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Coterie and Crowd: Modernists' Engagement with the Theatre

JAMES MORAN, *Modernists and the Theatre: The Drama of W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf*.

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Stephanie Pocock Boeninger

The so-called “1922 core” of literary modernism, while never suffering from a lack of critical attention, has rarely been examined for its theatrical experiments and relationship to the stage (1). This new monograph by James Moran redresses that oversight, using literary biography to demonstrate the significant influence of the theatre on W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. Moran resists the lure of these authors’ most famous works, and instead delves deeply into archives, letters, and juvenilia to reveal a variety of engagements with the stage. These engagements range from childhood play-acting to college performances in drag, and from the musical chanting of poetry to the business of theatre reviews. Given Moran’s exhaustive research, it is likely that even the most seasoned scholar of literary modernism will discover several new anecdotes about their favorite modernist. The difficult and at times thankless work of literary biography is one of this book’s greatest offerings to the field.

But *Modernists and the Theatre* is more than a series of disconnected biographical vignettes. Moran impressively weaves together the chapters to reveal the chains of influence between these authors; each was witnessing the others’ theatrical experiments and adding to them. Along the way, recurring themes emerge, most notably the tension between the coterie and the crowd. Each member of the “1922 core” relished the opportunities presented by the small performance for a select audience, whether aristocrats in drawing rooms or family members at a Christmas gathering. Yet each, in his or her own way, also longed for the approval of the crowd, for the energy and potential of the popular theatre. Moran demonstrates how, for Yeats and Pound, this tension between elite exclusivity and the desire to speak to the masses fed their tendency towards fascistic thinking, as “these figures often desired a wider audience, but certainly did not feel that they ought to be in thrall to majoritarian or democratic opinion” (14). However, for some other modernists, the same tension between coterie and crowd moved away from univocality towards flexibility and experimentation. Moran quotes Richard Schnecher’s observation that theatre “can be a powerful weapon for public control or, conversely, for radical change” (16).

Chapter One focuses on W.B. Yeats, the figure who looms largest over the book. Yeats is indisputably the modernist most thoroughly involved with the theatre as he was a profoundly experimental playwright, but perhaps most significantly as the co-founder of the Abbey and ardent supporter of other playwrights, including J.M. Synge. Resisting these well-known phases of Yeats’s career, Moran focuses instead on the period from Yeats’s teenage years to the beginning of the twentieth century, uncovering his early fascination with Shakespeare, the vocal experiments of Florence Farr, and the potential of “small-scale” and “unpopular” theatre (23). It is in this chapter that Moran’s archival biographical work shines; he works with letters from Yeats’s childhood, several unpublished or rarely published plays, and an unfinished play that “exists only in an unruly manuscript at the National Library of Ireland” (25). This chapter will undoubtedly be of great use to

Yeats scholars who may not have easy access to those archival materials. In examining these early works, Moran reveals the growing tension in Yeats between elitism and the lure of the popular stage, a tension that would shape not only his own work but that of each of the other authors in the study.

The book's second chapter moves from Ezra Pound's early experiments as an actor to his fascination with and eventual friendship with Yeats (a section within the chapter is titled, humorously, "Stalking Yeats"). Pound shared with Yeats his fascination with Japanese Noh theatre, and Yeats shared his appreciation for Synge and dismay at the way the "mob" had treated Synge (56). This fruitful collaboration led to Yeats's experimental Noh-inspired plays as well as Pound's lesser-known theatrical scripts, which "attempt to combine the theatrical style of Synge ... with the very different formal aesthetic of traditional Japanese drama" (56). While both Yeats and Pound were drawn to aristocratic and elite forms of theatre, both also desired a wider influence; they wanted their plays performed. Pound's tendency towards elitism fed his developing anti-Semitism. Moran traces the beginnings of Pound's anti-Semitic writing back further than other critics, locating some of its earliest expressions in Pound's theatre reviews of the 1920's. Pound's fascist radio broadcasts of WWII thus represent the dangerous culmination of his elitist and anti-Semitic theatrical thinking.

