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Approaching plays

# Approaching plays

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The Open University Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

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## Introduction

Do you want to get more out of drama? This course is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary plays. You will learn about dialogue, stage directions, blank verse, dramatic structure and conventions and aspects of performance.

It's not necessary for you to have previously read any of the plays mentioned in the course before embarking on it, but to get the most from it you may like to obtain texts of the following:

- Churchill, Caryl (1994) *Top Girls*, with commentary and notes by Bill Naismith, Methuen.
- Ibsen, Henrik (1992) *A Doll's House*, Dover Thrift Publications.
- Shakespeare, William (2005) *As You Like It*, edited by H. J. Oliver, Penguin.
- Shakespeare, William (1996) *Henry V*, edited by A. R. Humphries, Penguin.
- Shakespeare, William (1996) *Othello*, edited by Kenneth Muir, Penguin.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the basic technical terms associated with plays
- make the most out the text of a play.

## 1 Approaching plays

Most people's experience of plays will be through seeing them on stage, or on television or video. Or, thinking of drama in a more general sense, we might be avid watchers of TV soaps or films. But, as a student of literature, you are sitting at home with a book open in front of you. It contains the text of a play. What, then, are you to make of the words on the page before you? If the script you were examining was intended for a film or a TV play it would look different from the examples that follow, since these media focus more on the visual aspect, and the conventions or presentation for a film or TV script are different from those of a play script intended primarily for the stage. In this course, we shall be concentrating on play texts, but we shall also be offering some guidance for how to get the most out of watching a **performance**.

### Example 1

ANGIE Wish she was dead.

KIT Wanna watch *The Exterminator*?

ANGIE You're sitting on my leg.

KIT There's nothing on telly. We can have an ice cream. Angie?

ANGIE Shall I tell you something?

KIT Do you wanna watch *The Exterminator*?

ANGIE It's X, innit.

KIT I can get into Xs.

ANGIE Shall I tell you something?

KIT We'll go to something else. We'll go to Ipswich. What's on the Odeon?

ANGIE She won't let me, will she?

KIT Don't tell her.

ANGIE I've no money.

KIT I'll pay.

### Example 2

NORA *Really!* Did a big dog run after you? But it didn't bite you? No, dogs don't bite nice little dolly children. You mustn't look at the parcels, Ivar. What are they? Ah, I daresay you would like to know. No, no – it's something nasty! Come, let us have a game! What shall we play at? Hide and seek? Yes, we'll play hide and seek. Bob shall hide first. Must I hide? Very well, I'll hide



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first.

*[She and the children laugh and shout and romp in and out of the room; at last NORA hides under the table; the children rush in and look for her but do not see her; they hear her smothered laughter, run to the table, lift up the cloth and find her. Shouts of laughter. She crawls forward and pretends to frighten them. Fresh laughter. Meanwhile there has been a knock at the hall door but none of them has noticed it. The door is half opened and KROGSTAD appears, he waits a little; the game goes on.]*

**Example 3**

KING HENRY    Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,  
                         Or close the wall up with our English dead!  
                         In peace there's nothing so becomes a man  
                         As modest stillness and humility:  
                         But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
                         Then imitate the action of the tiger;  
                         Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,  
                         Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage;  
                         Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;  
                         Let it pry through the portage of the head  
                         Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it  
                         As fearfully as doth a galléd rock  
                         O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,  
                         Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.

**Activity 1**

First we would like you to look at the examples above from three scripts for plays, which all look different on the page, and which offer different challenges in interpretation. As you read, ask yourself what the extracts have in common.

[View discussion - Activity 1](#)

I shall shortly be looking at the three extracts in detail, but for now I should like to focus on the main differences between them. There are no **stage directions** in the extract I have chosen from *Top Girls*, which consists simply of short lines of **dialogue** exchanged between two characters. In fact, I have cheated a bit here and deliberately

## Approaching plays

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chosen a passage which gives speech only; when I give the longer extract for discussion you will see that Churchill does give some directions. But on the whole there are relatively few in this play, unlike *A Doll's House*, where Ibsen gives many instructions to do with setting, action and expression. In the example here, the speech seems almost secondary to the action, and there are clearly actors on stage (the children) for whom no dialogue is written, though they are not silent, and another actor appears who is silent for some time. Henry V's speech is written in **blank verse**, a poetic form consisting of unrhymed **iambic pentameters** that was generally used in drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in combination with prose dialogue. The play script, put together after the performance, contains no stage directions beyond indications of entrances, exits, fights and flourishes. Obviously techniques that are used for analysing poetry and other texts can be relevant in reading a speech like this, but what is important to remember is that it is being delivered by an actor, in costume, to other actors, and to an audience.

This is where a play text differs crucially from a poem, a novel or a short story – it is a text for performance. Poems and stories may be performed in the sense that they may be read aloud, and in that event the way that they are read is itself an interpretation, but a play text is specifically a text for performance, and therefore it is necessary to read it with attention to the way the words will be brought to full life on stage; the performance will need to make not just an aural but also a visual appeal. Another important difference between drama and prose fiction, however, lies in the absence (generally speaking) of a narrator. There are exceptions to be found, for instance in the **chorus** in *Henry V* and *Romeo and Juliet*, or, to take two more modern examples, in Peter Schaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons*. In a novel, the narrator, typically, will act as a guide and interpreter, shaping the narrative to give it a particular significance, evaluating character and commenting on the action. In particular, through the handling of point of view the narrator can direct the reader's sympathies. On stage, the play will be interpreted by the director and the actors, and the way in which the audience's sympathies are manipulated is less obvious; much will depend on the extent to which they can identify with one or more of the characters.

## 2 Dialogue

Here is a longer passage from the scene in *Top Girls*:

*JOYCE's backyard. The house with backdoor is upstage. Downstage a shelter made of junk, made by children. Two girls, ANGIE and KIT, are in it, squashed together. ANGIE is 16, KIT is 12. They cannot be seen from the house. JOYCE calls from the house.*

JOYCE           Angie. Angie are you out there?

*Silence. They keep still and wait. When nothing else happens they relax.*

ANGIE           Wish she was dead.

KIT               Wanna watch *The Exterminator*?

ANGIE           You're sitting on my leg.

KIT               There's nothing on telly. We can have an ice cream. Angie?

ANGIE           Shall I tell you something?

KIT               Do you wanna watch *The Exterminator*?

ANGIE           It's X, innit.

KIT               I can get into Xs.

ANGIE           Shall I tell you something?

KIT               We'll go to something else. We'll go to Ipswich. What's on the Odeon?

ANGIE           She won't let me, will she?

KIT               Don't tell her.

ANGIE           I've no money.

KIT               I'll pay.

ANGIE           She'll moan though, won't she?

KIT               I'll ask her for you if you like.

ANGIE           I've no money, I don't want you to pay.

KIT               I'll ask her.

ANGIE           She don't like you.

KIT               I still got three pounds birthday money. Did she say she don't like me? I'll go by myself then.

ANGIE           Your mum don't let you. I got to take you.

KIT               She won't know.

ANGIE           You'd be scared who'd sit next to you.

KIT               No I wouldn't.

She does like me anyway.

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Tell me then.

ANGIE Tell you what?

KIT It's you she doesn't like.

ANGIE Well I don't like her so tough shit.

JOYCE (*off*) Angie. Angie. Angie. I know you're out there. I'm not coming out after you. You come in here.

*Silence. Nothing happens.*

In contrast to the dense blank verse of Henry's speech, most of the dialogue in Extract 1 is in alternating one-line speeches. The technical term for this is **stichomythia**, from the Greek 'line talk'. It was frequently used in classical drama, to convey a kind of verbal parrying, accompanied by antithesis (opposites, contrasting ideas) and repetitive patterns, and is an effective way of creating tension and conflict. Although it has been used less since the classical period, Shakespeare and other dramatists have employed stichomythia, and it is not uncommon in plays of the twentieth century.

