faults of which he is guiltless--or at least did not intend. Regarding religious experiences, for instance, Keown feels that Osborne, in his characterization of Luther, fails "in conveying the spiritual side of the man."¹⁵ As for the broader context of Luther's spiritual quest, Seymour finds the author "wanting in serious political grasp."¹⁶ As we have seen, the textual evidence indicates that Osborne indeed understands the nature of his material, both religious or political. But it is also true that often this material is treated in a way that justifies the charges levied by Keown and Seymour. Recalling the author's assertion that the play is about "religious experience" and "other things," it is important that the basis of such charges be examined in some detail.

Consider first the dramatization of Luther's religious experience. Though Osborne draws our attention to the interesting personal aspects of Luther's quest (e.g., his constipation and

his familial estrangement), much that is of prime importance is reported rather than dramatized. It is only after the celebration of his first mass, for instance, that we learn that Luther was "disturbed" throughout the proceedings, and this important information is revealed not by Luther but through a conversation between Brother Weinand and Hans (I,iii,33). Similarly, we learn of an earlier crucial experience that influenced Luther's monastic aspirations not from a dramatization of the event, nor from Luther himself, but from his father:

You know what, Martin, I think you've always been scared--ever since you could get off your knees and walk. You've been scared for the good reason that that's what you like to be. Yes, I'll tell you. I'll tell you what! Like that day, that day when you were coming home from Erfurt, and the thunderstorm broke, and you were so piss-scared, you lay on the ground and cried out to St. Anne because you saw a bit of lightning and thought you'd seen a vision. (I,iii,44)

Luther's spiritual crises subsequent to his acceptance into the religious order are conveyed in a similar manner. His reluctance to pursue religious studies, for instance, is recalled by Staupitz, rather than dramatized:

You were too frightened to become a Doctor of Theology, and you wouldn't be now if I hadn't forced you. "I'm too weak, I'm not strong enough. I shan't live long enough." Do you remember what I said to you? (II,ii,57)

Of course it might be objected, on rather commonsensical grounds,

that Osborne cannot be expected to dramatize at first hand every crisis suffered by Luther and that in any case scenes are included that serve to convey his sense of spiritual despair. This is true. After hearing Luther recall his fantastic dreams, he succumbs to a "raging fit" and literally roars "Not! Me! I am not!" (I,i,23) Similarly, after the dialogue relating to the storm vision, he meditates alone and asks: "But--but what if it isn't true?" (I,iii,45) In both cases, however, the frantic exclamation and the melancholy question that conclude these scenes are drained of a great deal of their dramatic impact because the experiences that give rise to their articulation are reported and consequently remain relatively abstract. Hence, though Osborne does not (as Bolt does) purposely omit information essential to our understanding of Luther's spiritual dilemma, the religious experience itself is not fully realized.

The same is true later in the play. Called to account for his "errors", Cajetan raises question that Luther--for the moment at least--is clearly unable to answer. Two years later we see him burning papal decretals and a year after that he rejects the demands of the Diet of Worms on the grounds that "to act against one's conscience is neither safe nor honest" (III,i,85). Clearly a great deal has taken place in Luther's mind since his meeting with Cajetan--but unfortunately the audience isn't really party to the tortuous decision-making. Again, the ingredients of the experience are present, but the

experience itself remains remote. Nine years after the Diet of Worms Luther admits to Staupitz that throughout the Diet proceedings he was never "certain" as to the basis of his conviction--but by this time we don't much care. Too much has happened in the meantime (e.g., the peasant revolt).

The result, on the whole, is disagreeably disappointing. The scene with Cajetan, for instance, is dramatically effective and problems are raised that are interesting as well as disturbing. As Worth notes,

Cajetan sees what must spring from Luther's emphasis on the individual conscience, the spread of individualism, leading eventually perhaps to universal doubt and despair about the very existence of religious experience.¹⁷

Moreover, the situation is suspenseful and we wonder how Luther's convictions will survive the onslaught of Cajetan's probing questions. We anxiously await a scene which will illuminate the nature of Luther's struggle. Osborne does not follow through, however, and the scene's dramatic impact is dissipated. As V.S. Pritchett puts it, the author occasionally "funks a climax".¹⁸

Turning now to the broad social and political context (the "other things") of Luther's religious experience, serious shortcomings are in evidence. It is assuredly to Osborne's credit that he gives relatively objective and weighty consideration to such matters, but too often the result is confusion rather than dramatic clarity. Rather than illuminating the significance of Luther's religious experience there is an

indiscriminate blurring of vitally important issues.

Throughout the play we are made aware that secular interests are, in one way or another, entangled with Church affairs. Though Staupitz agrees that Martin's attack on the sale of indulgences is justified, he nonetheless reminds him that a powerful duke not only indulges in the practice himself but that this same duke has paid all of Martin's educational expenses (II,ii,57). Similarly Cajetan, as we have seen, draws to Martin's attention the fact that non-religious interests would undoubtedly be only too happy to create disturbances under the false guise of religious conflict (II,iv,73). Later Martin himself articulates an awareness that nationalistic, as opposed to purely spiritual, considerations are part and parcel of his attack on the Vatican:

And no one has suffered more from this tyranny than the Germans. They have been plundered without mercy. If I were to retract those books now, I should be issuing a license for more tyranny, and it is too much to ask of me. (III,i,83)

The Peasant Revolt scene (III,ii) graphically illustrates the extent to which secular interests have become a part of the religious dispute. Many princes have supported Luther for their own self-interest while the peasantry, in turn, have initiated a revolt of their own.

Ironically, Luther is blamed for the resultant carnage. At least such is the opinion of the Knight:

All you've ever managed to do is convert everything into stench and dying and peril, but you

could have done it Martin, and you were the only one who could have ever done it. You could even have brought freedom and order in at one and the same time. (III,ii,89)

That Luther was indeed at least partly responsible for the slaughter of the peasants is later confirmed by Staupitz:

You needn't have encouraged the princes. They were butchered and you got them to do it. And they had just cause, Martin. They did, didn't they? (III,iii,99)

Martin agrees that their cause was just--but he also notes that "It was a mob, and because it was a mob it was against Christ."

Obviously, all of this information is both interesting and dramatically relevant. It is entirely appropriate that Osborne explore the historical issues related, in one way or another, to Luther's dispute with Rome. Unfortunately, too often we must pause and deduce what has occurred because we know too little of the precise relationship between the religious and secular interests. As noted earlier, Luther was supported by certain princes but nowhere are we informed of the nature of this alliance. Denty points out that all this is a matter of historical record and suggests:

...possibly it might have been worthwhile to include a scene depicting Martin's relation with the Prince Elector of Saxony, who protected him from apprehension by Emperor and Church by giving him asylum at Wartburg.¹⁹

Denty's suggestion is assuredly valid. Though the Knight informs us of the questionable motives that led powerful figures to support Luther (III,ii,87-88), the information remains unverified (and unverifiable) hearsay.

Equally obscure is Luther's relationship to the peasants. As Elliott points out, Luther's "harsh repression of the rebellious peasants is neither prepared for nor developed within the play."²⁰ In fact, we know so little either of the peasants or the princes that the dramatic significance of the rebellion is almost totally lost. Of course, Luther--at the Diet of Worms--does refer to the exploitation suffered by Germany because of Church corruption. In view of the Peasant Revolt, however, we might justifiably demand to know just who was exploiting whom and in the interests of dramatic clarity we should have that information in our possession before learning of the revolt. As it is, we are left to puzzle the matter out as best we can--and we do so at the risk of inattention to the interesting theological questions raised by the Knight in his conversation with Luther.

Gascoigne, however, defends Osborne on this point. Agreeing that a great deal relating to the revolt is left out, he nonetheless asserts:

...to demand that it should be inserted is to demand a totally different play, and one which would not necessarily be greater.²¹

What Gascoigne overlooks here is the fact that Osborne's omission inadvertently diverts our attention from other matters which the author obviously felt important enough to include. At best the result is confusion; at worst, indifference. Taylor suggests a more plausible explanation. He alleges that the Peasant Revolt

scene was not present in an earlier version of the play and that it was only inserted later to clarify matters.²² Whatever the improvement over the earlier version, however, the confusion remains and the play suffers because of it. We must agree with Pritchett's observation that "we have never seen Luther placed politically."²³

As we have seen, Luther as a complex personality is effectively conveyed, while the relationship between Luther and the broader political and social milieu is exasperatingly obscure. What, we might now ask, is the problem? Some critics feel that Osborne's aims are incompatible with the dramatic form utilized to embody those aims. Martin Esslin, for instance, evaluates Luther in terms of Brecht's "epic" theatre but concludes that it is "anything but epic theatre--it is an attempt to clothe personal psychological problems in the superficial garb of historical drama."²⁴ For the most part, such an observation is itself superficial. A close reading of the text reveals that Osborne does understand the historical issues and that Luther's problems are spiritual as well as "psychological." What cannot be dismissed, on the other hand, is that the author fails to integrate the two into a coherent dramatic whole. Though Luther, the individual, is dramatically realized, Luther, the social and political man, is not. The necessary information is provided, but we must ferret it out as best we can. Laurence Kitchen, also using Brecht as a point of reference,

concludes that "Depth psychology doesn't go well with epic form...."²⁵ This conclusion is fairer and more accurate than Esslin's, and deserves our attention.

Given the long time span, the episodic structure, and the fact that Osborne wishes to present both an in depth study of Luther and his relationship to the larger historical issues, it is clear that Osborne sets himself a formidable task. A problem arises as to how much time to devote to Luther's personal nature and how much to related historical issues. As the play illustrates, Osborne spends too much time on the individual. As one anonymous reviewer notes:

Time spent on the makings of the monk is rather badly needed when the chronicle comes to the momentous acts of his life.²⁶

Consequently, when we are meant to appreciate the significance of Luther's actions in relation to its political and social consequences we have too little to go on, as the Peasant Revolt scene adequately illustrates. Its dramatic impact rapidly dissipates as we attempt to piece together what has happened--and why. Though Osborne clearly wishes us to understand the issues, "there is not," as Taylor points out, "room left to deal with them properly."²⁷

That is not to say, of course, that Luther himself need be depicted as fully cognisant of the relationship between his doctrinal dispute and the other issues. On the contrary, Osborne's insistence on his relative political ignorance and

reactionary attitude in respect to social matters is both historically accurate and dramatically interesting. Unfortunately, the author's failure to "place" Luther in relation to these related issues dulls the dramatic impact of his horrified reaction to the catastrophic events subsequent to his break with Rome. The audience, in other words, need not be left in the dark in respect to matters that Luther clearly does not understand.

As we have seen, one result of this failure is that Osborne, besides being compared unfavorably with Brecht, is also accused of lacking intelligent, historical insight. Charles Marowitz, for instance, feels that "unlike Brecht, he has not endowed his play with that added intellectual dimension around which the drama may cohere."²⁸ Raymond Williams echoes this charge, and extends it:

In Brecht, a historical action becomes a dramatic action, of a public kind. In Osborne, a historical action is reduced to a historical personality, who is then made the centre of a private psychological play. In feeling, Luther belongs with Lytton Strachey and Aldous Huxley rather than with Brecht.²⁹

Of course, it must be emphasized that Osborne is under no obligation to Brecht, and that Brecht himself, in "A Short Organum for the Theatre," stresses that "there are many conceivable ways of telling a story, some of them known and some still to be discovered."³⁰ However, the charges do draw

attention to the apparent conflict of purpose at the heart of the play. This conflict, moreover, becomes damagingly evident in the narrative structure. The Peasant Revolt scene, for instance, introduces relevant historical information which is of the utmost importance to our understanding of Luther. As we have seen, however, such information is abruptly proffered and it comes too late in the play. The result is confusion rather than dramatic or historical clarity.

Of course, the play contains merits. Though they often remain unrealized in dramatic terms, Osborne does attempt to grapple with complex issues in unmelodramatic fashion. Moreover, his language is always serviceable and at times brilliantly entertaining. Particularly noteworthy here are Tetzels long indulgence-vending speech (II,i,47-51) and Martin's tirade against the abuses of faith holiness (II,iii,61-63). Unfortunately, such merits fail to conceal the conflict of purpose and the confusing structural fragmentation.

Regarding Osborne's use of historical material, interesting problems arise. Actually, his play demonstrates that historical authenticity does not automatically result in a critically successful history play. Though the author is faithful to what we know of Luther as an individual and though he is careful to draw our attention to the complexity of important historical issues, the result, in dramatic terms, is often curiously flat. At times Luther appears to be little more than a transcription

of an historical source, even though many scenes are compelling enough in their own right. Judicious historical selectivity, then, is not enough. Osborne's play demonstrates that such selectivity must be accompanied by dramatic or theatrical selectivity. In the absence of such, narrative coherence degenerates into confusion and neither the presence of an interesting protagonist nor the historical relevance of the issues at hand can save the situation.

Consider, now, Osborne's achievement in relation to the previously discussed playwrights. Different thematic considerations are immediately apparent. Bolt, for the most part, depicts his protagonist in essentially static terms. He is more concerned to show More attempting to resist external threats to his conscience than he is to dramatize his spiritual development. Though Bolt's theme is challenging enough, and though Sir Thomas proves an interesting character in his own right, Bolt's static conception reduces his task somewhat. Of course, the author does attempt to depict the agony felt by Sir Thomas in attempting to remain loyal to Henry, but in the final analysis Bolt need only contrive situations in which Sir Thomas wittily evades or defensively parries the verbal arguments of his political enemies.

Osborne's aims, on the other hand, are somewhat more ambitious. He attempts to provide a dramatized "documentation" of his protagonist's spiritual struggles from youth to middle age. He also attempts to render understandable such struggles

in terms of Luther's individual psychology, his personal relationships and a broad historical milieu. Though his aims are not fully realized, his failure can be attributed, at least partially, to the sheer magnitude of his task. Actually, Shaffer's thematic concerns are roughly comparable to Osborne's in that he attempts to convey Pizarro's spiritual torment and his search for some kind of spiritual certainty. As we have seen, however, Shaffer evades (as Osborne does not) issues that are essential to our appreciation of the protagonist's situation, while his turgid prose effectively dulls our interest.

Regarding the use of historical sources, interesting similarities are apparent. Bolt and Osborne make use of excerpts from their sources, but if any general conclusion can be drawn it is that authenticity of language, however useful in defining character or creating a period atmosphere, is not enough to render significant the action within its historical context or from a contemporary perspective. Sir Thomas proves entertainingly witty, but the language here does not compensate for the author's neglect of important issues. Similarly, Luther's electrifying tirades, liberally interspersed with obscenities, compels our attention, but it does not compensate for Osborne's belated and clumsy attempt to "place" the protagonist politically. The same is essentially true of historical authenticity or, in the case of Shaffer, the use of another's historical attitudes. It is not enough, for instance, that Bolt include a few accurate observations regarding the corruption in

Henry's court or that Shaffer recreate actual historical incidents relating to the Spanish conquest. If an author fails to provide a context which will serve to focus our attention on, rather than divert it from, his principle thematic concerns, such historical details serve only a decorative purpose. Osborne proves more conscientious in this matter but, as we have seen, he fails to integrate the two.

However, a few qualitative judgments are in order. Bolt and Shaffer do creditably contrive a large number of scenes, and though many scenes reveal an appalling lack of substance, at least each contributes to narrative coherence or dramatic clarity. Osborne also proves skillful in this respect, but the Peasant Revolt scene shatters the continuity and draws our attention to matters that should have been dealt with in earlier scenes. Of course, Osborne's aims are somewhat ambitious, but we may also justifiably suspect plain carelessness in the matter of construction. On the other hand, Luther does reveal qualities that are lacking in Seasons and Royal Hunt. Osborne attempts to deal with weighty issues in an interesting manner, and though a deficiency of craftsmanship and an apparent conflict of purpose mar the play as a whole, there is reason to agree with Tynan's opinion that it "will be read long after it has ceased to be acted."³¹ We cannot, with the same degree of assurance, venture a similar speculation in regard to Seasons or Royal Hunt.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER III

¹ John Osborne, "That Awful Museum," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (Feb. 1961), 216.

² Erik H. Erikson, Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History (New York, 1962).

³ Gordon Rupp, "Luther and Mr. Osborne," Cambridge Quarterly, I, i (Winter 1965-1966), 28-42.

⁴ Vera D. Denty, "The Psychology of Martin Luther," Catholic World, CXCIV (Nov. 1961), 99-105.

⁵ It seems to me that someone once reported that Osborne had read Erickson's study, a report that seems largely substantiated by comparing the play with the book.

⁶ John Osborne, "Note," Luther (London, 1966), p. 11. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

⁷ Katharine J. Worth, "The Angry Young Man: John Osborne," Experimental Drama, ed. William A. Armstrong (London, 1963), p. 166.

⁸ Wellwarth, Protest and Paradox, p. 230.

⁹ Taylor, Anger and After, p. 54.

¹⁰ George P. Elliott, "Letter from London," Nation, Dec. 30, 1961, p. 540.

¹¹ John Rosselli, "At Home with Lucifer," Reporter, Oct. 12, 1961, p. 53.

¹² Eric Keown, "At the Play," Punch, Aug. 9, 1961, p. 220.

¹³ Laurence Kitchin, Drama in the Sixties: Form and Interpretation (London, 1966), p. 186

¹⁴ Bamber Gascoigne, "First Person Singular," Spectator, Aug. 4, 1961, p. 171.

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- 15 Keown, "At the Play," 220.
- 16 Alan Seymour, "Osborne, VC," London Magazine, V, 2 (May 1965), 71.
- 17 Katharine J. Worth, "Shaw and John Osborne," Shavian, II, 10 (1964), 31.
- 18 V. S. Pritchett, "Operation Osborne," New Statesman, Aug. 4, 1961, p. 163.
- 19 Denty, "Psychology," 103.
- 20 Elliott, "Letter," 539.
- 21 Gascoigne, "First Person," 171.
- 22 Taylor, Anger, p. 54.
- 23 Pritchett, "Operation Osborne," 163.
- 24 Martin Esslin, "Brecht and the English Theatre," 69.
- 25 Kitchin, Drama in the Sixties, p. 187.
- 26 "Mr. Osborne's Stamina" (anon. rev.), Times Weekly Review, Aug. 3, 1961, p. 10.
- 27 Taylor, Anger and After, p. 53.
- 28 Charles Marowitz, "The Ascension of John Osborne," TDR, VII, 2 (Winter 1962), 176.
- 29 Raymond Williams, "Recent English Drama," The Modern Age, ed. Boris Ford (Pelican Guide to Eng. Lit., 7, 1964), p. 506.
- 30 Brecht on Theatre, p. 201.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER III

³¹ Kenneth Tynan, "A Second Look at O'Casey and Osborne,"
Observer, July 30, 1961, p. 20.

CHAPTER IV

LEFT-HANDED LIBERTY

Unlike Bolt, Shaffer and Osborne, John Arden has always been interested in the writing of history plays. Whereas the former playwrights were interested primarily in contemporary settings and only later directed their attention in another direction, Arden began with historical settings:

I began to write plays when I was about sixteen. I never actually finished them either but I used to start one periodically, fill up a couple of exercise books, then it would get left. They were mostly prose plays, set in an historical period....I had a fascination for the Middle Ages in those days, and was always writing plays about the Crusades and things.¹

This interest in historical material continued throughout his later student years, when he wrote an unpublished comedy ("All Fall Down") concerning the building of a railway during the Victorian age,² and it has persisted throughout his maturer years as a critically important dramatist.

There is ample reason, then, why three of Arden's plays should be discussed in this paper. Of course, there are Arden plays which are of interest to our topic but which cannot be included because of limitations of space. His Christmas play,

The Business of Good Government, deals with events in the Gospel in terms of their ancient historical context and in relation to their contemporary political relevance, and his Ironhand, an adaptation of Goethe's Goetz von Berlichingen, reveals themes similar to those in Armstrong's Last Goodnight. Despite such exclusions, however, the three plays under discussion do provide a fairly representative selection of Arden's historical dramas.

A word of explanation is in order regarding the sequence in which the plays are discussed. Chronologically, Left-Handed Liberty, first performed in 1965, comes after the first performance or publication of Armstrong's Last Goodnight (1964) and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1959). The sequence of discussion, in effect, is a reversal of the chronological order. It must be emphasized, however, that no significance should be attached to this order. It is determined by the needs of the topic in regard to the author's use of historical material, not by considerations related to Arden's individual development as a dramatist. With this in mind, we may now discuss the plays.

Commissioned by the Corporation of the City of London to commemorate the 750th anniversary of Magna Carta, Arden's Left-Handed Liberty is of interest for a number of reasons, mainly academic. Inferior to his other plays that deal with historical subjects, it illustrates the artistic shortcomings to which even major talents sometimes succumb. It also illustrates that mere avoidance of the worst faults of other playwrights does not make

for successful drama. In this play Arden reveals a sophisticated understanding of the various possibilities in regard to the use of historical material. Unfortunately, these possibilities are only occasionally realized and we ask, with Penelope Gilliatt, "What does it lack that isn't so missed if one reads it?"³

Of course the occasion of the work--the fact that it was commissioned and the subject more or less chosen for the author--may help to account for some of the play's defects, but Arden himself points out that the lack of freedom here was counter-balanced by a freedom of "opinion" in his treatment of the subject.⁴ Furthermore, in dealing with Magna Carta Arden ignored the more conventional approach of dwelling on events preceding an historic occasion and instead begins his play where many playwrights would have ended:

It was a considerable surprise for me to discover how soon the agreement between John and the Barons was repudiated, and how unfortunate his reconciliation with the Pope had proved for the Baronial party. This apparent complete failure of the Charter struck me as a more fruitful theme for a play than the more obvious one of the events leading up to Runnymede.⁵

In short, though the author's freedom was limited by the occasion, the restriction was by no means oppressive in terms of artistic integrity--either in the matter of plot or the opinions embodied therein.

