Dark Matter

Invisibility

in

Drama, Theater, & Performance

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Dark Matter

An Introduction

We know very little for sure about dark matter.
—Frank Wilczek, Nobel Prize winner in physics

Sometimes you see ideas in the way an astronomer sees stars
in the far distance. (Or it seems like that anyway.)
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

At the heart of English medieval liturgical drama lies the Visit to the Sepulchre by the three Marys on Easter morning, with its revelation of Jesus’ Resurrection at the empty tomb. Various versions survive, but all incorporate the famous Quem quaeritis (Whom do you seek?) trope, originally sung in tenth-century monastic churches as part of the Easter service. The clergy was actively encouraged to develop the trope in the direction of performed drama. For example, in The Regularis Concordia of St. Ethelwold, a liturgical script prepared at Winchester for Benedictine use in England, three brethren dressed in copes are instructed to haltingly approach the “tomb” area of the church, bearing thuribles with incense to suggest the three Marys. There they discover a fourth cleric, wearing an alb and holding a palm in his hand in imitation of the angel seated on Christ’s tomb. “Whom do you seek in the sepulchre, O followers of Christ?” chants the Angel (in Latin). The three answer with one voice, “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, O heaven-dweller.” The angel responds, “He is not here, he has risen as he had foretold . . . Come and see the place.” In what can only
How to Do Things with Demons

Conjuring Performatives in
Doctor Faustus

'Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me.
—Faustus in Doctor Faustus (1.1.112)

I can't fix the roof by saying "I fix the roof" and I can't fry an egg by saying "I fry an egg," but I can promise to come and see you just by saying "I promise to come and see you" and I can order you to leave the room just by saying "I order you to leave the room." Now why the one and not the other?
—John R. Searle

What did it mean for an Elizabethan actor to perform black magic on the early modern stage? When Edward Alleyn stepped onstage as Faustus, dressed in a white surplice and cross and carrying his magical book, the air was charged with dangerous electricity.\(^1\) True, Alleyn was clearly an actor, reciting lines that had been set down for him in a play whose comic scenes made light of the blasphemous act of conjuring demons. Noted one skeptical witness at the Fortune, "A man may behold shagge-hayr'd Devills runne roaring over the Stage with Squibs in their mouthes, while Drummers make Thunder in the Tying-house, and twelve-penny Hirelings make artificiall Lightning in their Heavens."\(^2\) But once the magical formula escaped Alleyn's lips, anything could happen—and apparently did. Stories of "one devil too many" appearing onstage at performances of Faustus became legendary.\(^3\) Decades later the antitheatricalist William Prynne relished
Quantum Mechanicals

Desiring Bottom in
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

All for your delight
We are not here.
—Quince as Prologue,
A Midsummer Night’s Dream (5.1.114–15)

It is easy to get lost in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Like most of Shakespeare’s comedies, the Dream concerns misprision: a misunderstanding in which one thing is taken for another. A quartet of lovers blunders around a threatening wood; a troupe of actors misplaces its star; Bottom the weaver temporarily loses his head; Puck, alias Robin Goodfellow, lays the love juice on the wrong swain’s eyelid; and fairy Queen and King battle for custody of a changeling child. Bushes are supposed bears, and monsters paramours. Even the self-appointed rationalist Duke Theseus, never having read Chaucer, let alone North’s Plutarch, misses the hilarious incongruity of his own presence in a comedy that ostensibly celebrates marriage. References to eyes and eyesight continually remind us that Shakespeare’s muddled characters are in the dark. Often performed in broad daylight, A Midsummer Night’s Dream invites us to celebrate our own superiority over its love- and law-addled Athenians, and to congratulate ourselves on our own (English?) clear-sightedness.

Yet all is not as it appears. As Dennis Kay remarks, “The play is full of unresolved matters requiring the active engagement of an audience’s inter-
Unmasking Women

The Rover and Sexual Signification on the Restoration Stage

What is the essential nature of a fully-developed femininity? ... The conception of womanliness as a mask, behind which man suspects some hidden danger, throws a little light on the enigma.