### Activity 2

Does the stichomythia here work to create tension and conflict?

[View discussion - Activity 2](#)

The language is not poetical in the usual sense and it employs the idioms of colloquial speech ('Wanna', 'innit', 'tough shit'), but although we might say that this is naturalistic dialogue, it is still constructed; it does not resemble a transcript of real speech.

### Activity 3

I have already drawn attention to the frequency of negative statements. What else do you notice about the patterning of the language? How does it help our understanding of the scene?

[View discussion - Activity 3](#)

Drama has been defined as a process of conflict and resolution. In this scene we have concentrated so far on the tension that builds up between the two girls, and that tension, which is a matter of rivalry and of closeness, is reflected in the use of space. The girls are placed in close physical contact in the makeshift hut, and the indication in the stage directions that they are 'squashed together' is emphasized in a speech: 'You're sitting on my leg'. Later in the scene Kit says: 'You're sitting on me'. So, despite the sparse stage directions a director would know how the girls should be placed onstage. Even within the confined space of the hut, the reversal of positions shows that movement is taking place and it is through movement that the audience

### Approaching plays

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can be made aware of the fluctuations in the relationship between the two girls. A further dimension of tension is created by the part that Joyce plays in the scene. The girls' refusal to answer her call unites them against her, the adult; she represents the outside world within which their hut is a juvenile retreat, and a place of secrets. The rest of the scene is punctuated not only by the silences but by Joyce's calls to the two girls, and later we will see that the tension manifests itself in outright antagonism on the part of Angie.

### 3 Stage directions

Here is a longer passage from the scene from *A Doll's House* (The MAID referred to is the NURSE).

*[RANK, HELMER and MRS LINDE go downstairs. The NURSE comes forward with the children; NORA shuts the hall door.]*

NORA How fresh and well you look! Such red cheeks! – like apples and roses. *[The children all talk at once while she speaks to them.]* Have you had great fun? That's splendid! What, you pulled both Emmy and Bob along on the sledge? Both at once? That was good. You are a clever boy, Ivar. Let me take her for a little, Anne. My sweet little baby doll! *[ Takes the baby from the MAID and dances it up and down ]* Yes, yes, Mother will dance with Bob too. What! Have you been snowballing? I wish I had been there too! No, no, I will take their things off, Anne; please let me do it, it is such fun. Go in now, you look half frozen. There is some hot coffee for you on the stove.

*[The NURSE goes into the room on the left. NORA takes off the children's things and throws them about while they all talk to her at once.]*

NORA *Really!* Did a big dog run after you? But it didn't bite you? No, dogs don't bite nice little dolly children. You mustn't look at the parcels, Ivar. What are they? Ah, I daresay you would like to know. No, no – it's something nasty! Come, let us have a game! What shall we play at? Hide and seek? Yes, we'll play hide and seek. Bob shall hide first. Must I hide? Very well, I'll hide first.

*[She and the children laugh and shout and romp in and out of the room; at last NORA hides under the table; the children rush in and look for her but do not see her; they hear her smothered laughter, run to the table, lift up the cloth and find her. Shouts of laughter. She crawls forward and pretends to frighten them. Fresh laughter. Meanwhile there has been a knock at the hall door but none of them has noticed it. The door is half opened and KROGSTAD appears, he waits a little; the game goes on.]*

Unlike Caryl Churchill, Ibsen writes very full stage directions, which in this extract take up almost as much space as the dialogue.

#### Activity 4

What do you think is the significance of these directions?

[View discussion - Activity 4](#)

Furthermore, the directions indicate not only movement but sound. No lines are written for the children, but they are far from silent; they talk and laugh and shout.

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Nora's questions in her first speech indicate something of what they say. Incidentally, her speech also indicates further action: 'No, no, I will take their things off, Anne'.

Speech and stage directions together give us a picture of a mother happy to play with her children at their level. When she takes their outside clothes off, she 'throws them about' rather than putting them tidily away, as a responsible adult might, and the directions tell us that there is a good deal of romping about for Nora and the children, and that it is Nora who hides under the table. The scene contributes to our view of her as a vigorous, playful young woman, and links with the way she is represented in other scenes in the play. Nora's passionate physicality is evident later, in a more sexual sense, in the scene when she dances the tarantella. And the way she addresses her children ('My sweet little baby doll!'; 'No, dogs don't bite nice little dolly children') recalls the way her husband has spoken to her in the first scene of the play ('Is that my little lark twittering out there?'; 'It's a sweet little spendthrift, but she uses up a deal of money').

Stage directions are perhaps the most obvious way in which a playwright will indicate how the text is to be performed, but they need to be interpreted as much as the speeches do, and will not necessarily be followed literally. Here, for instance, is the description of the Helmers' living room with which the play text starts:

*SCENE – A room furnished comfortably and tastefully but not extravagantly. At the back a door to the right leads to the entrance hall; another to the left leads to HELMER'S study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door and beyond a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door, and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking chair; between the stove and the door a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter.*

### Activity 5

What is the impression created by this description?

[View discussion - Activity 5](#)

This is *her* space (Torvald has his study offstage), and she is seen in it for almost the whole play, only being absent for the scene between Krogstad and Mrs Linde at the beginning of Act III. The visual impression should be of a claustrophobic interior, and this may be created in a literal way, following Ibsen's instructions as closely as possible. But it may also be interpreted more freely. The last production that I saw, performed by Shared Experience, actually included in the set a fairly large doll's house, large enough for adult characters to crawl in and out. This does not form part of Ibsen's directions, but is one way of interpreting the claustrophobia that the directions suggest, as well, of course, as giving literal expression to the title of the play.

## 4 Blank verse

The speech from *Henry V* offers a way of transferring skills you have acquired if you have studied poetry. As with any form of poetry, although there is no rhyme, the language is highly patterned, and it is important to pay attention to the ways in which this patterning is achieved. It is a good idea to get into the habit of marking up your text when you are doing a close analysis of a particular passage. The following shows how Henry V's speech (given in its entirety this time) might be annotated.

In this speech King Henry is performing a specific role. This is a public occasion of enormous importance, the first engagement of the English army against the French. The simple family men who have arrived in France must be transformed into a collective fighting machine, and he must achieve this end through **oratory**. In the first scene of the play the Archbishop of Canterbury has extolled the King's **rhetorical** skill; here we have a chance to witness it for ourselves.

### Activity 6

Using the annotations in our example to help you, pick out some of the rhetorical devices in this speech which seem designed to encourage a communal fighting spirit.



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iambic pentameter — Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,  
 Or close the wall up with our English dead!

self-contained — In peace there's nothing so becomes a man  
 As modest stillness and humility:

hard sounds — But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
 Then imitate the action of the tiger:  
Stiffer the sinews, conjure up the blood,  
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage;  
 Then send the eye a terrible aspect;  
 Let it pry through the portage of the head  
 Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it  
 As fearfully as doth a galled rock  
 O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,  
 Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.

alliteration — active & commands  
 simile — elongated & extended metaphor  
 echoes sound of waves? — emphasised - no pause after 'spirit'  
 hard sounds — suggests relentless inevitability

biblical suggestion? — emphasis on family  
 community - as in 'friends' line 1

build-up of short phrases, culminating in longer final 1/2 lines - helped by use of caesura. — simile alliteration - emphasises eagerness?

run on  
 apostrophe  
 repetition  
 Englishness

To his full height! On, on you noblest English,  
 Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof! -  
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,  
 Have in these parts from morn till even fought,  
 And sheathed their swords for lack of argument.  
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest  
 That those whom you called fathers did beget you!  
 Be copy now to men of grosser blood,  
 And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,  
 Whose limbs were made in England show us here  
 The mettle of your pasture; let us swear  
 That you are worth your breeding - which I doubt not;  
 For there is none of you so mean and base  
 That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.  
 I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,  
Straining upon the start! The game's afoot!  
 Follow your spirit, and upon this charge  
 Cry, 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

[Click to view annotated excerpt as pdf.](#)

[View discussion - Activity 6](#)

It is clear that the King is instructing his men in the requirements of the occasion:

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man  
As modest stillness and humility.