Before proceeding further, however, it is important to note that our evaluation of Liberty is obstructed by textual problems, due to the fact that the published text apparently

differs from that used in the actual performance of the play.

Arden notes that

I made radical changes to the dialogue, particularly of the last act, during the final stages of rehearsal, as may be discovered by anyone who is able to compare the prompt copy with the prematurely printed text. I think that these changes improved the play.⁶

In the absence of a published version of this prompt copy, however, the student can only deal with the play as it now stands.

A variation is also suggested in the Appendix where Arden offers an episode embodying the legend of the Wise Men of Gotham as an alternative to the Kentish Trial (II,iv). Because this alternative does no great violence to the structure of the play as it now stands and is also in keeping with the subject matter, the problem need not detain us--at least for the moment.

Before attempting to catalogue the play's many defects, it is only fair to note the honourable intentions and/or achievements of the author. In choosing to treat the highly questionable motives and actions of those who signed the Charter--as well as those who did not--the author brings insights of the twentieth century to bear on a subject that in lesser hands could have been easily treated in an uninformative light. As Michael Kustow notes, "Arden has treated the subject in the only possible way for an age haunted by happy Neville Chamberlain waving his bit of paper...."⁷ In addition, Arden takes care to place the signing of the Charter and the subsequent unhappy

events within the context of the thirteenth century historical milieu, a milieu which he renders understandable from a twentieth century perspective.

From a political viewpoint, the Charter is viewed unsentimentally from both sides of the dispute. For John it is a matter of pure expedience (and safety) to accede to baronial demands:

I chose to submit. I viewed the matter in a larger perspective. I never make the mistake of elevating small disputes into questions of principle. Besides, I had to deal with Baronial discontent and a danger of invasion from France.
(I,ii,8)

Though he later expresses an inclination for the rights of individualism (III,vii), his behaviour is nonetheless dictated throughout by political realities and his own self-interest.

The barons are of similar leanings, with the difference that it is their own self-interest that is of prime importance. Fitzwalter places his trust in force ("His soldiers are in Flanders. Mine are across the river.") while De Vesci is sensitive to principles in the Charter that might be detrimental to baronial privileges, however just to other: "There is too much latitude in the Charter. I am highly suspicious of it."
(I,iii,47)

A Charter, however, particularly if it is a legal document, lends itself to the interpretation of any group who happens to see means by which its own interests might be satisfied. London commercial interests, though initially sympathetic to the baronial

party, cite Magna Carta as authority to demand the removal of the barons' troops from the city--due to the detrimental effect of their presence on trade and hence pecuniary gain. It is, as the Mayor says to De Vesci, a question of "tit-for-tat"(II,ii,52) France, taking advantage of the subsequent strife between John and the barons, exploits the situation and invades England under religious pretexts--despite the Pope's open declaration in John's favour. As Pandulph puts it:

The Hand of God has been invoked by a great many people lately--I wonder are we not perhaps in danger of confounding our Divine Redeemer with those obscene idols of the Orient that Crusaders talk of--I mean the ones with six or seven arms growing out of a single body?
(III,iii,74)

Arden, however, does not attempt to account for the debacle merely in terms of the self-seeking motives of individuals or groups. Larger cultural factors are also shown to be at work--though not necessarily understood by the historical participants. As V. S. Pritchett notes: "...the play is not about the Charter, but about a historical break in men's minds."⁸ The break here--or rather the impending break--has to do with feudalism, particularly in relation to the status of women. Lady De Vesci is regarded by her husband as merely "a navigable river, a sluice" but she cites the liberties embodied in the Charter as justifications for her defiance of his orders (II,ii).

Economic factors are also drawn into focus. John, besieged and beleaguered because his soldiers have not received their pay, expresses his puzzlement with the situation:

I have gone into this before--how many times
 I don't know--that I do not understand, and
 nobody understands, where the money comes from
 or where it goes to when it has been spent.
 If some new Aristotle could develop a science
 out of that, perhaps we could then know how to
 govern our people. Had Stephen Langton studied
 in Paris the pilgrimage of money instead of the
 pilgrimage of the soul, he might never have
 needed to frame that destructive Charter....
 (III,iv.p.75)

Recalling the importance of taxation in relation to baronial demands, John's concerns here are entirely understandable.

Arden--in his thematic treatment--also attempts to avoid a purely "serious" or academic approach to the many issues involved. Unlike Shaffer's Royal Hunt, where humour is ineffectual or absent, Liberty embodies episodes which are amusing in their own right. With levity we see Lady De Vesci citing her husband's own handiwork as justification for defying him, while the Kentish trial scene (II,iii) provides a humorous glimpse into a way of life not dominated by weighty political considerations. Though the dramatic worth of such episodes is--as we shall see--of questionable value, Arden does seek to avoid a dry, text-book approach to his subject.

In view of the multiplicity of issues, it is also obvious that Arden's subject is susceptible to confusion on the part of the audience, but this he attempts to avoid. Regarding the structure, Arden cites Brecht's Galileo and Shaw's Saint Joan as models analogous to Liberty, models which are "loose in structure, to accomodate a necessary diversity of scenes."⁹ In order that this diversity not get out of hand, Arden makes

use of Pandulph, the Papal Legate, who via direct addresses to the audience interprets the events in terms of the theological cosmology of the time. Consequently, we are provided with a constant frame-of-reference throughout. In addition, Arden has John himself step out of character to address the audience and interpret events from a contemporary point of view (III,vii). John's action here is a complete theatrical surprise and, as Pritchett notes, is "intended to build up the end of a play that cannot easily escape from the flatness of chronology."¹⁰ Though we question its success in this regard, the scene nonetheless helps to clarify the meaning of many arguments and issues before John meets his death in the Wash (III,viii).

Both thematically and structurally, however, the play contains many serious shortcomings, despite Arden's attempts to the contrary. The unhappy result is an inartistic lack of coherence which appears all the worse when compared with the author's achievements in Serjeant Musgrave's Dance and Armstrong's Last Goodnight.

Consider, first, Arden's handling of his themes. As we have seen, he does attempt to deal honestly and unmelodramatically with the historical issues. However, historical and dramatic honesty are not enough and we can only agree with Frank Cox's evaluation:

An anatomy of liberty, the value of treaties, the irony of historical fact, these are the themes and they are cleverly discussed, but good themes though they are they prove top-

heavy for this play, or rather for its author.
 John Arden the individual sinks under their
 weight....¹¹

The purely political aspects of Magna Carta, for instance, are inherently interesting and Arden does not neglect them. But for the most part they are merely reported and it is through a relatively uninteresting dialogue between John and the elder Marshal that we hear of the loss of French possessions, the refusal of the barons to pay taxes in lieu of sending troops and the alliance of baronial and commercial interests (I,iii). In the absence of actual dramatic conflict between John and his opponents in respect to these matters, the relating of such information is dull and provokes our boredom. Of course a certain amount of reportage is necessary--especially in view of the many issues involved--but too often a mere recitation of facts is offered in place of interestingly dramatic situations.

That Arden is capable of depicting dramatically the antagonism between John and the barons is well illustrated when John tricks the barons into standing (a gesture of respect) by calling them "equivocating whoremongers" (II,i,28). However, the conflict embodied in this incident is one of personalities rather than political interests and, effective though it is, we can only wish that more of the latter had been presented in a similar manner.

The same criticism might also be voiced in respect to the economic aspects of the dispute. We see the commercial

classes, in the person of the Mayor, in relation to the barons (II,ii) and we hear John meditating on the baffling nature of financial matters (III,iv)--but the precise relationship between King, barons and middle-class in respect to economic matters remains, on the whole, unrealized in a dramatic sense. The information is there and we can elicit for ourselves--by studying the mass of reported data--the factors contributing to the complexities of the situation. The danger here, however, is that the audience might justifiably conclude that its curiosity regarding such matters might be equally well satisfied elsewhere.

Regarding the chivalry motif, there seems to be an absence of clearly defined purpose on the author's part, even though much of the play is devoted to the subject. In the opening scene John's mother, the aging Eleanor, recalls the amorous intrigues of her more youthful years:

Sometimes for my lover
 Sometimes for my poet
 Always I kept the back door unlocked
 Never for the King:
 He could beat at the great gate
 Until the hinges rocked. (I,i,6-7)

Subsequent scenes reveal the adulterous relations between John and Lady De Vesci and De Vesci and his whores. In addition we see the younger Marshal's idolization of De Vesci's wife. In short, Arden is concerned to show the varieties of love, from the commercially sordid to the unattainably ideal, inherent in feudal society.

Arden is also concerned to show that such relationships are, in one way or another, affected by Magna Carta. Lady De Vesce cites it to justify her defiance while the younger Marshal's love interests are brushed aside by the exigencies of the war that follows the signing of the Charter. John cites Paragraph 54, which relieved men of the obligation of duelling on behalf of women, as evidence that "The Age of Chivalry is dead--1215." (III, vii, 85)

However, Arden's handling of the subject is--on the whole--clumsy and confusing. As V.S. Pritchett notes,

Magna Carta was a coarse male affair, as Mr. Arden tells us, and the ladies are dimmed; but in the text of the play they have an intended importance which Mr. Arden has not rescued dramatically from some essay he has in mind on the end of the Middle Ages and the cultural dilemma of chivalry.¹²

Though there is much humour in the subject, humour which serves as a welcome relief to the dull reportage that clogs much of the narrative, its thematic relevance remains obscure. In fact, Arden practically admits as much when he has John step out of character and ramble on in what Lumley calls "an eloquent but largely irrelevant speech on the character of women."¹³ We can disagree with Lumley's assessment in regard to this particular speech--but it is applicable to earlier episodes in the play in which women play an important role. Pointing to Lady De Vesce, John notes:

She was a rumour in certain circles in the thirteenth century, to her husband she was a pretext for a grievance: and that's about her lot. Or so you might believe. Because this play concerns Magna Carta, and Magna Carta only. The lady is peripheral. A thoroughly masculine piece of work was Magna Carta-.... (III,vii,84)

He then goes on to illustrate how Paragraph 54 served to relieve men of unfair obligations to womanhood. At this point, however, we might justifiably ask why such information was left to the last scene but one, and why it should be of anything more than academic or "peripheral" interest to the audience now. It would appear that Arden himself was uncertain as to the real function of the ladies in Liberty until this particular scene and then attempted to set matters right both in his own mind and in ours. Though his salvage attempt serves to clarify the situation, it also draws our attention to the ill-defined purpose of earlier scenes.

Specific scenes dealing with the lower echelons of society also serve to illustrate the fragmentary nature of the play. Roderick Nordell correctly points out that the author "offers the alerting reminder that the stated rights resulting from the struggle between the barons and King John did not necessarily extend to the common people."¹⁴ However, Nordell goes on, the representatives of the commoners are rather unrepresentative: three prostitutes and cartoon caricatures of a foolish goldsmith, his wife, and a mandolin-playing priest

embroiled in a marital dispute.¹⁵

Arden's depiction of such people is, at times, amusing enough, but it discourages us from seriously considering them in relation to Magna Carta. The Kentish Trial, for instance, ostensibly serves to illustrate John's capabilities as an administrator but the antiquarian caricatures induce us to agree with Kustow when he says that the scene seems "to be written for a medieval audience."¹⁶ The episode is, in effect, an entirely irrelevant sideshow, unrelated either to preceding or subsequent events. Arden admits as much when, in the Appendix, he suggests that the legend of the Wise Men of Gosham might be substituted in its place with no damage to the play (Liberty p.97). In this alternate episode the conflict between royal prerogative and the economic interests of the peasants is brought into focus, but again the figures are cartoon characters and medieval humour, as opposed to political realities, provides the real centre of interest.

We might leave the matter there if it were not for the fact that Arden does wish us to consider (seriously) the effects of the events in relation to the commoners. This is illustrated when the author dramatizes the demoralizing effect of the war on the populace at large(III,v). Three street girls dance and sing and articulate the feeling that they too--like John and his antagonists--are free to interpret the Charter according to their own desires:

in terms that are general enough to admit of the vagaries of human nature. But coming as it does so late in the play, and in the absence of earlier analogous references, the dramatic effect of such expression is largely gratuitous. The reason would seem to be that Arden, at least to this point in the play, was undecided as to the relative degrees of importance of the multiplicity of themes. Consequently, this indecisiveness is reflected in the language itself.

The overall structure of Liberty also reflects the play's thematic incoherence. Though one anonymous reviewer finds the play a "finely organized piece of work,"¹⁷ and another seems to imply as much by stressing that the play's real weakness is due to a preponderance of talk over action,¹⁸ it is difficult, nonetheless, to exonerate Arden of charges of plain sloppiness in the matter of dramatic construction.

Consider, for instance, the role of Eleanor. She appears in the first scene, set in 1204, and draws our attention to the chivalry motif which figures so prominently later in the play. The next scene takes place some eleven years later and we hear nothing much more of her except in relation to "garlic-mouthed poets" (II,ii,46). Actually, she seems to have been introduced for no other reason but to die. Of course, the aged queen does provide obvious links with the past and her dynastic connections with France draw attention to a tenuous international "unity" that is subsequently shattered. But in the final analysis nothing

of dramatic significance appears later in the play that could not have been fully realized without her earlier presence, and we wonder why she was introduced in the first place. It would appear that Arden had originally intended to emphasize more clearly her posthumous importance but became involved with other considerations along the way. Consequently her one and only scene, effective though it is in its own right, seems an isolated fragment in relation to the rest of the play.

This fragmentation is also characteristic of other scenes. The quarrel between Lady De Vesci and her husband, as well as the Kentish trial scene, for instance, seem detachable from the dramatic narrative because their thematic importance is highly dubious. Kustow sums it up this way:

What seems to me unsatisfactory about the middle part of Left-Handed Liberty is its absorption in the minutiae of medieval living, at the expense of those luminous gestures of action which bridge time.¹⁹

Again, taken on their own terms such scenes are effective, but in terms of the dramatic narrative their relationship to it is either obscure (as in the case of the De Vesci's) or highly tenuous (as the trial scene illustrates). As we have seen, Arden attempts to place in perspective the battle of the sexes (III,vii) and candidly admits to the inorganic nature of the trial scene in the Appendix--but this fails to conceal the confusion.

Arden also admits to the confusion in regard to other

matters and that his attempt to clarify the situation left something to be desired:

I did get a bit tangled in a confusion of baronial and episcopal minutiae, until Margaretta D'Arcy...suggested that I use the Papal Legate--until then a very minor character--to pull the whole play together and set it in a framework of medieval theology and cosmology. Even so it is a bit of a chaos....²⁰

The author's assessment is essentially correct. Though Pandulph does serve as a unifying device, his theological perorations bear little relationship to the dramatic action. There is one scene in which Pandulph and the Archbishop debate the wisdom of Papal intervention (III,i), but for the most part the action centres around characters who are unaware of or indifferent to such considerations. Of course, Arden may have intended irony here--to draw our attention to what Richard Gilman calls "the impure, capricious, uncodifiable nature of reality beneath our schemes for organizing it."²¹ John's reference to the desired existence of dandelions on pure green meadows (III,vii) indicates that such was indeed an important thematic consideration. However, in the absence of clarity on this point (we don't really see the relationship between John and Pandulph's points of view), such irony is irretrievably lost and the play suffers because of it.

Regarding the end of the play, Pandulph is conspicuous by his absence. It is the Elder Marshal who stands by and pro-

vides a commentary laced with Biblical allusions while John sinks helplessly into the mud of the Wash. Recalling Pandulph's opening speech (in the Prologue) alluding to the prophesy that is now apparently being fulfilled, it seems strange that it should be the Marshal who has the last word on the subject--and in the play. In the interests of narrative coherence, if nothing else, it seems reasonable that Pandulph should fulfill this function, especially in that there seems to be no pressing reason why he should not. However Arden, if he thought at all, thought otherwise, and in view of his own admission that the play is "a bit of a chaos" there seems little point in pursuing the matter.

Regarding John's direct address to the audience, it is obvious that in stepping out of character he is meant to fulfill the same "unifying" function that Pandulph does throughout most of the play. He announces:

There comes a time in any stage-play, when
the stage itself, the persons upon it, the
persons in front of it, must justify their
existence--and I think this is the time now
..... (III,vii,83)

and then proceeds to explain the nature of the dispute surrounding Magna Carta: its political uses and abuses, the role of women, and its contemporary (1965) relevance.

Now there is nothing inherently wrong in the playwright making use of such a device and we need take no heed of David Benedictus' opinion that Arden "has broken the two cardinal rules of playwriting: 'Never apologise--never explain.'"²²

(Benedictus cites no authority for such "rules," nor does he explain how he arrived at them.) However, the reason for Arden's making use of such a device is interesting in that it reveals his awareness of the weaknesses in Liberty and the need for expository clarification.

For the most part, John's address is an attempt to focus our attention on important matters which have, for one reason or another, become lost or distorted in the chaos of earlier scenes:

A document repudiated, and nobody knew what
for. A villainous king and his villainous
barons sprinkling each other's blood all
over the map. A good Archbishop disgraced.
A sagacious Pope flung all cack-handed in
the Vatican by contradictory letters con-
tinually coming in on every post....(III,vii,84)

Moreover, the address reveals a rather transparent attempt to deal with matters that Arden apparently forgot to attend to in previous scenes. For instance, John seeks to clarify the peripheral nature of the chivalry motif, but he does so in terms of Paragraph 54 of the Charter--mentioned here for the first time. Why, we might ask, was this not at least alluded to in earlier scenes?

On the whole, then, Liberty is marred by a multiplicity of unrealized themes and a faulty narrative structure. Of course, it may be argued that the narrative confusion is meant

to reflect the confusion of the characters in regard to the historical events they do not fully comprehend. Arden, in the Author's Notes, draws attention to this aspect of the historical period:

It seems unlikely....that any of the men concerned with drawing up the Great Charter had any conception of the reputation the document would have for the future generations. They no doubt believed that they were defining an uncertain and disputed frontier between the rights of the king and those of his subjects; and any idea that they were preparing 'the cornerstone of English liberty' must have been far from their minds. Indeed it was far from the minds of any Englishmen until about the end of the sixteenth century. (Liberty p.x)

The play, as we have seen, does reflect this consideration and it does deal with a variety of related issues, including the nature of paper agreements, the different attitudes that men have toward them and the unpredictable uses to which they are put. Too often, however, the confusion in the minds of the characters is complemented by a similar confusion in the collective mind of the audience. Neither Pandulph's interpretive comments nor John's direct address serves to remedy the situation. In a sense, Arden's failure here is similar to Osborne's in Luther. John's address serves the same function as the Knight's address in the Peasant Revolt scene in that it, too, reveals--somewhat belatedly--information necessary to our understanding of the proceedings. At issue here, of course, is not the use of the direct address or John's stepping out of character, but

the transparent necessity that prompts the use of either.

The play does contain merits, however, merits that qualitatively distinguish it from the works of previously discussed authors. The four playwrights prove relatively conversant with their respective periods or settings, but Arden, in Liberty, reveals a more sophisticated understanding of his historical material and he is more successful in suggesting its relevance in terms of contemporary life. Seasons, for instance, proves to be little more than rather orthodox and sentimentalized melodrama, despite the language and the allusions to historical events. The charge is true to an even greater degree in regard to Royal Hunt. Osborne attempts to evade such superficiality, but despite his obvious familiarity with Luther's life and times, we occasionally feel that Luther is merely an interesting dramatic transcription of an historical source--in this case, Erik Erikson's.

Arden's play, on the other hand, exudes a confident and comprehensive familiarity with the period. The author admits to a studied knowledge of the "bald and prejudiced" chronicles of the period; he differentiates between the historical "facts" and his own "less historical" opinions; and he notes that his attempt to modify the conventional image of John as a "villainous king" is compatible with contemporary historical opinion (Luther p.x). He also points out his use of fictionalized and undocumented material which includes the Young Marshal's love

for Lady De Vesci, the latter's adulterous relationship with John and Pandulph's correspondence with the Flemish recruiting agents (Liberty p.ix). We may generously speculate that diligent research and dramatic inventiveness also characterizes the approach of the other authors, but Arden does reveal a superior intellectual grasp. In other words, he seems to have absorbed more fully the contents and opinions of a variety of sources before adapting them to his own particular artistic ends. Whatever its many faults, Liberty is uniquely "Ardenesque." Whereas the former plays often smack of superficial or hasty historicism and at times seem pretentious or derivative, Liberty proves a thoughtful and original piece of work. This is undoubtedly due to the author's comprehensive understanding of his material and his appreciation of its dramatic possibilities.

Of course, Liberty also proves a somewhat clumsily managed affair, and because of this our response is apt to be characterized by exasperated confusion or bored indifference. Consequently, we are in danger of overlooking those elements in Liberty that merit attention, and which will be pertinent to our subsequent discussion of Armstrong's Last Goodnight and Serjeant Musgrave's Dance. Consider, for instance, the author's knowledge and use of the legends of the period, legends which he attempts to incorporate into the play. As we have seen, the integration is somewhat unsuccessful in that the thematic relevance of such episodes remain tenuous or ambiguous. However,

we do become aware that Arden, in addition to being interested in the political, social and religious aspects of the period, is also interested in what may be termed the artistic milieu, at least as manifested in the folk-tales. Consequently, we see the characters not only as the author, chroniclers or historians see them; we also see them as they presumably saw (or liked to see) themselves. Of course, Shaffer attempts to do likewise in Royal Hunt through the depiction of Inca rituals, dances and the like. However, we suspect that Shaffer is pandering to the spectator's appetite for colorful spectacle. Moreover the spectacles themselves are tailored or domesticated to suit the sentimental bourgeois sensibility of a nineteenth century "liberal" rather than calculated to enlarge our understanding of the Inca culture. Arden, on the other hand, juxtaposes what may be termed the period's popular "artistic imagination" with its ugly political realities. The result is stimulating dramatic tension that engages our attention and enlarges our understanding of the period. Of course, the use of such a technique is extremely limited here, and largely unsuccessful at that. However, its importance will become more apparent in our discussion of the author's other plays.

