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Toward an Understanding of Christopher Fry

Edward Joseph Mattimoe
Loyola University Chicago

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TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTOPHER FRY

by

Edward Joseph Mattimoe, S.J.

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LIFE

Edward Joseph Mattimoe was born in Toledo, Ohio, on April 8, 1934.

After graduating from Campion High School, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin in May, 1952, he entered the Society of Jesus at Sacred Heart Novitiate, Milford, Ohio, on September 1, 1952.

He began his undergraduate studies at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio in September, 1952. In 1956 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University and there received the Bachelor of Arts degree in June, 1957. He then entered the Graduate School of Loyola University.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the purpose of thesis—Plan of the thesis—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biography of the playwright.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE MAIN IDEAS IN CHRISTOPHER FRY'S PLAYS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summaries of Fry's eight published plays—Fry's main ideas:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The miracle of existence—The sense of mystery—The sense</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of paradox—The world of nature—The fact of birth—Human</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life—Love as a force in the world—The fact of death—The</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hatred for war—The idea of God.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE STYLE OF CHRISTOPHER FRY</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The verse—Humor—Paradox—Substitution—Punning—Strange</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words—Word inventions—Invective—Self-mockery—Advantages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and disadvantages of Fry's style.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. AN EXPERIENCE OF CRITICS</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fry's book <em>An Experience of Critics</em>—Stephen Spender—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe K. Spears—John Mason Brown—George Jean Nathan—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert Highet—Walter Kerr—Raymond Williams—Frederick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lummley—Harold Clurman—Rolfe Arnold Scott—James—William</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrowsmith—Erwin Stierl—Derek Stanford—Criticism of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religious plays—John Gassner.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions regarding ideas—Conclusions regarding style.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the first half of the twentieth century neared its close, the English-speaking world was surprised by the discovery of a new poetic dramatist. Christopher Fry, a soft-spoken Englishman, was bringing verse comedies to the British and American stage. Verse had been rare enough during the last half century, and when it had been used, it was nearly always for tragedy. But this was exuberant, rapidly moving poetry. Christopher Fry immediately became a center of attention. George Jean Nathan dubbed him "the English wonder-child." It was an apt title. Fry's sheer verbal power, incorporating skill in using existing words and inventiveness in coining new words, was a source of wonder on two continents. Some wondered whether Fry was to be the harbinger of a new poetic drama. Fry was quickly compared and contrasted with Shakespeare, with Congreve, with Sheridan, with Eliot. Others wondered whether this upstart wordmaker had anything at all to say. Criticism of Fry's work has remained disparate and sometimes contradictory in the decade that followed his appearance on the dramatic horizon.

The purpose of this thesis will be to study the main ideas which Chris-

Christopher Fry is attempting to convey by means of his poetic drama, and to investigate what reactions there have been on the part of the critics. By his ideas are meant the attitudes, the important concepts, the spiritual notions which Fry has in his mind when he writes his plays. Some have chosen to call these his "metaphysical" ideas. If this term is used, it must be borne in mind that it is not implied that Fry is a metaphysical poet in the usual sense. Rather, as Derek Stanford writes in his biography of Fry,

we see that, for the poet, the metaphysical is none other than his general feelings upon such subjects as time, and mortality, love and the supernatural and death. Whether these conclusions are 'determined logically' or by means of some other power will depend upon the temperament of the poet, his prevailing faculty or qualité principal. Using the word in the vernacular, we understand by it merely a reference to extraphysical subjects or behaviour to those things or functions which lie beyond or lie beneath the physical. The perception of these qualities may, again, entail the formulation of no ordered system. The revelation of them may be individual, intermittent, or sequential. It may posit no more than a moment of vision, or—on the other hand—it may bring with it a concatenation of argument or statement.  

These ideas, then may be called metaphysical, religious, or perhaps best, philosophical. The specific nature of the ideas will be explained in the next chapter. Whether they are expressive of an ordered system of thought and belief, and to what extent these ideas help or hinder Fry's plays will also be subject for discussion.

Chapter II will be a consideration of the philosophical ideas of Fry. In the third chapter, Christopher Fry's peculiar style will be discussed in its function as a vehicle for conveying the poet's thought. First, elements of style which are Fry's trademark will be pointed out and examples will be

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given. Then in the light of the ideas he is trying to convey, an attempt will be made to assess the advantages and disadvantages of this style. Criticism of Fry's work will be the topic of Chapter IV, in which the importance of the philosophical ideas as a background for criticism will be stressed. The fifth chapter will draw together critical judgments on Fry's philosophy and his style, and show how they must be considered for a fair evaluation of the plays. A possible division of critics will be pointed out, though no attempt will be made to canonize Fry or his works.

In order to understand the background of Christopher Fry's ideas, some knowledge of his biography will be helpful. Although his plays do not mirror his environment as those say, of a Tennessee Williams, perhaps more often than is generally thought Fry is commenting on contemporary life or the world in which he grew up.

Christopher Fry was born in Bristol, England, on December 18, 1907, to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Harris. His father was an architect by profession, but gave this up to become a lay missionary in the slums of Bristol. He worked with great zeal; but his health was not strong, and he died in 1910. Stanford points out that, although Christopher was only three years old at the time of his father's death, he had a deep impression of his father's faith and personality.

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4Derek Stanford, Christopher Fry (London, 1955), p. 11. Stanford has written two books on Fry. Subsequently, this one will be called Fry, the one cited on page 2, Appreciation.
By taking in boarders, Fry's widowed mother was able to send him to a good school, the Bedford Modern School. Christopher remained there until he was eighteen. Fry's mother, like his father, was religious-minded. Though she herself was Church of England, she came from Quaker background. Fry assumed her Quaker religion to a certain extent, although he never became a practicing Quaker. He also assumed his mother's former name, Fry. "It was a matter of euphony," he said. 

When he had finished his schooling, Fry took up teaching for a year and then turned to the theater. It was not a completely new idea. He had written and produced his first play, a farce, at the age of eleven, a poem at twelve, and had already tried his hand at verse drama at fourteen. He joined the Bath Repertory Company but found this mode of living precarious. Back he went to teaching for another three years. Finding that he had managed to save the sum of ten pounds from his teaching career, Fry gave it up permanently. He became a sort of theatrical Jack-of-all-trades. One of his jobs was as secretary to a popular-song writer. Fry himself composed a few songs, which did not become popular.

Although his life was not marked by a great deal of success during the twenties and thirties, it contained a great deal of theatrical experience. He acted in a number of plays and in 1934 was made director of the Tunbridge Wells Players. "He says he didn't write a line from the age of eighteen to twenty-eight, though the assurance that he would, never faltered." In 1935, he wrote

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5Anonymous, Time, LVI, 61.

6Current Biography, 1951, 213.
the words and music for an Andre Charlot revue, *She Shall Have Music*. It enjoyed a brief run at the Savoy in London. The Tunbridge Wells Players failed financially in 1936. Fry was commissioned to write a play on the life of John Barnardo, founder of Dr. Barnardo's Homes, a charitable organization which runs orphanages all over England. Fry toured England for two years with this piece, called *Open Door*. He wrote and staged some other productions, such as *The Tower*, written for the Tewkesbury Festival in 1939. Another pageant, *Thursday's Child*, was presented at Albert Hall.

None of these early plays were published, and Fry was scarcely known. He had married Phyllis Hart, a journalist, in 1936, and by 1938, as Fry states candidly, "we finally got to the point that we had no money at all." The details of this early period serve to point up the fact that Fry has had a long and arduous apprenticeship in the theater. As W. J. Igoe has noted, "His training in the arts of the theater is traditional and if we are to accept, as the writer would, Duff Cooper's *Sergeant Shakespeare*, has everything in common with the apprenticeship of England's greatest writer." A small legacy inherited from a cousin permitted Fry to begin work on his first important play, *The Boy with a Cart*, published by Oxford University Press in 1939.

At the start of World War II, Christopher Fry became director of the Oxford Playhouse. The winter of 1940 saw Fry drafted into the military service. As a Quaker, he refused to take part in armed combat. He was assigned to the

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7*Time*, LVI, 62.

Pioneer Corps, and took part in clearing away rubble all over bombed Britain.

Despite his artistic temperament, Fry was not high-brow or stand-offish in the services. Derek Stanford, who met him in 1940 when both were serving in a non-combatant arm, notes: "He did not, as do certain poets, exhibit and indulge his inspiration in public. He was not always falling into calculated trances which sometimes seem to suggest constipation rather than the sudden visitation of the muse. Indeed, he was always amenable and ready to apply his talents to the most modest ends. Many are the khaki concerts I recall in which his dexterity as tap-dancer, his quiet professional stage-managing touch and gift for the writing of songscripts were apparent; giving to what otherwise must have been rice-pudding the volatile ebullient tempo of a bubble." ⁹

When Fry returned to civilian life in 1944, his first task was to complete The Firstborn, a tragedy which he had begun in 1936. The text of the play was published in 1946. In the same year, the first of his comedies was presented in England and quite well received. This was A Phoenix Too Frequent, first presented at the Mercury Theater, then later in the year at the Arts Theater in London.

Fry's next play was Thor, with Angels written for the festival week of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral. The Firstborn was also produced for the first time that same year, 1948, at the Edinburgh Festival. But the playwright's first notable success came when the Arts Theater in London presented The Lady's Not for Burning. John Gielgud was impressed by the play, and he

⁹Stanford, Appreciation, p. 18.
brought it to the stage of the Globe Theater, where it ran for nearly 300 performances. Gielgud himself took the lead, and was assisted by Pamela Brown as the Lady. The Lady's Not for Burning was brought to the American stage by Gielgud's company in November of 1950. It was received as enthusiastically by New York audiences as it had been in London. A Phoenix Too Frequent had been presented in the spring of that same year, but was not successful.

Sir Laurence Olivier was favorably impressed by Fry's poetic drama and commissioned him to write a third comedy, Venus Observed, which he directed and in which he took the leading role. During one week, four of Fry's plays were running simultaneously in London.

For the Festival of Britain in 1951, Fry wrote his third religious play, A Sleep of Prisoners. It was first performed in St. Mary's, Oxford, having been written specifically for church presentation. Later in the year it moved to St. Thomas's Church, Regent Street, and ran there for many weeks. Late that year the play had a limited run at St. James Church, New York.

Fry's latest play, The Dark Is Light Enough, appeared in 1954 in England and a year later in this country. At present writing, Fry is said to be two-thirds finished with a tragedy based on the life of Henry II.

The eight plays named above will be the primary sources considered in this thesis. To complete the biography of Christopher Fry, however, it should be noted that the dramatist has also gained some renown as a translator of modern French plays. In 1950, Fry's translation of Jean Anouilh's L'Invitation au Château appeared at the Globe under the title, Ring Round the Moon. This was followed in 1955 by The Lark, Fry's translation of Anouilh's L'Alouette. Jean Giraudoux's La Guerre de Troie N'Aura pas Lieu appeared this same year,
rendered as *Tiger at the Gates* by Fry.

Christopher Fry's private life is quiet and simple, centered in the country rather than the city. He lives with his wife and son in a cottage in Oxfordshire. He came to America for the first time in the spring of 1958 when *The Firstborn* opened in New York.

These skeletal biographical details will serve to give some idea of the playwright's background. More specific details will be mentioned in the subsequent chapters when these bear a relation to the play in question.
CHAPTER II

THE MAIN IDEAS IN CHRISTOPHER FRY'S PLAYS

In this chapter, an attempt will be made to indicate the main ideas, the important themes, which Christopher Fry has in mind when he writes his plays. Evidence of these ideas will be presented mainly from texts of the plays themselves. This will be supplemented by statements from Fry, and also by citations from commentators on his work. This chapter will not set out to criticize these ideas, nor to judge whether they are effectively communicated in the plays.

Since Fry's ideas are to be drawn mostly from his plays, it is necessary to give some general summary of each play. At this point the plot structure will be indicated, and the main characters introduced. This will not be an analysis of the plays but will serve to make later references clear.