Notice how the first line runs into the second one, a technique known as **enjambement** that here suggests that an *unquestionable statement* is being made about the way men behave in peacetime. This reasonable idea from a reasonable king is about to be shattered by one small word denoting change, 'But', which is immediately given additional emphasis by the alliteration of 'blast' and 'blows'. Henry has to prepare his men's minds for battle. After satisfying them (and the audience) that he is a peace-loving, reasonable king, he then needs to get them to reject this image, throw off any constraints on their blood lust, such as 'modest stillness and humility', and act more like 'the tiger' than 'a man'. In a sense he is making it 'all right' for them, and the literary devices help him achieve this. He draws the men close to him by calling them 'dear friends', and by suggesting in the repeated 'Once more' that the 'dear friends' have been through this together before and have survived. Furthermore, the first person plural associates them all (him as well as them) with 'our English dead'.

Throughout the speech there is a repetition of 'blood' to denote heritage, but in a context of bloodshed – where any escape from the fighting would result in 'dishonour' to the soldiers' mothers. The soldiers are invited to offer themselves as role-models to 'men of grosser blood'. The 'good yeomen' are being asked to demonstrate (or repay?) the goodness that England has given to them ('The mettle of your pasture'). All this could be seen as a group of frightened people being made to feel guilty of this fear or appreciative of the opportunity to prove their gratitude. By the end of the speech Henry confidently envisages his men as 'greyhounds in the slips/Straining upon the start'. But he fails to acknowledge (he cannot afford to acknowledge) that greyhounds are bred for little else, whereas his 'dear friends' have other considerations such as the 'wives left poor' and the 'children rawly left' (IV.1.130–42) which Williams, one of the English soldiers, draws attention to later in the play.

The dead will be 'English dead', and the speech has a strong sense of Englishness.

### Activity 7

Try to find examples of the way language is used to suggest a sense of national identity.

[View discussion - Activity 7](#)

Those addressed – the soldiers outside Harfleur – are invited to identify with the 'Harry' who is part of the 'England and Saint George'. The inclusion of Saint George reinforces the idea that God is already involved via this Saint's protection of England, so 'Cry, "God"...' is more a recognition of this support than a plea for it. Through his

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clever use of rhetoric Henry succeeds in stimulating patriotic fervour, convincing the men of the rightness of their action, suggesting to them the inevitability of the action, and utilizing their sense of manly pride which is closely tied up with their sense of being English. In the theatre this speech is commonly rounded off with resounding cheers and even in an age when people are more sceptical of patriotism, it still has the power to stir an audience. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the next scene is one in which the common soldiers mock the rhetoric of this speech:

**BARDOLPH** On, on, on, on, on! To the breach, to the breach!

It is worth reminding you, too, that Shakespeare's play was performed before it was published. In discussing the language, I have made little reference to the performance aspects of this speech but, just as with Ibsen and Churchill, we need to be aware as we read about how, and in what context, the actor would deliver these lines. You will find an extract from *Macbeth* discussed from this point below.

## 5 Play structure

Just like a novel or a poem, a play will have some sort of structure. The traditional plot of a play will consist of an **exposition**, action leading to a **climax**, and a **denouement** or resolution. A certain amount of information about characters and events is necessary at the start of a play, and sometimes an explanation of what has happened in the past is required for the audience to make sense of what is to follow: all this is accomplished through the exposition. Some skill is necessary if the exposition is to be interesting, and subtle, natural-seeming, not holding the action up for too long. The plays of Ibsen offer a particularly interesting variation on this theme, since the action of the play is in fact to unravel those happenings in the past that have led to the present consequences that the play is concerned with. It has been said that his plays are one long exposition.

Many modern plays eschew this sort of structure. *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, which has been described as a play in which nothing happens – twice, has two acts that parallel each other rather than making any sort of forward movement. The idea of climax is subverted by the absence of any excitement, the ‘action’ consists of intentions that fail to be implemented, and any sense of final resolution is denied. At the end of the play, the tree, which at the opening has been bare, may have gained four or five leaves, but the characters remain as they were in the beginning. In another break with tradition, the first act of *Top Girls* uses characters that are not seen or referred to at all in the rest of the play, and the final scene backtracks to a year before the previous one, so that the end of the play does not coincide with the end of the action it purports to represent. In the BBC performance on the video the order of the first two scenes is reversed, so that we are introduced to one of the characters who will be central in the rest of the play, but the scene in the Top Girls agency with which it now starts is not an exposition in the traditional sense. It perhaps makes more sense when discussing drama of the twentieth century and later to think of exposition in terms of themes.

In working out the structure of a play, particularly where the acts are divided into a number of scenes, as in Shakespeare, it can be helpful to make brief summaries of the scenes. These summaries will not only help to clarify the action, but are later useful for revision purposes.

### Activity 8

Try making a summary of the three scenes of Act I of *As You Like It*. How does Shakespeare achieve his exposition? Do these scenes further the plot in any way?

[View discussion - Activity 8](#)

Before the denouement can take place, there are two key features identified by Aristotle that are still important in any drama: **anagnorisis**, which can be translated as recognition or discovery, and **peripeteia**, or a change from one state of affairs to its opposite, a reversal of fortune. The famous example used by Aristotle to illustrate his

### Approaching plays

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theory is that of *Oedipus Rex*. Once Oedipus, king of Corinth, has recognized that it was he himself who, unknowingly, killed his father and thus condemned the city to relentless plague, he puts out his own eyes and goes into voluntary exile, thus reversing his fortunes.

#### Activity 9

Can you think of any scenes in *As You Like It* which mark moments of discovery/recognition or a reversal in the state of affairs?

[View discussion - Activity 9](#)

We have just analysed the play in terms of classical dramatic structure. Modern criticism has suggested other ways of looking at the play's structure, which you will find discussed in *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*. Interestingly, what all these analyses have in common is a three-part form, which at its most basic can be expressed as beginning, middle and end.

## 6 From text to performance

### 6.1 Performance and production

The idea that drama is a performed art should, by now, be one with which you feel familiar. What should also be clear from each of the examples discussed so far is that there is a range of factors to consider when approaching a dramatic text, and that to engage with any dramatic work we need to consider more than just the words on the page. Here, I'll be asking you to think about the language of the text, and about what's involved in moving outwards from the page to the stage. I will also be asking you to begin thinking about the text in relationship to its *production* and *reception*. This means acknowledging that the process of moving from the text to the performance involves making decisions about, among other things, delivery, movement, set design, sound, costume and lighting.

The following two extracts are very different; the first is from the Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth*, and the second from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Both, however, also contain some similarities in terms of how they suggest performance possibilities. Here they are reproduced without the stage directions. Read the following extracts carefully, noting how the language implies possibilities for performance.

#### Extract 1

GENTLEWOMAN Lo you, here she comes. This is her very guise, and upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her, stand close.

DOCTOR How came she by that light?

GENTLEWOMAN Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually, 'tis her command.

DOCTOR You see her eyes are open.

GENTLEWOMAN Ay, but their sense are shut.