Related to Arden's use of popular folk-tale or legend is his use of "cartoon characters" or caricatures. Though the author states that "There is very little in this play which cannot be justified historically" (Liberty p.ix), he does not feel obligated

to define all of his characters in realistic or naturalistic terms. He freely uses a variety of approaches or artistic conventions and though the narrative incoherence of Liberty dulls our appreciation of such diversity, particularly as it relates to his use of historical material, the text does reveal dramatic possibilities which are often astonishingly successfully realized in the subsequent plays under discussion.

Finally, note must be made of the language. Arden intersperses poetry throughout the text, but because the aesthetics that determine his use of poetry will be discussed in later chapters we can defer discussion here. Regarding the prose, Arden notes that he has "tried to write a kind of dialogue which has the straightforwardness of medieval speech--more florid for courtly scenes and more colloquial for other episodes, but generally without regional colouring." (Liberty p.xiii) In short, he attempts to imbue the speech with what Kustow calls "a specific historical texture"²³ while at the same time rendering it easily understandable to a modern audience. Though the tediously expository nature of much of the narrative somewhat dampens our linguistic sensitivities, we nonetheless can concede the author's success here.

In summary, then, we can say that Liberty is a bad play in many ways. In fact, it may eventually prove to be Arden's worst. But it does reveal an approach to historical material that is considerably more sophisticated than that revealed by

Bolt, Shaffer or Osborne. And it does contain dramatic possibilities that are more successfully realized in Arden's other plays. Rarely can we say as much about the worst efforts of other playwrights.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER IV

- ¹ "Building the Play: An interview with John Arden," The New British Drama, ed. Henry Popkin (New York, 1964), p. 581.
- ² Ibid., p. 583.
- ³ Penelope Gilliatt, "Plantagenets and Philistines," Observer, June 20, 1965, p. 25.
- ⁴ "Who's for a Revolution?: Two Interviews with John Arden," TDR, XI, 2 (Winter 1966), 50.
- ⁵ "Author's Notes," Left-Handed Liberty: A Play about Magna Carta (London, 1965), p. xi. Subsequent references will be to this edition--hereafter cited as Liberty.
- ⁶ "John Arden: An Interview with Tom Milne and Clive Goodwin," Theatre at Work: Playwrights and Production in the Modern British Theatre, ed. Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler (London, 1967), p. 55.
- ⁷ Michael Kustow, "Left-Handed Liberty," Encore, XII, 4 (July-August 1965), 40.
- ⁸ V. S. Pritchett, "Bad King," New Statesman, June 25, 1965, p. 1022.
- ⁹ "Questions of Expediency: John Arden talks to Simon Trussler," Plays and Players, XII, 10 (July 1965), 15.
- ¹⁰ Pritchett, "Bad King," 1022.
- ¹¹ Frank Cox, "Left-Handed Liberty," Plays and Players, XII (August 1965), 41.
- ¹² Pritchett, "Bad King," 1022.
- ¹³ Lumley, New Trends, p. 265.
- ¹⁴ Roderick Nordell, "Left-Handed Liberty," Christian Science Monitor (Boston), Jan. 8, 1968, p. 4.
- ¹⁵ Loc. cit.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER IV

16 Kustow, Encore, XII, 41.

17 "Big Barter" (anon. rev.), Times Literary Supplement, June 17, 1965, p. 520.

18 Gilliatt, "Plantagenets and Philistines," 25.

19 Kustow, Encore, XII, 40-41.

20 "Who's for a Revolution?" 50.

21 Richard Gilman, "Arden's Unsteady Ground," TDR, XII, 2 (Winter 1966), 56.

22 David Benedictus, "It Comes Out in the Wash," Spectator, June 25, 1965, p. 821.

23 Kustow, Encore, XII, 40.

CHAPTER V

ARMSTRONG'S LAST GOODNIGHT

In contrast to the relative confusion of Liberty, Arden's Armstrong's Last Goodnight provides a superior illustration of the aims and methods inherent in the author's use of historical material. It is at once both intellectually and theatrically forceful and doubtless of more enduring aesthetic worth than the play about Magna Carta. Of course, it also embodies problems of its own in respect to history plays in general, problems which will be examined in some detail, but it nonetheless fulfills many of the artistic possibilities which elude the author in Liberty.

The genesis of ideas and motivations which led to the writing of Armstrong's Last Goodnight are indicative of two principle concerns on Arden's part: The desire to illuminate problems of the past in a manner which renders them relevant to contemporary life and the desire to revivify past poetic and dramatic traditions which the author fears are in danger of being lost to, or ignored in, contemporary theatre. Stimulated by Tyrone Guthrie's 1949 production of Sir David Lindsay's The Three Estates,¹ "a highly romantic Renaissance spectacle,"

Arden notes:

...I could discern the possibility of a modern drama that would deal as pertinently with the present ills of the world as Sir David Lindsay had dealt with those of the sixteenth century, and yet would not be compelled to renounce the excitement and splendour of the old theatre I had been brought up to believe in.²

The result is an Arden play in which Lindsay himself--a sixteenth century diplomat, poet and playwright--appears as a central protagonist in confrontation with a legendary and/or fictional Scottish border lord.

Regarding the splendour of the "old theatre," Arden's play embodies many of its characteristics. Its colourfully costumed characters and episodic narrative, combined with a simple set and action-packed plot, are reminiscent of Shakespeare, as well as nineteenth century romantic drama, while its use of simultaneous staging recalls the medieval theatre. Arden feels that "most people are still affected by the romanticism of border ballads, outlaws, and all the rest of what Walter Scott brought in"³ and much in the play illustrates his concern to satisfy the audience's appetite in this respect.

On the whole, it is the ballad tradition which appears to be the strongest single influence on Arden here. He feels it to be the "bedrock of English poetry"⁴ and finds it regrettable that the public seems to have lost touch with this source--particularly in the theatre. Noting that the themes in traditional

ballads always embody basically simple situations, he feels that

There is no need to be afraid of being corny
in choice of plot. When the stories are as
firmly grounded as these, there is scarcely
any limit to the amount of meaning and re-
levance a writer can insert into them.⁵

Consequently, Arden feels that the sixteenth century "Ballad of Johnny Armstrong" embodies a situation which--given a writer of talent--is capable of bearing meanings that will be of relevance to a twentieth century audience.

Turning to the play, now, we find that the basic situation or plot is simple enough: in the interests of peace with England and a securely united realm, James V sends Lindsay, an urbane and cultivated diplomat, to put an end to the troublesome border activities of the illiterate, stuttering Gilnockie (Johnny Armstrong) and other free-booting lords of the area. As Lindsay puts it:

...through my craft and humanity
I will save the realm frae butchery
Gif I can, good sir, but gif I can.⁶

Our first exposure to Johnny reveals a marked absence of such "humanity" or desire for peace. After swearing friendship with Wamphrary, he has him murdered (I,iii) and we are inclined to agree with the later assessment of Lindsay's secretary, McGlass:

He is ane terrible Gogmagog, he is ane wild
Cyclops of the mountains: begod he has baith
his een--but hauf a tongue in the man's heid...
Did ye listen to the Gaelic? I think we need
to cut his throat. (I,ix,59)

On the surface, then, it would appear that the conflict is clear-cut: humane civilization versus barbaric anarchism--or social amity versus destructive individualism. Moreover, we are inclined to agree (initially, at least) with Gilman's feeling that such a conflict is "inevitable."⁷ Though the "civilized" Scottish authorities may feel no particular grief at the looting and burning of English homes, retaliatory raids on Scottish territory--as well as the threat of a full-scale English invasion--does much to mitigate this sense of satisfaction. In addition, the fact that the Scottish border clans feel free "To brenn a Scotsman's roof, and lay the wyte of it on the English"(II,xiv,88) serves to emphasize that patriotic motivations, whether of the border clans or the centralized authorities, have only a tenuous connection with the destructive barbarism and the desire for its suppression. In short--the situation is intolerable and Armstrong and his allies must be subdued, in one way or another.

However, though the conflict seems inevitable, the attempt to resolve it reveals perplexing complexities. As Arden explains:

I've tried to present a situation in which everything is linked to another factor, until you can hardly get through the thicket at all. There is no simple answer, which is the natural situation in life. One is always coming up against circumstances in which one has to make certain compromises, which seems all right until they lead to others, and others--until one is completely turned about.⁸

As we have noted, political expediency is strong motivation for the king's desire for peace--whatever the humanitarian impulses

of his principle diplomat. But, the unpredictable, contradictory and irrational impulses in human nature itself are factors which Arden takes fully into account. He brings to bear valid insights into the behaviour of not only Armstrong and his allies but of the representatives of authority that seek his demise--at least as a political force. As Bryden notes,

Arden's recurring theme is the denial of function. We are not the uniforms we wear, he reiterates, but the naked, complex, contradictory animals inside them.⁹

By revealing the contradictory "animals" within the uniforms on both sides of the conflict, and by suggesting that there are more than two sides to any problem, the play achieves a universality which transcends the chronological bounds of its setting.

Consider more fully, now, the personality of Armstrong. In many ways he does embody traits that the romantic imagination might associate with "individualism": He defies centralized authority, whether it be political or--in the case of his "conversions" to the Evangelist's brand of religion--ecclesiastical. In the more private areas of life he is similarly inclined. His marriage does not deter him from satisfying his sexual desires with Lindsay's mistress (the Lady), an act which the Lady suggests is motivated by political considerations:

What ye desirit was never in principle me,
it was the proof of the jealousy of Lindsay.
For gif Lindsay were to hauld the possession
of his paramour, ane manifest harlot, as
matter for gravest honour: then what way
could he condemn you for the murder of--of
Wamphray, is the name? Whilk murder, as I .

guess, bean to avenge ane lost chastity.
 But ye are in dreid it has been discoverit,
 and ye willna get your Royal Pardon.
 (II,ix,78-79)

Whatever the case, it is clear the Lady's role is not politically inspired, a point that is emphasized by her maid:

My lady is awa with Armstrong because Armstrong
 is what he is. Gif that be sufficient for her
 ye should crave no further reason. (II,xi,84)

Finally, Johnny displays qualities of personal courage. After learning of the king's refusal to bequeath to him Lord Maxwell's titles, he exclaims:

I repudiate Lord Maxwell and am his man nae
 longer. The decision of my conduct, for
 peace or for war, belongs to me and to nane
 other! (II,xv,91)

Even in the face of death his courage is steadfast. He refuses to beg for his life, professes his alleged belief in heretical evangelism, and sings a magnificent song of defiance:

But had I wist ere I cam frae home
 How thou unkind wadst be to me
 I wad hae keepit the border side
 In spite of all they men and thee-- (III,xiv,120)

In many ways, then, Armstrong seems to be a kind of romantic individualist and certain of his qualities inspire admiration. On the other hand, the author makes clear that there is more to it than this. As Gilman notes,

It is one of the deepest proofs of Arden's
 artistry that virtue is not allowed to
 accumulate in Armstrong's hands, just as it
 is not allowed to accumulate in the hands of
 any of his erstwhile heroes, those passionate,

anarchic souls who struggle inconclusively
against the realities of the structure of
the world.¹⁰

As we have seen, the murder of Wamphray and Johnny's willingness to burn and loot indiscriminately for his own ends do much to qualify our veneration.

In addition, we also learn that Johnny is not really a nonconformist in respect to authority in general. On the contrary, he is intensely concerned with his own authority and when Lindsay offers to extend that power, he is agreeably flattered:

Break it with ye. Bread: salt, Ye are the
King's Herald: ye bring the offer of the
King. Acceptit! I am his Officer. Ye are
ane good man. Gilnockie's roof-tree renders
welcome. Welcome, sir. (I,vii,51)

Though "primitive" in his approach to political problems, he nonetheless reveals a legalistically cunning mind when he perceives the material rewards at stake after Wamphray's death:

...I do desire reversal of that traitor's
property and lands. He did conspire against
my life. I am a King's Officer. That's
treason. If the land are no grantit me, ye
can tell the King I will grip them! (II,xvi,92)

He also proves to be somewhat of an opportunist in the matter of religion. He embraces evangelism when his new titles are withheld, but drops the matter altogether ("Evangelist? What's an Evangelist?") when it appears that his authority is to be confirmed.¹¹ In fact, it is in the belief that the king will accept him as an equal-- a "brither"--that prompts him to walk into the fatal trap that Lindsay has laid for him. Of course, personal vanity is undoubtedly

involved here. On the other hand, Arden seems to ask, is not the quest for power, political or otherwise, merely one manifestation of this human frailty?

Clearly, then, Armstrong is not merely a simple anarchist in the matter of politics. Of course, there is some justification for Lumley's contention that

He is in contrast to Lindsay a simple man,
an innocent unable to grasp the manipulation
of Lindsay's tactics.¹²

But this is true only insofar as Lindsay and the more sophisticated political authorities are concerned. In the sphere of border clans, Armstrong is master of the situation and proves himself adroit in the manipulation of power here. Moreover, he does serve a useful function. As his wife points out, the people of the laird depend upon him for protection(I,vi).

Turning now to the other aspects of his "individualism," we find many unpleasant or ambiguous corollaries. Though his amorous intrigues could be interpreted as the honest and hence refreshingly "romantic" expression of individual desire, it is also clear that he is a tyrant where the rights of others are involved in this respect. He is indifferent to the plight of Meg, whose lover he has murdered, and his wife confides to the Lady that "Gif I were to be fause to Gilnockie, I think that he wad kill me."(II,vii,74) Both Johnny and the clan system of which he is a product reveal dictatorial tendencies which are at odds with romantic "individualism." Though there is

evidence to suggest that the play is about what Gilman calls "the rival claims of authority and the individual"¹³ and Irving Wardle "the moral collisions of freedom and necessity,"¹⁴ it is equally clear that Johnny's conceptions of individualism and freedom are severely qualified by his own egotism, as well as the despotic aspects of the clan system.

This contradiction is also apparent in the matter of his personal courage. Facing death, he re-embraces evangelism and refers to himself as "the elect, the godly me"(III,xiv,119). Though the sect professes freedom from established religion, it is militant in its own right; though it embodies a kind of democratic and individualistic spiritualism, it also includes a human hierarchy culminating in the "elect." Assuming that Johnny actually believes such theology (which must remain a matter of speculation), then we might also assume he believes the power that has been denied him on earth will be satisfied elsewhere--and perhaps it is his belief in this that fortifies his courage.

Turning now to Lindsay's character, it would appear that he embodies many qualities or characteristics that are--on the surface--absent in Johnny. In contrast to the illiterate Armstrong, he is an educated, cultivated individual:

...ane very subtle practiser, he has been
tutor to the King, is now his herald, ane
very pleasurable contriver, too, of farces,
ballads, allegories, and the delights of
poetry. (I,ii,25)

In addition, he reveals an understanding of human nature in general that seems to well equip him for dealing with the likes of Armstrong:

The rags and robes that we do wear
Express the function of our life
But the bawdy body that we bear
Beneath them carries nocht
But shame and greed and strife. (I,ii,26)

Because he is a product of a more complex political system, his methods of diplomacy appear more sophisticated than those employed by Armstrong. Moreover, he seems aware of the complexities of the situation. He refers to it as a "Gordian knot" and sees it as his task to unravel it while at the same time keeping the realm free from bloodshed.

With such a worthy aim in mind, Lindsay--armed only with a vaguely worded commission from the king--enters Armstrong territory. He boldly informs Johnny that

Ye are ane tedious nuisance to the realm.
Ye are indeed cause for ane itchy paragraph
or twae in some paper of state. (I,vii,45)

but then flatteringly recalls the honorable role played by Armstrongs in Scotland's history and advances his proposals for peace. As Lumley notes, Lindsay is

a Machiavellian genius who can outmatch
most moves; he knows when to flatter,
when to tease, when to be ruthless.¹³

Our initial impression is that such qualities will be sufficient to achieve a peaceable solution of the problem. His bravery undoubtedly earns the respect of Johnny, while

his calm, rational approach to dangerous matters seems more than a match for the indiscreet impulsiveness of his adversary.

However, it soon becomes apparent that there is another side to Lindsay's humanity and rational statesmanship. He knows that due to clan rivalry Johnny will not keep his promise and he ignores McGlass' warning that his policy of "blind flattery and dishonour" (I,ix,58) will prove ultimately destructive. Lindsay disagrees and notes that by fomenting trouble among the border lords he will "Set them a' to wonder what in de'il's name we're playen at." (I,ix,59)

More than political policy is involved here. Consider Gilman's assessment:

...his consciousness and rationality, his wit and sense of the way the world runs, are not ultimately serious; simulacra of seriousness, they are actually the instruments of a game he plays, the game played by anyone who is too civilized, too given over, that is to say, to one side--practical, abstract, logical--of the perennial conflict that runs through man's organized life in common.¹⁶

To be sure, Lindsay is, in a sense, both "civilised" and "practical." He believes that his policy will achieve, ultimately, the desired ends and he does not permit his own emotional attachments to interfere with his mission. Aware that his mistress is romantically involved with Johnny, he says:

I wad never claim that I had in any way foreseen or contrivat this particular development. Gif I had, I wad hae been ane pandar. (II,x,81)

But besides being "practical", abstract, logical," as Gilman notes,

Lindsay is--in the final analysis--almost incurably and impractically romantic. Beneath the rational facade is an impulsive and irresponsible individualism that plays havoc with his diplomacy. His individual initiative, for instance, results in his making promises that the king later refuses to approve. Despite his self-professed knowledge of human nature, he inadvertently unleashes the very forces he seeks to placate. For example, he overlooks what Milne calls the "simple yearning impulse to loyalty"¹⁷ that Armstrong reveals to the Lady:

They wad gain ane better service out of
Armstrang gif they were to cease to demand
it as ane service: and instead to request
it--d'ye hear the word, request--to request
it in humility as any collaborate act of
good friendship and fraternal warmth! (II,ix,80)

Of course, Armstrong here chooses to overlook his own violations of "good friendship" (e.g., Wamphray's murder), but the fact remains that Lindsay gains nothing and loses much by treating Johnny as a rebellious child and making promises that prove to be empty.

Despite McGlass' warnings and the king's disapproval, Lindsay continues to pursue a dangerous course, a course which culminates in a fantastic scheme to create a separate border state with Armstrong as a kind of king. Again, he reveals a game-like approach to diplomacy: "I did ever tak pleisure in ane devious activity"(II,i,97). And he also betrays a highly

romanticized view of Armstrong: "He is ane potential magnificent ruler of his people." (III,v,101) It would almost appear that Lindsay is the prisoner of his own imagination, that he is himself the kind of irresponsible child that he imagines Johnny to be.

It is not until McGlass is fatally stabbed by the Evangelist (who also has plans for a "kingdom") that Lindsay recognizes his shortcomings. As Laurence Kitchin notes, he learns that "the reality underlying tribal romanticism is a knife in the guts."¹⁸ Dying, McGlass points out Lindsay's weakness:

Ye did tak pride in your recognition of the
fallibility of man. Recognize your ain, then,
Lindsay: you have ane certain weakness, ye
can never accept the gravity of ane other
man's violence. For you yourself hae never
been grave in the hale of your life! (III,ix,108)

and notes that "There is nothing for you now but to match that same fury, and with reason and intelligence, sae that this time you will win." (III,ix,109) Lindsay acts on this advice--and the result is the betrayal and hanging of Armstrong. However, he is now realistic enough to know that such drastic simple remedies provide no long term solutions:

Naething mair, sire. The man is deid, there
will be nae war with England: this year.
There will be but small turbulence wupon
the Border: this year. (III,xv,121)

However, Lindsay concludes this speech with an interestingly ambiguous remark:

And what we have done is no likely to be forgotten: this year, the next year, and many years after that.

Does he mean that the murder of Armstrong will serve as an effective warning that will discourage others from engaging in similar activities? Or does he mean Armstrong's followers will remember the event and use it as a pretext for further pillaging? Or is he speculating that posterity will forget the political realities that prompted the betrayal and remember only the calumnies that preceded and accompanied the event?

The answer, we may safely conclude, involves all three. Lindsay is now realistic or serious-minded enough to appreciate the complexities of the situation which his cavalier irresponsibility had prevented him from fully appreciating before McGlass' murder. The hanging may serve as a temporary deterrent, but Lindsay appears skeptical about its long-term effectiveness. Lindsay is also realistic enough to realize that no one particular individual or group is responsible for the disastrous consequence:

...here may ye read the varieties of dishonour,
and determine in your mind how best ye can avoid
whilk ane of them, and when. (III,xvi,122)

Obviously remorseful about his own role in the affair, he is nonetheless objective enough to take a statesman-like view of the situation.

Arden suggests that despite Lindsay's personal responsibility, there is a basic contradiction in the protagonist's

position:

Lindsay's problem would not have arisen, at all, had he not subscribed to the belief in the necessity of government, and had he not undertaken to further this belief by serving the King. There is a basic contradiction between such service and the ideals of humanity that he expresses in my first act, and because he fails to detect this inconsistency, all his troubles come upon him.¹⁹

Though the author's melancholy philosophical observation takes us somewhat beyond the confines of the play itself, it does point up the fact that Lindsay's romanticized view of Armstrong can be accounted for--at least in part--in terms of well-meaning idealism. Moreover, disastrous though the result is, it is interesting--and paradoxical--to note that Armstrong does, in the end, fulfill certain of Lindsay's idealistic conceptions.

Consider, for instance, his earlier view that Johnny is a "magnificent political ruler." As we have seen, within the realm of the clan system Johnny proves to be politically cunning. And if his murderous methods violate conventional moral sensibilities, they are certainly no worse than those employed by the rulers of England and Scotland. It is in the face of death, though, that he most fully fulfills the role that Lindsay had imaginatively conceived for him. Lindsay and his agents encourage him to view himself as a "king" (in order to deceive him) and the fact that he dies believing himself not only to be the equal of James V, but his superior--as well as the regally defiant tone with which he voices this belief--serve to confirm that Johnny

does possess certain of the qualities that Lindsay had imagined.