The first of Fry's published works was *The Boy with a Cart*. Written for the fiftieth anniversary of a village parish church, *The Boy* was more of a pageant than a play. It tells the story of Cuthman, Saint of Sussex. The incidents are loosely strung together and miracles are fairly abundant. It is the only play in which Fry makes use of a chorus, a device used more often today in the pageant than in the play.

In scene one of *The Boy*, Cuthman, a carefree shepherd is informed by two
neighbor ladies that his father has died. Guthman and his mother are left penniless. He works quite industriously building a cart to carry his mother from town to town. He persuades her that they will ride from village to village till they find one that they like. They set out with Guthman pulling the cart by means of a rope over his shoulders. The rope breaks as the boy and his mother are passing some mowers, and the mowers laugh as Guthman's mother is dumped on the ground. Guthman goes to a nearby ford to cut withies to make a new rope for the cart. When he returns to his mother, he tells her that he has had a vision from God. He has been given a sort of vocation; at the place where the new withies break, he is to stop and build a church. He and his mother travel on until they reach the village of Steyning, where the withies break. Here Guthman stops, and with the aid of a few miracles to surmount his difficulties, he builds his church.

The Boy with a Cart shows more of T. S. Eliot's influence than any of Fry's later works. This is true especially in the use of the chorus of "The People of South England," as Derek Stanford observes. 1 The opening chorus seems quite similar in mood and cadence to that of Murder in the Cathedral. It has been pointed out that Fry "acknowledges a great debt to Eliot." 2 Certainly the debt is most obvious in this play.

Fry's ideas, as will be seen, are not as readily apparent in The Boy as in the later plays. The only characters who are on the stage long enough to

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1 Stanford, Fry, p. 17.

merit some development are Cuthman and his mother. Yet, even in this play, there are unmistakable Fry touches. For example, Cuthman's relationship with his mother is kept from being sentimental by their interchanges of wit. A case in point occurs when Cuthman's mother, who cherishes respectability, says:

**Mother.** It is just as well that we went away respected; that will be something to remember at any rate. I told the villagers, 'We are going away; Cuthman has found work to do.'

**Cuthman.** And hard work, too, Mother, if there are many hills. You're no feather.  

Even Fry's later device of humor, having one character comment on the other's choice of words, is seen at least once.

**Cuthman.** The rope broke, Mother. Are you hurt?

**Mother.** Of course I'm hurt. I'm more than hurt, I'm injured.  

By the time Fry had completed *The Boy with a Cart*, he had already begun to work on his only tragedy, *The Firstborn*. He did not complete it until 1945, "after four years when circumstance made me neglect it," as he wryly comments, referring to the war.  

The *Firstborn* is based on the Biblical story of the Jews' enslavement under the Pharaoh and their escape under the leadership of Moses. The tragedy is contained in the death of the Pharaoh's first-born son, which Moses sees as impossible to prevent.

Since this play will be cited as exemplifying some of Fry's dominant

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4Ibid., p. 17.

ideas, a rather extensive analysis of it will be helpful. Fry has given the characters a twist of his own so that the story is not just a dramatization of a Bible incident. Moses is portrayed as being torn between an allegiance to Egypt, the country which had adopted him, and the loyalty to his own people and his God. Moses is not a "type" character, as in a morality play, but it is clear from the play and from Fry's own comments that Moses is conceived as the man torn by conscience on the one hand, and the pull of humanity on the other. "The character of Moses," says the playwright, "is a movement towards maturity, towards a balancing of life within the mystery, where the conflicts and dilemmas are the trembling of the balance."6

At the beginning of the play, the Pharaoh's sister and his daughter, Anath Bithiah and Teusret, are watching the Jewish slaves building the Pharaoh's tomb. Anath tells Teusret how she rescued the baby Moses, how he had been adopted into the royal palace, how he had become nearly a prince in Egypt, and how he had killed the Egyptian who was beating the Jewish slave. At this point the Pharaoh, Seti the Second, is introduced. Fry has not conceived him as the bad man who is fighting the good man, Moses. Rather he is the power politician who wants to do everything necessary for his state, but who has no other norm. Seti, as a matter of fact, has come to ask his sister if she knows where Moses is. He would like to pardon Moses and have him take over a generalship in Libya. The Pharaoh's son, Ramases, a boy of eighteen, also appears on the scene. Fry intends this character to take a central place in the play. "Ramases," says Fry, "is the innocence, humanity, vigour,

6 Ibid.
and worth which stand on the enemy side, not altering the justice or necessity of Moses' cause, but linking the ways of men and the ways of God with a deep and urgent question-mark."7 Ramases tells that he has seen two Jews coming to the palace. A few moments later, Moses and Aaron appear. They have come to ask for justice for the Jews. The Pharaoh discusses the problem on a business level. Speaking of the Jewish slaves he says:

Seti. I have put men to a purpose who otherwise
Would have had not the least meaning.8

He thinks Moses is foolish for bothering with the Jews, and again offers him his former position, which Moses refuses.

Ramases, who has been deeply impressed by Moses, goes to the tent of Moses' sister, Miriam, to offer Moses his help in reasoning with the Pharaoh. Despite Aaron's urging, Moses will not use the aid offered. Moses tells Ramases:

Moses. We're not enemies so much
As creatures of division. You and I,
Ramases, like money in a purse,
Ring together only to be spent
For different reasons.9

In Act One, scene three, Ramases is informed of the marriage with a Syrian princess that has been planned for him. As his sister is making her own celebration of the betrothal, Moses enters bearing the dead body of an Israelite boy, as symbol and proof of what the Pharaoh's rule stands for. The Pharaoh agrees to punish the man who killed the boy, but Moses means much more by

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 15.
9 Ibid., p. 27.
the gesture. He wants to lead the Jews into the wilderness. To the Pharaoh, this is nonsense. For him the Jews are the necessary tools for building a civilization. Moses says he will be compelled to act if the Pharaoh will not listen. In the distance a cracking of thunder is heard. Moses takes this to be a sign that God is with him.

By the time the action of the next scene unfolds, several of the plagues have taken place. Anath, the Pharaoh's sister, arrives at the tent of Moses' sister, saying that the Pharaoh is ready to talk to Moses. But it is quickly seen that Moses is not going to get anywhere with Seti. Over and over again the Pharaoh tricks him, and each broken promise is succeeded by a plague. Even Ramases becomes confused in his idealistic thinking and turns his sympathies from the Jews when he sees a Jewish officer beating his own people savagely. Moses is asked for the last time to take away the plagues, but the situation is now in God's hands. Says Moses:

Moses: It must be one people or another, your people
Or mine. You appeal to Moses,
But Moses is now only a name and an obedience. 10

The last act takes place the evening of the Exodus, just before all the firstborn are to be struck dead. Suddenly Moses realizes that Ramases will be killed too. Moses rushes to the palace, and asks all there to lend their strength to fight off the invisible death. But Ramases falls dead just as his bride arrives. The Firstborn ends on a stage of mourning.

Thor, with Angels, although a religious play with a tragic ending, is closely akin to Fry's four comedies. Set in the year 596 in England, Thor

10 Ibid., p. 65.
tells the story of the second coming of Christianity to that country. At the beginning of the play, Cymen, a Jute, returns to his wife and family after a battle with the Saxons. Cymen tells a strange story. He and his men had been carrying the day when their onrush was stopped by a young British slave fighting for the Saxons. The Briton was quickly overcome and would have been summarily killed, had not Cymen leapt in, bestraddled the fallen body, and broken his sword over his head. He himself could not explain what invisible force compelled him to do this. He takes the Briton prisoner, feeling that he may be able to learn something about this strange force. The reactions of Cymen's family are varied. His wife Clodesuida thinks that they are going to anger the gods by keeping Hoel (the Briton) alive. Cymen's daughter Martina finds herself falling in love with the prisoner, though she feels it is her duty to hate him. The two sons of Cymen, Quichelm and Cheldric, and his brothers-in-law, Tadfrid and Osmer, are all for killing the prisoner. These characters, especially Clodesuida, will be described more in detail later as exemplifying Fry's ideas. Colgrin and Anna, Cymen's steward and his wife, are the playwright's first notable comedy pair. But they are not merely added to lighten the play. Colgrin especially serves to bring out contrast with the other characters, as will be shown. Merlin is also introduced during the course of the play but he does not contribute very much to the action.

As the play (which is not divided into acts) progresses, it becomes clear that Hoel is a Christian, though he does not remember the details of his faith very distinctly. He informs Martina that, when he was little, he had been taught that there were not many gods. He says:
Hoel. When I was a boy I was only
Allowed to have one, though in that One, they said,
There were three. But the altars are broken up. I've tried
To pick away the moss and read the inscriptions
But I've almost forgotten our language. I only know
The god was both father and son and a brooding dove.11

When Cymen's flock is attacked by wolves, Hoel shows himself the bravest
by killing the biggest wolf with his bare hands. But his brothers-in-law
suggest that Hoel must have some dark powers if he is able to do such things,
and suggest that he be sacrificed to appease the gods. Cymen, puzzled as to
what he should do, prays to the gods for enlightenment. For an answer he re­
ceives only silence. Suddenly a messenger comes to tell him that he is to go
to hear Augustine who will tell the assembly about the Christian God. Cymen
warns that Hoel is not to be killed in his absence. But on the excuse that
Hoel is trying to seduce Martina, the brothers-in-law tie him, with arms out­
spread, to a tree, and drive a spear into his side. Thus, just as Cymen re­
turns from the assembly converted to Christianity, Hoel dies his sacrificial
death.

A Sleep of Prisoners is Fry's latest religious play. It was written to
be dramatized in church. Four British soldiers are imprisoned in this church
which is in enemy territory during war-time. These four are the only charac­
ters in the play. As the play begins, the men are making their beds. The
youngest, Peter Able, is in a cantankerous mood, and David King, a young sol­
dier who does not see things Peter's way, very nearly strangles his friend.
Finally peace is made through the intervention of the two older soldiers, and
the four prisoners retire. Four dreams follow which serve to reveal the

characters of the four soldiers. The body of the play is the dramatization of the dreams, which, influenced by the ecclesiastical environment, all turn on Biblical themes. Fry says that "each of four men is seen through the sleeping thoughts of the others, and each, in his own dream, speaks as at heart he is, not as he believes himself to be." 12 Meadows' dream is the first. The scene he sees is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Meadows stands for God, and Corporal Adams appears as Adam, watching his sons but incapable of stopping them. Peter Able is seen as Abel and David King as Cain. When Meadows wakes up, David's dream begins. He dreams of himself as King David and of Peter Able as his son Absalom. Peter's dream is the third. He also sees the relationship between himself and King as a father-son relationship, but he dreams that he himself is Isaac and King is Abraham, leading him up the hill of sacrifice. Even in these first three dreams, there is more interweaving of characters than has been indicated in this scheme. But the fourth dream is more complex than these. As Corporal Adams dreams, Fry points out, "the dream changes into a state of thought entered into by all the sleeping men, as though, sharing their prison life, they shared for a few moments of the night, their sleeping life also." 13 The Corporal first dreams of himself adrift on the ocean, then of the four of them marching for miles through the rain over slimy logs. Then the four of them see themselves as Shadrac, Meshac, and Abednego, with Meadows appearing as the figure of God, that is, Man under the command of God. They wake up at the end of the play, and Adams speaks:


13 Ibid.
Adams. Well, sleep, I suppose.  
David. Yeh, God bless.  
Peter. Rest you merry.  
Meadows. Hope so. Hope so.  

(They settle down. The church clock strikes. A bugle sounds in the distance.)

Fry's other four plays are all comedies. They are sometimes called his secular pieces to distinguish them from the religious plays. This is perhaps an unfortunate nomenclature, since Fry could scarcely write two consecutive "secular" lines.