DOCTOR What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

GENTLEWOMAN It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands; I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

LADY Yet here's a spot.

MACBETH

DOCTOR Hark, she speaks.

#### Extract 2

HELMER Nora, what do you think I have got here?

NORA Money!



### Approaching plays

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- HELMER There you are! Do you think I don't know what a lot is wanted for housekeeping at Christmas time?
- NORA Ten shillings – a pound – two pounds! Thank you, thank you, Torvald; that will keep me going for a long time.
- HELMER Indeed it must.
- NORA Yes, yes, it will. But come here and let me show you what I have bought. And all so cheap! Look, here is a new suit for Ivar and a sword, and a horse and a trumpet for Bob, and a doll and dolly's bedstead for Emmy - they are very plain, but anyway she will soon break them in pieces. And here are dress lengths and handkerchiefs for the maids; old Anne really ought to have something better.
- HELMER And what is in this parcel?
- NORA No, no! You mustn't see that till this evening.

There are obvious contrasts between the two extracts, both in the language used and in the way the subject of the dialogue is revealed to us. The first draws us into a dialogue, but one that is highly ambiguous as to its subject, at least at the start. It becomes apparent that this is a scene of voyeurism, in which those watching observe the somnambulant rituals of Lady Macbeth. The second extract presents an altogether more naturalistic scene; here there are identifiable characters, engaged in a dialogue about a discernible subject. There is however a sense in which the language in the two extracts is very similar, and that is in its *performative function*. Dramatic language often ensures that the dramatic situation is constituted in the speech-act itself; in the Shakespearean and earlier periods the verbal indicators of dramatic action were especially important, given the absence of the visual and technical means of presentation we have today. Here the speech of the Doctor and the Gentlewoman suggests a series of actions carried out by Lady Macbeth (sleepwalking, carrying a light, washing), while the dialogue between Torvald and Nora denotes various actions, gestures and dynamics; the counting of the money, the movement of Torvald towards Nora to look at the presents, and Nora's display of them, his curiosity in the parcel that Nora then refuses to let him see.

#### Activity 10

What are some of the implications for the performance of these extracts?

[View discussion - Activity 10](#)

#### Activity 11

Read the following extract, and note the main differences between this and the two extracts above. What are the main performance considerations?

Extract 3

## Approaching plays

*Stage in darkness but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone.*

*AUDITOR, downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4 feet high, shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on MOUTH, dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated. See Note.*

*As house lights down MOUTH's voice unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds. With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required, leading when curtain fully up and attention sufficient, into:*

MOUTH ... out ... into this world ... this world ... tiny little thing ... before its time... in a godfor- ... what? ... girl ... yes ... tiny little girl.....into this ... out into this ... before her time ... godforsaken hole called ... called ... no matter ... parents unknown ... unheard of... he having vanished ... thin air ... no sooner buttoned up his breeches ... she similarly ... eight months later ... almost to the tick ... so no love ... spared that... no love such as normally vented on the ... speechless infant... in the home ... no ... nor indeed for that matter any of any kind ... no love of any kind ... at any subsequent stage ... so typical affair .. nothing of any note till coming up to sixty when- ... what? ... seventy? ... good God! ... coming up to seventy ... wandering in a field ... looking aimlessly for cowslips ... to make a ball ... a few steps then stop ... stare into space ... then on ... a few more ... stop and stare again ... so on ... drifting around ... when suddenly ... gradually ... all went out... all that April morning light... and she found herself in the- ... what? ... who? ... no!.....she! ... (*Pause and movement 1.*) ... found herself in the dark ...

(Beckett, 1990, pp. 216–17)

[View discussion - Activity 11](#)

## 6.2 Performance and reception

Our discussion of the performance possibilities for Beckett's play begins to reveal the author as someone who went to great lengths to articulate a particular artistic vision. The matter of how his plays were received was extremely important to him, and his presence at rehearsals is frequently recounted as an active, if not obtrusive one. Beckett was someone who sought extensive directorial control over the production of his work. Indeed, he made this the subject of one of his plays, in *Catastrophe: Tale of an Authoritarian Director* (1982) and wrote plays with particular actors in mind; Patrick Magee's voice, for example, was the one he 'heard inside his mind' when writing *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and Billie Whitelaw's was the female voice he had listened to when he wrote *Not I*. For Beckett, the role of the author was one which extended beyond the writing of the text, and one which should be allowed



## Approaching plays

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considerable licence in seeing that text realized in performance. Central to his vision were the matters of authenticity and authorial intention. Let's consider these issues, for a moment, in a different context.

### Activity 12

In 1864, a New York production of *Hamlet* cast a well-known and highly regarded actor, Edwin Booth, in the leading role. Sir John Gielgud also famously played Hamlet in London's New Theatre production of the play in 1934, as did Jonathan Pryce, at the Royal Court in 1980. Which of these is the real Hamlet, and why?

[View discussion - Activity 12](#)

I want to say something about these issues, but first I'd like to ask you to think about how you answered the question.

I can't anticipate every possible response to this question, but I'd be surprised if you hadn't taken into account that the three actors are young, white and male. Photographic stills of the actors would also reveal that each, despite their differences, has a somewhat romantic demeanour, indicative perhaps of the complex range of qualities associated with the role. You might well agree that so far nothing about each of these Hamlets challenges our traditional notion of what the character Hamlet is traditionally supposed to be like. But what if I had asked you to consider a 74-year-old Hamlet, or a female Hamlet? Would you then have been so convinced that this is what Shakespeare intended? I doubt it. You might have felt curious about what such interpretations of the part sought to achieve, or your doubts might have sent you back to the text, to the 'authorial source', to find some justification for these performance decisions.

At this point it is worth remembering that there are many versions of *Hamlet*, and that historically the editing of the play text reflects a desire to focus on the central character, emphasizing his psychological or emotional condition (Ryan, 2000, p. 163). It is also worth observing that the text, whilst occupying a privileged role in the field of drama today, would not have done so at the time of *Hamlet's* early performances. Similarly the author, who today commands a form of reverence among many of his readers and audiences, would not have been regarded with the kind of authority which we now ascribe to writers. Read the following extract and note down what you take to be the main points.

These plays [Shakespeare's] were made and mediated in the interaction of certain complex material conditions, of which the author was only one. When we deconstruct the Shakespeare myth what we discover is not a universal individual genius creating literary texts that remain a permanently valuable repository of human experience and wisdom; but a collaborative cultural process in which plays were made by writers, theatrical entrepreneurs, architects and craftsmen, actors and audience; a process in

which plays were constructed first as performance, and subsequently given the formal permanence of print.

(Holderness, 1988, p. 13)

Holderness emphasizes the collaborative nature of drama and theatre, making the point that plays were the product of a combination of text, production and reception, and not simply sacred pieces of manuscript. He says that theatre was created by the collaborative efforts of playwrights, performers, and a whole host of other craftsmen, as well as through audience response. Indeed, he suggests that far from the text determining the performance, it was more likely to be the case that the performance signalled the direction the writing of the play script would take. Recall, for example, that the staging of *Henry V* took place *before* the play text was published.

To illustrate this point further, we can go back beyond Shakespeare to some of the earliest forms of drama where very few of the performers could read or write; in these ritual-based performances a text would not have been necessary, since the components of drama would have been handed down through an oral tradition. Our current valorization of the author and the primacy of the text are then, peculiarly modern concepts, and tend to render the role of the reader, or in the case of performance texts the audience, less significant. This point is made by the critic, Roland Barthes, whose highly influential essay, 'The death of the author' (1977), argues for a 're-birth' of the reader as against the primacy of the writer:

A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author ... a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination ... Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer ... we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.