—Joan Riviere


—John Berger

In Aphra Behn’s popular Restoration comedy The Rover (1677), set in Naples at Carnival time during the English interregnum, three spirited young Spanish women decide to evade the control of their noble family and rove the streets in masquerade and vizard. The heroines seek romance with some English cavaliers, followers of the banished Prince Charles, who are visiting the city. Florinda has her eye on an English colonel, Belvile, who saved her from ravishment at the Siege of Pamplona. Her saucy younger sister Hellena, intended for a nun by the sisters’ brother Don Pedro, prefers Belvile’s companion-in-arms, the devil-may-care Willmore, an impecunious rake. Valeria, the sisters’ cousin, falls by default for the less colorful cavalier Frederick. While the women seek romance, the roving men (with the exception of the priggish Belvile) are out for easy sex and, if they can get it, money as well. As if this were not enough excitement, for a woman to don vizard and masquerade during Carnival is to advertise herself as a
Unbecoming Acts

Power, Performance, and the
Self-Consuming Body in Tennessee Williams’s
Suddenly Last Summer

It’s a simple but hugely effective theatrical conceit, this idea of a main character who never materializes, and I suppose it’s the same idea that “faith” is built around in any of your organised religions—God is out there, he or she just hasn’t decided to reveal themselves quite yet.

—Neil LaBute

... What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?
If design govern in a thing so small.

—Robert Frost

Suddenly Last Summer is unique in the Williams canon in that its protagonist is dark matter. The poet Sebastian Venable dies before the action takes place; he is at once a blank text, like the empty pages of the notebook his mother Violet brandishes in triumphant fury as proof of his inability to write his last Poem of Summer, and a palimpsest “awesome in his ambiguity.”1 Although Sebastian is literally absent, his afterimages repeat and refract until the play becomes a dizzying hall of mirrors: Cousin George
Bugs in the Mind

The Archbishop’s Ceiling
and Arthur Miller’s Prismatic Drama

[The reality was what was happening in the dark.]
—Arthur Miller

Written eight years since his last Broadway hit, and from a place of personal crisis in relation to his art, *The Archbishop’s Ceiling* (1977) marks a significant departure in Arthur Miller’s drama. Ever since his first big success, *All My Sons* (1947), Miller had chronicled the American self under pressure, a pressure manifested as the past catching up with the present despite the self’s attempt to deny that past. Yet in *The Archbishop’s Ceiling*, set not in the United States but in Eastern Europe, the fugitive self pursued by the consequences of past acts of betrayal gives way to the self as a fiction: a maelstrom of conflicting forces that threaten to explode identity from within.

How, then, to express this internalized pressure within the framework of drama, in which conflict must somehow be externalized for an audience? Miller’s revised notion of the self demanded a new dramaturgy, and one reason *The Archbishop’s Ceiling* initially failed in performance is that its realistic production style obscured the fact that the play’s true subject is not political repression, as most critics of the play suggest, but dramatic form itself. Beneath a superficially conventional plot, which involves a dissident writer’s choice between saving himself or his art, *The Archbishop’s Ceiling* critiques the linear dramaturgy Miller inherited from Ibsen in order to
Invisible Wounds

Rehearsing Trauma on the
Contemporary Stage

A black play is a white play when the lights go out.
—Suzan-Lori Parks

In the dark? how would you see that in the dark?
—Harper in Far Away

In Adam and Adrienne Kennedy’s nightmarish memory play Sleep Deprivation Chamber (1996), the brutal beating of a young black man by a white policeman repeats itself over and over, both in narrative and before our eyes. These remorseless loops seem out of the conscious control of the narrating characters that conjure them into being. Interspersed with the horror, fragmented scenes of college students rehearsing a production of Hamlet unfold. Yorick’s grave haunts Sleep Deprivation Chamber as a spectral presence both inside and outside the action; Hamlet is at once text and intertext, contents and envelope. What does it mean to rehearse within and beyond a scene of trauma that is itself an imitation of the real thing? What is the relationship between trauma and theatrical representation?

Contemporary anglophone playwrights frequently address collective traumas that transcend individual suffering: genocide, war, sexual abuse, terrorism, natural disasters, and other calamities.1 Indeed, Christina Wald has posited “Trauma Drama” as a distinct genre that has evolved since the late 1980s.2 Staging trauma poses a representational conundrum because