A Phoenix Too Frequent was Fry's first comedy to appear after the war. It is a small play, not broken by a division of acts or scenes, and having just three characters. Fry borrowed the plot from Petronius' story of a lady of Ephesus who determined to starve herself in her husband's tomb to be with him. But the appearance of a handsome young corporal of the guard leads her to change her mind. As Dynamene, the lady in question, and her faithful maid Doto wait for death in the tomb, Tegeus, the soldier comes on the scene and asks if he can eat his dinner there. First he tries to offer Doto food and she remains quite adamant—until she sees the food. Then he offers her some of his wine, and she takes a goodly share of it. Doto encourages her mistress to have a bit. Finally Dynamene consents. Soon with the aid of a few more bowls of wine, the three find themselves engaged in a melancholy but witty discussion of life and death. Tegeus manages to convince Dynamene that she can solve her problems much better by loving him than by dying. But at this point he goes out of the tomb to check on the six hanged corpses which

14Ibid., p. 51.
he is supposed to have been guarding. He comes back distraught to tell Dynamene that one of the bodies has disappeared and that he will surely be put to death for his neglect of duty. He even wants to commit suicide on the spot. Suddenly Dynamene has a light. Her husband's dead body can substitute for the missing corpse. Tegeus is rather shocked but Dynamene assures him that this is far better than having her husband "idling into corruption." The play ends as Doto returns to the scene and realizes that love has satisfactorily triumphed over death.

The Lady's Not for Burning was perhaps Christopher Fry's most successful play. Again he borrowed his plot, this time from a German short story. Life and death are again the themes, but this comedy's setting is in the imaginary town of Cool Clary, England, around 1400. Thomas Mendip, having fought as a soldier in Flanders to the point of surfeit, shows up at the Mayor's house (where the entire play takes place) requesting that he be hanged. He confesses to a couple of murders to make the task easier. The Mayor meanwhile is busy discovering a beautiful witch in his town. Suddenly the alleged witch, Jennet Jourdewayne, comes bounding into the room. Unlike Thomas, she is not minded to die; hence the title of the play. There are more complications to the plot; Richard, the Mayor's clerk, falls in love with the Mayor's innocent young ward, Alizon Eliot. She is supposed to be engaged to Humphrey Devize, one of the Mayor's two loutish nephews, who live at his house. As the first

act ends, Thomas Mendip finds that his will to death is not as strong as it was before Jennet arrived on the scene. He says as his curtain line:

Thomas. Mr. Mayor, hang me for pity's sake,  
For God's sake hang me, before I love that woman.  

The Mayor and his cronies decide that if they bring Thomas and Jennet to a party given by the family, Thomas will decide that life is not so bad, deny his guilt, and thus not be on their hands. They also hope that by leaving Jennet alone with him for a time, they will be able to get some sure evidence that she is a bona fide witch. In the course of their conversation, Thomas declares that a man is nothing but a sort of biped vegetable, and asks why love should arise between them. Jennet answers:

Jennet. You are Evil, Hell, the Father of Lies; if so  
Hell is my home and my days of good were a holiday:  
Hell is my hill and the world slopes away from it  
Into insignificance.  

Of course the Mayor and his friends mistake the language of love for the language of diabolism, and Jennet is quickly condemned to be burned. In the absence of Thomas during the scene which follows, Humphrey Devise tries to force his attentions on Jennet. He says that he can have her sentence revoked if she will capitulate. She decides that it would be better to die and tells him so. At this point Richard and Alizon return with Matthew Skipps, the man whom Jennet had supposedly turned into a dog with her witchcraft. Thomas had also confessed to the murder of this man. So the play ends with Thomas and

17 Ibid., p. 59.
Jennet left to themselves. Jennet tells him:

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Jennet.    Thomas, only another
Fifty years or so and then I promise
To let you go.18
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As will be demonstrated later, the ending is not exactly "happily ever after" since Mendip does not make a complete volte-face from his earlier death wish.

Fry's third comedy was *Venus Observed*, commissioned by Sir Laurence Olivier. Fry wanted to make it a sort of comedy of season. "In *Venus,*" he says, "the season is autumn, the scene is a house beginning to fall into decay, the characters, most of them, are in the middle life."19 It is the story of the Duke of Altair, a sophisticated amanuensis who is just passing the prime of his life. At the opening of the play, the Duke is asking his son Edgar to choose his father a wife from among three women, each of whom has at one time been on intimate terms with the Duke. The Duke's agent, Herbert Reedbeck, is also introduced. Reedbeck receives a telegram informing him that his daughter is about to arrive from America, while the Duke is preparing to receive the three ladies. Reedbeck also has a rather unlikable son named Dominic, who is forever insisting that his father is a fraud.

The Duke has arranged to have this strange meeting take place in his observatory (once his bedroom) so that all may watch the eclipse expected that day. The three women, Rosabel Fleming, an actress, Mrs. Jessie Dill, a sort of complacent and placating person, and Hilda Taylor-Snell, a punctual and


sarcastic person, arrive for the judgment. Edgar, the Duke's son, is supposed to hand an apple to the woman he chooses for his father. During the course of the conversation, the apple is twice given out and twice taken back. Just as the sun comes out of its eclipse, Reedbeck's daughter, Perpetua, arrives from America. The Duke, who seemed to be indifferent to love prior to this, suddenly decides that he himself would like to offer the apple to Perpetua. But surprisingly, she whips out a small pistol, shoots at the apple, and shatters it in the Duke's hand. The Duke is quite taken with Perpetua, but so is his son. Dominic encourages Perpetua to be co-operative with the Duke, since a marriage with him would protect their father from the legal prosecution which he deserves. That night the Duke has a secret meeting with Perpetua in the observatory. He explains to her the reason for his career of philandering: his first wife had died in childbirth, and he has been looking ever since to rediscover the source of love. Perpetua seems to be handling herself quite coolly, but suddenly the observatory begins to burn—having been set afire by Rosabel Fleming. In her fear, she confesses her love for the Duke.

The last act of the strange set of circumstances takes place at the Temple of the Ancient Virtues, in the park near the Duke's mansion. Rosabel confesses to having set fire to the observatory. She did not realize that anyone was inside. She says:

Rosabel. I fired the wing,
To destroy the observatory, to make you human,
To bring you down to be among the rest of us,
To make you understand the savage sorrows
That go on below you, 20

The Duke begins to see that "So much I delighted in is all of ash." 21 The Duke forgives Rosabel, but it comes as a shock to him when Perpetua tells him that her confession of love was motivated mainly by fear. While he is forgiving people, the Duke also forgives Perpetua's father all his illegal transactions, which, the Duke reveals, he has known about from the start. Only Dominic seems to be unforgiven. "Dominic, dear boy," says the Duke,

God would tell me He loves you, but then God
Is wonderfully accomplished, and to me
You seem less lovely... 22

The Duke watches his son go off with Perpetua, at last realizing that he himself is growing old. As the play ends, he explains to Reedbeck that he will marry Rosabel Fleming and settle down to a happy old age. The strange turn of events in this play may seem less strange when seen in the light of the ideas that Mr. Fry is trying to symbolize.

The last of Fry's comedies, The Dark Is Light Enough, centers on the character of the Countess Rosmarin Ostenburg. The time is the winter of 1848-1849 in an Austrian country-house near the Hungarian border. The Countess is presented as a type of god-like figure. "Lives make and unmake themselves in her neighbourhood," says one of her admirers, 23 The Countess has a tremendous interest in each person whom she meets, as an individual with a mind and will

21 Ibid., p. 81.
22 Ibid., p. 93.
of his own. The play is concerned chiefly with her interest in an individual named Richard Gettner, a spineless, conscienceless weakling. The Countess, it is revealed, had some years ago married off her daughter Gelda to Gettner, although she knew that he was not much good. The marriage, which was not consummated, rapidly fell to pieces, and, soon after, Gelda had married Count Peter Zichy. For some reason, Gettner has joined the Hungarian side in the Revolution against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But he loses interest in this and deserts his army. At the opening of the play, the Countess has ridden off in a blizzard by herself to bring Gettner back to her house for sanctuary. The Hungarian army tracks him there, and the Countess refuses to hand him over, preferring rather to have her house ransacked. Gettner shows his character to be thoroughly nauseating, even to the extent of trying to make love to his former wife. The Countess remains stubbornly loyal, not so much to the person of Gettner but to her belief in the individual. Finally, at the end of the play, she is able to redeem Gettner, but she does not live to see the redemption. As it happens, the tables have turned. The Colonel who had taken over the Countess' house is now on the run and the Countess is hiding him, just as she had hidden Gettner. Gettner himself is getting ready to hide. He tells the Countess that she has to face the enemy as she has done before. He thinks that she has fallen asleep in her chair, but suddenly realizes that she has died. Gettner says:

Gettner. You're dead, Rosmarin. Understand that.
What is there to stay for? You never showed
Any expectations of me when you were alive,
Why should you now?
This isn't how I meant that you should love me!
(He closes the window and comes back to her and speaks curtly.)
Very well, very well. Be with me. 24

These brief summaries of the eight plays will provide the framework for the analysis which follows. Most of the main characters in Fry's plays have been named, so that when some reference is made to them later, an entire explanation of the play will not be necessary.

What are Christopher Fry's main ideas, as derived from his plays? When he was asked what he was trying to say in his plays, Fry replied: "What I am trying to say is that life itself is the real and most miraculous miracle of all. If one had never before seen a human hand and were suddenly presented for the first time with this strange and wonderful thing, what a miracle, what a magnificently shocking and inexplicable and mysterious thing it would be. In my plays I want to look at life—at the commonplaces of existence—as if we had just turned a corner and run into it for the first time." 25 This wonder as life unfolds is present in all the works of Fry. In another place, the dramatist speaks of "the domestication of the miracle," by which he means the dulling of the awareness that existence itself is a marvelous thing. 26 Fry's purpose is perhaps most clearly stated in The Lady's Not for Burning. The supposed witch appears for the first time in the doorway of Mayor Tyson's house. Tyson cries out twice in horror "What is the meaning of this?" To

24 Ibid., p. 102.
which Thomas Mendip replies:

Thomas. That's the most relevant
Question in the world. 27

Again, in Venus Observed, Fry expresses his relevant question through the
mouth of the Duke of Altair. The Duke's son is asking his father to withdraw
from the battle for Perpetua's affections. But the Duke's problem is a deep
and perplexing one. He tells his son:

Duke. Edgar,
I mean to be a good father to you, but
A good father must be a man. And what
Is a man? Edgar, what is a man? 0
My man-child, what in the world is a man?
Speaking for myself, I am precisely that question:
I exist to know that I exist
Interrogatively. 28

Erwin Stüral also insists that, although the problems of life and death,
time and eternity, God and the supernatural appear over and over again in Fry,
nonetheless, what the poet has given most attention to is the forever renewed
wonder at life, the mystery of existence. 29 "[H]uman life," says Fry, "if it
means anything at all, means something infinite, and that is not something to
be understood between one bus stop and the next." 30

As every catechism teacher tries to make clear when explaining the truths
of the Catholic religion, the word mystery contains two ideas. The first

27 Fry, Lady's, p. 21.
28 Fry, Venus, p. 52.
29 Erwin Stüral, "Christopher Fry—Dramatiker des Metaphysischen," Stimmen
Der Zeit, CLIV (July 1954), 273.
idea, that a mystery (e.g. the Incarnation) is something that cannot be understood, is a deadening thought, discouraging all further inquiry on the subject of that mystery. The second idea, that a mystery is a truth whose intelligibility can never be exhausted by the human mind, is also true but it serves to stimulate the mind. The second idea would seem to be the one that Christopher Fry is trying to bring out in his plays. Sister Mary Maura comments appositely on this point:

The momentary glimpse into the Eden of order will not be revealed by a photographic reproduction of things as they are. He must be allowed to plunge beneath the surface appearance. There, shadowed though it often is, or blurred, what man contemplates in art, a reality which is dependent on God, will have in it something of a mystery. But mystery, as Walter Farrell, O.P., has luminously explained in the Companion to the Summa is 'natural to man as breathing.' In man the thirst for the infinite, for the object worthy of his straining powers and capacities, is essentially mysterious. Because in the world there is an element of being, in everything there is an element of mystery.31

Fry's comments on existence will hardly be expressed in the barren terms of cause and effect, the wonder of the natural scientist. This is brought out quite clearly in The Lady's Not for Burning. Jennet explains to Thomas that her father was an alchemist, who wasted his years wondering at the mystery of things.