As this examination of the two central figures has shown, then, the play involves much more than the clash between romantic "individualism" and centralized "authority", between freedom and political necessity. Lindsay and Armstrong share mutual characteristics and both are susceptible to one another's qualities. Individually, neither has a monopoly on virtue or vice--and the same is true of the different ways of life represented by the two men.

What Arden does, in effect, is humanize a political situation. And though decisive and drastic steps are ostensibly needed to solve the problem at hand, we are nonetheless shocked by the calumny that this entails. Though Armstrong has proven himself to be as unscrupulous as the forces that defeat him, our sympathy for him forces us to accept Arden's view that the play is about "the inadequacy of political expediency."²⁰

After all, nothing of lasting value has been achieved by this expediency, as Lindsay fully realizes, while something of romantic or imaginative value has been destroyed. Despite Armstrong's unpleasant traits, his corpse symbolizes something more than a dangerous political nuisance: it also symbolizes the defeat of imaginative idealism (even if it is only of the story-book variety) by the cold and often cruel reality of human affairs. In addition to losing his political naïvety, Lindsay loses a kind of spiritual or imaginative "innocence"--

and we are left to ponder whether or not the result was worth it.

Of course, though Armstrong and Lindsay are the principals in the drama, Arden makes clear that their actions and attitudes must be considered within the broader political, social and religious context of their lives. The possibility of war with England, the conflicting claims and value systems of the clan and centralized forms of government, the clash between heretical evangelism and the established Church: all are important factors that help to clarify the nature of the Lindsay-Armstrong confrontation. Though both men are authors of much of the action, they are to some extent victims of historical forces which they fail to comprehend or which are beyond their control. Arden warns that Armstrong "is not to be read as an accurate historical chronicle" (Armstrong p.7) but his consideration of the period's diverse historical forces deserves the praise that critics have bestowed. John Gross, for instance, finds that Arden respects "the sheer otherness of the past,"²¹ while William Gaskill, a co-director of the Chichester production, finds that Arden's play is far superior to Bolt's in this respect:

I think one of the great achievements of Armstrong is that it is one of the few plays I know where you genuinely do believe that you are in the past, quite unlike A Man for All Seasons, which is really no more than a drawing-room comedy, because you get no real sense of what it was like at the court of Henry VIII--you don't feel the texture of it.²²

Of course, Arden's language, of which more will be said later, helps to establish this "texture." Moreover, it must be emphasized that Bolt's aims are not necessarily similar to Arden's. But considered in terms of his own objectives, Arden proves considerably more successful.

Taken together, Arden's relative detachment in the matters of characterization and historical forces serves to reveal the complexities inherent in what initially appears to be a simple situation. However, at least two critics feel that Arden's approach is indicative of political or moral neutrality on the author's part.²³ That is, because Armstrong and Lindsay are both "right" and "wrong" and because their actions can be more or less deterministically accounted for in terms of their individual personalities and the wider context of their lives, the author (and presumably the audience) remains uncommitted.

Arden, however, is not of this view. He states unequivocally that "Lindsay was wrong."²⁴ But as to what Lindsay should have done, he admits that "there is a question that I cannot pretend to answer."²⁵ What Arden does, in effect, is leave it to the audience to ponder or assess the complexities of the situation and, presumably, to arrive at solutions that avoid the treachery that tragically inheres in Lindsay's approach. Like Brecht, Arden hopes the audience will remain intellectually involved after leaving the theatre--and this hope is realized to a large degree in regard to Armstrong.

However, it must be pointed out that certain issues are somewhat less than perfectly integrated into the play as a whole, raising critical problems as to the role of individual characters. Related to this are questions concerning the narrative structure of Armstrong, the examination of which will do much to illuminate the nature of the difficulties involved in both cases. It is to the narrative structure, then, that we first may devote our attention.

As noted earlier, Arden is strongly influenced by the ballad tradition in English poetry, the characteristics of which he wishes to translate into dramatic terms. The situation, he feels, should be basically simple (however complex the meanings imbued), while strong visual stage images should be employed to forcefully illustrate the dramatic issues.²⁶ Regarding the characters, they should be strongly drawn and their functions immediately recognizable by the audience. Here Arden notes the importance of costuming:

The costumes should be 'working dress'-- that is to say, each of the characters should be immediately recognizable as a member of his respective social class, rather than as a picturesque element in a colourful historical pageant. (Armstrong p.10)

Though he notes that "there is scarcely any limit to the amount of meaning and relevance" a writer can insert into his narrative, he also cautions against 'editorializing' on the author's part:

This does not happen in ballads at their best. There we are given the fable, and

we draw our own conclusions. If the poet intends us to make a judgment on his characters, this will be implied by the whole turn of the story, not by intellectualized comments as it proceeds. The tale stands and exists in its own right. If the poet is a true one, then the tale will be true too.²⁷

In summary, Arden's aesthetics in regard to the narrative demand directness and simplicity. The action may carry many subtle or complex meanings, but they need not be expostulated throughout.

Many elements of Arden's theory are recognizably present in Armstrong. As we have seen, complex and subtle meanings are implicit in the basically simple situation involving the Armstrong-Lindsay conflict, and these are discernible (though not consistently so) without the "intellectualized comments" against which Arden cautions. Of course, much is stated, particularly by McGlass and later by Lindsay, but Arden obviously attempts to allow the dramatic action to reveal as much of the meaning as is consistent with clarity. Assisting him here, of course, is his occasionally masterful use of stage "images" or pictures. Meg's dragging of her lover's corpse into the forest and her periodic reappearances, in mournfully demented condition, continually reminds us of the murderous cruelties inherent in the clan system of "honour," as well as the unscrupulous use to which it is put by Johnny and his allies. Meg's situation also embodies a basic and universal aspect of human experience, grief at the loss of a loved one--a

subject common to any number of ballads.

Similarly, the gaudily and incongruously costumed Armstrong confronting the king, who is "inconspicuous in a plain Highland dress"(II,xiv,116) for treacherous reasons of state, presents an image which embodies several thematic considerations: childlike trust confronts political chicanery; an older more primitive civilization confronts a more complex and sophisticated one; the colorful romanticism of the past confronts the sober realities of the present. Such are but a few of the meanings suggested by the stage picture here. Finally, the body of Armstrong dangling from the bough of a blossomless tree forcefully illustrates the result of the preceding action and its implications for the future. Though Lindsay comments on its meaning, it is the visual image that effectively ensures our attention. Referring to Arden's use of stage images in Armstrong, Gilliatt points out that

They are the sort of pictures that a child retains from narrative poetry read aloud, part of the world of ballad, like most of the other good things in the play.²⁸

To be sure, it is Arden's ability in combining visual simplicity with an underlying intellectual (and emotional) complexity that contributes greatly to the dramatic impact of the play.

Some aspects of Arden's narrative method, however, have met with critical disapproval. The lack of naturalistic explanation and motivation in regard to much of the action is a case in point. Bamber Gascoigne, for instance, deplores the unmotivated

swiftness with which the Evangelist lusts after Meg and stabs McGlass when questioned about it:

All this sound and fury signifies plenty of things in allegorical terms...but the final effect is of many truths being stated but none being investigated.²⁹

Edwin Morgan, expressing a similar view, feels that Arden "should be devoted to exploring his themes far more deeply and at a far warmer level of involvement."³⁰ As we shall see presently, there is much room for criticism in regard to Arden's method, but such comments indicate a certain basic misunderstanding or lack of appreciation of the author's approach. The swiftness of action and the absence of detailed examinations of motive are compatible with the ballad-like narrative desired by the author. In addition, Arden's attempt to deal with many conflicts in order to illustrate the complexity of the situation necessitates the kind of dramatic treatment described by Gascoigne and Morgan.

Moreover, the fact that Arden seeks to depict such conflicts within the context of a broad historical canvas--on an "epic" scale, in effect--precludes the possibility (or desirability) of lengthy, detailed examinations of motives. That does not mean that motivation is absent--it is there if we care to look for or speculate about it. But in a play that contains some thirty speakers who are representative of a broad social spectrum, it would be unrealistic, as well as tediously

inartistic, if the author were to present the dramatic action in terms of conventional naturalistic drama. As Kitchin validly--if somewhat simplistically--explains:

Some of the criticism which Armstrong has met with seems to come from inadequate sympathy with epic drama, and indeed from uncertainty as to what epic does. What epic can't do is to accommodate private esoteric states of feeling or complex analysis of character. From Virgil to screen Westerns, the characters act out the type of a Roman, a barbarian, an outlaw or whatever.³¹

(It is interesting to note that Arden originally imagined Armstrong in cinematic terms but dropped the idea because of the inartistic limitations--presumably regarding content--imposed on film-makers.³²)

As we have seen, the striking of an appropriate balance between individual characterization and external historical forces has been a problem grappled with by most of the playwrights discussed thus far (e.g., Osborne's Luther) but Arden seems to understand best the aesthetic basis of the difficulty--at least insofar as characterization is concerned.

Despite Arden's relative clarity in the matter of aesthetic theory, he is nonetheless inconsistent in its application in regard to the narrative. This, in turn, gives rise to the vagueness and confusion that he professedly seeks to avoid-- in relation to certain characters as well as the historical or social forces they are meant to represent.

Consider, again, the religious issue. Though Arden notes in the Introduction that "English heresy was not likely to have

been worrying the Church in Scotland at this date"(p.8), the liberty he takes with historical chronology is entirely justifiable. As Agnes Mure Mackenzie points out, the real Lindsay, in The Three Estates, was very concerned with Church corruption in Scotland.³³ Hence, though the evangelistic forerunners of the Reformation may not yet have been active, at least the conditions that facilitated their rise were strongly in evidence. Moreover, the Evangelist's role in Armstrong is assuredly compatible with Arden's thematic concerns. The relationship between sexual repression and religious fanaticism; the ease with which militant fundamentalism fills a political vacuum; the disastrous consequences that result from ignoring or underestimating the importance of such factor: all are related, in one way or another, to the basic conflict between Lindsay and Armstrong. For that reason, Lumley's contention that the Evangelist's role seems "irrelevant"³⁴ or Hilary Spurling's reference to the roles of Meg and the gospeller as "pointless"³⁵ are based on readings that ignore the essential thematic relevance of such characters.

On the other hand, it is true that occasionally this thematic relevance becomes obscured or is handled in such a way as to be flatly undramatic--despite the ballad-like clarity that Arden desires. For the most part, the broad religious context of the action is merely reported. A conversation between the English and Scottish Commissioners reveals that

both sides are concerned with "The prevention and deterrence of subversive transportation of professors of alleged heresy between the realm."(I,i,20) Here, as well as later from the Cardinal's Secretary, we learn of Henry VIII's ambiguous relationship with the Pope (II,iv). Such information is important insofar as it has a bearing on the relations between England and Scotland.

But nowhere is this importance realized in dramatic terms. Nowhere do we actually see the Evangelist confronting the ecclesiastical authorities whose position he allegedly threatens--nor are we witness to the corruption that presumably accounts for his rise as a potent force in the first place. Though we appreciate the significance of his dealings with Johnny--his exploitation of a political vacuum--we are nonetheless uncomfortably suspicious that it is a dramatic vacuum from which he emerges. This, in turn, gives rise to the charges of pointlessness or irrelevance voiced by Lumley and Spurling, as well as the accusation that Arden is guilty of "...a certain rootless poeticism and symbol-mongering, which prevent the play's own context from ever becoming clearly defined."³⁶ Clearly, it is the lack of a clearly defined religious context that provokes such criticism.

A similar difficulty arises in regard to the political context. Again, reportage rather than dramatization is used to convey important information. Though we do see the murderous political methods employed by the border clans, the important

conflict of interest between Armstrong and Maxwell (which leads to much strife) and the later reconciliation between Maxwell and Johnstone (which also helps to precipitate much action) are drily described by the Secretaries of the principals and hence their significance is dulled.

The same is true in regard to Lindsay's relationship with King James. The rift between the two men is extremely important in that as the King's instrument Lindsay must be in agreement on policy if his mission is to succeed. It is the absence of such agreement that helps to account, in part, for the debacle that results. However, the differences are merely reported and their significance is in danger of being lost on the audience. As Gascoigne notes,

...we hear brief talk of the manoeuvres
behind the scenes which frustrate Lindsay's
diplomacy, but they are not made dramatically
noticeable; "necessity" is never established.³⁷

Of course, it can be justifiably argued that Arden wishes us to appreciate the important role played by behind-the-scenes officialdom both in the religious and political scheme of things--to emphasize that the publicly ordained wielders of power are themselves subject to forces which are beyond their comprehension or control. Arden implies as much in his description of the Secretaries: "These men are really responsible for the political decision and policies of their masters." (Armstrong, p.12)

On the other hand, the undramatic prominence assigned to such figures in Armstrong seems at variance with Arden's

desire that a story proceed with ballad-like clarity. Though the author does not "editorialize" in the scenes in which such figures appear, the undramatic manner in which important information is conveyed not only slows the action but dulls its significance. Unfortunately, certain characters then appear as mere contrivances invented for the sake of historical veracity rather than as figures or historical forces organic to, and inseparable from, the play's themes.

Moreover, even the more obvious dramatic significance of many characters is called into question and their importance devalued. John Gross, for instance, finds the episodes between Meg and the Evangelist "hackneyed and unconvincing"³⁸ and Gilliatt, though appreciate of the problems of characterization in epic narrative, feels that Arden "overcharges the deliberately brutal outlines of his characters with rather unclear and attributed ideas."³⁹ If such characters seem unconvincing or their ideas attributed it is not, as we have seen, because they are thematically superfluous. Rather, it is because the author has left vague or merely reported their real significance insofar as it relates to the broader context of the action. Confusion, as opposed to clarity, is the result.

Of course, critical opinion is not unanimous on this point. Though fully appreciative of its subtleties, Gaskill finds Armstrong "a perfectly straightforward play."⁴⁰ Albert Hunt, also an admirer of the play, attributes the confusion

to the audience:

Arden is first and foremost a story-teller, and the people who find him obscure and confused are those who aren't willing simply to follow a story.⁴¹

Though such comments reveal a basic (and valid) sympathy with Arden's narrative method, they do overlook the fact that the author is inconsistent in the application of his own principles here, giving rise to the charges of irrelevance and confusion that he wishes to avoid and which he is more successful in avoiding in Serjeant Musgrave's Dance.

Consider, now, one of the play's most impressive aspects--its language. As in Liberty, the author strives for speech that will convey the "flavour of the age" but at the same time will be understandable to a modern audience:

In the end I have put together a sort of Babylonish dialect that will, I hope, prove practical on the stage and will yet suggest the sixteenth century. My model in this was Arthur Miller's adaptation of early American speech in The Crucible.
(Armstrong p.8)

As Bryden correctly points out, the dialect does prove impressive and contributes to much of the play's vitality:

Arden has steeped himself in the marvelous language of Dunbar and the real Lindsay, lovingly re-creating it into a theatrical speech thorny with images, knotted with strength, rough and springy as an uncombed speech.⁴²

Gaskill, also appreciative, notes its success in conveying "the sense of the social environment, and the texture of the peoples

lives...."⁴³ Edinburgh court speech, for instance, contrasts with the Border speech of the clans. This contrast, in turn, draws into convincing focus at least one aspect of the important divisions between the major conflicting forces. In short, the dialect conveys both period atmosphere and the important class or social characteristics that help to define the action.

However, the dialect does give rise to certain difficulties, especially for audiences unfamiliar with Scots speech.

Kitchin best sums up the nature of the problem:

...it depends on how far an audience should be made to work. If instant comprehension is the aim, then Arden is taking a risk, but no greater than the one taken by Sir Tyrone Guthrie when he put on Lindsay's The Thrie Estatis at Edinburgh, where it was revived year after year.⁴⁴

In question here, in short, is the degree to which an author should go in establishing the historical milieu by means of language. It must be pointed out, however, that Arden is not dogmatic on this point. He emphasizes that it would be "silly" to reconstruct the exact speech of the period, and he does stress his wish that the dialect prove "practical" on the stage (Armstrong p.8). Hence, Arden's flexibility allows for sensible modifications on the part of the director.

Ironically, Arden's success with the dialect has given rise to praise of a somewhat dubious nature. Gaskill, for instance, refers to Armstrong as "a major work of scholarship"⁴⁵ and Lumley, though appreciative of Arden's feeling for the

period, pays him an ambiguous compliment:

It is almost as if he were like the Dutch art forger Van Meegeren producing an undiscovered original, perhaps by Sir David Lindsay himself....⁴⁶

Of course, Gaskill is referring to the diligent research that characterizes Arden's historical approach and Lumley is clearly wrong--the author does not strive for exact linguistic authenticity. But it is possible to read into such praise the notion that perhaps Armstrong is really no more than a strikingly effective academic exercise and hence--by extension-- of limited significance in terms of twentieth century drama. Such a notion, of course, is misleading. If the play seems "academic" in the perjorative sense of the word, such a characteristic can be attributed to the undramatic nature of parts of the narrative. As noted earlier, much information is conveyed by Secretaries, Commissioners, Clerks and the like, resulting in a kind of text-book exposition that is at odds with Arden's aesthetics as well as the dramatic and visual directness of many of the scenes. In short, it is the narrative, rather than the dialect, that creates such an unfavourable impression.

Consider, now, Arden's use of verse and prose--another impressive characteristic of Armstrong. Arden notes that his approach here has been influenced by ancient Irish heroic legends. In such legends prose is used for those parts of the narrative that serve mainly an expository or descriptive function while verse serves to convey emotional crises or tension.

Arden seeks to translate such an approach into dramatic or theatrical terms:

...the dialogue can be naturalistic and "plotty" as long as the basic poetic issue has not been crystallized. But when this point is reached, then the language becomes formal (if you like, in verse, or sung), the visual image coalesces into a vital image that is one of the nerve-centres of the play.⁴⁷

In Armstrong the prose does serve the function described by Arden, and includes direct addresses to the audience, while verse, both spoken and sung, conveys a variety of emotional climaxes and moods.

Actually, the two categories of verse are used for a variety of purposes. The songs and ballads serve to define character, for instance. Armstrong's repertoire of bawdy songs helps delineate his robust personality throughout, and our attention is directed to a less bureaucratic side of McGlass when he sings of the "unkindness of womankind" (I,v,39). Songs and ballads, sung by a variety of characters, also serve to establish moods appropriate to the immediate circumstances and to emphasize the difference between the cold officialdom of centralized authority and the more primitive vitality of the clansmen.

The spoken verse serves a similar variety of functions. Lindsay's formal meditations on human nature and the objectives of his diplomacy reveal an important aspect of his personality (his poetic nature) and the major thematic considerations at the heart of the play (I,ii,26-27). Meg's formal lament over

her lover's corpse serves to universalize, for the audience, the grief arising from a particular experience. Spoken verse is also used to convey emotional excitement. Consider Armstrong's seduction of the Lady, for instance (II,x). He begins abruptly (and prosaically) enough: "Tak your claithes off." She gradually reveals her impatient willingness in verse, verse which gradually gives way to feverishly sensual prose as Johnny leads her into the forest:

In the pot. On the fire. All the warm sliden
fishes, Johnny, out of the deep of the sea,
guttit and filletit and weel-rubbit with sharp
onion and the rasp of black pepper... (II,x,81)

What Arden does here, in effect, is make use of a kind of reversal. Though the lady "formalizes" her excitement in verse, Arden shows such formality dissolving in the wake of sexual and emotional excitement.

On the whole, then, no rigidly dogmatic pattern governs Arden's use of verse (or prose). Though variety characterizes his usage, it is always executed with skill and subtlety. Actually, thematic relevance would seem to be his most important consideration here. Obviously, Arden does not attempt to work within the limits of realistic or naturalistic convention. The brutally prosaic details of Wamphray's murder are followed by Meg's hauntingly beautiful lament while the ugly realities that lead to the betrayal of Johnny are followed by his defiant gallows song. In real life, of course, the Megs of this world

do not burst into poetry upon discovering a lover's corpse, nor do murderers usually go tunefully to the gallows. Such behaviour is more common to the world of art--to operas, plays and ballads--as Arden is well aware. What the author does, in a sense, is juxtapose ugly realities with the various artistic conventions that often serve to define them. Wamphray becomes the subject of a beautiful lament--the lost lover of the ballad-world--but he is also, we are acutely aware, a helpless victim of savage politiking (even though Armstrong uses "honour" as a pretext). Conversely, though we know Johnny is a murderer, his operatic gallows song serves to remind us that something more than a border outlaw is about to be liquidated. He becomes, in effect, the kind of magnificent ruler that Lindsay's imagination had conceived him to be. The fact that his song is interrupted by the noose seems to imply that the romantic imagination, whether in Lindsay's mind or Armstrong's song, is itself the victim of the rationalized brutalities of human affairs. The fact that the remaining scenes are in prose seems to confirm this point.

In contrast to Liberty, then, we can say that Armstrong reveals a more sophisticated handling of diverse artistic conventions, particularly as they relate to the historical material. In the former play, the folk-tales, the "cartoon" figures, and the street songs do add charm and period atmosphere to a disorganized narrative, but their thematic relevance remains, for

the most part, a matter of conjecture. In Armstrong, on the other hand, ballad-like characters jostle realistically conceived bureaucrats; bawdy songs and ballads contrast with the rational language of diplomacy; and operatic behaviour intrudes upon naturalistically realized situations. But such diverse elements are related, in one way or another, to the play's primary thematic concerns. In fact, the exciting interaction between such elements is instrumental in enlarging our understanding of those themes.