(p. 146)

Read in the context of plays and performance, Barthes emphasizes the processes of writing, the multiplicity of perspectives and points of origin of texts, and deconstructs the traditional notion that the author is the point of unity, drawing all the various strands of meaning together. The relevance of Barthes' argument for considering issues of performance and audience is to be found in the challenge it presents to approaches such as Beckett's. Barthes argues that our response should not be determined by author or playwright, and that we need to avoid the tendency to think that in 'getting close' to the author, we are assured of a more authoritative meaning of the text.

## 6.3 Performance spaces

## Approaching plays

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Dramatic texts intended for performance are, in an important sense, a ‘living’ art form. Plays are conceived with a particular space in mind, and to varying degrees the relationship between the text and its enactment is influenced by the kinds of theatre practices and spaces that have become conventionalized. Some plays lend themselves to particular kinds of performance spaces, such as Brecht's *Mahogonny* (1927), which carried over the boxing ring metaphor of the play's main theme to a literal method of staging: an in-the-round/arena space was specially constructed to function as a boxing ring for a performance of this play. Similarly, Jim Cartwright's modern play *Road* (1989) was written to be performed in a promenade performance space.

A history of the variety and development of performance spaces would show the changing social role and function of drama since its recorded origins in ancient Greece almost 3,000 years ago. It would serve to remind us that what we now recognize as the theatre is far removed from the vast open-air Greek **amphitheatres** capable of seating up to 24,000 people. We tend to regard going to the theatre as a much more rarefied experience than it would originally have been perceived to be, and came to be treated by play-goers in medieval times or in Shakespeare's time. We wouldn't usually associate it with a religious event, we certainly wouldn't expect to stand throughout a performance and would probably find it strange or even unnerving to be expected to participate in the action. We can trace the most significant changes in the development of performance spaces by looking at the shift in the spatial relationship between audience and performers. [Figure 1](#) broadly illustrates the changes in the spatial relationships between what represents the ‘stage’ and what serves as the auditorium.

## Approaching plays

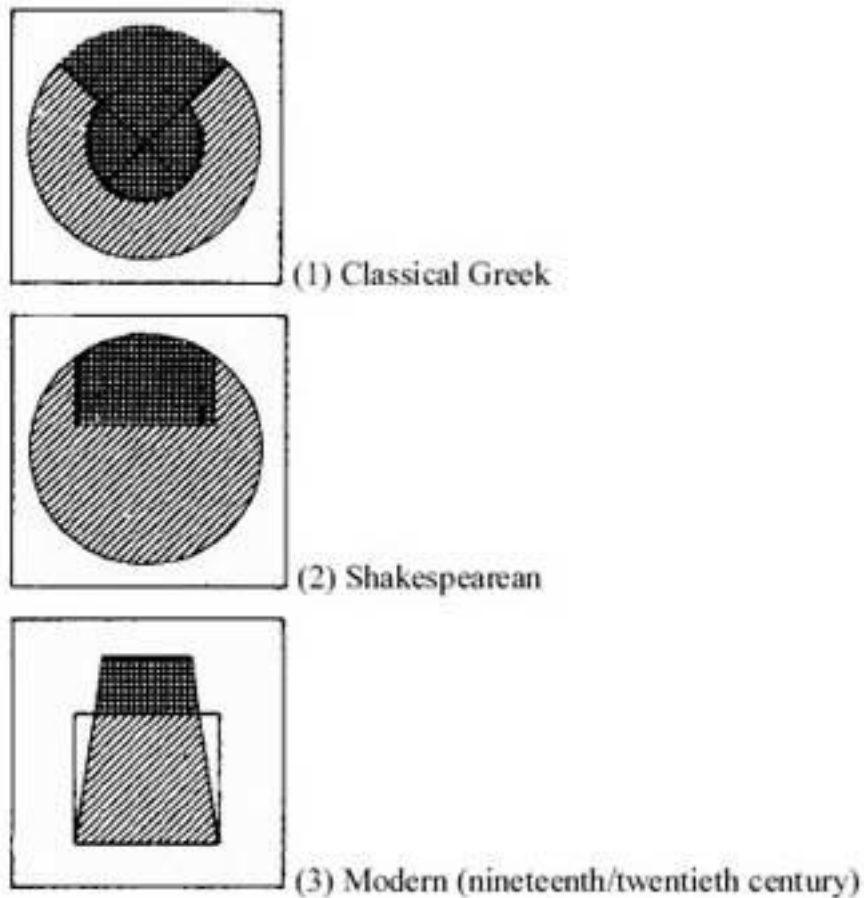


Figure 1 Performance spaces: from the classical to the modern

[View description - Figure 1 Performance spaces: from the classical to the modern](#)

### Activity 13

Look carefully at each, noting that the dark section signifies the performance area and the lighter section the viewing area. What is the main change you observe taking place?

[View discussion - Activity 13](#)

### Activity 14

Look at the diagram again. What do you think some of the implications are for performance in each of the performance spaces, as indicated by the spatial relationship between audience and players?

[View discussion - Activity 14](#)

## 7 Dramatic conventions

### 7.1 Soliloquy

A **soliloquy** is a speech, usually quite lengthy, delivered by a character who is alone onstage. It is a convention of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in particular, apparently giving direct access to that character's thoughts and feelings, divulging their intentions and reactions to events and to other people, and thus making that character more intimately known to the audience.

#### Activity 15

Read the following soliloquy (*Othello*, Act III, scene 3, 255–76) and think about what we learn about Othello.

OTHELLO This fellow's of exceeding honesty,  
 And knows all qualities with a learned spirit  
 Of human dealings. If I do prove her haggard,  
 Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings,  
 I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind 5  
 To prey at fortune. Haply, for I am black  
 And have not those soft parts of conversation  
 That chamberers have; or for I am declined  
 Into the vale of years – yet that's not much -  
 She's gone: I am abused, and my relief 10  
 Must be to loathe her. O, curse of marriage!  
 That we can call these delicate creatures ours  
 And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad  
 And live upon the vapour of a dungeon  
 Than keep a corner in the thing I love 15  
 For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;  
 Prerogated are they less than the base.  
 'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death:  
 Even then this forkéd plague is fated to us  
 When we do quicken. Desdemona comes: 20

*Enter Desdemona and Emilia*

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself

I'll not believe't.

[View discussion - Activity 15](#)

Through this speech, his first soliloquy, we see Othello's vulnerability and the precarious nature of the unwitting Desdemona's relationship with him. He reveals to the audience his state of mind, taking us with him through the tortuous twists and turns of his emotional suffering. But the audience, privy to Iago's machiavellian plans, realize that Othello, a man of action rather than of political intrigue, has been well and truly duped. Desdemona, who loves him for reasons other than the physical attributes he mentions, has no thought of infidelity.

### Activity 16

Now read Iago's soliloquy from Act II, scene 3. What function is it fulfilling?

IAGO If I can fasten but one cup upon him,  
 With that which he hath drunk tonight already,  
 He'll be as full of quarrel and offence  
 As my young mistress' dog. Now my sick fool Roderigo,  
 Whom love hath turned almost the wrong side out,                   5  
 To Desdemona hath tonight caroused  
 Potations pottle-deep; and he's to watch.  
 Three else of Cyprus, noble swelling spirits –  
 That hold their honours in a wary distance,  
 The very elements of this warlike isle –                               10  
 Have I tonight flustered with flowing cups,  
 And they watch too. Now 'mongst this flock of drunkards,  
 Am I to put our Cassio in some action  
 That may offend the isle. But here they come;  
 If consequence do but approve my dream.                               15  
 My boat sails freely both with wind and stream.