Jennet. My father broke on the wheel of a dream; he was lost
In a search. And so, for me, the actual
What I touch, what I see, what I know; the essential fact.

And Thomas replies, in a typical Fry manner, with point and pun in the same

expression: "In other words, the bare untruth." He then launches into a condemnation of what he calls her superstitious belief in reality, ending as follows:

Thomas. We have given you a world as contradictory
As a female, as cabbalistic [sic] as the male,
A conscienceless hermaphrodite who plays
Heaven off against hell, hell off against heaven,
Revolving in the ballroom of the skies
Glittering with conflict as with diamonds:
We have wasted paradox and mystery on you
When all you ask for, is cause and effect!—
A copy of your birth-certificate was all you needed
To make you at peace with Creation. How uneconomical
The whole thing's been.

Even later, in The Dark Is Light Enough, when Fry was restraining his verbal pyrotechnics, he could not resist having the Countess express her own disdain of the mentality of cause and effect. The scoundrel of the play, Gettner, finding the Countess sick nearly to death, says to her, "And I'm the cause /
Of this illness, I suppose." The Countess, refusing to blame Gettner and implying that his conclusion is too simple, replies:

Countess. The arithmetic
Of cause and effect I've never understood.
How many beans make five is an immense
Question, depending on how many
Preliminary beans preceded them.

Having noted that Fry's dominant idea is the mystery of existence itself, another point should now be made. In Thomas Mendip's speech cited on this page, it can be seen that Fry links the words paradox and mystery explicitly.

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32 Fry, Lady's, p. 53.
33 Ibid., p. 54.
34 Fry, Dark, p. 97.
For Fry, the clearest statement of existence is nearly always made in terms of a paradox. Often enough this paradox will be stated in humorous language. Whether this helps or hinders the playwright in putting across his ideas will be discussed later. But Fry has stated his faith in humor in this way: "A joke, sometimes even a bad joke, can reflect the astonishing light that we live in. Indeed, laughter itself is a great mystery of flesh as though flesh were entertaining something other than itself; something vociferous but inarticulate." He makes Thomas Mendip express this idea in more poetic language.

Because the passage expresses such a key idea of Fry's, it should be quoted in full.

**Thomas.**

**[L]aughter is surely**
The surest touch of genius in creation.
Would you ever have thought of it, I ask you,
If you had been making man, stuffing him full
Of such hopping greed and passions that he has
To blow himself to pieces as often as he
Can conveniently manage it—would it also
Have occurred to you to make him burst himself
With such a phenomenon as cachinnation?
That same laughter, madam, is an irrelevancy
Which almost amounts to revelation.36

Fry's paradoxes are seen everywhere in his plays. The plots themselves are often enough the bringing together of two opposing forces, whether it be life and death, faith and convention, or flesh and spirit. The resulting conflicts often result in shedding light on the human person. Examples will bring this out later, but for now the plot of *A Phoenix Too Frequent* can serve to make the point clear. Doto, the maid who has generously offered to die with her

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36 Fry, *Lady's*, p. 50.
mistress, seems to have a definite purpose in the play. Dynamene's noble spirit of self-sacrifice resulting in a wish for death is nicely set off by Doto's exuberance over life itself, and her complete failure to understand the reasoning of her mistress. In the opening scene, Doto weeps copiously, but only because her mistress is weeping. Dynamene asks her, "Have you / No grief of your own you could die of?" Doto answers, thinking of grief in terms of departed gentlemen, "Not really. They was all one to me." Doto proceeds to confuse Dynamene even more by telling her:

Doto.    It's all
Fresh to me. Death's a new interest in life,
If it doesn't disturb you, madam, to have me crying.
I shall try to grieve a little, too.
It would take lessons, I imagine, to do it out loud
For long. If I could only remember
Any one of those fellows without wanting to laugh.
Hopeless, I am.

This is Fry at his paradoxical best. Doto unwittingly has succeeded in upsetting the secure apple-cart of her mistress' grief, and has made her think about the really complicated state of existence. Then in a last paradoxical statement, Doto, who is unable to despair, calls herself "Hopeless." It is the sort of double-entendre that Fry relishes.

Other examples of Fry's paradoxes will be brought out further on, but this one example will have served to make the point, and to show that Fry is never being just funny.

37 Fry, Phoenix, p. 4.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p. 6.
Earlier in the chapter, Fry was quoted as saying that he wanted to show his audiences the commonplaces of existence as though they were seeing them for the first time. Now that the playwright's general outlook has been to some extent explained, particular examples of his portraying these "commonplaces" will be given.

Fry's wonderment always includes a generous dose of amazement at the non-rational world, the world of nature. As early as The Boy with a Cart, he speaks through the chorus of the People of South England:

The People of South England. We merely remind you, though we've told you before, how things stand. We're apt to take the meticulous intervention of the sun, the strict moon and the seasons much too much for granted.

But Fry could not with truth be called a "Nature" poet. A careful reading of his plays will show that he is never found only singing the praises of the cosmos, but rather he sees it in its conjunction with man. The human person as related to nature always dominates. Even in The Lady's Not for Burning, where Fry's nature images are perhaps at their most exuberant, they are used to bring out a character, or to show the actual strangeness of the human position. For instance, Alizon Eliot, the innocent young girl of the play, always describes nature in radiant terms. Her opening lines are well-known, showing at once brilliant description and also the essential optimism of her personality:

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40 See above, p. 25.
41 Fry, Boy, p. 36.
Coming in from the light, I am all out at the eyes.

Such white doves were paddling in the sunshine.
And the trees were as bright as a shower of broken glass.
Out there, in the sparkling air, the sun and the rain
Clash together like the cymbals clashing
When David did his dance. I've an April blindness.
You're hidden in a cloud of crimson catherine-wheels.42

Richard, the Mayor's clerk, is not as naive as Alizon. He too speaks of April, but in a way suited to his particular outlook. Note this interchange:

Alison. Men are strange. It's almost unexpected
To find they speak English. Do you think so too?
Richard. Things happen to them.
Alison. What things?
Richard. Machinations of nature;
As April does to the earth.
Alison. I wish it were true!
Show me daffodils happening to a man!
Richard. Very easily.43

In the same play, April is seen again through the eyes of Margaret Devise. She is a stuffy woman who attempts to appear respectable, although it is easily seen that she does not care much whether innocent people suffer or not. She describes April twice in her fussy way:

Margaret. O heavens, we have all been young,

Perfectly young, obstreperously golden,
What a martyrdom it was.—Tchi! more rain!
This is properly April.44

The second time, Margaret is trying to explain Thomas Mendip's desire to be hanged and his consequent confession, to her brother the Mayor:

42 Fry, Lady's, p. 4.
43 Ibid., p. 7.
44 Ibid., p. 10.
Margaret. Hebble, they’re all
In the same fit of April exasperating nonsense.45

Thomas Mendip, once he has fallen in love with Jennet, speaks of April in a
puzzled but romantic way. He tells Richard:

Thomas. The Great Bear is looking so geometrical
One would think something or other could be proved.
.I’ve been cast adrift on a raft of melancholy.
The night-wind passed me, like a sail across
A blind man’s eye. There it is,
The interminable tumbling of the great grey
Main of moonlight, washing over
The little oyster-shell of this month of April...

The world of nature then, for Fry, never takes precedence over the world of
human beings.

One of the commonplaces of existence that Christopher Fry seems to enjoy
emphasizing in his affirmation of the miracle of existence is the amazing fact
of birth. Anath Bithiah expresses this wonder in a negative way in The First-
born. The Pharaoh has just accused her of being superstitious in saying that
he caused the plagues. Anath answers:

Anath. I admit it.
I am superstitious. I have my terrors.
We are born too inexplicably out
Of one night’s pleasure, and have too little security;
No more than a beating heart to keep us probable.
There must be other probabilities.47

At first her statement may appear to be that of a sceptic. But what she
is saying is that there must be something intangible, something spiritual,
almost something miraculous to the way human beings come to exist. A fortiori.

46 Ibid., p. 74.
47 Fry, Firstborn, p. 57.
she argues, it is not foolish to suppose that other physical realities (like the plagues), have strange causes.

This sense of the wonder of birth is expressed in a lighter vein by the Duke of Altair, when he introduces his son to his guests as "My extension in time: Edgar." To which Edgar replies, "Five feet ten / Of my unlimited father."48 In the same play, another father, Herbert Reedbeck, speaks of his daughter in glowing terms. The statement may seem to be rather frank, but it should be remembered that Fry is trying to stress the mysteries which people so often miss:

Reedbeck. She really makes me
Respectful of astrology; it must
Have been the arrangement of stars she was born under.
It couldn't have been all me and her mother. Why,
I couldn't even dream so beautifully,
Let alone propagate. It must have been
The state of the zodiac when she was conceived.
But even so, I was there, and that in itself
Is remarkable.49

Whether such clever expression is entirely germane to Reedbeck's character will be discussed later. Nonetheless, the expression itself seems apt in the context of a play dealing so much with astronomy and the heavens. Fry has also given Reedbeck one of those paradoxical and funny understatements, the "I was there" of the second last line quoted above.

In The Lady's Not for Burning, Jennet Jourdewayne explains to Thomas how her father died in the pursuit of Science. In an excellent spoof of scientism, Jennet relates of her father:

49 Ibid., p. 41.
Jennet. When he was born he gave an algebraic
Cry; at one glance measured the cubic content
Of that ivory cone his mother's breast
And multiplied his appetite by five.
So he matured by a progression, gained
Experience by correlation, expanded
Into a marriage by contraction, and by
Certain physical dynamics
Formulated me. And on he went
Still deeper into the calculating twilight
Under the twinkling of five-pointed figures
Till Truth became for him the sum of sums
And Death the long division. 50

This is a good example of Fry's pointing up the miracle of existence in terms
in which it is seldom thought of. It also serves as an example of the exuberance
of language with which Fry likes to express himself.

Not less interesting than Fry's speeches on the beginnings of human life
are the expressions in which he describes his view of life itself. Some of
these expressions will now be examined as found in the text of the plays.

Christopher Fry has written that "[t]he workings of the spirit in the
material universe are a clarification, not a mystification, of human life.
How far the playwright can succeed in expressing this is a lifetime job for
him." 51 This clarification of life is the clarification of a life which is
to be immortal. "The intimations of immortality in the world are definite
and logical, not shadowy and half-hearted," the dramatist has written. 52 Al-
though Fry seems to be interested in the here and now in the plays, and

50 Fry, Lady's, p. 51.
52 Ibid.
although he speaks much less often of eternity than of birth and death; nevertheless, Fry is not to be thought of as an atheistic existentialist. Stürzl indicates that Fry has definitely renounced this sort of unbelief. He notes that the playwright has said that we are indeed fortunate to live in such times as will force us to take steps toward God. What Fry's concept of God is will be considered after his ideas on life and death have been shown.

Life, for Fry, is always paradoxical. In The Firstborn Moses finds himself torn by the conflict between his upbringing and his ancestry, between his nature and the destiny which he has accepted. The firstborn himself, Ramases, is bowled over by a paradox. He has seen Moses' nephew, Shendi the Jew, come crawling back home when he had escaped the whips of the Egyptians. Later the Pharaoh elevates Shendi to the position of an officer, hoping in this way to win Moses back to the Egyptian side. And Ramases is then dismayed to see that Shendi is more cruel to his own people in his new position than any Egyptian had been. Fry seems to be trying to say, "Life is not as simple as you think. There are not 'good guys' and 'bad guys.'" Human life, Fry is trying to show, is always contrary and sometimes contradictory.

