

ELINOR FUCHS

EF'S VISIT TO A SMALL PLANET:  
SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK A PLAY

Since its origination as a classroom tool in the early 1990s, Elinor Fuchs's essay has acquired a devoted following, with tattered photocopies circulating in literary offices and university departments. More recently it has inspired discussions in Internet chat rooms and garnered citations in scholarly journals, despite remaining unavailable to a broad readership. The time has come to publish "EF's Visit to a Small Planet," an essay that widens our perception of dramatic worlds. Like good plays, it grows more meaningful with each reading.

—*Editors*

The following walk through dramatic structure is a teaching tool. For the past several years I have used it at the Yale School of Drama as an entry to Reading Theater, a critical writing course for students in the MFA Dramaturgy Program.

The "Questions" below are in part designed to forestall the immediate (and crippling) leap to character and normative psychology that underwrites much dramatic criticism. Aside from that corrective bias, the approach offered here is not a "system" intended to replace other approaches to play analysis; I often use it together with Aristotle's unparalleled insight into plot structure. Rather, it could be thought of as a template for the critical imagination.

In a fine article on *Hedda Gabler*, Philip E. Larson described the nature of "a genuine performance criticism." If criticism "is unwilling to rest content with the evaluation of ephemera," he wrote, "[it] must attempt to describe a potential object, one that neither the dramatist, the critics, nor the reader has ever seen, or will see."<sup>1</sup> These "Questions" are intended to light up some of the dark matter in dramatic worlds, to illuminate the potentialities Larson points to. No matter what answers come, the very act of questioning makes an essential contribution to the enterprise of criticism.

—*Elinor Fuchs*

*We must make the assumption that in the world of the play there are no accidents. Nothing occurs "by chance," not even chance. In that case, nothing in the play is without significance. Correspondingly, the play asks us to focus upon it a total awareness, to bring our attention and curiosity without the censorship of selective interpretation, "good taste," or "correct form." Before making judgments, we must ask questions. This is the deepest meaning of the idea, often-repeated but little understood, that the study of art shows us how to live.*

## I. THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: FIRST THINGS FIRST

A play is not a flat work of literature, not a description in poetry of another world, but is in itself another world passing before you in time and space. Language is only one part of this world. Those who think too exclusively in terms of language find it hard to read plays. When you "see" this other world, when you experience its space-time dynamics, its architectonics, then you can figure out the role of language in it.

If too tight a focus on language makes it hard to read plays, too tight a focus on character creates the opposite problem: it makes the reading too easy. To look at dramatic structures narrowly in terms of characters risks unproblematically collapsing this strange world into our own world. The stage world never obeys the same rules as ours, because in its world, nothing else is possible besides what is there: no one else lives there; no other geography is available; no alternative actions can be taken.

To see this entire world, do this literally: Mold the play into a medium-sized ball, set it before you in the middle distance, and squint your eyes. Make the ball small enough that you can see the entire planet, not so small that you lose detail, and not so large that detail overwhelms the whole.

Before you is the "world of the play." Still squinting, ask about the space. What is space like on this planet? Interior or exterior, built or natural? Is space here confined or wide open? Do you see a long passage with many "stations"? Do you see a landscape of valleys and mountains? Sea and land? Are we on an island? In a cave? In a desert or a jungle? On a country road?

Now ask about the time. How does time behave on this planet? Does "time stand still"? Is time frantic and staccato on this planet? Is it leisurely, easy-going time? How is time marked on this planet? By clock? By the sun? By the sound of footsteps? What kind of time are we in? Cyclical time? Eternal time? Linear time? What kind of line? One day? One lifetime?

Ask about the climate on this planet. Do we have storms? Eclipses of the sun and moon? Do we have extreme heat? Paralyzing cold? Is the environment on this planet lush and abundant, sere and life-denying, airless and suffocating? What is the seasonal "feel" of this world? Autumnal? Wintry?

What is the mood on this planet? Jolly? Serious? Sad? Ironic? Sepulchral? The mood is not just a question of plot (comedies are "happy," etc.), "tone" also contributes to mood. What is the tone of this planet? Delicate or coarse? Cerebral or passionate? Restrained or violent? How are mood and tone created on this planet? Through music? Light, sound, color, shape? What shapes? Curves? Angles?