Chapter Three's title, "D.H. Lawrence: Theatre and the Working Class" reveals a shift from the previous chapter on Pound. However, the chapter begins with a youthful encounter between the two men, recording the ways in which Lawrence was influenced by Pound and Yeats. Lawrence shared their interest in small-scale performance, the works of J.M. Synge, and the experiments of Florence Farr. In these similar inspirations, Moran contends, Lawrence found different and broader ideas. His theatrical works, when performed at all, were staged before small groups, but they featured "the voices and experiences of the broader working class" (83). Oddly enough, however, the only play that Lawrence saw professionally performed during his lifetime, *David*, is strikingly similar to the highbrow musical and theatrical experiments of Yeats or Pound, indicating that perhaps his status as a champion of working-class voices found expression more fully in his novels than in his dramatic works.

The title of the fourth chapter promises a study of James Joyce that connects his theatrical thinking and writing with "sexual non-conformity." Yet this chapter remains as focused on D.H. Lawrence as James Joyce, intent on demonstrating a parallel between the two men who did not like each other's work. This premise seems like a valuable task, as Moran demonstrates a number of similarities in the theatrical work and attitudes of the two modernists. However, the chapter sits somewhat uneasily in the context of the overall book, where every other chapter focuses on the literary biography of its subject, tracing influences and exploring relationships but ultimately remaining fixed on the developing work and ideas of one writer. Moran draws many illuminating comparisons between Joyce and Lawrence, such as their close engagement with *Riders to the Sea*. Others seem less so, like the fact that they went to similar schools and studied Shakespeare or the observation that their fathers enjoyed music and dancing. When considered in conjunction with the other chapters, this one makes the reader question why Joyce did not earn his own chapter, whether his theatrical engagement was not as significant as that of the other modernists. The chapter also claims that "Joyce and Lawrence both saw drama as a place where marginalized sexual and gender identities might be expressed" (98). Yet relatively little evidence is given to support this claim, perhaps because Moran spends little time on the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses*. Instead, he focuses on *Exiles* and Lawrence's *The Fight for Barbara*, both plays in which two straight men (one of whom represents the author) compete for the love of a straight woman (who stands in for the author's lover or wife). While the material may have been risqué for the time, it seems like a stretch to classify it as a victory for "marginalized sexual and gender identities" (98).

Chapter 5 traces the increasing pull of the popular theatre on T.S. Eliot. Drawn to Yeats's verse drama and to his coterie performances, Eliot maintained that playwrights should strive to "be entertaining" and reach a "larger public" (122). Following Eliot's religious conversion, his experience writing and staging a "version of the York medieval mystery plays" gave him a taste of the popular theatre (131). In *Murder in the Cathedral*, he brings together Yeatsian verse drama with the religious subject material that had enabled his first popular success. Yet his subsequent plays do away with the verse drama almost entirely and instead embrace the light humor of the drawing room comedy. While popular in Eliot's lifetime, these plays are now rarely performed and Eliot's slide into theatrical accessibility is often bemoaned as a loss for literature.

Moran's final chapter explores Virginia Woolf's engagement with the theatre, which was more limited than that of the other modernists because of her gender. Similar to Yeats and Pound, she was drawn to the small-scale coterie performance, but for practical rather than elitist reasons; she "depended on family involvement to provide the opportunity for female theatrical development" (146). Woolf's friendship and rivalry with T.S. Eliot influenced her writing for and about the theatre. Ultimately, though, she was troubled by the religious beliefs and social conservatism she saw in his theatrical works. Woolf frequently celebrated female performers and theatre-makers in her writing; her only complete theatrical script, *Freshwater*, is about the treatment of the life of actress Ellen Terry. Finally, as Eliot moved towards larger audiences and increasing popularity, Woolf moved inward, demonstrating in her novels the significance of performance in everyday life, especially in the lives of women. Her final novel, *Between the Acts*, examines the staging of a local pageant, ending with an avant-garde scene that suggests "the development of a drama that would speak *with* rather than *at* an audience" (168).

Modernists and the Theatre is exhaustively researched, well written, persuasively argued, and an important work of scholarship. By compiling and examining little-known biographical sources and juvenilia that demonstrate the modernists' engagement with the theatre, Moran has done a great service for scholars of dramatic literature and of literary modernism alike.

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