[View discussion - Activity 16](#)

## 7.2 Asides

An aside is a shorter speech, maybe only a few words, spoken *sotto voce* to the audience. It is presumed that the other characters on stage cannot hear what is being said, unless the aside is between two characters. Unlike the soliloquy, which largely died out with the decline of poetic drama, the aside is a convention that was widely used until the rise of naturalistic drama early in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is still employed in those conventional dramatic genres, pantomime and farce. Asides are most likely to be used where there is intrigue and characters are acting with duplicity, whether this is in comedy or tragedy. It is noticeable that a history play like *Henry V* contains few (if any) asides; it is not a play of private intrigue but of political negotiations and warfare.

## 7.3 Masks and disguises

Masks were used in classical Greek theatre to exaggerate expressions so that they could be seen in the large open-air amphitheatres. Most of us are familiar with the famous stereotypes for tragedy and comedy, but masks were also identified with particular types, whether comic or tragic, such as old man, or king, courtesan or queen. Masks have not been part of the dramatic conventions in Britain, but have been used to reflect social conventions of the Restoration period. The connotations of 'play' make it appropriate that plays should incorporate the social play of carnival and revelry, occasions when it was customary for participants to appear masked. Thus in *The Rover* masks are used by the characters, male and female, who participate in the carnival as a form of disguise, so that 'whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer 'em', as Belville admits (Act II, scene 1).

Masking is a particular form of disguise, but disguising through clothes is a much commoner convention. The actors in a play are of course already disguising themselves simply by assuming their roles in the play, but a further level of disguise is frequently added, as it is in *Henry V*, *As You Like It* and *The Rover*. Disguise may encompass cross-dressing; Shakespeare, for instance, was particularly fond of requiring his heroines (played by boys of course) to take on a male role, as Rosalind does in *As You Like It*. But it can also be effected without any change of costume. The Macbeths, for instance, welcome Duncan to their castle with murder in mind: 'look like th'innocent flower,/But be the serpent under't', Lady Macbeth advises her husband (Act 1, scene 5, Arden edition). Similarly, in *Othello*, Iago pretends honesty, in order to work on 'the Moor', who 'is of a free and open nature,/That thinks men honest that but seem to be so' (Act 1, scene 3). In *A Doll's House*, Torvald draws attention to the mask of hypocrisy that Krogstad must assume, and Nora in effect disguises herself in the costume of a Neapolitan fisher-girl for a fancy-dress party. She adopts elements of that costume when at the end of Act II she dances the tarantella that reveals so much of her inner anguish. For that is the interesting thing about disguise; it both disguises and reveals or liberates, since clothes constrain not only by their form, but also by the behaviour that is associated with them. When Rosalind fashions herself as Ganymede she does so initially to escape danger at the court and to make her way out of the city without attracting notice. Similarly, the male disguise that Hellena adopts in *The Rover* allows her to behave with a freedom that would have been shocking in a woman. Disguise, then, can be used to escape



danger, to titillate, or simply for fun, but it has the effect of exposing the dual nature of human beings, their repressed desires and impulses, as well as the self-consciousness of theatrical activity.

## 7.4 Doubling

The cast list for the first performance of *Top Girls* at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1982 indicates that six of the actors played two or more roles each; only one actor had a single role, that of Marlene. This doubling is also used in a BBC recording of the play, but it is not prescribed by the playwright, Caryl Churchill, who in fact has reservations about its desirability.

### Activity 17

What are the implications of having two characters played by the same actor?

[View discussion - Activity 17](#)



## Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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## Glossary

### Amphitheatre

a circular structure with seats rising behind and above each other around a central open space or arena; originating in classical Greece, they are the first known specifically designated theatre spaces.

### Apostrophe

a rhetorical convention in which the speaker either addresses a dead or absent person, or an inanimate object or abstraction. An apostrophe can also refer to a speaker's address to a particular member or section of the audience.

### Anagnorisis

a scene of recognition or discovery.

### Aside

a short speech spoken *sotto voce* to the audience or another character on stage, with the presumption that other characters cannot hear what is being said.

### Blank verse

unrhymed iambic pentameters.

### Chorus

group of male singers and dancers who took part in and commented on the action of the play, providing a summary and a narrative link. The name Chorus is also given to the lyric or poetic sections of the play performed by the Chorus. In Elizabethan and modern drama the Chorus is usually a single actor.

### Climax

the moment of crisis leading to the denouement or resolution.

### Denouement

the unravelling of the complications of the plot at the end of a play.

### Dialogue

speech between characters in a play.

### Enjambement

where the sense of the poetry runs on from one line to the next. The ends of the run-on lines are not marked by any punctuation.

### Exposition

information given at the beginning of a play that is needed in order to understand the action of the play.

### Iambic pentameters

the basic metre of verse written in English, in which each line has five unstressed syllables and five stressed syllables arranged in pairs, as in: 'Put out the light, and then put out the light'.

### Monologue

varieties include the Dramatic Monologue, which is a kind of poem in which the speaker addresses a silent audience, and the **Soliloquy**. Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, in which there is only one character, is also an example of a monologue – an extended speech by a lone character.

### Naturalism

naturalist drama of the late nineteenth-century emphasizes the roles of society, history and personality in determining the activities of its characters. It is often

### Approaching plays

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expressed as a conflict between the character and their environment; a style associated with the work of August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen in dramatic art, and rooted in the naturalistic novels of Emile Zola.

#### Oratory

the art of public speaking.

#### Performance

the interpretation and presentation of a dramatic text on stage by actors. Like many of the terms associated with drama, this is a term with a range of meanings.

#### Peripeteia

a reversal of fortune, a change in the state of affairs.

#### Proscenium arch

the name derives from the Greek work, *skene*. Originally *skene* referred to a building for actors changing at the back of the acting area in a Greek amphitheatre; it therefore implied a version of permanent sc(k)enery. Thus, proscenium denoted a space in front of the back scenery. Proscenium is now taken to mean the front opening of the stage and its surround is called the proscenium arch.

#### Realism

theory of the real or representation of what the artist or audience broadly agree is true to life. This is one of the trickiest concepts in the analysis of art, performance or otherwise. Always remember that a play offers the representation of reality, not 'reality' itself.

#### Rhetoric

the art of using language, spoken or written, for persuasion. Rhetorical rules and figures of speech were formulated by classical writers and are still used today.

#### Soliloquy

a speech, usually quite lengthy, delivered by a character alone on stage. See also **Monologue**.

#### Stage directions

notes incorporated in a script to indicate entrances and exits, movement, style of delivery, details of location, scenery and effects.

#### Stichomythia

dialogue of alternate single lines.

#### Wings

both the side areas of the stage and the painted, canvas-covered flats masking that area and forming part of the set.

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# Activity 1

## Discussion

The three extracts above may look very different on the page, but they have this in common: they are all intended for performance, and as you read you need to envisage actors moving around on stage, speaking the words. The first example comes from Caryl Churchill's play, *Top Girls*, published and performed in 1982. It is followed by an extract from Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, which was first performed in Copenhagen in 1879 and first reached the London stage in 1889. Finally, there is an extract from Henry V's famous speech before the battle of Harfleur. Shakespeare's play, *Henry V*, is thought to have been first performed in 1599, and first published in 1600.

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## Activity 2

### Discussion

I think it does. We are told that the girls are aged 16 and 12, but there is no clear sense of the older girl taking charge of the younger one. Questions are asked and not answered immediately, actions are proposed and are met by objections. The prevailing tone is set by Angie's first speech: 'Wish she was dead'. Thereafter, the debate about going to the cinema is refracted through a lens of negativity: of the individual speeches, thirteen contain clear negatives. Even the concluding stage direction is negative (*'Nothing happens'*).