Remember, you can't just decide the planet is wintry or dark because you think it would look more interesting in snow or smog, at least not yet. Make sure you're alert to what's there; there should be actual evidence on the planet for what you report.

You're not done. In most dramatic worlds there are hidden, or at least unseen, spaces. Ask questions about them as well. What are their characteristics of space, time, tone, and mood? How do they relate to the represented world, the world you can see?

Finally, while you're looking at this planet, listen to its "music." Every dramatic world will have, or suggest, characteristic sounds—of mourning, celebration, children's patter, incantation. It will alternate sounds of human and landscape, or sound and silence. Listen for the pattern of the sound.

## II. THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE PLAY: A CLOSER LOOK

You are still not ready to examine the beings who inhabit this world. Before you inquire into their individual traits and motives, there are other things you need to know.

Keep squinting at the planet. Is this a public world, or private? What are its class rules? Aristocratic? Popular? Mixed?

In what kinds of patterns do the figures on this planet arrange themselves? Do you see groups in action, isolated individuals, both? Is there a single central figure, surrounded by a group? Are figures matched off in conflicting pairs? Are you seeing (and feeling) the tension of interlocking triangles?

How do figures appear on this planet? Are they inward or two-dimensional? Subtle? Exaggerated? Are they like puppets? Like clowns? Like you? (Are you sure?)

How do figures dress on this planet? In rags, in gowns, in cardboard cutouts? Like us? (Are you sure?)

How do figures interact? By fighting? Reasoned discussion?

Who has power on this planet? How is it achieved? Over whom is it exercised? To what ends is it exercised?

What are the language habits on this planet? Verse or prose, dialogue or monologue, certainly. But also, what kinds of language predominate—of thoughts or of feelings? And what kinds of feelings? Is language colorful or flat, clipped or flowing, metaphorical or logical? Exuberant or deliberate? And what about silences?

## III. WHAT CHANGES?

You have gotten a feel for this world. Now look at it dynamically, because it moves in time. Within the "rules" of its operation, nothing stays the same. What changes in this world?

Look at the first image. Now look at the last. Then locate some striking image near the center of the play (the empty box in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is a good example). To give an account of destiny on this planet range over these three markers. Why was it essential to pass through the gate of the central image to get from the first to the last?