In A Phoenix Too Frequent, Fry states his paradoxes in a comedy vein. Nonetheless Phoenix comes off perhaps as a better commentary on life than The Firstborn. The opposition of the temperaments of Doto, who cannot think of anything to die for, and Dynamene, who wants to die so elegantly, has already been discussed. It should be noted that some find it difficult to determine whether or not the playwright intends this plot to be taken seriously. But

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53Stürzl, Stimmen Der Zeit, CLIV, 279.
Dynamene is not just posing; she intends to die with her husband. And Doto takes her seriously. When Tegeus first appears in the doorway of the tomb and asks why Dynamene means to die, Doto replies, "For love; beautiful, curious madam." Tegeus also takes Dynamene seriously, saying that death is a kind of love. But the serious aspect must not be overemphasized; if it is, the ending will seem macabre and distasteful. (It would seem that heavy-handed directing, that is, taking the plot too seriously, partially accounts for the sudden death of the first New York production of Phoenix.)

Fry re-states his view of life in serio-comic terms in Thor, with Angels. The play is light in mood, yet the ending, the sacrificial death of Hoel, the Briton prisoner, concludes the work on a grim note. Here again, Fry has chosen to point up the life-death dichotomy by using a comic character (as he did in Phoenix.) This time it is Colgrin, the steward of the household of Cymen. Colgrin is a bumptious person whose ideal in life is to be "horizontal and absolutely unconscious." When Cymen brings home the prisoner, Colgrin is set to guard him. In their short conversation, the playwright brings out the irony of their contrasting life-views. Hoel realizes that when he escaped death, he escaped going home. Realizing that the earth is a valley of tears, he says:

Hoel: Why don't I settle
To a steady job in the grave, instead of this damned

54 Fry, Phoenix, p. 7.
56 Fry, Thor, p. 17.
Ambition for life, which doesn't even offer
A living wage? I want to live, even
If it's like a louse on the back of a sheep, skewering
Into the wool away from the beaks of crows;
Even like a limpet on a sour rock.
I want to live!  

Colgrin replies that he too wants to live, but in a state of sleep. Says Colgrin, "Everything would be all right if we'd been granted / Hibernation."  
The irony of these lines is more fully realized at the end of the play when it is Hoel who is killed, and Colgrin is left to continue his meaningless existence.

But to Fry life is not only the bitter irony of injustice. For in the same story of Hoel's death is written the paradoxical truth of redemption.

In the concluding scene of Thor, Cymen has gone off to the assembly to hear Augustine explain the Christian God. He has commanded that the Christian prisoner should not be harmed in his absence. But his brothers-in-law and sons disregard his orders. They fasten Hoel to a tree with his arms spread (obviously suggestive of the cross) and drive a spear through his side.

Minutes later, Cymen returns home jubilant over his new-found religion. He begins to explain to his family that the days of the old religion of fear are over.

Cymen. And never again need we sacrifice, on and on
And on, greedy of the gods' goodwill
But always uncertain; for sacrifice
Can only perfectly be made by God
And sacrifice has so been made, by God
To God in the body of God with man.

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., p. 18.
On a tree set up at the four crossing roads
Of earth, heaven, time and eternity
Which meet upon that cross.59

He then explains that as the Christian missionary spoke, he (Cymen) had looked up above the shoulder of the speaking man and had seen a cross of light. At this point his daughter cries out to him, and Cymen turns and sees Hoel's body lashed to the tree. For a moment he thinks it is a repetition of the vision of the cross. He says:

Cymen. Is it also here?
Can the sun have written it so hotly on my eyes—
What have you done?60

This ending is full of meaning. Hoel has been killed because he was a Christian. Like the martyrs, he had no natural desire to die. Yet, paradoxically enough, with his death Christianity is elevated to its rightful position. For Fry the tragic ending is a beginning. The play ends on a solemn but optimistic note with Cymen asking God for forgiveness for all men and asking God to "give us courage to exist in God."61

*Sleep of Prisoners* will serve as the last example to show Fry's view of life. In this play, Fry has cut away much of the commentary on nature which was so evident in *Venus Observed* and *The Lady's Not for Burning*, and has concentrated mainly on description of the four characters. For a number of reasons the piece is especially significant in presenting Fry's life-picture. First, each of the characters has his own particular personality. This is shown

59Ibid., p. 52.
60Ibid.
61Ibid., p. 54.
by the short conflict at the start of the play, in which all four characters reveal their own traits. But they are also seen in a unique way through the dreams in which, as Fry has said, "Each in his own dream, speaks as at heart he is, not as he believes himself to be." Secondly, the piece is significant because each of their characters has been given a larger personality by the device of having each one seen as a character from the Bible. The selection of the Biblical figures is not arbitrary: each is a mirror of that particular soldier's personality. Thirdly, the characters seem to have a universal significance. As has been noted before, Fry's characters are not types; yet it is impossible not to think of Peter Able as exemplar of the too-satisfied pacifist and David King as the man who is always willing to fight, even before he knows what he is fighting for. Meadows expresses this perception of the universal when he says to David:

Meadows. I see the world in you very well. 'Tisn't Your meaning, but you're a clumsy well-eyed bulldozer. You don't know what you're hitting.

Whether Fry has totally succeeded at getting meaning into these three levels and has still kept his characters dramatically integral is a point of further discussion; here at least his method has been pointed out.

Meadows' dream, the first one, is of Cain's murder of Abel. David is seen as Cain, or the man ruled by the body. Peter is seen as Abel, the man

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62 See above, p. 17.

63 Fry, Sleep, p. 5.

64 On this point, see Walter Kerr, Pieces at Eight (New York, 1957), p. 142; and John Ferguson, "Christopher Fry's A Sleep of Prisoners," English, X (Spring 1954), 42. Kerr believes that Fry has lost the characters; Ferguson does not.
ruled so much by the spirit that he almost ignores the body. Both are wrong, forgetting that man is a composite of flesh and spirit. Adams, as Adam, watches his sons gambling at dice and describes their characters to God:

Adams. Sir, my sons are playing. Cain's your man.
He goes in the mould of passion as you made him.
He can walk this broken world as easily
As I and Eve the ivory light of Eden.
I recommend him. The other boy
Frets for what never came his way,
Will never reconcile us to our exile.

But Abel wins the gamble for the world, and Cain is furious. He is especially angry since he cannot understand why God should have been on the side of his brother, who, it seems to him, tries to bring spirit and flesh together. Cain explodes with anger, and in his anger he expresses the wonder that Fry wants to get across, the wonder that man should be so different from the rest of creation; that he should find in himself that war of flesh and spirit which no other animal knows.

Cain. So any lion can BE, and any ass,
And any cockatoo: and all the unbiddable
Roaming voices up and down
Can live their lives and welcome
While I go pestered and wondering down hill
Like a half-wit angel strapped to the back of a mule.

But Cain cannot bear to try to live out the dichotomy of flesh and spirit: he concludes, "Thanks! I'll be as the body was first presumed." A Sleep of Prisoners is full of such rich portrayals of the mysteries of human life.

65 Fry, Sleep, p. 15.
66 Ibid., p. 16.
67 Ibid.
Fry's main guiding idea has been shown to be the wonder of existence itself, and two more specific ideas—those of birth and life—have been discussed. A third of Fry's driving ideas is the notion of love as a force in the world. Love is a force in Fry's plays because it works almost independently of the persons involved. This idea is brought out quite forcefully in The Dark Is Light Enough. Near the end of the play, the Countess Rosmarin is dying. Richard Gettner, as soon as he found himself out of danger from the Hungarians, had left the Countess' home without a word. But in the first unselfish act of his life, he turns around and comes back to her when he hears that she is dying. In their last scene together, Richard asks her to marry him, since he was under the impression that she must have protected him because she loved him. The Countess is astonished. Quite candidly, she confesses that she never loved him.

**Countess.** I mean simply,

It never came about.
There we have no free-will.
At the one place of experience
Where we're most at mercy, and where
The decision will alter us to the end of our days,
Our destination is fixed;
We're elected into love. 68

She goes on to say that not only did she not love him, she did not even like him. But she promises (referring to her imminent death) not to leave him until she can love him. Gettner misses the point and leaves angrily. But coward that he is, he returns quickly when he finds that there are soldiers nearby. He goes to tell the Countess to get up and face the soldiers, but

68 Fry, Dark, p. 99.
this time there will be no protection from the Countess—she has died. In the final lines already quoted, Gettner realizes that this was what she had meant when she had said that she would not leave him until she could love him.69 In his first gesture of bravery and his first gesture of love, he stands beside the Countess and tells the maid to open the door to the soldiers. Here Fry has brought out forcefully his idea of love; a force that is stronger than life and death. Gettner is redeemed at once by the Countess' death and by her love.

Again in Thor, with Angels, Cymen's daughter Martina finds herself falling in love with her father's prisoner, Hoel. Yet even to the end of the play she resists the force, simply because she and Hoel are of different races. Martina states both the attraction and her checking of it in this paradoxical way:

**Martina.** It's a pity
You had to be born a Briton. I'm forced to hate you.70

You're a born heathen. Get some sleep.
You look too tired to be hated
And that won't do at all.

**Hoel.** Do you have to hate me?

**Martina.** It isn't one of my easiest duties. But how else
Can we keep our footing and our self-esteem?
Now sleep and look malignant when you awake.71

These passages make clear Fry's idea of love (and hate also) as forces in themselves. Martina feels herself to be necessitated in her hate. It would

69 See above, p. 24–25.
70 Fry, Thor, p. 20.
71 Ibid., p. 44.
be missing Fry's point, however, to interpret this as determinism. Rather he is stressing the reality of spiritual forces in the world. It might also be noted here that when Martina speaks of her own state of thought, it is a good example of what may be called the "inner portrait." She is not speaking realistically, rather she is exteriorizing the conflict that is going on within herself. Fry pointed out that he was trying to do this explicitly in A Sleep of Prisoners, as has been noted above.72 But the device is evident in many other plays of his also. Whether this cultivated articulateness in so many characters is a fault will be discussed later.

Another example of love as a force is found in A Phoenix Too Frequent. Whether this love, which overrides Dynamene's death-wish, is rational or sensual, or only the latter, is a matter of disagreement among critics. Stürzl believes that Phoenix is a product of the war, meant to entertain. From this he concludes that Dynamene's love is the love of passion.73 Professor Donald Heiney would hold essentially the same position, since he says that the heroes of Fry's dramas are those who are moved by their physical urges.74 This seems to be an unwarranted generalization; one wonders what physical urge moves Moses in The Firstborn or Hoel in Thor, with Angels or Cuthman in The Box with a Cart. Stephen Spender must also interpret Tegeus and Dynamene's love-making to be entirely on the sense level. He speaks of the "not infrequent obscene

72See above, p. 17.
73Stürzl, Stimmen Der Zeit, CLIV, 275.
passages" in Fry's plays. If he was able to find frequent obscenity in the play, he must be referring mainly to Tegeus and Dynamene. In any case, the word obscene seems to be a poor choice. Stanford seems closer to the mark when he says that Dynamene's love is not solely physical, that she is not speaking the language of simple sexual hunger. This would seem to be more consonant with Fry's other works; for this playwright, flesh is never merely flesh and spirit never merely spirit.

Some lines from Phoenix will bring out Fry's idea of love linked up with his idea of life. Dynamene has begun to love Tegeus but she cannot understand it since she says her love is in Hades. Tegeus protests that were he her dead husband, he would not be expecting her to follow after him.

Tegeus. I should say 'I have left
My wealth warm on the earth, and, hell, earth needs it.'
'Was all I taught her of love,' I should say, 'so poor
That she will leave her flesh and become shadow?'
'Wasn't our love for each other' (I should continue).
'Infused with life, and life infused with our love?'

Then at the climax, when Tegeus acts horrified that they should hang up the dead body of Dynamene's husband, she answers him in the same terms:

Dynamene. How little you can understand. I loved
His life not his death. And now we can give his death
The power of life. Not horrible; wonderful!