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## Activity 3

### Discussion

There are repeated references to money, to telling and to not liking. Kit's three-line speech stands out from the prevailing one-liners. Notice that it is written as three separate lines. I think this suggests that the actor should allow space between them, so that each receives individual focus, and we can hear that each line relates to a different component of the scene. The first line ('No I wouldn't') is a direct response to Angie ('You'd be scared who'd sit next to you'). The second line contributes to the wrangle about who Angie's mother does or does not like. The third line ('Tell me then') seems to come out of the blue, and Angie's question that follows ('Tell you what?') emphasizes this. A reader of the play can look back through the text, though, and see that Angie has twice said, 'Shall I tell you something?' earlier in the scene. In performance, the scene is likely to play fast enough for the audience to retain an aural memory of these speeches. It is only after the punctuating '*Silence*' that Angie tells her story about being able to make things move. This, presumably, is what she offered to 'tell' earlier on.

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## Activity 4

### Discussion

In the first place the directions tell us about the movement of characters on and off the stage. We learn that three characters who have been onstage now leave, while the Nurse brings the children in and then leaves to go to the kitchen. Nora, consequently, is left alone with the children. Notice the careful direction that she should close the hall door by which the Nurse has entered with the children. We are aware of other people being in the house, but it is important that Nora should feel safely enclosed within her domestic space, and that Krogstad should come in as an outsider. His knock is not heard by Nora, who is so happily involved with the children, and when he pushes open the door, he stands for a moment as a silent observer of the scene. This emphasizes his exclusion from the domesticity enjoyed by the Helmers, and lends a slightly sinister element to his appearance. As the scene continues we find that not only has he been excluded from the Helmers' life in another way (by being sacked from the bank), but that his intrusion into the Helmer household brings a threat to Nora's security.

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## Activity 5

### Discussion

What strikes me is the number of doors and the quantity of furniture! If you try to map out the stage, as though you were a director or stage designer, bearing in mind that the actors need to be able to move round the stage without treading on each other's toes or knocking into the furniture, you will see how difficult it is to fit everything in. I think that Ibsen is creating the impression of a comfortable but cluttered domestic interior. The piano, engravings, china and books indicate that this is a middle-class home with some interest in cultural pursuits, but the quantity of furniture limits the space in which the actors can move and this is, I think, an important way of indicating the constraints upon Nora.

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## Activity 6

### Discussion

You may have chosen different examples, but these are some of the rhetorical devices that are used:

- **repetition** ('Once more ... once more', 'On, on')
- **apostrophe** or direct address ('dear friends')
- **imperatives** or commands ('imitate', 'Stiffen', 'conjure up', 'Disguise', 'Cry')
- **simile** ('like the brass cannon', 'like greyhounds in the slips')
- **extended metaphor** ('let the brow o'erwhelm it/As fearfully as doth a galléd rock/O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,/Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.')
- **allusion** or associative language ('Dishonour not your mothers': reminiscent of the biblical 'Honour your father and your mother').

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## Activity 7

### Discussion

I expect you have included the number of times England or being English is referred to (apart from the ‘English dead’, we have ‘noblest English’, ‘made in England’, ‘Cry, “God for Harry, England, and Saint George!”’). I’d like to take this a stage further and suggest that the audience is being invited to include itself in a very nationalistic bias which succeeds by virtue of a ‘them and us’ conflict. Notice how many times Henry uses ‘our’ (twice), ‘you!’/‘your’ (ten times), ‘us’ (twice) as part of his rhetorical strategy to gain his soldiers’ solid support. When he refers to ‘our English dead’ he is not simply uniting them with himself, but, by the addition of ‘English’ he is appealing to their sense of national identity and reminding them that they are not merely fighting for themselves but for their country (which includes their more personal loves of parents, wives, children and friends).

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## Activity 8

### Discussion

The first scene introduces us to Orlando and his old servant, Adam. Through the dialogue of the old and the young man we learn of the difficult situation in which Orlando is placed, before seeing for ourselves the antagonism he faces when his elder brother, Oliver, enters the scene. Orlando out of the way, Oliver sets up a dangerous situation for him with the professional wrestler, Charles, but their conversation also acts as a preliminary exposition for the main plot, the banishment of Rosalind. It is not until the second scene that Rosalind herself appears with Celia and the exposition is completed. This scene is not purely expository since it includes the wrestling of Charles and Orlando and it starts the love interest between Rosalind and Orlando. By the end of Act I, the main plot has been moved forward significantly, since in scene 3, Rosalind, like her father, is banished from the court, and Celia resolves to go with her. A further subplot concerning Touchstone, Audrey and William, and another concerning Phebe and Silvius are revealed once the action moves to the forest.

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## Activity 9

### Discussion

In *As You Like It*, there are two main moments of discovery, one associated with the Oliver/Orlando plot and the other with the Rosalind plot, and in both cases they are linked with a change in the state of affairs. In a dramatic off-stage scene, Orlando saves a sleeping man from being attacked by a lioness. The man awakes, Orlando recognizes him as his brother, and their enmity is dispelled. Oliver meets and falls in love with Celia, resolves to marry her and to abandon the court for the life of a shepherd. The central scene of recognition, though, comes when, having set up an elaborate riddle for the various couples, Rosalind reveals her true identity and secures Orlando as her husband. This scene marks the climax of the play, and ushers in the denouement, or unravelling of the complications of the various relationships. There is yet a further moment of reversal, when at the very end of the play Jaques de Boys (brother to Orlando and Oliver) arrives with the news of the usurping Duke's sudden conversion to a life of religious solitude, and the reversion of the crown to his exiled brother, Rosalind's father.

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## Activity 10

### Discussion

The first extract presents us with a number of performance considerations, the most challenging being how to direct the movement and actions of Lady Macbeth. She is carrying a light and is sleepwalking, so decisions about lighting and costume need to be considered. Does she, for example, occupy the main performance area, with the other characters looking on from the side in hushed conversation? Does she remain standing, or would you want her to be kneeling, perhaps implying remorse or the act of praying? When Roman Polanski directed Francesca Annis in this scene in his 1971 film version of *Macbeth*, he chose to present her without clothes, thus emphasizing her vulnerability, and in stark contrast to the scores of Lady Macbeths who roam the stage in a nightdress. How would you choose to portray her in this scene?

The second extract depicts a conversation between a husband and wife in an altogether more naturalistic scene, but is nonetheless dramatic. Performance considerations would centre on set design (it is Christmas time), costume and the dynamics between Nora and Torvald. The conversation is about money, and the characters occupy what could be described as parent and child roles in its exchange here. You might choose to emphasize this and direct Nora to play up to this role by suggesting that she makes the running here with Torvald remaining still, keeping the money out of her sight and reach. Or, if you chose to interpret the dynamic of the relationship as one in which Nora has the power (notice that it is she who beckons to Torvald to ‘come here’), then you would need to consider a different approach to directing the movement of the characters.

These two extracts show us how dramatic language is constructed to influence and direct performance through signals and indicators of action. However, not all dramatic language is constituted in this way; some modern drama, for example, deliberately refuses such information, giving us little in the way of signs or directions.

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## Activity 11

### Discussion

You were probably struck by how detailed the stage directions are, and probably grateful for them, since without them, what are we to make of this? This is from the modern playwright Samuel Beckett's play, *Not I* (1972), and as with all of Beckett's plays, it concentrates on the mystery of existence, and the impossibility of making rational explanation of time, birth or death, in short the essential incommunicability of much of the would-be material of art. His characters therefore often enact the absurd patterns of the 'wait' for the end, sometimes obsessively uttering the frustration with the less than satisfactory nature of the medium: words. In *Not I* words dominate, but as an almost unintelligible droning, a manic re-enactment of a futile past. Syntax and structures are shattered, as the character plays out her dilemma.