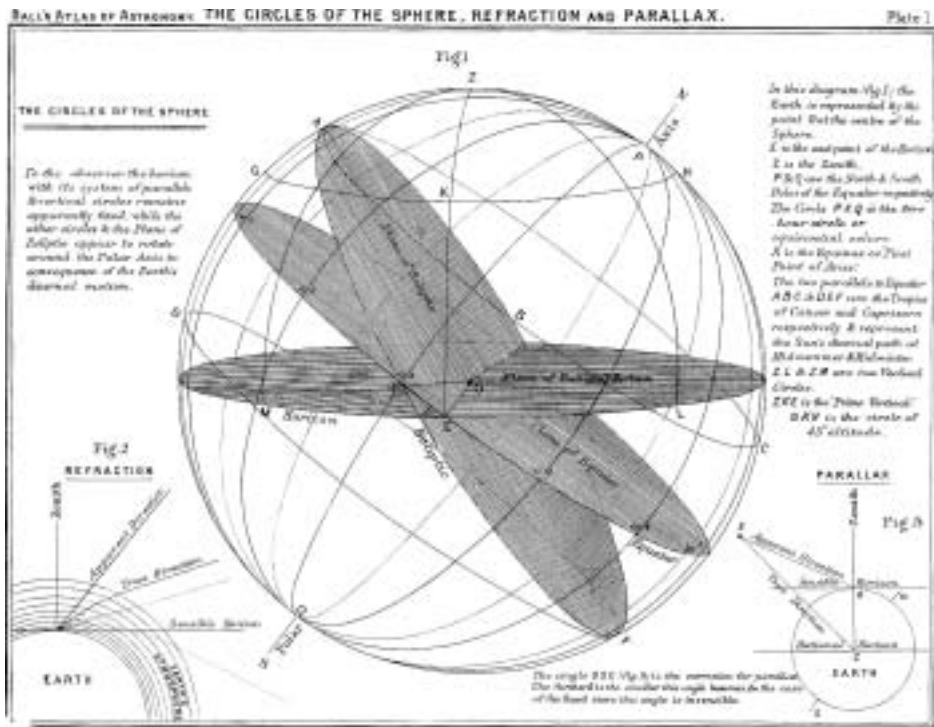


Diagram of the circles of the sphere, refraction, and parallax. Illustration: Sir Robert Stawell Ball

What changes in the landscape of this world? Does it move from inside to outside? From valleys to mountains? From town to wilderness?

What changes in time? Does time move from dusk to night? Night to dawn? Morning to midnight? Through four seasons of a year? Through the stages of a human life? Or the stages of eternal life, from Creation to Last Judgment?

What changes in language? In tone, mood, dress?

All of the changes you discover will of course contribute to and reflect on character, but each trajectory should be seen as a signifying system on its own.

What changes in the action? Have we moved from confusion to wedding (the basic plot of romantic comedy)? From threat to peaceful celebration (the basic plot of [traditional] tragicomedy)? From threat to disaster (the basic plot of tragedy)? From suffering to rebirth (the plot of the Passion play)? From threat to dual outcome, suffering for evil persons and vindication for good (the basic plot of melodrama)?

What doesn't change? Is there a stable or fixed point in this world? An absolute reality? God? The grave?

Squint one last time. Putting together space, time, the natural world and the social world, elements that change and those that don't, you are discovering the "myth." Plays are full of archetypal places—castles, gardens, forests, roads, islands, green worlds, dream worlds, storms, night scenes, and on and on. If the play starts in a palace, goes on to a moonlit forest, and returns to the palace the next day or night (which is it? day or night?), what does that progression tell you? How is the final palace scene conditioned by the night journey into the forest? Is the world of the play at the end of the play a transformed world? Or is it the same world returned to "normal," with minor adjustments? Worlds stand or fall on your answer.

## IV. DON'T FORGET YOURSELF

Seeking what changes, don't forget to ask what changes in you, the imaginer of worlds. Ask, what has this world demanded of me? Does it ask me for pity and fear? Does it ask me to reason? To physically participate in the action on the stage? Does it ask me to interact with other spectators? To leave the theater and take political action? To search my ethical being to the core? Maybe this world means only to entertain me, why not? But how does it make this intention known?

## V. THEATRICAL MIRRORS

Important as these internal systems are, dramatic worlds don't just speak to and within themselves; they also speak to each other. How many performances are signaling to you from inside this world? How many echoes of other dramatic worlds do they suggest? How do these additional layers of theatricality comment on what you have already discovered?

## VI. THE CHARACTER FITS THE PATTERN

Only now are you really ready to examine the figures who inhabit this world. Every assumption you make about a character must reflect the conditions of its world, including the way psychology functions in that world. You can arrive at the most interesting version of any question about character by first exploring the features of her theatrical planet. Characters *mean* only as they inhabit, enact, fulfill, engage a succession of sites, actions, and objects under a specific set of conditions. They are constituents of a complex artistic pattern. Find the pattern first!

Warning: Don't permit yourself to construct a pattern that omits "singularities," puzzling events, objects, figures, or scenes that "do not fit." Remember, there is nothing in the world of a play by accident. *The puzzles may hold the key.* Assume that the dramatic world is entirely conscious, determinate, limited. Give an account of that world that attempts to consider the role of every element in that world—visual, aural, temporal, tonal, figural. Become curious as each element is revealed as a player in the play. *Be someone who is aroused to meaning.*

Of course you can construct meaning in this world in many different ways. Construct it in the most inclusive way you can. There will still be more to see.

## NOTE

1. Philip E. Larson, "French Farce Conventions and the Mythic Story Pattern in *Hedda Gabler*: A Performance Criticism," in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget AS, 1985), 202.