Certainly this is comedy—sophisticated, adult comedy—yet the point is so

75 Stephen Spender, "Christopher Fry," The Spectator, CLXXXIV (March 24, 1950), 364.
76 Stanford, Fry, p. 23.
77 Fry, Phoenix, p. 31.
78 Ibid., p. 43.
much like the point of Fry's other plays that it would seem he means it somewhat seriously and not as a mere rationalization of Dynamene's physical surrender. It is like the Countess whose death also "has the power of life." It is like Hoel, whose death seems to be almost a necessity—in the mysterious way in which martyrs' deaths are necessary—for bringing the life of faith to England.

Fry's idea of love has been portrayed in examples from three of the plays. There follows a consideration of an idea that Fry always links up with love and life. It is the idea of death. As has been seen in the passages given above, death for Fry is inextricably wound into life. Death is seen as a challenge to the living in The Firstborn:

Death was their question to us, and our lives
Become their understanding or perplexity. 79

In the same play, Moses brings in the corpse of an Israelite boy and puts it at the feet of the Pharaoh, telling him:

Moses. If you move your foot only a little forward
Your toe will be against your power. 80

Fry is pointing out in forceful words that the power of a totalitarian state is built over the deaths of its people. The speech of Ramases, the firstborn, describing his thoughts when he killed the bird, is well known. The irony is that the young son of the Pharaoh is the one who must die at the end of the play. When he has been struck down dead, his aunt addresses him with words of wonder and sadness:

79 Fry, Firstborn, p. 21.
80 Ibid., p. 40.
Anath. Ramases, can you forget life so quickly?
This is my hand, a living hand, remember?
My dear, my pharaoh of sleep, you have
The one sure possession of the world.81

Again it is seen that Fry is trying to bring forward the wonder of death. It
was miracle enough that man should be alive and be so different from all other
creatures. But death is another mystery. In a moment what was alive is now
before us "A stone. Stone," as Ramases' father says.82 Fry is expressing
Everyman's wonder, but in poetic terms. Such poetic terms will demand a cer-
tain restraint. Raymond Williams seems to forget this when he says, "There is
a certain concern with death, but Mr. Fry's is an essentially genteel escha-
tology."83 If death were not an important idea to Fry, it would not occur
over and over again in the plays.

The importance of death in Thor, with Angels has already been discussed.
It might also be noted that throughout The Dark Is Light Enough, the Countess
is aware of her coming death. "My body tells me sometimes / I'm not here for-
ever," says the Countess.84 Yet when she announces to her friends who gather
at her home on Thursday evenings that this may be their last meeting, she does
it without regret:

Countess. The argument, philosophy, wit, and eloquence
Were all in the light of this end we come to.
Without it there would have been very little
To mention except the weather. Protect me
From a body without death. Such indignity

81Ibid., p. 87.
82 Ibid.
83 Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot (London, 1952), p. 263.
84 Fry, Dark, p. 74.
Would be outcast, like a rock in the sea.
But with death, it can hold
More than time gives it, or the earth shows it. 85

In *The Lady's Not for Burning*, Fry purposely opposes the death-wish, expressed by Thomas Mendip, and the will to live, expressed by Jennet Jourdemayne. Thomas has been away at the wars for years and finds himself sick of existence. He asks to be hanged, and of course runs into all the entanglements of politics and red tape. Thomas makes it clear throughout the play that he is thoroughly disillusioned with life on this earth. The situation is comic, but Thomas' intention to be hanged is serious. He is even disgusted with human love. He tells Jennet:

**Thomas.** I tell you,
My heart is worthless,
Nothing more than a pomander's perfume
In the sewerage. And a nosegay of private emotion
Won't distract me from the stench of the plague-pit,
You needn't think it will. 86

Jennet insists that that is just what makes him so attractive—his wish for death. It is then that Thomas makes his "Just see me as I am . . . like a perambulating vegetable" speech, in which he insists that man's existence itself is:

**Thomas.** driven and scorched
By boomerang rages and lunacies which never
Touch the accommodating artichokes
Or the seraphic strawberry beaming in its bed. 87

This short passage from the speech brings out Thomas' comic bitterness against

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85 *Tbid.*, p. 89.
86 *Fry, Lady's*, p. 57.
his nature as it exists, and it also brings out the mystery of how much man differs from the other creatures of the earth. Finally, however, love for Jennet breaks down his resolve and he confesses to her that although nothing else on earth could affect him, she has. He has decided to live. When she is exonerated, she tells Thomas that she will let him go in another fifty years. The dialogue that follows this brings out the fact that Thomas has not come to think the world is a lovelier place just because of his love for Jennet. He tells her:

**Thomas.** Girl, you haven't changed the world. Glimmer as you will, the world's not changed. Perhaps I could draw you up over my eyes for a time But the world sickens me still.88

Jennet asks whether she is an inconvenience to him. His answer conveys both his love for her and his attitude toward death:

**Thomas.** As inevitably as original sin, And I shall be loath to loose one day of you, Even for the sake of my ultimate friendly death.89

And as a last ironic touch, Thomas ends with words reminiscent of a judge who has just condemned a man to death, "And God have mercy on our souls."90

A deep hatred for war is another characteristic shown in all Fry's work. Fry's only play to be set in contemporary times is *Venus Observed*, and even this is cast in an idyllic setting which gives it the flavor of a period piece. Therefore at first glance, it may appear that Fry is an artist unaffected by

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88 Ibid., p. 96.
89 Ibid., p. 97.
90 Ibid.
the times in which he lived. However, a careful reading of his plays shows that this is not true. Fry's belief in the utter uselessness of war sometimes amounts to real bitterness. He sees the individual as the pivotal point of existence, as Erwin Stüral has insisted.91 He hates to see the freedom of the individual man overrun by the mob, as is so often the case in war. It is well to remember two factors which may be the explanation of why the playwright feels as he does. First, Fry was brought up as a Quaker. The Quakers have a long tradition of passive resistance to persecution, and do not believe fighting in war can be justified.92 Fry himself, as was pointed out earlier, joined a non-combatant wing when drafted into military service.93 Besides this first reason it is important to remember that Fry's life has been lived in England while it participated in the two worst wars in history. Speaking through Merlin, Fry describes the course of history as "quest and conquest and quest again."94 Throughout his plays there appears a certain amazement that men do not learn anything from their horrible experiences of war. The world seems to have no sense of its history even though "the centuries are piled so high."95

Clodesuida demonstrates the narrow-mindedness that makes for hate and war

91Stüral, Stimmen Der Zeit, CLIV, 276.
93See above, pp. 5-6.
94Fry, Thor, p. 27.
95Fry, Lady's, p. 27.
in *Thor, with Angels*, in this sentence: "We should rid the country of these things which aren't ourselves." But probably Fry's most trenchant commentary on war is found in *The Dark Is Light Enough*. In this play he tries to bring out the full irony of armed conflict. First one side is on top, then the other. Through it all, the Countess holds herself in an almost superhuman neutrality. She shows herself as having a genuine pity for the men in the war, but not for any one particular side. When her maid asks her who started the war, the Countess answers:

**Countess.**
A lot of time would be wasted
Going back through the years to answer that.
We could scarcely be of our own time if we would,
Being moved about by such very odd disturbances.
If we could wake each morning with no memory
Of living before we went to sleep, we might
Arrive at a faultless day, once in a great many.
But the hardest frost of a year
Will not arrest the growing world
As blame and the memory of wrong will do.  

Or again the Countess expresses her belief in the foolishness of war when she is accused of having no pity for the downtrodden.

**Countess.**
Not
As they are downtrodden, but as they are men
I think of them, as they should think of those
Who oppress them. We gain so little by the change
When the downtrodden in their turn tread down.

It is plain that in Fry's view, war improves nothing. Belmann and Jakob, characters in the same play, bring out this idea also. Jakob thinks that Bel-

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97 Fry, *Dark*, p. 51.
98 Ibid.
mann has insulted the Countess and he challenges him to a duel with pistols. Belmann replies acidly:

Belmann. Let us, by all means, shoot at one another
If you think it will improve human nature.
And what is to happen after that? 99

Towards the end of the play an event is reported which, whether Fry meant it to be so or not, seems very much like a commentary on the Nuremberg trials that took place after World War II. The Countess’ son-in-law, Peter, reports to his wife that his own side, the Austrians, are following up their victory in the war with contemptuous court-martials, and afterwards executing the Hungarians:

Peter. I was afraid
They’d lose the liberties they were beginning to gain
Lately, not that we should lose the humanity
We took of God two thousand years ago. 100

We’re celebrating victory
By executing every considerable officer
We can lay our hands on. I think someone
Should go and ask them why. 101

And another character comments, interpreting the event with a long range view:

Kassel. They’re determined the world shall have
Incident; they mean the historians
Never to fail for matter. 102

Such examples should make it quite clear that Fry is trying to make people see war as a blemish on human existence, as a thing without any sufficient reason.

99 Ibid., p. 8.
100 Ibid., p. 79.
101 Ibid., p. 83.
102 Ibid., p. 84.
The last of Fry's main ideas to be treated in this chapter is the playwright's idea of God. There is no doubt that Fry believes in God. If the notion of God in the plays did not make this clear enough, there are still explicit statements from Fry himself, as the one cited by Stürzl: "The human heart can over all distances reach to God." But right from the beginning it must be pointed out that the idea of God in Fry is not a clearly defined one. Bible study has always played an important role in the Quaker way of life, in which Fry was brought up. Yet it is also to be noted that Quakerism has no formulated creed demanding definite subscription. It is rather an "atmosphere, a manner of life, a method of approaching questions, a habit and an attitude of mind." A person therefore is not called a practicing Quaker or a non-practicing one. If one's parents were Quakers, one automatically belongs to the Society of Friends. To the Catholic reader, such a religion may appear flaccid and ineffectual. Yet it should be borne in mind that for the Quakers it is a very real thing; they have suffered persecution for it, and have over the years given their time and money to the care of the poor and the sick, the freeing of slaves, and the education of youth.

A Catholic writer who has been both in and out of the Catholic Church, Caryll Houselander, has written well on this point:

Most people who want to know God and who are outside the Church have just one thing that is precious to them, though to us with our clear-cut definitions, our discipline and our sacraments, it may seem so vague that it is hard for us to realize how much it means to them. This is their

103Stürzl, Stimmen Der Zeit, CLIV, 280.
personal approach to God. Very often it seems to be hardly
that at all, so vague is it, so closely does it lean to
sentimentality. . . . Quite wrongly, we [Catholics] give
them the idea that we are not seeking any more, that we
have a formula for everything. . . . Of course this is
untrue. We too are always seeking for God, and we are
blinded by the very light of the mysteries of our faith,
which we can live by but cannot explain and can barely
begin to understand. 105

This quotation seems to bear a particular application to Fry’s approach to God.
Since Fry is a Quaker, he would be lacking exactly the three things which Miss
Houselander enumerates: definitions, discipline, and sacraments. The Quaker
approach, like the approach she describes, is one in which “every event in life,
important or unimportant, may be turned into a sacrament, a means of grace,” 106

Fry has declared:

Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise
Is exploration unto God. 107

This is the poet’s way of describing the seeking for God of which Miss House-
lander writes.

In The Firstborn, Fry portrays God as quite impersonal. As far as can be
seen, Moses has no direct conversations or contacts with God. God is described
as a person but as one somewhat distant from the Israelites. He appears to be
mainly a God of power, to whom Moses tries to attune himself as an instrument.
At the conclusion of the first act, Moses asks God whether he will have the

106 “Society of Friends,” EBF, IX, p. 49.
107 Fry, Sleep, p. 49.
power to carry out the mission he is called to. He ends with the question
"What says the infinite eavesdropper?" This statement makes clear that
God is thought of as a person, but the word eavesdropper seems to indicate a
curiously distant relationship between God and his people. Later Moses speaks
of God thus:

Moses. It is the God of the Hebrews, springing out
Of unknown ambush, a vigour moving
In a great shadow, who draws the supple bow
Of his mystery, to loose this punishing arrow
Feathered with my fate. . . .

Again the relationship expressed is not a very personal one, although it gets
across the idea of God's mastery.

