

Reviews

Poets at Play: An Anthology of Modernist Drama.

Edited by Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010.

Wallace Stevens has pride of place in this anthology of modernist drama. Although his *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* was not produced by the Provincetown Players until 1920, because it received the inaugural prize for drama from *Poetry* magazine, where it was published in 1916, editors Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole credit it with having “introduced poetic drama to American audiences” (28). Thus it leads off this collection of plays that exemplify the editors’ definition of “poetic drama,” a term that to them “distinguishes drama written with explicit attention to the individual line structure and to the aesthetic properties of language” (17). In the context of modernism, the editors define poetic drama as “those plays that draw attention to themselves as literary creations that are never subsumed into the apparent reality of the play,” and for which “the textual form of poetic drama is always self-consciously evident, even in performance” (17–18). They write that modernist poetic drama “attempts to resolve the basic division between poetry as literature and theater as performance” (14). In performance, however, both the literary and the performative “remain visible in the play,” although “poetic drama foregrounds language and line structure as the key principles of dramatic composition” (18). In effect, the editors position “poetic drama” in opposition to realism, emphasizing its metadramatic and self-consciously literary dialogic elements.

In selecting the plays, the editors have chosen to situate poetic drama “within a discourse of modernism,” and thus to collect plays that, while balanced between male and female playwrights, are by writers “mostly well known to readers of modern American poetry,” and “largely restricted to the interwar period as the height of poetic drama” (24). Excluded from the collection are playwrights such as Robert Lowell, Robinson Jeffers, and the New York School poets, because they wrote after World War II, as well as the writers who essentially brought poetic drama back to the American theater in the mid-twentieth century with highly successful verse plays, Maxwell Anderson, Archibald MacLeish, and T. S. Eliot, the first two because “neither writer was predominantly known as a poet” (25) and Eliot because the editors consider him primarily a British dramatist. Another surprising omission, not mentioned by the editors, is Alfred Kreymborg, who was most responsible for involving the *Others* magazine poets in the New York art theater scene in the teens, convincing the Provincetown Players to produce his own *Lima Beans*, in which William Carlos Williams and Mina Loy acted, as well as Stevens’ *Three Travelers* in 1920. Kreymborg’s *Lima Beans*, *Jack’s House*, and *Manikin and Minikin* are distinguished both for their experimental poetic dialogue and for their metadramatic technique.

A collection of eight plays must be very selective, however, and the editors have chosen representative plays that, for the most part, are not readily available. Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria da Capo* (1919), a classic and often produced one-act play, has been anthologized many times, and recently included, along with *Three Travelers*, in *The Provincetown Players: A Choice of the Shorter Works*, edited by Barbara Ozieblo. The other plays in the volume are less well known. Williams' *Many Loves: Trial Horse No. 1* (1942), which had a very successful production by the experimental Living Theatre in 1959, is an ambitious metatheatrical play that is not as well known as it should be. H. D.'s *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927) and Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928) have never had full-blown productions. It is interesting to see the texts of Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All* (1945–1946), which is known as the libretto for an opera with music by Virgil Thompson, and Ezra Pound's *Sophokles: Women of Trachis* (1954), which has been produced on the radio and in college theaters.

Although space was clearly a limitation in putting the collection together, it is disappointing to see only the third act of E. E. Cummings' *Him* (1928), which, like *Aria da Capo* and *Many Loves*, had a significant impact on modernist aesthetics in the American theater, effectively bringing the "poetic drama" to full realization on the stage. In this case in particular, placing the full play in its theatrical context would give a better sense of the climate of modernist experimentation in which these poets-turned-playwrights were seeking to participate. The editors suggest that Cummings' plays were "composed in direct opposition to the realist tendencies of early twentieth-century American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill" (157). This statement seems to require more explanation when one considers that *Him* was produced by the Experimental Theatre, Inc. (ETI), of which O'Neill was a founding director, having worked very hard to create it after the demise of the Provincetown Players in order to give his own experimental work a theatrical space in which to flourish apart from the commercial pressures of Broadway. In April of 1928, when *Him* was produced, O'Neill was enjoying his greatest period of fame during his lifetime as the author of *Strange Interlude*, known for its experimentation with stream-of-consciousness dialogue and its violation of realistic stage conventions. Act 2 of *Him* includes a parody of O'Neill's experimental mask play, *The Great God Brown*, produced by the ETI in 1926 and directed by James Light, who also directed *Him*. Act 2 of *Him* also features a scene about the playwright Mr. O'Him (misquoted in this volume's headnote as "Mr. O. Him"), probably also a reference to O'Neill.

These details are not particularly important in themselves, but they suggest a perhaps troubling perspective that is indicated by the volume's title, *Poets at Play*. Implying that the theater is a pleasant diversion from poetry, something that poets take only half seriously, not only diminishes the importance of the theatrical aesthetics that plays like *Him* or *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* intervene in seriously and in important ways, but makes light of the opportunity to really look at the poet at work in the theater. It is interesting to see someone like H. D. or Pound experimenting with theatrical dialogue as a poetic form,

but so much more so to see Millay, Cummings, Williams, and Stevens working full out to take on what used to be called the “poetry of the theater” as well as “poetry in the theater.”

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Mr. and Mrs. Stevens and Other Essays.

By Mark Ford. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011.

Mark Ford is the author of three collections of poetry, a frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and *London Review of Books*, and a Professor of English at University College London. This intriguing volume assembles several previously published but here revised pieces, drawn from Ford’s reviews of poetry or of recent critical works concerning a wide range of American, English, and Irish authors. Ford offers a highly readable and often insightful group of essays drawing on diverse voices from Gerard Manley Hopkins—who lends Ford the title of his 2001 volume *Soft Sift* (from “The Wreck of the Deutschland”)—to W. B. Yeats, Paul Muldoon, Edward Thomas, Ted Hughes, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler, Donald Justice, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Joe Brainard, Bob Dylan (here in critical discussion with Emerson), as well as Wallace Stevens.

Of principal interest to lovers of Stevens’ work are the essays “Mr. and Mrs. Stevens,” which derives from a review of J. Donald Blount’s *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie*, and “Nicholas Moore, Wallace Stevens and the Fortune Press,” which first appeared in a collection of essays Bart Eeckhout and I edited in 2008, *Wallace Stevens across the Atlantic*. Ford begins “Mr. and Mrs. Stevens” with a comment Henry Church made to Stevens in a letter of 1943, noting, “I am convinced that Mrs. Stevens has had an important part to play in the poetry of Wallace Stevens” (53). However, as Ford notes, with reference to Stevens’ early poems of courtship—the “Book of Verses” of 1908 and “The Little June Book” of 1909—“Although certain lines and images from both are carried over into *Harmonium*, neither sequence suggests that their author, by this time in his early thirties, was destined to metamorphose into one of the major poets of the twentieth century” (53).

As Ford knows, this is well-trodden critical ground. However, he tentatively suggests that it “seems to have taken the disappointment of marriage itself, which he had fondly imagined as likely to ‘exceed all faery,’ to convert Stevens from a dabbler in nineties-ish colours and textures and whimsicalities, into the author of ‘Sunday Morning,’ ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream,’ and ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier’” (53). Drawing on Blount’s valuable collection, Ford deftly adumbrates the story of Stevens’ aesthetic projection of Elsie in both poetic and epistolary terms—the two often being indistinguishable in the letters themselves—observing, with respect to Stevens’ early journal entries, the “almost Dickensian nature of the fantasy on which their relationship was based” (56).