Consider, now, the play's relevance in terms of modern life. Arden does stress that "present ills" are the subject of his play, some of which he finds described in Conor Cruise O'Brien's To Katanga and Back, a diplomat's first-hand account of United Nations' realpolitik in the Congo. Though he warns against pressing the parallel too far, Arden does see a basic similarity between his historical situation and the one described by O'Brien:

There's a strong similarity between Sir David Lindsay, this civilised poet and conventional diplomat, sent out by James V to deal with a violent situation in the tribal part of Scotland, and O'Brien, brought up among all the trappings of a civilised society, accustomed to the ways of European statecraft, a man of letters. He, too, was sent out where diplomacy had to do with murder and threats of murder. This parallel musn't be pressed too far, but in both cases one sees the opposition of two kinds of received values, the impact of one upon the other.⁴⁸

Of course, Arden's specific parallel, the O'Brien-Tshombe conflict,

invites rather obvious objections. Tshombe, for instance, is well-educated and a tool of his own lieutenants (e.g., Munongo) and Western financial interests. This is in sharp contrast to the illiteracy and stubborn egocentricity of Armstrong. Moreover, O'Brien himself is relatively free of the romantic illusions that Lindsay eventually casts off. Hence, there is a degree of truth in one critics contention that there are no Tshombe's or O'Briens "to be discovered lurking among those sixteenth century border lairds."⁴⁹

On the other hand, Arden's opinion that both situations embody a conflict between "two kinds of received values" is assuredly valid. And as Gilliatt correctly points out, the parallel emerges quite naturally from the action of Armstrong:

...the two chief characters in the play are themselves separated from each other temperamentally by what seems like centuries; with this sort of time-tug existing between them, the ripple passes long the rope to the present.⁵⁰

Emphasizing this separation, of course, are the historical forces that serve to define the different ways of life represented by the two central protagonists. Arden makes abundantly clear that more than a personality conflict is involved. Moreover, his success in illustrating the complexity of the situation encourages us to consider its universal aspects independently of the chronological limits that frame the dramatic action.

At this point we become aware of the superiority of Armstrong in relation to the achievements of Bolt, Shaffer and

Osborne. Before evaluating Arden's accomplishment, however, it will be useful to recall briefly some of the play's deficiencies. As we have seen, occasionally narrative clarity is lost or obscured by the expository manner in which much important information is conveyed. Consequently, we question the role of certain characters, such as the Cardinal and Evangelist. This, in turn, call into question the thematic relevance of certain relationships (e.g. the Evangelist and Meg). The result is that important issues are in danger of becoming a matter of impatient audience speculation, rather than actively involved interest.

A possible explanation is that perhaps Arden attempts to do too much, that he tries to take into account too many aspects of a complex situation, and in so doing relies excessively on the expedient of undramatic exposition. Now, the use of such means is by no means invalid. But when it does little or nothing to clarify the significance of the issues or action--especially when it is obvious that dramatic confrontation would do just that--then we are justified in taking the author to task. For instance, confrontations between the Evangelist and the Cardinal's Secretary (if not the Cardinal himself), between Armstrong and the King, between Armstrong and Maxwell--all would give immediacy and dramatic significance to issues that are at present unclear to, if not totally lost upon, the audience. Perhaps Arden does have thematic considerations in mind (e.g., the

real power of minor officialdom), but if so they remain needlessly obscure.

Bolt and Shaffer maintain relative clarity in this respect. Unfortunately, their plays offer little else. The personalities of Sir Thomas and Henry, or Pizarro and Atahualpa, and the conflicts in which they become embroiled, are of potential dramatic interest. But in both cases the treatment of the equally important historical issues is exasperatingly superficial. Consequently, we do not really appreciate the significance of the situations independently of the plays' chronological contexts--if at all. Osborne proves more interesting in this respect but, as we have seen, the historical milieu is drawn into hasty perspective too late in the play to be of much use, or interest. Confusion is the result.

In contrast, Arden's play reveals a rich historical texture. His masterful use of a "Babylônish dialect," his relatively objective view of conflicting historical forces, the energetic vitality of the ballads and songs--all contribute to, or embody, the context and substance of his period and his themes. But Arden offers something more. He combines extravagant "theatricalism" and historical "realism" in such a way that our attention is engaged, rather than distracted, in regard to the issues at hand. Shaffer's total theatre is merely an accoutrement to rather sentimental melodrama. If the Inca civilization emerges as superior to the Spanish, it also proves sexless, anemic and, ultimately, uninteresting. The same is roughly true of Bolt's

Sir Thomas. He proves witty and possessed of higher moral standards than the politicians around him. But direct addresses, Elizabethan imagery and swift scene changes do not submerge our unfortunate realization that perhaps More's virtue is more the product of Bolt's imagination than it is of a thoughtful and qualitative comparison with the protagonist's contemporaries.

Arden, on the contrary, has it both ways. In regard to plot machinations and atmosphere, Armstrong exudes the melodramatic characteristics of Seasons and Royal Hunt. Border outlaws pillage or plot revenge, an idealistic poet with romantic schemes blunders in, a love-lost girl wanders mournfully through a forest, amorous intrigues add spice to the concoction, and songs, ballads and a strange dialect give it a veneer of period authenticity. In short, plot, character and language have about them a romantic aura, a kind of fairy-tale quality that is at once reminiscent of a child's delight in adventure-laden narrative poetry and an adult's recollection of melodrama (or opera) in all its theatrical candidness.

At the same time, the author, for the most part, is at a distance from and in control of such colourful ingredients. We are made aware that beneath the swirling excitement lurk soberingly cruel and prosaic aspects of human nature and political reality. Armstrong and his border lords are colourful--but they are savagely despotic. Lindsay is poetic and idealistic--but he is also detached and coolly manipulative. The result, Arden emphasizes, is murder--of Wamphary, of

McGlass, of Armstrong, as well as countless victims on both sides of the border.

What Arden does, in effect, is exploit, for his own dramatic ends, certain appealing elements in ballads or melodramas while at the same time turning them in upon themselves. For instance, Lindsay's world is, in a sense, a child's world--a world in which heroic outlaws and thrilling adventures exist free and at a distance from present realities. Or to put it another way, Lindsay attempts to live in a world defined by vicariously enjoyable artistic conventions. He "plays" at diplomacy; he "delights" in political intrigue; he "imagines" the creation of new kingdoms and new kings. What he is finally forced to recognize, however, is the fact that such is not the way of the real world, that the knife and noose are shockingly integral parts of present realities.

Naturally, Lindsay's realization is our own. Though we delight in the colour, the adventure, the verse and songs, we nonetheless become uncomfortably aware of the ugly realities that give rise to all this, or the unpleasant consequences that result. We also ask: Need it be this way? Thus, what Arden has to say is organically related to the way in which he says it. The interaction between the two creates a rich dramatic tension that appeals, alternately, to our child-like fantasies and our adult-like understanding. And like Lindsay, we are left to ponder the possibility and desirability of reconciling the two.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER V

¹ The Three Estates is the modernized title of Sir David Lindsay's Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis, ed. James Kinsley (Melbourne, Heinemann Education, 1967).

² John Arden, "A Thoroughly Romantic View," London Magazine, VII (July 1960), 13.

³ Arden, "Who's for a Revolution," 50.

⁴ Arden, "Telling a True Tale," The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama (London, 1965), p. 125.

⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

⁶ John Arden, Armstrong's Last Goodnight: An Exercise in Diplomacy (London, 1965), p. 27. Subsequent references will be to this edition--hereafter cited in the text as Armstrong.

⁷ Richard Gilman, "Arden's Unsteady Ground," TDR, XI, 2 (Winter 1966), 60.

⁸ Quoted by Benedict Nightingale in an interview with Arden, "The Theatre of Bewilderment," Guardian, July 6, 1965, p.7.

⁹ Ronald Bryden, "Ballad Country," New Statesman, May 15, 1964, p. 783.

¹⁰ Gilman, "Unsteady Ground," 61.

¹¹ It must also be pointed out that Armstrong's interest in religion is motivated in large part by his desire to loot monasteries (III,vi,105).

¹² Lumley, New Trends, p. 266.

¹³ Gilman, "Unsteady Ground," 60.

¹⁴ Irving Wardle, "Arden: intellectual marauder," New Society, Dec. 9, 1963, p. 23.

¹⁵ Lumley, New Trends, p. 266.

¹⁶ Gilman, "Unsteady Ground," 61.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER V

17 Tom Milne, "Armstrong's Last Goodnight," Encore, XII, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1965), 38.

18 Kitchin, Drama in the Sixties, p. 86.

19 Arden advances this view in a reply to criticisms of Edwin Morgan, "Letters," Encore, XI, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1964), 52.

20 "Questions of Expediency," 14.

21 John Cross, "Rebels and Renegades," Encounter, XXV, 4 (Oct. 1965), 41.

22 "Producing Arden: An Interview with William Gaskill," Encore, XII, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1965), 22.

23 See Martin Esslin, "Brecht and the English Theatre," 70, and Edwin Morgan, "Armstrong's Last Goodnight," Encore, XI, 4 (July-Aug. 1964), 47-51.

24 "Letters," Encore, XI, 52.

25 Loc. cit.

26 See "Telling a True Tale," 125-129, and "Verse in the Theatre," New Theatre Magazine, II, 3 (April 1961), 12-17.

27 "Telling a True Tale," 128-129.

28 Penelope Gilliatt, "Adjusting the focus of history," Observer Weekend Review, July 11, 1965, p. 21.

29 Bamber Gascoigne, "Arden's border manoeuvres," Observer Weekend Review, May 10, 1964, p. 24.

30 Morgan, Encore, XI, 51.

31 Kitchin, Drama in the Sixties, p. 88.

32 "Questions of Expediency," 14, and "Who's for a Revolution," 50.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER V

33 Agnes Mure Mackenzie, "Critical Introduction," Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis, p. 16.

34 Lumley, New Trends, p. 266.

35 Hilary Spurling, "A Bossy Playwright," Spectator, Oct. 22, 1965, p. 513.

36 Gascoigne, "border manoeuvres," 24.

37 Ibid., p. 24.

38 Gross, "Rebels," 42.

39 Gilliatt, "Adjusting the focus," 21.

40 Gaskill, "Producing Arden," 22.

41 From a conversation between Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, "Arden: Professionals and Amateurs," Encore, XII, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1965), 30.

42 Bryden, "Ballad Country," 783.

43 Gaskill, "Producing Arden," 23.

44 Kitchin, Drama in the Sixties, p. 88.

45 Gaskill, "Producing Arden," 22.

46 Lumley, New Trends, p. 266.

47 "Telling a True Tale," 128.

48 "Questions of Expediency," 14.

49 Gross, "Rebels," 41.

50 Gilliatt, "Adjusting the focus," 21..

CHAPTER VI

SERJEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE

i Thematic Complexity

Though written before Liberty and Armstrong, there are interesting and justifiable reasons why a discussion of Serjeant Musgrave's Dance¹ should terminate not only our study of Arden's excursions into historical material, but conclude our discussion of history plays in general. In the first place, it is in many ways superior to the plays discussed thus far. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it significantly differs from the other plays in that despite its nineteenth century setting it is not strictly "historical;" that is, it is not based on actual personages or events. Consequently, we are afforded a somewhat different perspective on the entire subject of history plays--a perspective which hopefully will serve to illuminate further the nature of problems related to the writing and the evaluation of such plays.

Despite the fictional aspects of Dance, the author iterates a two-fold aim which is implicit in all of the plays discussed thus far: he wishes to imbue his subject with a certain amount of historical or period interest and he hopes the dramatic proceedings will prove relevant to contemporary life. Regard-

ing the central character, for instance, he notes:

If I had made Musgrave into a straight forward liberal, with whom our modern progressives would immediately feel at home, he would have been historically out of the picture, and most unlikely as a serjeant in the Victorian army. ²

He cites contemporary newspaper reports of atrocities committed by British troops in Cyprus as an influence which led to the writing of Dance,³ and he comments on the immediacy of his theme, an immediacy which transcends the political-military context of his inspiration:

I have endeavoured to write about the violence that is so evident in the world, and to do so through a story that is partly one of wish-fulfilment. I think that many of us have felt an overpowering urge to match some particularly outrageous piece of violence with an even greater and more outrageous retaliation. (Dance p.7)

Turning now to the theme itself, we find that Arden's approach is characteristically ambiguous--on the surface at least. Led by the fanatically religious Musgrave, a small band of deserters disguised as recruiting officers seek to end warfare by revealing the horrors of killing to the townspeople of Billy, a dead comrade. By showing Billy's skeleton, they hope to stress--by peaceful means--the urgency of their pacifist message. But Musgrave, to the surprise of his comrades, reveals a grisly plan of his own. He intends to slaughter twenty-five leading townsmen in accordance with the kind of military logic which dictated the retaliatory killing of colonial rebels by the British army. Only the timely arrival of Dragoons prevents the massacre from taking place.

As such a bald plot-summary indicates, the play seems susceptible to any number of interpretations, depending upon one's broadly political viewpoint. As one anonymous reviewer recalls, Dance was "Read by some as a muddled pacifist tract and by others as an equally muddled anti-imperialist one...."⁴ while Taylor, stressing the author's fair-minded treatment of all argumentative ideas in the play, concludes that Arden does not take sides at all.⁵ As usual in Arden's work, a cursory perusal of the narrative reveals evidence that seems to substantiate--in part at least--such conflicting or contradictory readings. Musgrave, for instance, professes to be a pacifist, but his sanguinary means of argument seem to belie the sincerity of his convictions. On the other hand, we might ask, is peaceful persuasion a more acceptable alternative and--even if we concur that it is--is there any evidence to suggest that such an approach would be effective? Arden's refusal to advance clear-cut answers to such questions serves to complicate the matter:

It is the job of the playwright to demonstrate the complexity, to try to elucidate it by the clarity of the demonstration. But to go further and start deciding for his audience I think is rather presumptuous. If I was able to give the solution to Serjeant Musgrave's Dance I would be the Prime Minister. And I am not.⁶

Naturally, Arden's comments here should caution against any simplistic interpretation of Dance. More specifically, we must avoid interpreting the play solely in terms of the central

character and his message. This latter point deserves emphasis because if we focus our attention on Musgrave and are inattentive to other matters, the play becomes what Wellwarth calls "a clumsily written case study of a lunatic."⁷ Similarly, if we allow indiscriminate sympathy with Musgrave's pacifism to obscure the broader context of the dramatic action, we may be tempted to the equally erroneous conclusion that "Arden is merely preaching sermons to the converted...."⁸

Of course, Musgrave and his message are of central importance. But of equal importance are the views and actions of the other characters, as well as the social, economic, political and religious aspects of the situation in the colliery town--a situation which Musgrave sees as analogous to the unhappy colonial conflict from which he and his followers have fled. It is the perplexing interaction of all such factors which serves, in fact, to demonstrate the complexity of the problem at hand--a problem which certainly cannot be elucidated solely in terms of Musgrave's "lunacy" or Arden's "sermonizing."

Consider, now, the soldiers. Unaware of their leader's ultimate plan, they initially appear to have a common purpose. All are deserters and all are involved in a plan which hopefully will awaken the British conscience in regard to the immorality of warfare. Billy's skeleton, as well as the display of a destructive Gatling gun, will assist them here.

Regarding the town itself, circumstances seem propitious

for such a venture. Because wintry conditions isolate the community, the deserters have time to execute their plan in safety. More important, labor strife divides the community. Though the colliers are suspicious that the soldiers may be there in a strike-breaking capacity, Musgrave is confident that their support will be won:

At the present, they believe we've come
to kill them. Soon they'll find we haven't,
so they'll stop hating. (I,iii,33)

Underlying Musgrave's confidence here, of course, is his belief that the cause of the colliers and the cause of the deserters are one and the same:

It's a hot coal, this town, despite that
it's freezing--choose your minute and blow:
and whoosh, she's flamed your roof off!
They're trembling already into the strikers'
riots. Well, their riots and our war are the
same one corruption. This town is ours, it's
ready for us: and its people, when they've
heard us, and the Word of God, crying the
murders that we've done--I'll tell you they'll
turn to us, and they'll turn against that war!
(I,iii,36)

From one perspective, then the situation seems relatively clear-cut: the deserters and the colliers are "rebels" with a common cause and a common oppressor. The Mayor, Parson and Constable are equivalent--at least in Musgrave's mind--to the political, economic, and religious forces which dictate the warfare against which they have revolted. Just as the Imperial government uses the military to quell colonial dissidence, so the Mayor sees it as a useful instrument in dealing with

dissidence at home:

The Queen's got wars, she's got rebellions.
Over the sea. All right. Beat these fellers'
drums high around the town, I'll put one pound
down for every Royal Shilling the serjeant pays.
Red coats and flags. Get rid o' the trouble-
makers. Drums and fifes and glory. (I,ii,22)

Theoretically, then, circumstances are favourable for the desert-ers. Apparently united themselves, a common ally (the colliers) and a common enemy (the town's "Establishment") are factors which appear advantageous to the success of their mission.

Arden makes clear, however, that this unanimity is illusory. Though a common purpose and a common danger unite the soldiers, sharp and even violent differences exist within the group in respect to the motivations which prompted their mission and the means by which they hope to accomplish it. Musgrave, for instance, constantly stresses the religious nature of his motives and seems convinced that Providence Himself is directly involved:

But there's more to it than a bodily black-mail--isn't there?--because my power's the power of God, and that's what brought me here and all three of you with me. (I,iii,29-30)

Hurst, on the other hand, takes a somewhat different view. Weary of the "treat-you-like-dirt" aspect of army life, he expresses a desire to initiate some killing on his own, but without the divine auspices alleged by Musgrave:

It's nowt to do wi' God. I don't understand all that about God, why d'you bring God into it! You've come here to tell the people and then there'd be no more war--.... (I,iii.30)

Regarding Sparky, the youngest member of the group, we

find that his motives seem more connected with personal grief at the death of his friend Billy than with any generalized concept about pacifism. He even jeers at Hurst because he was not acquainted with Billy (I,iii,35). In addition, there is evidence to substantiate Jack Richardson's suggestion that Sparky "fears his Serjeant more than he does war itself...."⁹ He frequently refers to Musgrave as "God," for instance, and when commanded by the Serjeant to explain their choice of this particular town, a stage direction notes that he replies "as with a conditioned reflex"(p.34).

Actually, the only true pacifist would appear to be Attercliffe--at least insofar as clearly-defined motivations are concerned. When Musgrave expresses his desire to turn the townsmen against the current colonial war, Attercliffe corrects him:

All wars, Serjeant Musgrave. They've got to turn against all wars. Colonial war, do we say, no war of honour? I'm a private soldier, I never had no honour, I went killing for the Queen, I did it for me wages, that wor my life. But I've got a new life. There was one night's work, and I said: no more killing. (I,iii,36)

He delivers a similar rebuke to Hurst's assertion that "It's time we did our own killing."

On the whole, then, there is no unifying consensus of opinion within the group, despite the danger and the common purpose which ostensibly unite it. Actually, it would appear that it is Musgrave's firm leadership, rather than extenuating

factors, which ensures cohesive action--at least in the earliest stages of the mission. Even the aggressive Hurst recoils "submissively" when the Serjeant asserts his own point of view (pp.35,36).

Turning now to the colliers, a similar lack of accord exists. Unlike Walsh, their leader, they are easily provoked to violence--as evidenced by the Pugnacious Collier's drunken attack on the Constable (II,i,47)--and fight amongst themselves on seemingly flimsy pretexts (II,ii,55). Such behaviour provokes Walsh's sarcastic "Holy God! My mates! My Brothers!" and emphasizes the comparative lack of rapport amongst the town "rebels." As Richardson somewhat harshly points out:

...it becomes apparent that the chief obstacle to Musgrave's vision will be the very people he is trying to save. The drunk, cloddish workingmen, beset with their own very specific problems of survival, are either too suspicious or too self-seeking to be concerned with an evangelical Serjeant.¹⁰

Of course, it must not be inferred that the colliers are necessarily disunited in the matter of their own conflict with the "Establishment." Where this aspect of their collective self-interest is concerned, they appear of one hostile mind or attitude in regard to the Mayor, Parson and Constable, however argumentative their behaviour in other respects. On the other hand, their behaviour is somewhat at odds with the disciplined obedience that Musgrave demands--and temporarily receives--from his own followers, obedience that he must also

elicit from the colliers if his plan is to succeed.

It is from this perspective that we may now examine in more detail the character of Musgrave and the nature of his mission. Described by Arden as akin to the serjeants who fought under Cromwell and in the Crimea with Bible in one hand and weapon in the other,¹¹ he is religious, militantly authoritarian and--perhaps more important--single-minded. "It's not material," is his favorite reply to queries or arguments that seem, in one way or another, to call into question the correctness of his position. As Katharine Worth notes, the phrase "runs through the play like a desperate affirmation of the logic of his position."¹²

Though a military deserter, both his personality and his plan paradoxically embody many characteristics of the life from which he has escaped. He despises "anarchy" of any sort and, despite the incongruity of his own position, he expresses--to the Constable--his dislike of agitators "in or out of the army" (II,i,50). Though ostensibly a man of "peace," in the New Testament sense of the word, his concept of God is curiously akin to that of the Old Testament, as well as to the bloody militarism he wishes to destroy:

I'm in this town to change all soldiers'
duties. My prayer is: keep my mind clear
so I can weight Judgement against the Mercy
and Judgement against the Blood, and make
this Dance as terrible as You have put into
my brain. The Word alone is terrible: the
Deed must be worse. But I know it is Your
Logic, and You will provide. (I,iii,37)

Even the end of the world--God's 'Judgement-Day'--he envisions in military terms:

...I mean, numbers and order, like so many ranks this side, so many that, properly dressed, steadiness on parade, so that whether you knew you was right, or you knew you was wrong--you'd know it, and you'd stand. (He shivers.) (II,ii,65)

It is not till the revelation of his plan, however, that the implications of his beliefs become shockingly apparent. Because Billy's death led to the retaliatory slaughter of five rebels, Musgrave's "logic" leads him to the arithmetic conclusion that twenty-five of the leading townsmen, whom he regards as at least partially responsible for colonial wars, must also be eliminated:

One man, and for him five. Therefore, for five of them we multiply out, and we find it five-and-twenty....So as I understand Logic and Logic to me is the mechanism of God--that means that today there's twenty-five persons will have to be-- (III,i,91)

In view of such "Logic" it is easy (too easy, perhaps) to agree with Lumley's contention that Musgrave is simply a "religious maniac" who displays the attributes of a "simpleton."¹³ But to do so is to overlook certain aspects of his behaviour which seriously qualify such a description. Though Musgrave's "Logic" is indicative of blind single-mindedness, he also displays a certain amount of self-awareness. Before revealing his plan, for instance, he displays at least a partial recognition that his past military life is partially responsible for his present

sense of purpose:

You see, the Queen's Book, which eighteen years I've lived, it's turned inside out for me. There used to be my duty: now there's a disease-- (III,i,90)

Other evidence also suggests awareness on Musgrave's part. Though apparently convinced of the righteousness of his real plan, he nonetheless conceals his intentions until the last moment. Obviously, he suspects that God's "Logic" will be by no means as clear to others as it is to him--a suspicion which is justified by subsequent events.

Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that perhaps even Musgrave himself is not entirely convinced. Consider his reaction to the truth about Billy's past life in the town. As described by Mrs. Hitchcock, Billy was "Not what you'd call a bad young feller, you know--but he weren't no good either." (I,ii,26) In addition to singing (and presumably parodying?) hymns in the pub, he fathered barmaid Annie's deformed baby before going off to war. Coincidentally, both the baby and Billy died at approximately the same time. Musgrave is disturbed by this information and he seeks Mrs. Hitchcock's cooperation in withholding it:

What you've just been telling me, don't tell it to these. Dead men and dead children should abide where they're put and not be rose up to the thoughts of the living. It's bad for discipline....(I,ii,27)

Musgrave's reaction here is richly suggestive. Though he says that dead men should "not be rose up," Musgrave intends

to use Billy's skeleton as a rallying point for the rebellious townsmen. In fact, the deserters' careful concealment of its presence is indicative of the shock-effect value they hope it will have when they finally reveal it in the town square.

It becomes clear, however, that Musgrave regards it as something more than a rallying device. His desire to conceal unpleasant aspects of Billy's past is--in addition to being conducive to good discipline among his own men---suggestive of the religious significance Musgrave attaches to the skeleton. He has held up Billy--to his men--as a kind of martyr, and when he learns of his previous unsaintly behaviour his first reaction is to suppress evidence that tarnishes the "image."

Moreover, it is clear that Musgrave is personally disturbed by the information. When Mrs. Hitchcock draws his attention to the coincidence of Billy and the baby's death, he carelessly replies that "It's not material. He was no great friend to me." But he then goes on to reveal his own uneasiness in regard to the matter:

But maybe, as you said, strange. He did
use to sing. And yellow hair he had,
didn't he? (I,ii,27)

A number of ambiguous questions arise at this point. Does Musgrave suspect that Billy's former behaviour invalidates his usefulness as a symbol--and hence indicates a purely military "blunder" on the Serjeant's part, a blunder which, in typical military fashion, he wishes to conceal? More important, does

the "strange" death of both father and deformed child portentously foreshadow the failure of the present mission or, more disturbingly, suggest that its alleged divine auspices have been a sham from the beginning? In other words, does Musgrave suspect that he is himself a "deformity"? (His later reference to former duty as present "disease"--p.90--is interesting from this point of view.)

Though Arden does not clarify the exact nature of Musgrave's uneasiness, the foregoing discussion suggests that the Serjeant's beliefs and behaviour are conditioned by something more than maniacal single-mindedness. In fact, his tendency to suppress, avoid, or even sublimate anything that might interfere with his plans--although indicative of a seemingly blind sense of purpose--is also suggestive of a spiritual pilgrimage. He has "faith" in God's Logic, he appreciates the value of symbolic "relics" (the skeleton), he is confronted by "doubts" (about Billy's past and the reactions of his comrades). Also suggestive is his meeting with the hostile masses. He holds the power of "life and death" (with the Gatling gun), he is deserted by one of his own "disciples" (Attercliffe), and ultimately his pains on behalf of humanity are to be rewarded with his "crucifixion" (he is to be hanged).¹⁴

Though Musgrave might be a religious "maniac," his career is nonetheless suggestive of the lives of illustrious--and better known--predecessors. Moreover, if we recoil at the bloodshed dictated by his sense of God's "Logic", our reaction is qualified

by reference to two important factors. One is the Old Testament, which needs no elaboration. The other is the town Pastor, organized Christianity's mouthpiece in the play. A jingoist in the worst sense of the word, as well as a willing instrument of the economic status quo, he cites a Biblical quotation to justify and encourage the colliers' participation in warfare:

'And Jesus said, I come not to bring peace
but a sword.'(III,i,79)

The quotation--at least in the sense that the Pastor uses it--is quite compatible with Musgrave's theology. Moreover, given the blatantly secular ends to which it is directed (by both Mayor and Pastor), Musgrave emerges as a comparatively high-minded individual. If his theology is perverse, it suffers little (if at all) by comparison with that of the Pastor.

However understandable his motivations or noble his intentions, on the other hand, Arden makes clear that neither is enough to ensure the success of Musgrave's mission. As Malcolm Page notes, "His Faith in Logic does not fit the facts of the world."¹⁵ And it is the world with which Musgrave must deal. In fact, it would appear that it is the sincerity of his convictions--as well as his tenacious sense of purpose--that causes him to overlook, consciously or otherwise, important aspects of the present realities he wishes to change.

As we have seen, harmonious relations are notably absent both within and between two important groups: the deserters and the colliers. Musgrave, however, operates on the assumption that despite the hostility and suspicion unanimity will eventually

prevail. In other words, he has "faith"--though not faith enough to reveal his real intentions until the town meeting.

Underlying this faith is an apocalyptic view of the universe that he simplistically applies to the facts of 'this world.' As noted earlier, Musgrave envisions judgment day as a kind of military parade, where mankind is neatly divided "so that you knew you was right, or you knew you was wrong--you'd know it, and you'd stand." (II,iii,65) It is precisely in such terms that he views the situation in the town. The colliers are "right," the Establishment is "wrong,"--and because he identifies the colliers' cause with his own, he assumes that an identical solution is in order.

What Musgrave is unable or unwilling to recognize, however, is the presence of persons who do not view the situation in such rigourously moralistic terms. The ubiquitous Bargee, for instance, is one such person and, as J.D. Hainsworth notes, "one for whom the notion of morality simply does not exist."¹⁶ An amoral opportunist, he assists or betrays either side according to his own unscrupulous whims and self-interest. Aptly described by Richardson as "a sort of devious Everyman,"¹⁷ he personifies the baser elements of human nature which the idealistic Musgrave fails to appreciate or take into thoughtful consideration. Not surprisingly, it is the Bargee who holds a rifle to Musgrave's back when the Dragoons arrive (III,i,97).

In addition to overlooking or underestimating human nature's baser characteristics, Musgrave also fails to appreciate

the significance of basic human drives. Here the importance of the women in the play becomes apparent. Consider Mrs. Hitchcock's attitude, for instance. Though she mocks the Mayor (I,ii,15)--and hence is presumably sympathetic towards the colliers' cause--her description of the labor dispute is based on something more than the moral abstractions that characterize Musgrave's:

No work in the colliery. The owner calls
it a strike, the men call it a lockout,
we call it starvation. (I,ii,20)

Her reference to starvation is important in that it reflects a concern for immediate human suffering caused by the dispute, as opposed to the long-term causes and solutions that preoccupy Musgrave. This does not necessarily imply moral neutrality on Mrs. Hitchcock's part, of course, nor must we conclude that the Serjeant is indifferent to human suffering because he views the affair in somewhat abstract terms. The two characters' assessments do, however, reveal different priorities, as well as illustrate that the townspeople are concerned with something more than what is "right" and what is "wrong". They are also concerned with what is "comfortable" or--more important--"necessary." Naturally, food is a prerequisite of either.

Annie, the soldier's whore, draws our attention to another basic human appetite (or emotion, if we equate sex with love). Candidly sensual, she propositions the deserters and in so doing provokes a reaction from Musgrave that further illustrates a stern, abstract approach to the situation at hand, as opposed

to concern for the satisfaction of more immediate desire:

Look, lassie, anarchy: now, we're soldiers. Our work isn't easy, no and it's not soft: it's got a strong name--duty. And it's drawn out straight and black for us, a clear plan. But if you come to us with what you call your life or love--I'd call it your indulgence--and you scribble all over that plan, you make it crooked, dirty, untidy, bad--there's anarchy. I am a religious man. I know words, and I know deeds, and I know how to be strong. So do these men. You will not stand between them and their strength! Go on now, take yourself off. (II,i,51)

Hurst is in agreement with Musgrave on this point. Resolved to be militantly self-disciplined, he rejects Annie's advances because he, too, wants "no scrawling."

The reactions of the other two deserters, however, are significantly different. Though Attercliffe also rejects Annie, he is kind to her. Guilt-ridden because of his own participation in the horrors of warfare, he spurns her offer not because of an abstract sense of "duty," but because he feels that sleeping with Annie "wouldn't do no good"(II,iii,60). Sparky, on the other hand, accepts her and in doing so articulates beliefs that flatly contradict those of Musgrave and Hurst:

It wouldn't be anarchy you know; he can't be right there! All it would be, is: you live and I live--we don't need his duty, we don't need his Word--a dead man's a dead man! We could call it all paid for! Your life and my life--make our own road, we don't follow nobody. (II,iii,63-64)

He then plans to desert to London with Annie, a plan which is interrupted by Hurst and which leads to his accidental death at the hands of the kindly Attercliffe.

The differing reactions of the deserters are both interesting and thematically relevant. On one level, Annie serves, because of her former relationship with Billy, as a personal link between the deserters and the townsmen. Hence, the deserters' attitudes toward her are, in a sense, symptomatic of their attitudes toward much broader concerns--such as warfare and civilian life in general. As we have seen, the soldiers display divergent emotional (or rational) reactions when confronted by Annie. However, certain pertinent generalizations are possible. For instance, the deserters who reject Annie are all 'seasoned' soldiers with long and/or bloody military backgrounds. Sparky, the one deserter who accepts Annie, provides a significant contrast. He is young and, in view of his strong personal grief at Billy's death, presumably of limited military experience. Recalling Attercliffe's reason for refusing Annie, it would appear that Sparky's relative innocence in respect to bloodshed, as well as his relative freedom from the concepts of "duty" that seem to obsess Musgrave and Hurst, are conducive to a satisfying relationship with the barmaid.

In contrast, the responses of the other deserters are strongly influenced by their past military life, a life which was essentially womanless. Moreover, it was a life that dictated the killing of women and children--a fact which continually haunts Attercliffe and a reality of war which Musgrave later draws to the attention of the townsmen (III,i,87). It is perhaps

significant that the only deserter who is compassionate towards Annie and is horrified at Sparky's death is Attercliffe, who was formerly married and who went to war only because of his wife's infidelity. Though his age and past experiences prevent his envisaging a happy future for himself, he is still capable of sympathy for the living as well as grief for the dead.

In contrast to Musgrave, and comparable to the attitudes of the women, the colliers, too, are concerned with basic human appetites and emotions. Though involved in a kind of "war" with the Establishment and prone to fight amongst themselves, it is perhaps significant that it is "cuckoldry"--as opposed to weightier abstract issues--that provokes violence in the town (e.g. II, i, 46-47 and II, ii, 55). Of course, drunkenness is also a factor, but like sex, that is also the result of satisfying a basic human appetite. In any case, the incidents illustrate that the men are as yet more concerned with immediate appetitive satisfactions than they are with the grave moral issues that Musgrave eventually draws to their attention.

Musgrave overlooks this--both in terms of his own followers and the townsmen (and women). Moreover, he fails to appreciate the consequences that could result from Sparky's death. He refuses to accept Attercliffe's contention that the "Logic" of his own pacifist stance is now seriously compromised. Moreover, he reveals that when his own plans are involved he is quite capable of ignoring the facts both of life and death:

Aye, aye...Desertion. Fornication. It's not material. He's dead. Hide him away. (II, iii, 69)

Unlike Attercliffe, Musgrave persists in interpreting everything --whether it be life, love or death--from a military standpoint.

From one point of view, Musgrave's behaviour here is perhaps no more and no less than what one would expect from a good military commander in a difficult military situation. Emotionally controlled, steadfast, persistent despite obstacles--all are qualities usually associated with military leadership. However, despite his apparently callous attitude towards Sparky's death and his unpleasant impatience with Annie's grief, it would be a mistake to conclude that he is inhumanly stubborn, much as his behaviour invites that description. Prior to Sparky's death, we learn that Musgrave is haunted by agonizing nightmares which are the result of his past military experiences (II,iii,64). In addition, a stage direction indicates that immediately after the incident he sits alone "with his head in his hands," which perhaps suggests that he has been more deeply affected by the death than his previous remarks would indicate.

However, what is important here is not what Musgrave feels, but what he thinks and later does. As his comments to the weeping Annie indicate, he is well aware of this:

Oh, you can shake, you can quiver, you can
open your mouth like a quicksand and all--
blubbering and trouble--but I've got to
think and I've got to do. (II,iii,69)

Though Arden does not reveal to us details of the mental "debate," Musgrave's adamant refusal to be persuaded that Sparky's death "wipes the whole thing out" and his determination to proceed as planned suffice to satisfy our curiosity. In short, the military

side of his nature is victorious.

Musgrave's mistake, however, lies in his assuming that his "Logic" is applicable to the situation in the town, that the colliers will view their own struggle as analogous to that of the unhappy colonials, and that Sparky's death will be of little or no consequence when weightier moral concerns are broached. Much to his puzzlement, the townsmen do not react in accordance with his expectations. Though shocked by the appearance of the skeleton, the revelation that it is Billy's is greeted with disbelief rather than outrage at the immorality of war (III,i,89). And when Musgrave reveals his startling plan to kill twenty-five prominent townsmen, a unified sense of purpose or agreement fails to materialize, even amongst his own followers. One collier, echoing his alleged enemy, the Mayor, thinks the soldiers "balmy," the Bargee freely switches allegiances, and the Slow Collier only tentatively suggests that Musgrave "might be right" (III,i,95).

Predictably, Attercliffe flatly refuses to accept his leader's proposal and even goes against him by drawing attention to Sparky's death (III,i,96). Hurst, on the other hand, is in full agreement with Musgrave in regard to the slaughter but, as the Serjeant points out,

The wrong way. The wrong way. You're
trying to do it without Logic. (III,i,96)

What Musgrave refuses to recognize, of course, is the "Logic" of his own position.

Consider, for instance, his plea to the townsmen when

support is not forthcoming. Pointing to the skeleton, he asks:

None of you at all? Come on, come on, why,
he was your Billy, wasn't he? That you knew
and you worked with--don't you want to revenge
him? (III,i,93)

The plea is ironic. Though he had earlier dismissed as immaterial Annie's grief at the death of Sparky, he now appeals to the emotions of the crowd (including Annie's) on behalf of someone they haven't seen for nearly two years. Also ironic is the fact that the only one who responds whole-heartedly to this plea for revenge is Hurst--someone who never knew Billy in the first place.

The confused response from the crowd is indicative of Musgrave's failure even from a purely military point of view. A cardinal maxim is to never underestimate the enemy; in Musgrave's case, he has made the even greater mistake of underestimating his friends or allies. His mathematical approach to the solution of an enormous problem has prevented him from fully considering such matters as espionage, sabotage, and "morale." It is appropriately poetic, then, that the arrival of soldiers--the Dragoons--signals the collapse of Musgrave's mission. Hurst is killed, Musgrave and Attercliffe imprisoned, and the townsmen and soldiers dance around a barrel of beer to commemorate the occasion.

What, if anything, has been accomplished? Noting the colliers seemingly joyous fraternization with former "enemies," Walsh comments with great bitterness:

The community's been saved. Peace and prosperity rules. We're all friends and neighbours for the rest of today. We're all sorted out. We're back where we were. So what do we do? (III,i,99)

The Bargee, passing out free beer, hails the end of "a bad dream," an officer urges the townsmen to "Let normal life begin again," Annie cradles the skeleton of her dead lover, and the men who had come to the town with the express purpose of telling them what to "do" now face death by hanging. In short, it would appear that nothing has been accomplished and that there are grounds for one critic's erroneous suggestion that "any philosophy the play may contain, although backed by the Serjeant's religious mania, is totally nihilist."¹⁸

Arden, however, rejects such an assessment, noting that factors other than Musgrave and his plan deserve our consideration:

...the fact that the sympathies of the play are clearly with him in his original horror, and then turn against him and his intended remedy, seem to have bewildered many people. I would suggest however, that a study of the roles of the women, and of Private Attercliffe, should be sufficient to remove any doubts as to where the 'moral' of the play lies. (Dance p.7)

In the prison, for instance, Mrs. Hitchcock attempts to explain to Musgrave the failure of his "Logic." First, she insists that there was life and love in the town, despite Musgrave's protestations to the contrary:

Then use your Logic--if you can. Look at it this road: here we are, and we'd got life and love. Then you came in and you did your scribbling where nobody asked you. Aye, it's arsy-versey to what you said, but it's still an anarchy, isn't it? And it's all your work. (III,ii,102)

Recalling Sparky's love for Annie, as well as the colliers' seemingly trivial preoccupation with "cuckoldry," it would appear that Mrs. Hitchcock's assessment is essentially correct. Secondly, she draws his attention to a point she previously made in regard to the strike:

There was hungry men, too--fighting for
their food. But you brought in a different
war. (III,i,102)

Finally, she assures the despairing Musgrave that despite the seemingly ungrateful indifference displayed towards his noble intentions his efforts have not been entirely in vain:

Ah, not for long. And it's not a dance of
joy. Those men are hungry, so they've got
no time for you. One day they'll be full,
though, and the Dragoons'll be gone, and
then they'll remember. (III,ii,102)

Though Musgrave disagrees, she gently persists: "Let's hope it, any road. Eh?"

Attercliffe also takes issue with Musgrave's "Logic," asserting that "You can't cure the pox by further whoring." And like Mrs. Hitchcock, he asks a question that might be construed as cautiously optimistic:

They're going to hang us up a length higher
nor most apple-trees grow, Serjeant. D'you
reckon we can start an orchard?

It is perhaps significant, too, that Attercliffe, rather than Musgrave, has the last word in the play.

Also important, as Arden makes clear, is the role of Walsh, spokesman for the colliers. Though awkwardly sympathetic to Musgrave's pacifist aims, he nonetheless rejects both the

proposed slaughter and, significantly, the basic analogy that allegedly unifies the interests of the colliers and deserters:

...he's still in uniform, and he's still got his Book. He's doing his duty. Well, I take no duties from no bloody lobsters. This town lives by colliers. That's coal-owners and it's pitmen --aye, and they battle, and the pitmen'll win. But not wi' no soldier-boys to order our fight for us. Remember their trade: you give 'em one smell of a broken town, you'll never get 'em out.
(III,i,92-93)

However, Walsh does not consistently maintain his opposition.

When he learns that the Dragoons are on the way, he wavers.

WALSH. I don't know. I don't trust it.

PUGNACIOUS COLLIER. Ahr, be damned these are just like the same as us. Why don't we stand with 'em?

WALSH. (obstinately). I've not yet got this clear.

(III,i.95)

It is not until Attercliffe confirms Annie's assertion that Sparky has been killed that he again adamantly rejects the Serjeant's plan.

Walsh's opposition, however, does not imply a total lack of sympathy. A stage direction makes clear that he is angry at the revelry that follows the arrival of the Dragoons and that it is only with extreme bitterness that he finally joins in the dance himself. Commenting on the difficulties involved in staging this scene, Arden notes that the stage should be full of soldiers:

Then the impression given would be that even the most sympathetic of the colliers, who nearly sides with Musgrave, has no alternative but to take part in the dance, and that law

and order have been re-established by force. The dance certainly implies apathy in some of the colliers but there is a stage direction which makes it quite clear that their leader, who is the last to join in, does so unwillingly. This is the sort of detail which, on a small stage covered with people, can easily be missed.¹⁹

Musgrave's message, then, has not been totally lost upon all the townsmen. Hence, we cannot interpret the play as indicative of nihilism on the part of the author.

Despite the tentatively affirmative responses displayed by some characters, however, the overall effect is essentially negative. That is, though such figures reject the sanguine means by which Musgrave seeks to end warfare, no one (including the author) proposes a clear-cut alternative. Assuredly, we are left with the impression that violence is not the answer, but we must deduce for ourselves other meaningful possibilities. The strike, for instance, suggests that peaceful means do exist by which disputes might be settled, but it's effectiveness is open to serious question. As Page points out:

The strike could be a kind of non-violent action beyond the range of Musgrave's imagination, but the strikers do not put all their trust in this, and attempt to steal the soldiers' Gatling gun.²⁰

Actually, the colliers' distrust is entirely justifiable: the mine owners display no qualms about the use of military force to settle differences with their workers. Furthermore, the effective use of a strike by soldiers is extremely dubious. The desertion of Musgrave and his followers is a kind of "strike", but death is the penalty for such non-violent action.

An investigation of Musgrave's "Logic" produces similar results. Though Mrs. Hitchcock and Attercliffe seem positive enough about what is "wrong" with his approach, they do not suggest a viable alternative--or any alternative at all, for that matter (unless, that is, we accept the peaceful delivery of a pacifist message as a suitable substitute). In fact, Arden's omission here forces us to re-examine Musgrave's "Logic," and to consider it in light of realities--as opposed to moral or ethical abstractions.