The pageant, The Boy with a Cart, speaks of God in a much warmer way; the
Chorus says: "[W]ith God we work shoulder to shoulder; the joint action of
root and sky, of man / And God." But this play is so full of legends and
miracles that the ideas of God cannot be taken too literally as Fry's own.

In Thor, with Angels are found Fry's most exact statements on God. The
pagans in this play live in fear of their gods. Their attitude is well brought
out by the character of Clodesuida, wife of Gyemen. When she hears that her
husband broke his sword above the Christian captive, she is afraid. She says:
"It's hard enough / To live well-thought-of by the gods." Another time
she puts it this way, not without a touch of humor:

108 Fry, Firstborn, p. 43.
109 Ibid., p. 65.
110 Fry, Boy, p. 1.
111 Fry, Thor, p. 5.
Clodesuida. I wear myself out securing us to the gods
With every device that's orthodox, sacrificing
To the hour, to the split minute of the risen sun,
But how can I keep them kind if always
They're being displeased by the rest of you?112

Or another time, she explains why the family should not take a chance on listening to the Christian missionaries. She says that they are "on poor enough terms with the gods as it is / Without seeming to keep open minds."113 So far, Fry has shown that the religion of fear is narrow and somewhat humorous. But he brings home his point that it is also cruel, when Hoel is murdered, and Clodesuida, covering her eyes, says:

Clodesuida. It has to be
For our good; we must endure these things, to destroy
Error, and so the gods will warm towards us.114

On the narrow chance that she is pleasing some god, she consents to something that she knows is evil.

Hoel, on the other hand, presents what he remembers of the One God. He describes the Trinity, and explains that the three make only one God. As he is about to be transfixed with the spear, he invokes the Trinity. The Sacrifice of Christ is also described. However, since these more doctrinal concepts do not recur in any of the later plays, it is doubtful whether they form a part of Fry's beliefs concerning God. Rather it would seem that he put them into this one play to be historically accurate. The Quakers "have always shrunk

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112 Ibid., p. 21.
113 Ibid., p. 40.
114 Ibid., p. 51.
from rigid Trinitarian definitions."

The character of Margaret Devize in *The Lady's Not for Burning* seems to bring out the fact that Fry dislikes a religious attitude that cowers fearfully before its own idea of God but makes no demands for a charitably Christian way of life. Like Clodesuida, Margaret is very solicitous about exterior things. This is epitomized when she speaks of her oafish and lecherous son: "But you will see, Alison, / What a nice boy he can be when he wears a clean shirt." Fry seems actually bitter at times about the lip-service such people pay to God. In one ironical line, Margaret, distraught over the presence of Thomas and the supposed witch, exclaims: "I shall lose my faith / In the good-breeding of providence."

Fry's positive idea of God seems to be that of a person, but a person at some distance from the affairs of men, who is sometimes concerned and sometimes not. The Duke, in *Venus Observed*, phrases this notion in a chilling way. Perpetua has just confessed that she did not love him. He says he forgives:

_Duke._ All the friction of this great orphanage
Where no one knows his origin and no one
Comes to claim him."

*The Dark Is Light Enough* supplies a final example of Fry's thought on God. The Countess is seen by her family and friends as a figure very like God. Her policy of gentle courtesy is labelled early in the play "divine non-interfer-

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117 Ibid., p. 29.
118 Fry, *Venus*, p. 89.
ence. She is thought of as being the whole world to those around her. When it is announced that she is dying, Belmann says: "You would think she would somehow have taken / The world with her." In the final scene, when she has explained to Richard Gettner that she neither loved him nor liked him, he asks angrily what he meant to her. She replies, "Simply what any life may mean." If Fry meant the Countess to be a figure of God, and Gettner as a figure of incorrigible mankind, this play will give us a further idea of what his concept of God is. This interpretation would seem to be at least implicit in the work, since the Countess is so often described in divine terms, and since she accomplishes the redemption of Gettner only with her death. William Becker has noted that a case could be made for this interpretation. But if Fry meant that the Countess should be an image of God, again it would seem that the playwright's God is somewhat distant. The Countess' main virtue seems to be an infinite amount of patience. There is about her little of the reforming spirit. She seems to be content to wait the sinner out. The portrait is not one of a God who acts immediately in the lives of his creatures.

This concludes the discussion of Christopher Fry's main ideas. In the search for the main guiding idea, it was seen that making clear the wonder of existence itself is the dominant thought of Fry's mind. To point up the

119 Fry, Dark, p. 5.
120 Ibid., p. 24.
121 Ibid., p. 100.
mystery, not in the sense of a "whodunit," as Fry has noted, but in the sense of "a what-am-I?" It was also noted that the dramatist's statements of the mystery are often paradoxical, the balancing of two apparently opposing forces. Some of the particular applications of this wonder at existence were then considered. First the world of nature was seen to be described and interwoven with the character portrayals. Four characters from one play, describing the same phenomenon of nature, were examined to bring out the point. Fry's recurring theme of the wonder of man's beginning—birth itself—was shown. Human life was the next main idea covered. The ideas were taken from a number of plays, with emphasis on A Sleep of Prisoners. Following upon the idea of life, the notion of love as a force in the world was shown with A Phoenix Too Frequent as the main example. Death was next seen to be a theme in nearly all of Fry's works. Along with death went the hatred for war which seems to have impressed itself so deeply in Fry. Lastly, Fry's idea of God was shown by definite statements in the plays, and indirectly through the figure of the Countess in The Dark Is Light Enough.

The next chapter will deal with the unique style in which Fry has expressed these main ideas. Then advantages and disadvantages of this style with relation to the expression of the ideas will be pointed out.

123Christopher Fry, "On Keeping the Sense of Wonder," Vogue, CXXVII (January 1956), 122.
CHAPTER III

THE STYLE OF CHRISTOPHER FRY

In this chapter will be treated the distinctive notes of Christopher Fry's style, and the advantages and disadvantages of that style in conveying his ideas. All will admit the fact that Fry has a style uniquely his own.¹

Virtually all of Fry's dramatic output is in verse. In his statements on why he chose verse as a medium of expression, the playwright refuses to be polemic, and answers inquiries in a rather puckish vein. "But still you may say, 'Why verse? Why this formality of syllables? Why this unnatural division of sentences into lines?' I suggest we forget the questions, and go on as though verse plays, like wasps, are apparently with us for some reason which they don't reveal."² For Fry, verse is a natural medium. He writes in a fairly loose line and does not make a great deal of it himself. "A reader," writes the dramatist, "need not be particularly worried that I break off a sentence before it reaches the edge of the page and continue it on the next line with a capital letter. That is no one's business but my own, and every man is free to think of the writing as verse, or sliced prose, or as a bastard

¹For a clever satire of Fry's style, see Patricia Collinge, "Open Entry for a Time & Tide Competition," The New Yorker, XXXII (December 8, 1956), 46.

²Christopher Fry, "Why Verse?" Vogue, CXXV (March 1955), 136.
offspring of the two. It is, in the long run, speech written down in this way because I find it convenient, and those who speak it may also occasionally find it helpful. Fry has also voiced the opinion that poetry has once again been accepted in the theater for two reasons. One is that people are tired of what he calls "surface realism, with its sparse, spare, cut-and-dried language, which never uses two words where one won't do. The other is that the world itself seems rather cut down a bit—we have all felt that since the war—and poetry provides something people lack and wish for; a richness and a reaffirmation."

Besides verse, Fry uses all the other devices of the poet: simile, metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and the others. But these in themselves do not give his style its peculiar quality. Some of the devices which seem to be singularly Fry's own will now be considered.

First, humor seems to be an essential part of Fry's method of communication. Even though his themes are serious, he nearly always makes use of wit to convey them. Only in The Firstborn is his characteristically gay spirit restrained. In all his other plays Fry likes to flash his meanings with a smile. On this point examples will not be given, since the quotations would have to be long to give an idea of the exchange of wit. If an isolated line or two is selected and indicated as funny, its significance in the fabric of the whole play will hardly be appreciated. Some of Fry's best humor is found in Doto's lines

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3Stanford, Appreciation, p. 197.

in A Phoenix Too Frequent, in Colgrin and Anna's interchanges in Thor, with Angels, and in the general confusion reigning in The Lady's Not for Burning.

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, paradox is always prevalent in Fry's work. This use of paradox, seen above in the playwright's themes, is also quite evident in his language. Additional examples need not be adduced here to prove the point.

Fry's word-substitution is a third characteristic of his style. One of his favorite forms of wordplay, it seems, is to take a familiar phrase and substitute another word for one of the words in the phrase. This gives his sentences a curious sort of double ring; the reader or listener is conscious that he has heard the phrase before but he cannot immediately recall the original context. A few examples from many will make this clear. In The Lady's Not for Burning, Humphrey hears Thomas ranting about how he wants to be hanged. Humphrey asks Richard, "Who the hell's that?" Richard answers, "The man about the gallows." Fry achieves humor by substituting the word gallows for a more ordinary expression, e.g. "The man about the furnace." Although the audience could not tell exactly what word should have been in the phrase, it is obvious that there has been a substitution. In the same play, Thomas promises Jennet at the end of the second act, "I'll live, if it kills me." Here again he takes the familiar phrase, whose meaning is so often forgotten in ordinary usage, and by giving it a different twist, turns it into a paradoxical joke, for

5On this point, see William Arrowsmith, "Notes on English Verse Drama: Christopher Fry," The Hudson Review, III (Summer 1950), 211.

6Fry, Lady's, p. 16.

7Ibid., p. 63.
living is exactly what kills people. The line is particularly appropriate to
Thomas Mendip's character.

Another example of this substitution is from Venus Observed. Reddleman,
the Duke's butler, feels obliged to confess to the Duke that "If the fellow
comes on duty with a bloody nose / 'Tis my doing, and long may it bleed."8
The substitution of bleed for reign gives Reddleman the proper vindictiveness
and humor.

Besides substitution, Fry seems to relish puns. When the innocent Alison
says solemnly that pride is one of the deadly sins, Thomas Mendip retorts: "And
it's better to go for the lively ones."9 Again in the same play, the Mayor and
his cronies have decided to leave Thomas and Jennet alone and eavesdrop on them
from the next room. Humphrey pretends to be shocked:

Humphrey. I should never have thought
You would have done anything so undignified
As to stoop to keyholes, uncle.
Tyson. No, no, no.
The door will be ajar, my boy.
Humphrey. Ah yes,
That will make us upright.10

The lady of The Lady's Not for Burning at one point calls herself "all unhall-
lows Eve to his poor Adam."11

Countless other examples could be given of Fry's wordplay, but the impor-
tant point is that Fry always has a purpose to his verbal virtuosity. He always

8 Fry, Venus, p. 4.
9 Fry, Lady's, p. 5.
10 Ibid., p. 47.
11 Ibid., p. 70.
wants to place in a new light the human condition, or the wonders of the world, or perhaps the wonder of the word itself. In an often quoted line from Venus Observed, Fry tells us through Reedbeck: "A spade is never so merely a spade as the word / Spade would imply." 12

Another characteristic of Fry's quite closely related to the substitution is the use of strange words. There is a temptation to say his invention of words; but fairly often words which look as though they must have been invented by the playwright appear in the dictionary with the precise meaning Fry was using. An example of this is Jennet Jourdeswayne's speaking of the "gibbous moon." 13 No doubt Fry is playing the word for its full strange effect, yet the fact remains that gibbous is a perfectly good English word, not even predicated of the moon metaphorically but literally. This one example could be supplemented by many others.

Nonetheless, Fry does invent words. Perhaps this was most noticeable in A Sleep of Prisoners. Fry would take elements of other words and fuse them together in a new expression. As in the use of substitution pointed out above, the reader or listener is conscious at once of something familiar and something strange. Cain, in the play named above, called himself a "huskular strapping." 14 Here Fry has fused in one expression the words husky, muscular, strapping, and strinling. The readers or listeners are probably not aware of the

12 Fry, Venus, p. 36.
13 Fry, Lady's, p. 25.
14 Fry, Sleep, p. 13.
components, yet the expression has something of all of them. Peter, in the same play, is described as "absent-fisted," another Fry invention.\textsuperscript{15} Fry's coined words could be multiplied indefinitely. Even as early as \textit{The Firstborn} is found "the world of filth made kings."\textsuperscript{16} The Pharaoh calls the Exodus the "god hunt."\textsuperscript{17} Whether all these inventions help or hinder Fry's purpose will be discussed later in this chapter.