Returning to the extract then, and the role of the stage directions, we get a sense of how this performance might look; lighting, performance space and acoustics are all important here. But even given the specifications of the set and the position of the character, we are far from knowing how to direct the action, or rather, the lack of it. What role does the AUDITOR play? What sort of performance space would suit this play? Given the potential intensity of this performance, and the nature of the subject, you might choose a performance space which enabled you to focus on the visual image of the MOUTH, and yet one which also allowed the utterances to be audible, so it would be a space which kept a close proximity between audience and performer. Given the domination of the words, it would be a good idea to emphasize the aural assault on the audience and minimize all movement, with the light focusing solely on the MOUTH. You would want to leave an audience almost breathless from the tirade; if read quickly, this play lasts approximately eighteen minutes. The greatest challenge, then, would be the actor's difficulty in delivering the lines; keeping up the momentum whilst retaining succinctness and clarity would be crucial in a play whose sole focus is words. When Billie Whitelaw played MOUTH in the 1973 Royal Court performance of *Not I*, she read the script at break-neck speed, strapped to a chair with her head fastened to the back. The play was performed in-the-round, with the AUDITOR to one side responding to the speech occasionally by flapping his arms helplessly at his sides in what the stage directions call 'an attitude of helpless compassion' (Beckett, 1990, p. 215).

This extract shows us that there are many more considerations than the stage directions suggest in directing a play, and that there are technical and practical as well as imaginative challenges involved.

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## Activity 12

### Discussion

The short answer is none of them and all of them. I agree that this is not a very satisfactory answer, but it drives home the point that there can be no definitive interpretation of the character and that every performance of *Hamlet* will say something different both about the play and the context in which it is performed. A longer answer would elaborate these latter two points and explore issues of authenticity and authorial intention, as well as perhaps accounting for changing conceptions of the role of the author and performance.

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## Activity 13

### Discussion

You probably noticed a gradual shift away from a spatial relationship where the audience was grouped around the stage area in an extended semi-circle, to one which had effected almost a complete separation of the stage and the audience. This break started with the introduction of the **proscenium arch** in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the **proscenium curtain**, used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, made the more decisive break.

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## Activity 14

### Discussion

1. The classical model seems more akin to a modern sports stadium than a theatre. The vastness of the audience and semi-circular design of the performance space made the notion of an illusionist set or realist drama impossible. Although the acoustics were generally good, given the scale of even the smallest amphitheatre, I would say that the **naturalism** we associate with the drama of Ibsen, for example, which often requires intimate conversation to serve as dialogue, would be out of the question here. More appropriate is the stylized, and exaggerated, gesture-like acting which characterized classical Greek drama. This was often accompanied by symbolic costume and masks, and of course, the chorus who commented on the action, addressing the audience directly. A good example is found in Aristophanes' 422 BCE comedy, *The Wasps*:

CHORUS: Now, ye countless tens of thousands,  
Seated on the benches round,  
Do not let our pearls of wisdom  
Fall unheeded to the ground.  
Not that you would be so stupid,  
So devoid of common sense –  
What it is to have enlightened  
People for an audience!

(Baldick, Radice and Jones, 1964, p.75)

2. We probably know more about the conventions of theatre in Shakespeare's time than we do about our own, so often are they themselves the source of dramatic portrayal, the film, *Shakespeare in Love*, being a recent example. What this diagram shows us is the proximity between audience and performers, and we can see that the audience still has access to the stage area on three sides. Unlike the amphitheatres of classical Greece, there is close contact between the actors and the spectators, and a further key difference is that these performance areas were housed in purpose-built theatres. Audiences would have been large (the Globe could hold two thousand), and socially disparate. Given the regular interaction between performers and audience, through **asides** and **monologues**, it would have been difficult to sustain the notion of dramatic illusion. There was little in the way of set design or décor to consider, thus enabling quick and easy scene changes.

3. The relationship designated by this performance space is the one we most commonly associate with our own experience of the theatre. The intimacy of the darkened space with a brightly lit stage is conducive to the same atmosphere of

### Approaching plays

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voyeuristic fascination as we experience in the cinema. We remain detached from the performers, looking into ‘rooms’ whose reality is sustained by scene changes through the use of the **proscenium** curtain, and the drama assumes a more ‘autonomous’ function. Set design, naturalistic acting and realistic situations create the illusion of reality, thus serving the conventions of the **realist** drama of, say, Ibsen or Chekhov. As with the other performance spaces, this has its limitations. The playful engagement with the audience by use of asides in Shakespearean and Restoration drama is severely hampered by the distance between audience and performers in this kind of space.

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## Activity 15

### Discussion

Othello refers to two other characters in this speech, praising the honesty of one, Iago (whom we, the audience, know, is far from honest), and showing his distrust of the other, his wife, Desdemona, in the metaphor of lines 3–6, in which he compares her to a hawk. The comparison suggests a desire for control, which is emphasized later (ll. 11–13) when, exclaiming against the trials of marriage, he bewails the fact that men can never entirely possess women. He thinks of reasons for Desdemona's presumed decline of interest in him – his race, his lack of a courtier's eloquence, his age – thus revealing his own insecurities. The repugnance of the metaphor of a toad in a dungeon reveals the violence of his emotions and his attempt to convert love into loathing. The next few lines (16–20) are difficult, but the general meaning seems to be that cuckoldry ('this forkéd plague') is as inevitable as death, a fate that comes at birth, though the metaphor of disease also implies contagious suffering, as though infidelity is 'caught' from others. As Desdemona enters, however, he quickly changes his mind, and distrust is banished.

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## Activity 16

### Discussion

Iago tells us about his plans for the evening. Drink is going to be important. In the first place, he intends to make Cassio drunk and therefore quarrelsome – an easy task, since he (and the audience) knows already that Cassio cannot hold his drink. Secondly, he has set Roderigo, who has already drunk to the bottom of a two-quart tankard (a ‘pottle’), to be on the alert. He has also set up three Cypriots in a similar way. In this alcohol-fuelled situation, Iago intends to provoke Cassio to some as yet undefined offensive action. The soliloquy ends as Cassio and his companions enter with wine; a rhyming couplet neatly clinches Iago's reflections as the action runs into the fulfilment of his plan.

This is a different sort of soliloquy from the one discussed above, since Iago is not telling us about his emotions and feelings. He has other soliloquies in which he purports, at least, to explain his motivation and inner feelings, but here he is explaining how he intends to further his plot against Othello. In this period, soliloquies are frequently given to the villain of the play, the manipulators of the plot. Their soliloquies, therefore, are a means by which the audience's knowledge can be kept ahead of that of the characters who are being duped or manipulated. The audience is made complicit, and put in a position of being able to judge the effectiveness of the plan.

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## Activity 17

### Discussion

The physical similarity suggests that there is some similarity between the characters; the audience is bound to look for comparisons and contrasts, which may be illuminating, but which may also be a distraction or invalid. Even though the doubling may be dictated by the need for economy, or by the desire to give actors a more substantial part to play, there may also be aesthetic issues at stake. This is less likely in a large-cast play where there are a number of 'bit' parts to be covered, but in a play like *Top Girls*, where each character is allowed to establish her own identity, the doubling of parts will be of significance. For instance, having the same actor play Dull Gret and Angie draws attention to their underprivileged social position and to their difficulties in articulation. But because Gret is able to assert herself at the end of the first scene, this underlines Angie's achievement in making the trip alone and unaided to London, and hints that maybe Marlene's prediction that the most she can expect out of life is to stack supermarket shelves is unduly pessimistic.

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# Figure 1 Performance spaces: from the classical to the modern

## Description

Figure 1

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