For instance, there is evidence to suggest that it is the threat of physical violence and bloodshed, rather than the peaceful display of Billy's skeleton, that shocks the townsmen into realizing the seriousness of Musgrave's message. It is not until the frantic Hurst reveals that he is indeed going to use the Gatling gun that a general reaction of fear spreads throughout the crowd. Moreover, the arrival of armed Dragoons forcefully illustrates the logic of Musgrave's message. Warfare does begin at home; a solution to the problem of violence must begin at its source. As we have seen, Walsh's reaction to the arrival of the Dragoons suggests that he, at least, is beginning to appreciate the significance of Musgrave's premises. It is doubtful if mere sermonizing, even with the assistance of a skeleton, would have accomplished as much.

It becomes obvious, then, that Musgrave's analysis of a serious problem, however simplistic, cannot merely be attributed to "the confusion of a simpleton."²¹ Of course, his

apparent belief that if one town subscribes to his message the others will follow suit seems hopelessly unrealistic. Moreover, his persistent identification of the strikers' cause with his own and his determination to place the blame on one particular group does seem to indicate immature and irrational thinking on his part. However, Musgrave is not as naive as all that. He recognizes, for instance, that without enlisted men war would be impossible. Moreover, he actually scolds the colliers for the ease with which recruitment is possible:

Wild-wood mad we are; and so we've fetched it home. You've had Moses and the Prophets--that's him--(He points at WALSH)--'cos he told you. But you were all for enlisting, it'd still have gone on. Moses and the Prophets, what good did they do? (III,i,90)

Actually, Musgrave places "blame" both on the "system" and the individuals who live within it. Though he intends to focus his fury on the system's most prominent representatives, it would be a mistake to assume that he views them as the sole agents of evil in the world.

Naturally, we can still dismiss Musgrave's reasoning as merely "maniacal," but a vexing question remains: if neither the system nor the individual human being is responsible for warfare, who or what is? Moreover, even if we disagree with Musgrave's assessment of the problem--as well as disapprove of the murderous solution he hopes to impose--can we simply dismiss as moronic his ultimate objective? In other words, must we throw out the message with the medium? G.W. Brandt aptly summarizes the situation:

...it would make for easier acceptance of SMD if the fanatical serjeant were to be either wholly condemned or wholly approved of. But is it not disturbing to see a morally sensitive man trying to start a public massacre? It is. Does his fanaticism invalidate his moral protest as such? It does not.²²

Actually, the fact that the play as a whole invites such questioning is proof that Arden has accomplished, in Dance, a major objective--that is, to demonstrate the complexity of the problem of violence in this world. Moreover, he does not strain our credulity nor compromise his own intellectual honesty by providing glib or "pat" solutions. Of course, the result is disturbing. But then, so is the ubiquitous and seemingly eternal problem.

ii Theatrical Means

A major achievement in Dance is the author's sophisticated use of diverse literary and theatrical styles. Like Armstrong, many aspects of the play reflect affinity to the ballad tradition in poetry, a tradition which Arden is concerned to translate into purely visual terms:

In the ballads the colours are primary.
Black is for death, and for the coalmines.
Red is for murder, and for the soldier's
coat the collier puts on to escape from
his black. Blue is for the sky and for
the sea that parts true love.²³

He also draws upon conventions of dissimilar theatrical genres. Stressing that all his plays are written within fairly tight

artistic limits, he notes that "Musgrave is based on a combination of Elizabethan tragedy and nineteenth century melodrama and works fairly well within those conventions."²⁴ The juxtaposition of and interaction between such conventions does much to illuminate the complexity of the thematic problems and renders impossible any meaningful evaluation of the play's content independent of the diverse forms that convey it. In fact, failure to consider fully this latter point leads to the overly simplistic--and hence distorted--interpretations which unfairly consign the play to the realm of mere propaganda.

Consider first the matter of characterization. As we have seen, Musgrave is more subtly delineated than a cursory examination of his religious convictions would indicate. On the other hand, the sheer magnitude of his sanguine plan at once qualifies any sympathetic response to him as a basically "well-rounded" human being. He is, as Malcolm Page points out, "both tragic hero--the noble man doomed by a flaw--and Victorian villain--the graveyard plotter and would-be murderer."²⁵

Arden's achievement here is that we are forced to consider both aspects together, as an examination of one brief episode will serve to illustrate. Praying alone in the churchyard, Musgrave reveals to us the basic sincerity of his convictions. But lurking in the background is "Crooked Old Joe," the Bargee, who parodies Musgrave's gestures. Actually, the Bargee here acts in a manner consistent with the hissing or booing of an audience-chorus of a nineteenth century melodrama. A distancing effect

is thus achieved. Of course, problems of stagecraft may arise here, as Albert Hunt reminds us:

Arden presents us with two opposites which illumine each other. The opposites exist in a physical relationship on the stage. If you identify with either--if, for example, the actor playing Musgrave pulls out all the emotional stops and carries you away; or if he exaggerates Musgrave's gestures to the point of caricature--the moral balance of the scene is destroyed.²⁶

On the other hand, the achievement of such a "balance" provides an ironic twist which considerably enriches the play. In melodrama, it is the villain who is usually hissed. Here an idealist is mimicked by an amoral cynic. However, when we subsequently learn just what the idealist has in mind, our emotional orientation is radically altered. We are forced to consider Musgrave not as "tragic" here or villain, but as an embodiment of both. In many ways, Musgrave seems to be a credibly motivated hero involved in an incredibly melodramatic plot. In any case, it becomes clear that Arden plays off one set of dramatic conventions against another and the resulting tension adds a dimension to the problem of violence which is lost if either is neglected.

Distortions or over-simplifications of the author's purpose also result if one aspect of characterization is emphasized at the expense of another or independently of the total dramatic context. In a hostile reaction to Arden's mingling of styles, Hilary Spurling singles out two characters as evidence of the author's narrowly simplistic (and biased) approach to the problem of warfare:

The feeling that every man not for is against, on liberalism as much as on censorship, seems to have overflowed on to the stage where it can only destroy its own ends. Thus the Clergyman and Mayor, church and capitalist staunchly holding out against pacifism, are presented as stage villains.²⁷

For the most part, Spurling's reference to the Pastor and Mayor as "villains" is essentially correct. Pecuniary interests unite them, while religious hypocrisy and ill-motivated jingoism characterize their actions throughout. In many ways they are ridiculously comic--and any attempt to describe them in purely naturalistic terms proves futile. On the other hand, to cite them as evidence of an "either-or" approach on the author's part is grossly misleading. As we have seen, Arden reveals the disturbing complexity of the problem at hand--and the fact that he provides no clear-cut solutions forces us to assess (and re-assess) the responsibility for its presence in the minds and actions other than those of the Establishment figures alone.

Arden attempts to rationalize the "villainy" of such characters:

Of course people will say that the Mayor and the parson and the policeman in Musgrave are cardboard figures: Well, that's because they are engaged in a situation where only their public personalities are displayed, and I think that in the expression of their public personalities I have not caricatured them. It is caricature by omission rather than by exaggeration--I could envisage another play in which those three people appear without the coal strike and without the eruption of the soldiers. And they would be rounded characters.²⁸

Actually, Arden's explanation here is somewhat less than satisfactory in that the definitions are irrelevant--especially in view of the "artistic limits" within which he professes to work. However, it does draw attention to an important aspect of the roles: we see the Establishment figures as they presumably saw themselves (at least in their public capacity) and we see them as their nineteenth century adversaries envisaged them.

More enlightening are the author's comments in regard to another of his plays, The Workhouse Donkey. Here the setting is contemporary, but Arden's remarks may apply equally well to Armstrong:

I mean some of the subsidiary characters are a bit Dickensian in style, and of course I am influenced by the nineteenth century theatre to some extent; I don't mean so much the plays as the approach to the theatre, the type of staging, the strong lines of character drawing and plot that were involved, you know; they didn't go in much for subtle playmaking and I think that I'm very much influenced by that. I have one of these nineteenth century toy theatres which I enjoy playing with, and I think that there is a certain element of this in my writing.²⁹

Arden's distinction here between dramatic convention ("the approach") and the play itself is particularly useful. Though the Establishment figures might appear as mere villainous contrivances common to melodrama, their interaction with more fully "rounded" characters is both interesting and thematically relevant. In their public roles, the Mayor and Parson display

stereotypic attitudes--strikes are wrong, patriotism is glorious--but these are precisely the attitudes that strikers such as Walsh and pacifists such as Attercliffe are forced to confront and--hopefully--attempt to change. Furthermore, the fact that such attitudes seem intractably abstract--and even humorous--testifies to their deep entrenchment in the society itself.

More importantly, Arden also makes clear that those who wish to change the "system" are themselves possessed of or conditioned by its worst characteristics. Musgrave, for instance, proves as intractable as his presumed adversaries while Hurst displays vindictive qualities which equal, if not surpass, those of the villains he seeks to eliminate. In varying degrees, this is also true of the other characters. We are forced to recognize, in fact, that stereotypic attitudes or actions are not the monopoly of the stage villains who embody them. Arden's use of dissimilar conventions forcefully facilitates that recognition.

Of course, the use of "types" or stereotypes is not confined to the personification of villainy. A glance at the cast list reveals an interesting division: some are individualized with names (the deserters, the women, and Walsh) while the others are characterized by function (the Mayor, Parson, Constable, and Dragoons) or descriptive labels (Slow Collier, Pugnacious Collier). In short, there is a rough division between those whose personal thoughts and behaviour is of prime importance and those whose public utterances and actions determine their thematic function.

Though Arden makes fruitful use of the dramatic interaction between the groups, the division is not mutually exclusive. Many of the more individualized characters are themselves suggestive of rather conventional theatrical or literary types. Mrs. Hitchcock's role, for instance, is familiar enough in terms of any number of Hollywood westerns. As Tom Prideaux aptly points out, she is "overflowing with that earthy wisdom that all bar-keeps are supposed to accrue from watching the human race get sozzled."³⁰ Similarly, Annie recalls the conventional whore with the heart of gold, as well as the forsaken lover of the ballad world--a role which is, in a sense, complemented by Attercliffe's function as cuckolded husband. As noted earlier, Musgrave himself suggests the wicked villainy common to Victorian melodrama.

On the whole each character--whether considered as an individual or as a "type,"--reflects or mirrors attributes of others around him. Though conventional "goodness" might find its opposite in conventional "wickedness," we become aware of subtle gradations or paradoxical similarities. At times the result is humorous, at times ironic, at times grotesque. But in all cases, a new or subtle aspect of the problem of violence becomes apparent. It also becomes apparent that isolated analysis of one character or one group is insufficient to explain or interpret the theme. As Taylor correctly summarizes: "...any simple alignment of character and concept is doomed to failure."³¹

What Arden does, in effect, is reveal--by deceptively simple means--the characters as they appear to themselves and as they appear to one another. The Establishment figures behave in a manner compatible with the stereotypic views of both the colliers and deserters; the deserters reveal characteristics that in many ways justify the suspicions both of the miners and town officials; even the women display qualities (affirmative humanitarianism or sluttish promiscuity) that correspond to the rather conventional clichés of the men around them. And representing no particular view--save that of cynical self-interest--is the ubiquitous Bargee, who enacts the double role of traitor and saviour. But even here the cynical self-interest is somehow earned or justifiable: the senseless circle of violence remains unchanged at the end of the play.

It becomes clear, then, that to embrace an "either-or" interpretation of the theme is to succumb to the simplistic or stereotypic ways of thinking that the characters display towards one another or to the central problem. Here the real value of the author's use of diverse conventions becomes apparent. We are induced to consider historic "reality" in terms of the theatrical "artificiality" that serves to define it. In doing so, we discover that they are inextricably intertwined--both inside and outside the theatre.

In addition to characterization, other aspects of the

play reflect Arden's opinion that

Even the most carefully naturalistic production of the tightest slice-of-life play never manages to persuade the audiences that they are watching anything than the actors and constructed scenery --and why should it? The pleasure is in marvelling how well it has been done, in enjoying a superb display of theatre-craft: not in submitting to an illusion.³²

He makes use of overtly theatrical stage "images," melodramatic coincidences establish the situation and propel the narrative action; an admixture of prose, verse, and songs characterize the language. Again, diverse conventions are used to convey the complexity of the central thematic problem.

Consider more fully the situation in the town. Patently contrived circumstances (wintry conditions and labour strife conveniently coincide with the deserters' arrival) afford temporary safety to the pacifists, but the overall "unreal" atmosphere created by such circumstances is in many ways symptomatic of the soldiers' states of mind. Nothing is clearly defined. Though presumably a modern industrial town, the Mayor points out that there is no railway (I,iii,22); clearly, the town is divided--but the colliers attribute it to a lockout, the owner to a strike. Circumscribing and hence intensifying an already tense situation are the forces of winter. the situation is, in a sense, frozen in the present.

Consider now the deserters. Though presumably united by common past experiences, nonetheless they seem unable to accurately or unanimously recall the precise circumstances

that prompted their defection (I,iii); regarding the future, they appear to have no definite plans beyond the meeting in the market place. Like the town itself, the deserters are also "frozen" into an uncertain present. As Gilliatt notes,

They are in a limbo where they are responsible
for no one and detached from cause and effect,
which is why they are dangerous.³³

Actually, Arden seems to fuse into a composite whole a narrative comprised of action with a situation which is basically static and--as with the characterization--the interaction of seemingly diverse considerations considerably enriches the play. On another level, there seems to be a fusion of prosaic realities (as articulated by Walsh and Mrs. Hitchcock) and poetic vision (as illustrated by the dreams of Musgrave) and the inter-penetration of the two is integral to the theme itself.

For the most part, thematic considerations control Arden's use of all non-naturalistic elements throughout the play. An examination of Annie's role should suffice to clarify his artistry from this perspective. As noted earlier, the barmaid recalls the deserted lover of ballads and the gold-hearted whore of melodrama. She expresses herself simply in prose, verse, or song and involves herself in the action in a direct, unconscious manner. As Wardle observes, the scene in which she visits the three soldiers in turn is itself "an expanded ballad."³⁴ The implication here, of course, is that whatever naturalistic motivations might be deduced from her actions, her role is

clear enough in terms of the theatrical or literary conventions that define her.

Conversely, to isolate that role in naturalistic terms produces incongruous results. Spurling, for instance, cites as "unconvincing" the calamities that befall her, notably the previous desertion of Billy and the death of her misshapen baby, rejection by two more lovers, the stabbing of another (Sparky), and the grotesque confrontation at which she sings a short ballad:

...so it comes as no surprise to learn that the skeleton strung up on the market cross in the last act belongs to her original sweetheart. 'And they expect me to sit under it making up song ballads,' she says grimly. Surely no one, save in the eccentric world of an Arden play would dream of expecting her to make up ballads on top of everything else.³⁵

Of course, Annie's unhappy career is "unconvincing" in Spurling's sense of the word, and--in view of the mournful circumstances--a display of her musical ability at this particular point does seem to fulfil rather "eccentric" expectations on the part of those around her.

On the other hand, Annie's actions are compatible with the conventions that define her. Moreover, the incidence of her ballad singing serves further to impress upon the audience the thematic relevance of such conventions. Though we do not expect the Annies of real life to sing at such improbable moments, we do expect them--after a suitably decent interval--to sell poppies or, at the very least, to sing appropriate

hymns every November 11th. What Arden does, in effect, is force a comparison between grief which is vicariously pleasurable (or cathartic) in artistic terms with the unpleasant historical or contemporary realities from which it is selectively distilled.

Moreover, Annie herself is aware of this distinction. She articulates and briefly fulfils her conventional artistic function. But then she draws prosaic attention to an incident which she believes to be of more immediate relevance--the death of Sparky at the hands of alleged pacifists:

Take sight o' this, you hearty colliers:
see what they've brought you. You can
match it up with Billy's. Last night
there were four o' these walking, weren't
there? Well, this morning there's three.
They buried the other one in Ma Hitchcock's
midden. Go on, ask 'em why! (III,i,95)

Actually, Annie's actions throughout this episode draw attention to an important aspect of Musgrave's personality. Though ostensibly devoted to "Logic," he is also incurably romantic. He expects Annie--when confronted with her dead lover's skeleton--to behave like the familiar grief-stricken heroines of any number of romantic ballads, novels or operas, and this she dutifully does. What he does not expect is her concern for present realities (Sparky's death). In a sense, Musgrave views the world and other people in terms of theatrical situations and conventions and it is his inability to recognize this that partially accounts for the disaster that befalls him. From this point of view, there is a distinct similarity between

Musgrave and Lindsay (in Armstrong).

On the whole, then, Arden makes effective use of what Prideaux describes as "almost an embarrassment of theatrical riches."³⁶ But there are difficulties, as Arden himself admits. Regarding the plot, for instance, he feels that

Somehow I have not managed to balance the business of giving the audience information so that they can understand the play with the business of withholding information in order to keep the tension going. I think there is a failure of craftsmanship here.³⁷

An examination of two key scenes will serve to illustrate Arden's contention here.

Consider the churchyard scene, for example, in which the deserters reveal their diverse motivations, as well as convey information essential to our understanding of the plot. Because of artistic mismanagement Arden feels that

The result is that the audience is so busy watching the actors dramatising their emotions that they aren't picking up the plot information which is being conveyed in the dialogue. It would be better if I divided the two parts of the scene, so that the plot is made clear and then the emotions developed from it. Or, if you like, you can have your emotional outburst and then settle down to listen to the plot. You can't have both at the same time, especially in a play where the emotions are so very oversized.³⁸

Of course it might be argued that any confusion that might exist here is subsequently clarified in any case. On the other hand, in view of the importance attached to Billy's skeleton by the deserters (especially its potential "shock" value) and in view of the ignorance of both deserters and audience regarding

Musgrave's real intentions, there is reason to be critical of narrative ambiguities or confusion.

Though Arden does not speak of it, the same is essentially true of the incidence of Sparky's death. The episode is crucial because of the dilemma now confronting Musgrave privately and the deserters in general. Moreover, a sense of urgency is added by news that the Dragoons are now on the way. This information is also important in that the sense of crisis forces an immediate decision on Musgrave's part. Unfortunately, the sequence here serves to distract our attention from the philosophical implications of the stabbing. Describing it as a somewhat unsuccessful "technical gamble in construction," Bryden summarizes the author's failure:

He muffles the impact of Sparky's death with a flurry of melodramatic comings and goings. The gamble doesn't pay off. The play's sure flow is dislocated, and with it, more seriously, its sense of reality. Everything that happens up to that point has had the profoundly rooted feeling of growing cause and effect. Sparky's death is turned into a non-event.³⁹

It must be pointed out, of course, that melodramatic "comings and goings" are indigenously legitimate and successful aspects of Arden's technique and that in any case Musgrave is publicly confronted with the "non-event" and its implications in a later scene. What Arden fails to do here, however, is integrate such elements in a manner which would reveal yet another aspect of the central problem. Perhaps the news of the Dragoons' imminent arrival might have been revealed before Sparky's death

and in that way the death itself would assume the central importance obviously intended, but belatedly clarified, by the author. As it now stands, however, the dramatic significance both of the stabbing and Musgrave's subsequent decision to proceed as planned become lost in the narrative excitement. Moreover, its belated clarification in the market place draws attention to this essentially unnecessary weakness in the narrative structure.

Another unhappy aspect of Dance relates to the Mayor's role. Whether considered as a mere public abstraction or as a humorously satirical creation, his actions and attitudes are integral to the play's thematic unity. On the other hand, he does relate important information--namely, the declining price of coal and the absence of a railway (I,ii,22)--which is never really integrated into the narrative woof, either in serious or comic terms. Rather, the subject is broached and--it would appear--subsequently forgotten or ignored by the author. Though the omission is relatively minor, it does suggest an uncertainty of purpose on the part of Arden. (Perhaps this uncertainty helps to account for the author's previously noted attempt to differentiate between the Mayor as caricature and the Mayor as public figure.)

Despite such criticisms, however, Arden's achievement in Dance is truly creditable. He utilizes a variety of techniques and conventions which, if considered singly, seem simple enough.

But when considered in terms of one another and the themes they convey, an astonishingly complex unity becomes apparent. . . What is said is inextricably related to the way it is said and though occasionally this relationship is tenuous or unnecessarily obscure, the final effect is provocative and forceful. As Richardson notes,

For all his faulty theatrics and literary fits of absence of mind, Arden can write with a terseness and passion which somehow hold his formal fragments together, making out of them a work of art. He may not be always in control, but then he has chosen such a large theme, and responded to it with such unconscious seriousness and complexity, that moments of shaky orchestration become only mildly jarring.⁴⁰

Even Wilfred Sheed, one of the play's most damning detractors, concedes an artistic unity of sorts:

It does not even come close to being a good play: but it has the haunting quality of an ugly face seen in childhood. Or of a bad sermon preached by a true believer.⁴¹

Actually, Sheed's impression is quite consistent with Arden's aim--which is, of course, to impress upon the audience the complexity of a very ugly problem. If the lingering impression is haunting--well, so much the better.

In many ways, Arden's approach to historical material is similar to his approach to artistic convention. The narrative is pure fiction, the chronological setting is vague (between 1860 and 1880), and he subordinates historical sequence to more purely aesthetic considerations. Regarding the soldiers' costumes, for instance, he suggests they reflect the later

"Kipling" epoch; on the other hand, he submits that the Constable's dress might be that "of an early Peeler--his role in the play suggesting a rather primitive type of police organisation."

(Armstrong p.5) Within this chronological mixture, however, he does stress that Musgrave's attitudes reflect those of "a plausible historical type," rather than those which would capture the immediate sympathy of a liberal and hence presumably progressive contemporary audience.⁴²

What Arden does, in effect, is freely utilize relatively diverse historical materials which, in turn, interact with the diverse artistic conventions which embody them. He abstracts pertinent elements from "artistic" history (the ballad, 19th century melodrama, Elizabethan tragedy) and "academic" history (colonialism, industrial conflict, Victorian religious forces) and fuses them into a metaphor or image of his central thematic concern. Though at times this is imperfectly executed, there is justification for Bryden's favorable evaluation:

The combination of its elements--black North and red-coated imperialism and pacifist argument--could have seemed arbitrary. Its use of tradition fused and reinforced them, gathering more of imperial England onto one stage than we could remember seeing there before.⁴³

Of course, difficulties arise in attempting to depict an historical problem in fictitious terms. Citing John Whiting's The Devils as a point of comparison, Arden articulates his awareness of such difficulties:

When you write a historical play, the audience has a definite point of reference--they say, we

don't know much about the devils of Loudon, but they did really happen, and they have been written up by an established writer like Aldous Huxley. I am quite sure, for instance, that if I had written Serjeant Musgrave's Dance not about Serjeant Musgrave, but about, say, the naval mutiny of 1796, I would have done much better. I dare say I could have used a subject like that and said all the things I tried to say. The historical play is a form that people understand, and you don't have to work so hard in the first ten minutes. But I suppose that to ask an English audience to accept a period play that is neither comedy, romance or even history is asking rather a lot.⁴⁴

Actually, Arden's comments here help to account for an aspect of its narrative that at least one critic finds annoying:

This devotedly serious play suffers from one of the longest expositions in the history of the theatre; for a good two-thirds of the evening I felt like someone in a casino playing bacarat with a tarot pack.⁴⁵

The absence of an historically verifiable framework also determines the nature of the narrative action. Though newspaper reports (contemporary) which inspired the writing of Dance reveal reprisals or casualties on a larger scale than that envisaged by Musgrave, Arden again takes the credulity of the audience into account:

I didn't want to overdo the atrocity. You see if you have an enormous massacre in a play that is set in a previous period, people start asking where it was. I had to be very careful all through the play not to make it so documentary that people would start wondering and worrying why they hadn't read about it in history books. This is one of the principal reasons why Musgrave could not massacre the crowd at the end. That would have been altogether too unhistorical. As it was, at least one critic opened his notice by saying, in a jeering sort of way, "When did a serjeant last invade a

Yorkshire village with a gatling gun,
and hold the town to ransom?"⁴⁶

Despite the limitations described by Arden, there are positive advantages inherent in the use of fictionalized history--and these he uses to good effect. The use of purely fictitious characters, for instance, permits their presentation through diverse artistic conventions, conventions which admit of comic exaggeration and the like. Of course, such an approach is common to satire--whether of historical or fictitious characters --which, in turn, implies interpretation (and distortion) on the author's part. But used with actual personages in a presumably serious history play, the way is often open to point-less critical argument not about the central thematic problems but about the factual sources which the author may or may not have judiciously consulted.

In the absence of historically verifiable personages, such figures as the Mayor and Parson freely embody abstract and often caricatured nineteenth century attitudes. The same is true of the colliers in their public role. Arden personifies such attitudes as historic forces, not as merely one aspect of naturalistic character studies, and as such we more easily assimilate their thematic function in terms of the historic problem of which they are a part. Distressingly, we also discover that they reflect attitudes which are still very much a part of the twentieth century milieu.

The use of fiction also permits the author to telescope more freely those aspects of nineteenth century history which

are relevant to his theme. Moreover, the vague chronology to some extent universalizes the situation--something which is also facilitated by Arden's use of diverse artistic conventions.

Considered merely as a "period piece," then, Dance embodies all of its most colorful--and even over-simplified aspects--but without the vacuous historical comment that too often characterizes such works. Considered as a serious historical study, it embodies a variety of simplistic--and even dated--propagandistic attitudes, but without the crude historicism that rapidly exhausts our patience or interest. Actually, Arden intelligently fuses the most appealing and stimulating aspects of both in a manner which reveals both an historic and dramatic sense superior to that displayed by previously discussed playwrights. Because of this the contemporary relevance of Dance is more readily appreciable.

Speaking of Arden's plays in general, Hainsworth notes that

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance is the one where the topical reference is the most important and this in spite of its ostensibly taking place in the time of Queen Victoria. For the audience are made to identify with the townsfolk of the colliery town to whom Musgrave has come with his fellow-deserters from the army, to impress upon them their responsibility for the murder of civilians overseas in the interest of national policy and prestige. It is at the audience that Musgrave points his focusing gun in that climactic scene in the market place where he finally reveals his purpose. Even this play, however, is not merely topical. The questions it raises about violence are relevant to any age. 47

Hainsworth's evaluation is essentially correct.

In many ways, Dance reveals a successful realization of those theatrical elements which are only ineffectually suggested in Liberty. It also represents a skilful refinement of the author's approach in Armstrong. Of course the latter play does portray a wider social spectrum--ranging from royalty to low-land vagrants--and it gives perhaps more ambitious consideration to a variety of historical issues, something which is also true of Liberty. Hence, it is only natural that the author's approach be somewhat different. But it is also true that the narrative is unnecessarily obscure in places and this, in turn, gives rise to audience confusion in regard to both individual characters and certain historical issues.

Dance, on the other hand, reveals a well-integrated cohesiveness. The "blood-red" imagery of the language (both poetry and prose) effectively complements and interacts with the visually striking scarlet of the soldiers' tunics. In common with Armstrong, it reveals a dense and intricate complexity of meaning, conveyed by an astonishing variety of techniques and conventions--but here the author better maintains control over his material. The thematic relevance of the various characters, or the forces they personify, is unobtrusively maintained--however subtle or flamboyant the means by which such relevance is conveyed. For example, Annie resembles Meg in many respects: both are defined by ballad-like conventions; both are love-lost lovers; both are involved with (or victimized by) larger historical forces--Meg with religion, Annie with the military. But Annie's relationship with others is clearly a

manifestation of important thematic considerations. The relationship between Meg and the Evangelist, on the other hand, remains needlessly obscure and hence distracting because the Evangelist's role is never effectively clarified in terms of the larger historical context.

Consider, too, Musgrave and the Establishment in relation to Lindsay and the court. Both the soldier and the diplomat are in the service of and/or in rebellion against higher authority. But in Lindsay's case the relationship is distractingly obscure. In Musgrave's the relationship is clear--even though authority is personified by small town officials who, in the larger scheme of things, are of relatively minor importance. Musgrave's situation is complex, but it is also definitive. In view of the valid narrative flexibility of Armstrong, there seems little or no reason why the same should not be true of Lindsay's situation.

Taken together, though, Armstrong and Dance do indicate a level of accomplishment that is unattained by Bolt, Shaffer and Osborne. If Arden's achievement seems uneven (as illustrated by Liberty), it nonetheless represents an important contribution to contemporary drama in general and history plays in particular.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER VI

- 1 John Arden, Serjeant Musgrave's Dance: An Unhistorical Parable (New York, 1960). Subsequent references will be to this edition--hereafter cited in the text as Dance.
- 2 "Building the Play," 593.
- 3 Ibid., 593.
- 4 Anon. rev., Newsweek, Mar. 21, 1966, p. 98.
- 5 Taylor, Anger and After, p. 83.
- 6 "Who's for a Revolution," 46.
- 7 Wellwarth, Protest and Paradox, p. 269.
- 8 "Pacifist Manifesto" (anon. rev.), Time, Mar. 18, 1966, p. 76.
- 9 Jack Richardson, "Musgrave's Dance and Azdak's Circle," Commentary, XLI, 6 (June 1966), 75.
- 10 Richardson, "Dance and Circle," 75.
- 11 "Introduction" to Dance, p. 6: "Building the Play," 593.
- 12 Katharine J. Worth, "Avant Garde at the Royal Court Theatre: John Arden and N. F. Simpson," Experimental Drama, p. 207.
- 13 Lumley, New Trends, p. 262.
- 14 Of course, we need not read the play as a religious parable or allegory. It is interesting to note, however, that the author reveals a recurring interest in evangelical religion in Armstrong, The Business of Good Government and Ironhand.
- 15 Malcolm Page, "The Motives of Pacifists," Drama Survey, VI, 1 (Spring-Summer 1967), 70.
- 16 J. D. Hainsworth, "John Arden and the Absurd," REL, VII, 4 (Oct. 1966), 45.

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- 17 Richardson, "Dance and Circle," 75.
- 18 Alan Pryce-Jones, "Uplift and Downfall," Observer, Oct. 25, 1959, p. 25.
- 19 "Building the Play," 594-595.
- 20 Page, "Motives," 71.
- 21 Lumley, New Trends, p. 262.
- 22 G. W. Brandt, "Realism and Parables," Contemporary Theatre, p. 52.
- 23 "Telling a True Tale," 127.
- 24 John Arden, "Writers and Television: The Writer's View," Contrast, II, 2 (Winter 1962), 133.
- 25 Page, "Motives," 73.
- 26 Albert Hunt, "Arden's Stagecraft," Encore, XII, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1965), 10.
- 27 Hilary Spurling, "Royal Fortress," Spectator, Dec. 17, 1965, p. 809.
- 28 "Who's for a Revolution," 45.
- 29 "Arden of Chichester: John Arden talks to Frank Cox," Plays and Players, X, 11 (Aug. 1963), 18.
- 30 Tom Frideaux, "Fanatic Warrior Who Fought War," Life, April 1, 1966, p. 12.
- 31 Taylor, Anger and After, p. 82.
- 32 John Arden, "Delusions of Grandeur," Twentieth Century, CLXIX (Feb. 1961), 202.
- 33 Penelope Gilliatt, "The Arden Limbo," Observer Weekend Review, Dec. 12, 1965, p. 25.

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- 34 Irving Wardle, "Intellectual marauder," 22.
- 35 Spurling, "Royal Fortress," 809.
- 36 Prideaux, "Fanatic Warrior," 12.
- 37 "Who's for a Revolution," 42.
- 38 "Building the Play," 599-600.
- 39 Ronald Bryden, "Deep as England," New Statesman,
Dec. 17, 1965, p. 979.
- 40 Richardson, "Dance and Circle," 75.
- 41 Wilfred Sheed, "Producing the Unproducible," Commonweal,
April 15, 1966, pp. 110-112.
- 42 "Building the Play," 593.
- 43 Bryden, "Deep as England," 979.
- 44 "Building the Play," 596.
- 45 Alan Pryce-Jones, "Uplift and Downfall," 25.
- 46 "Building the Play," 593-594.
- 47 Hainsworth, "Arden and the Absurd," 43.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE SUMMARY

Despite the diversity of approaches to historical material, the four playwrights reveal a common desire to provide a meaningful historical context for the dramatic action. For the most part, however, only Arden succeeds in doing just that. Though Bolt and Shaffer draw attention to issues which presumably help to define and lend significance to the thoughts and actions of their characters, too often the historical milieu merely serves as a foil by which the stature (both moral and dramatic) of the protagonists may be painlessly enhanced. Consequently, in Seasons we feel ourselves to be in the England not of Sir Thomas More, but of an evasively sympathetic Robert Bolt. Similarly, in Royal Hunt we are exposed to the Peru of neither Pizarro nor his Inca antagonist, but of Peter Shaffer--borrowed, somewhat unimaginatively, from his nineteenth century historical source.

It must be emphasized, of course, that the use of historical material necessitates rigorous selectivity on the author's part and that his thematic concerns will influence inescapably his choice of historical priorities. Such circumstances are both conducive to, and provide ample justification for, the use of fictionalized incidents or encounters. In short, "objectivity"

is neither possible nor desirable. However, when an author makes abundantly clear (as Bolt and Shaffer do) that the actions or moral decisions of his protagonists are dependent for their thematic relevance on the historical context in which such actions or decisions are taken, then the extraneous historical forces (or the characters who personify them) assume a position of central importance.

But this is precisely where Bolt and Shaffer fail us. More's difficult position is assuredly interesting, from both an historic and dramatic point of view, and Bolt does attempt to sustain our interest from both perspectives. What emerges, however, is not a meaningful context for the action but an historical vacuum. The same is true of Shaffer's play, despite the author's efforts to the contrary. The unfortunate result is that, unable to "place" the characters either historically or dramatically, we are discouraged from regarding their situations as relevant in terms of contemporary life--which is, after all, a major concern of both authors.

Osborne's Luther provides a somewhat different case in that the author is less fearful of confronting his protagonist with definitive conflicts. Even here, however, the result is less than satisfactory. There exists a dichotomy between Luther the private and Luther the public man. Of course, such a dichotomy is inherently interesting, but in the context of the play the two aspects of Luther are merely yoked, rather than dramatically related or integrated. This becomes uncomfortably apparent in the narrative structure itself when, in the Peasant

Revolt scene, we are suddenly confronted or deluged with important issues which Osborne has heretofore failed to explore. Consequently, we suspect an uncertainty of purpose on the author's part. Such uncertainty can at least partially be accounted for by reference to the author's source--a psychological study of Luther interestingly related to the historical milieu. Osborne seems undecided as to the degree of emphasis to be accorded to either, but he does attempt to be faithful to both. Though individual scenes prove effective in their own right, the play as a whole seems derivative in the perjorative sense of the word.

Actually, Osborne's failure is symptomatic of a weakness which may also be ascribed to Bolt and Shaffer--namely, an inability or unwillingness to provide an equitable balance between individual characterization and historical context. In Seasons, Royal Hunt and Luther, the authors do attempt to satisfy our curiosity and interest in both respects. As we have seen, however, too often one is accomplished at the inartistic expense of the other. Moreover, the three authors attempt to ameliorate or conceal this imbalance by overtly theatrical means. Bolt's Common Man and Shaffer's Old Martin, for instance, provide narrative continuity and interpretive comments, but they seem mere devices to distract our attention from the author's evasiveness in regard to important matters, or to engage our sympathies or emotional involvement when such reactions are unwarranted and undeserved. The same is true of the Knight's address in Luther, and while it does provide

badly needed information, it also reminds us of the author's inattention to such matters in previous scenes. At issue here is not the validity of the direct address (or any other theatrical device), but the transparent dramatic and narrative weaknesses that necessitate its use.

It may be argued, of course, that Bolt, Shaffer and Osborne write primarily about individuals and that it is only natural that they focus more attention on the central protagonists than on the extraneous forces with which they are involved. However, the plays are also concerned with such broad considerations as social protest, various aspects of political conflict, and the sobering implications of cultural genocide. Consequently, there remains the need for judicious selectivity if the individuals are themselves to be defined adequately. In the absence of such criterion, the protagonists become little more than mechanical contrivances used to distract, rather than engage, our attention in regard to issues that the authors obviously thought important enough to include. The individuals, in effect, become devices. They may blend smoothly into the purely structural edifice of the play, but in the process the various forces or moral abstractions they ostensibly represent become hopelessly diluted, if not lost altogether. More's private "self" and Pizarro's troubled "conscience" serve as catalysts for much of the narrative action. But we suspect, perhaps unfairly, that the demands of plot, rather than important thematic

considerations, define their importance. Osborne's Luther proves more satisfactorily defined in this respect, but the larger relevance of his spiritual torment remains only vaguely or tenuously related to the historical context because the context itself emerges as a belated after-thought on the part of the author. Of course, if it were the authors' concern to show that the protagonists are merely puppets at the mercy of incomprehensible historic forces, then the approach and the final effect would be compatible with such an aim. However, nothing in their plays or their critical writings indicate that such is their primary objective and we are justified in attributing their failure to a shallow historical approach, faulty narrative construction--or both.

With the exception of Liberty, Arden does, for the most part, avoid the worst faults of Bolt, Shaffer and Osborne. Though his plays differ from the latter authors' in that they seem more concerned with society in general than with particular individuals, his use of historical material is considerably more sophisticated. Rather than using the historical context as a foil to enhance the stature of his central characters, historical issues themselves become "protagonists." Rather than evade or dilute the interesting paradoxes and contradictions inherent in his situations or settings, he exploits them to great dramatic effect. Moreover, Arden achieves, in Armstrong and Dance, the equitable balance between individual characterization and historical context that eludes the other playwrights.

Arden's plays also reflect an historical insight that quite surpasses that of his contemporaries. It may be argued, of course, that his philosophical views or thematic considerations dictate different historical priorities. However, such an argument fails to account for the evasions (however theatrically disguised) that characterize the works of Bolt and Shaffer, or the distressing discontinuity at the heart of Luther. Arden, in contrast, exudes confidence in his material and he is successful in translating it into dramatic terms. Assisting him here, of course, is his broad knowledge of artistic history and his ability to exploit effectively diverse theatrical (and literary) conventions. Rather than utilizing theatrical devices to gloss over or evade pertinent issues, he juxtaposes them in such a way that we become aware of or acquire yet another perspective in regard to the play's thematic concerns. He uses fictionalized situations to similar effect and it is perhaps ironic that Arden's fiction seems more historically plausible than the ostensibly authentic historical allusions that punctuate the narratives of Bolt or Shaffer.

Actually, Arden's achievement invites more than favourable evaluation in relation to that of his immediate contemporaries. It also encourages cautious comparison with such diverse and internationally established figures as Brecht and Artaud. In his revised edition of The Dark Comedy, J. L. Styan comments on the market place scene in Dance in terms which are applicable to Arden's history plays in general:

Arden creates his argument in directly sensuous terms, as Shakespeare does in his problem comedies....The act meets all of Artaud's requirements for a theatre of cruelty and constitutes a prime example of 'total theatre' in which content and technique are interdependent--as they are in the best of Brecht.¹

In pleading for the return of spectacle to the stage, Artaud cites "the last great melodramas"² of the nineteenth century as evidence of what is lacking in modern theatre. In advocating his concept of total theatre Artaud articulates his awareness of the dangers and the advantages:

There is a risk. But let it not be forgotten that though a theatrical gesture is violent, it is disinterested; and that the theater teaches precisely the uselessness of the action which, once done, is not to be done....³

As noted earlier, Arden, too, is fascinated and influenced by nineteenth century melodrama. Moreover, he expresses his admiration for a kind of theatre which is roughly analogous to Artaud's and he articulates his awareness of his uses and abuses in similar terms:

I am ...aware that pacifists may be alarmed by the notion of a theatre full of people intoxicated en masse by the power of Dionysus. Of course. Like any other pattern of human activity, this one is liable to abuse. The Nuremberg rallies are a classic example. One must rely, as in all other departments of life, upon morality and decency, and upon a code of personal conduct. It is dangerous. But so is nuclear physics. We cannot prevent physicists carrying out their research. We can, however, prevent their using their discoveries from blowing up the world....⁴

Arden's affinity with Brecht is obvious enough, particularly in regard to his theatrical approach. It should also be pointed out that Arden resembles Bernard Shaw in many ways. Shaw (like Brecht) delighted in and exploited to great effect various paradoxical situations, and though one tends to associate his plays mainly with brilliant verbal rhetoric, he was conversant with an astonishing variety of artistic forms and conventions--many of which he appropriated and adapted for his own use. In a 1950 article, Shaw surveys and summarizes the nature of his dramatic achievement:

Opera taught me to shape my plays into recitatives, arias, duets, trios, ensemble finales, and bravura pieces to display the technical accomplishments of the executants, with the quaint result that all the critics, friendly and hostile, took my plays to be so new, so extraordinary, so revolutionary, that the Times critic declared they were not plays at all as plays had been defined for all time by Aristotle. The truth was that I was going back atavistically to Aristotle, to the tribune stage, to the circus, to the didactic Mysteries, to the word music of Shakespear, to the forms of my idol Mozart, and to the stage business of the great players whom I had actually seen acting....I was, and still am, the most old-fashioned playwright outside China and Japan.⁵

Arden, like Shaw, is also an "old-fashioned playwright." He also feels that some critics are insensitive to, or ignorant of, the rather traditional forms and techniques that he utilizes for his own particular ends:

I cannot help it if the critics are ignorant about the history of the theatre. These are reputable theatrical conventions that have been going off and on for four or five hundred years. It seems to me that it is up to the critics to know about these things and to recognize them.⁶

Of course, the parallels between Arden and his illustrious predecessors must not be pressed too far, nor can we overlook evidence of similar influences in the plays of Bolt, Shaffer, and Osborne. Unfortunately, the latter playwrights do not invite the flattering comparisons that we accord to Arden. Bolt's *Common Man* appears to have wandered in from we know not (or care not) where; Shaffer's total theatre emerges as little more than an irrelevant Artaudian appendage; the Knight's address in Luther smacks more of bad or borrowed Brecht than it does of original Osborne. In the final analysis we come to suspect, perhaps unjustly, that such authors have borrowed both their ideas and techniques, rather than assimilated, for their own dramatic ends, the wide variety of sources which it is their prerogative as artists to exploit.

Arden, on the other hand, appears to have absorbed, whether directly or indirectly, extraneous influences and fused them with ideas or styles which are uniquely his own. He draws freely on the sources of academic and artistic history, but easily transcends the limitations of either. Consequently, each play exudes an unmistakable period or historical atmosphere, yet each is modern or "Ardenesque." It must not be inferred, of course, that Arden's aesthetic theory or practice provides an immutable guide to the writing and evaluation of history plays, but his plays do suggest two important criteria. One is that the creation of a dramatically viable historical context demands an easy familiarity with the period under scrutiny. This enables

the playwright to assimilate, discard and even distort the ideas without appearing slavishly imitative. The other is that the ideas themselves more readily engage and hold our attention if the author is conversant with the vast array of artistic conventions that were once used (and continue to be used) to convey and define them. The interaction between abstract ideas and theatrical conventions allows for the exploration of innumerable subtleties, complexities, paradoxes, ambiguities, or ironies in a manner which is at once verbal and visual, historical and modern, objective and immediate.

The final result, of course, is that we more easily accept the contemporary relevance of the historical matter at hand. Understandably, Arden is not consistently successful. But his plays demonstrate that while the use of historical material is by no means new to drama, an historical approach to problems of contemporary importance remains a basically sound and often theatrically exciting venue by which such problems can be explored. For that, we can forgive the author any number of failures.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER VII

¹ J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy, rev. ed. (Cambridge at the University Press, 1968), pp. 172-173.

² Artaud, p. 76.

³ Artaud, p. 82.

⁴ John Arden, "A Theatre for the Gods," Peace News, Oct. 25, 1963, p.8.

⁵ Bernard Shaw, "The Play of Ideas," Shaw on Theatre, ed. E.J. West (New York, 1958), p. 294.

⁶ "Writers and Television," 133.

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