It has often been noted that Fry's word power is seen best in his passages of invective. He seems to eschew the four-letter words so popular elsewhere on the modern stage. Yet at least one critic has compared his use of abuse to O'Casey's, whose vigor in vituperation will hardly be contested.\textsuperscript{18} Doto, in \textit{A Phoenix Too Frequent}, calls Tagesus "you acorn-chewing infantryman . . . you square-bashing barbarian," for making Dynamoene weep.\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Venus Observed}, the unpleasant young Dominic comes in for his share of condemnation. Reedbeek calls him a "grovelling little / Gobemouche! You spigoted, bigoted, operculated prig!"\textsuperscript{20} The Duke himself calls Dominic a "strapping, / Ice-cold, donkey witted douche of tasteless water!"\textsuperscript{21} In \textit{Thor, with Angels} Colgrin is caught sleeping when Cymen's household returns from the war. Quichelm tries

\textsuperscript{15}Fry, \textit{Ibid.}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{16}Fry, \textit{Firstborn}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{18}Williams, \textit{Drawn from Ibsen to Eliot}, p. 266.
\textsuperscript{19}Fry, \textit{Phoenix}, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{20}Fry, \textit{Venus}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 93.
to awaken him to open the door.

**Quichelm.**
You scrawny old scurfscratcher, is that you?

**Colgrin,**
Runt of an old sow's litter, you slop-headed
Pot-scourer, come here, you buckle-backed
Gutsack, come out of there!²²

In *The Lady's Not for Burning*, Fry seemed to hit his peak in writing invective. Here are two examples, showing also Fry's skill at making new words from old ones. Humphrey addresses Nicholas as follows: "You slavvy poodle, you tike, / You crapulous puddering pipsqueak!"²³ Thomas Mendip gets off this bit to the Mayor:

**Thomas.** You bubble-mouthing, fog-blathering,
Chin-chuntering, chap-flapping, liturgical,
Turgidical, base old man!²⁴

These five examples show Fry's knack with expressive and colorful words.

As if to brake the onrush of words every once in a while, Fry will sometimes indulge in a little self-mockery. It is a way of keeping his poetry from becoming too pretentious. The device is seen as early as *A Phoenix Too Frequent*. Tegeus and Dynamene begin their conversation with a misunderstanding; Tegeus makes an elaborate apology, swearing by various gods for ten lines. Dynamene replies: "You needn't labor to prove your secondary education," and Doto adds: "How easy to swear if you're properly educated."²⁵ By this bit of self-mockery Fry has brought his high-flown poetry back to earth. Again in *The

²⁴Ibid., p. 27.
²⁵Fry, *Phoenix*, p. 16.
Lady's Not for Burning. Thomas stops for a moment to talk about a piece of rare poetry that Jennet has just gotten off:

**Thomas.** Madam, if I were Herod in the middle
Of the massacre of the innocents, I'd pause
Just to consider the confusion of your imagery.26

This conscious gentle mockery of the verse puts the verse on a sophisticated level and also keeps it from getting too seriously concerned with itself. There are other instances of this self-mockery, but these will suffice to show that Fry is conscious that verse can become stuffy and overserious, and has used this device to avert that danger.

So far in this chapter some of the poetic devices peculiar to Fry's work—his humor, his paradoxes, his wordplay in its various forms, his invective, and his self-mockery—have been considered. Now some of the advantages and disadvantages of this style can be noted.

First, one of the striking advantages Fry's style has in portraying his ideas is that it portrays them with unfailing good humor. Plays that are religious can often be terribly somber or boring. Although Fry is trying to express serious ideas, he refuses to be serious or glum. The puns, the invective, the dazzling words all serve to bring home the point that this poet is not angry with the world.

On the other hand, a disadvantage of the same quality, good humor, can be that the dramatist will not be taken seriously. As will be pointed out in the next chapter, there are those who think that Fry is not really trying to say anything serious. This is the price one must pay who insists upon saying

26Fry, Lady's, p. 86.
serious things with a smile. Yet the fault is partly Fry's. There is such a feeling of universal goodwill in his plays, that it is sometimes hard to take the plot seriously. One characteristic occurs again and again. A crisis will be reached which seems to demand some sort of action, even violent action. Yet the crisis reaches its high point; it passes; and the characters on the stage go on talking, as though trying to reconcile themselves to this new situation. A case in point would be in The Lady's Not for Burning, when Jennet repulses Humphrey's solicitation. Humphrey, instead of being furious when Mendip appears on the scene, gives in quite as gallantly as though he had not really meant his suggestion. The good-humor policy also seems to go to unbelievably lengths in The Dark Is Light Enough. It is all right for the Countess to be infinitely altruistic, but too many able-bodied men seem to be standing about philosophising at the time when a good knockout punch in the face of Richard Gettner is what is needed.

This good humor suggests another disadvantage of Fry's style. It has been objected that all his characters talk the same. Whether they are nobility or servants or soldiers, all seem to come out with the same clever puns, the same witty epigrams. This charge does not seem to be as well-founded as the first. First of all, there are many characters, like Doto, or Colgrin, or Tim Meadows in A Sleep of Prisoners, who have their own definite ways of speaking. Secondly an actor playing the part could bring out the peculiar ethos of a character, a remedy that cannot be applied in the case of the first difficulty discussed above.

Another advantage of Fry's style seems to be that his paradoxes are a particularly fitting way to bring out the fact of mystery. What makes a thing
a mystery is that it appears to be two truths fused into one: Three Persons in
One God, or one person who is both God and man. Paradox was used by Christ
Himself to bring out mysteries. Probably the best known is "He who secures his
own life will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake that will
secure it." But it has happened with some of Fry's paradoxical phrases that
instead of bringing out the mystery, they remain a mystery. This criticism
would seem to apply especially to the ending of A Sleep of Prisoners. The
language does not seem to make clear the ultimate resolution of the play.

Fry's various types of wordplay can also be both an advantage and a disad-
vantage in getting his ideas across. On the one hand his lines are given a
richness of meaning on different levels so that a number of ideas can be com-
pressed into one statement. On the other hand, sometimes even when a serious
point is intended, the words do so many tricks that they hide the idea. An
example of this occurs in The Lady's Not For Burning. Hebble Tyson, the Mayor,
is attempting to justify his decision to have Jennet burned. He says:

Tyson. The standard soul
Must mercilessly be maintained. No
Two ways of life. One God, one point of view.
A general acquiescence to the mean.

Thomas. And God knows when you say the mean, you mean
The mean.

In his clever reply to the pharisical Mayor, Thomas uses the word mean in three
senses. The first is the sense in which the Mayor had used it, as the average
norm between two extremes; the second, of course, is the verb; and the third is
mean in the sense of nasty or cruel. The retort is ingenious, yet it can have

27 Matt. x.39.
28 Fry, Lady's, p. 71.
the effect of making Fry sound as though he is not being serious. The same drawback could be pointed out with regard to the word-inventions and the invective. Somehow, their sheer abundance can give the impression that nothing very important is meant, that this is only harmless repartee. The reviewer for Time wrote of The Lady's Not for Burning, "Its forte is fireworks, not illumination." \(^{29}\) This seems to be an example of the reaction indicated above. From Fry's other writings, it hardly appears that he is striving for mere fireworks. It is notable that in the two plays after this, A Sleep of Prisoners and The Dark Is Light Enough, Fry showed more restraint in his language, especially in his descriptions.

In this chapter have been indicated some of the peculiar characteristics of Fry's style: his verse, his humor, his paradoxes and his wordplay. Under wordplay were included puns, substitutions, strange words, and invective. Self-mockery was seen as a device to keep the verse from becoming pompous.

Some of the advantages and disadvantages of this style were then discussed, not with a view to dramatization but centering on the style as a vehicle for the playwright's ideas. Benefits and drawbacks of this style were seen to stem from three common roots: Fry's persistent good humor, his paradoxes in theme and language, and his wordplay.

The next chapter will consider some of the interpretations and criticisms that Fry's plays have received.

\(^{29}\)"New Play in Manhattan," Time, LVI (November 20, 1950), 61.
CHAPTER IV

AN EXPERIENCE OF CRITICS

The title of this chapter is borrowed from Christopher Fry himself. In October, 1952, Fry published an address which he had delivered to the Critics' Circle in April of that year at the Arts Theater in London. He entitled his small book An Experience of Critics. The book is cast in a light vein, with a prologue by Alec Guinness and drawings by Ronald Searle, but still it makes some telling points. Walter Kerr said that the book "may have only been a temporary victory for Mr. Fry, but it was a juicy one. For one thing, Mr. Fry writes better than the people who write about his writing. And for another, he had thought long enough, calmly enough and trenchantly enough to have found some true and telling things to say."\(^1\) The Month noted that although at first the book seems innocuous enough, "this impression does not allow for Mr. Fry, who swings from the boughs of fantasy to the trunk of meaning with a rapid graceful motion which is apt to bewilder the merely rational mind."\(^2\)

Fry's main point in An Experience of Critics seems to be a plea for creative criticism, for criticism that tries to see what the author was trying to do and does not attempt to impose its own a priori ideas on the playwright.

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Fry's criticism of criticism is not itself above criticism, as will be pointed out. Nevertheless, it serves as a springboard to the function of this chapter: to examine some of the criticisms of Christopher Fry's plays with relationship to the ideas that he is trying to express.

The critical work on Fry is not very extensive. It began only a little before 1950, since before that Fry was virtually unknown as a playwright. It may be simplest to begin with a few examples of those who either do not care about the ideas which Fry is trying to express or who perhaps do not think he has any to express. Stephen Spender might head this list. In an article in The Spectator in April of 1950, Spender brushes aside any consideration of ideas by saying that "sentences are more important to Mr. Fry than any other reality." He thinks that Fry tries to be serious about things which it is not his virtue to be serious about. Spender seems to find a general lack of conviction in Fry's work. He grants that Fry has some good poetic passages, but describes his imagery as bloodless. Fry's greatest weakness, says Spender, is "his lack of a concrete grasp of words, as though words were roots or soil, and not just stage properties." This is a surprising criticism for Fry's work; even his severer critics usually bow to his word power and his feel for imagery. Spender's conclusion is that Fry is a frivolous writer. This short essay is perhaps the most caustic indictment of Fry's work. It is worth noting that Spender himself is a poet. Often artists in the same craft are the most severe critics of one another's work. James Johnson Sweeney, director of the

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3 Spender, The Spectator, CLXXXIV, 364.
4 Ibid.
Guggenheim Museum, has pointed out the fact that artists are often intolerant of other artists in the same field, when they themselves have been subjected to intolerance. He cites the example of Sir Jacob Epstein, who fought for years for recognition, and then labelled a fellow-artist, Piet Mondrian, a faker. Monroe K. Spears: 'Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy' has elements very much like Spender's article. He says that Fry is unreal and does not take reality seriously enough. Again this is a strange criticism to make of Fry, since he himself makes so much of constantly being aware of reality at every moment.

Other critics praise Fry's style but give the impression that they do not grasp his meanings. John Mason Brown, for example, praises Venus Observed and the verbal power Fry exhibits in it. Yet he admits that he does not understand "what Mr. Fry's play actually means in each and all of its madcap twists..." This failure to grasp the meanings, or perhaps the meaning, of the play is certainly not entirely the fault of the critic. Disadvantages of Fry's style have already been pointed out. This, and the fact that he apparently abides by no strict dogmas, which the mind naturally seeks, may give his plays lack of definition.

The late George Jean Nathan also paid compliments to Fry's word power. In a sort of inverse compliment reminiscent of his one-time partner H. L. Mencken, Nathan wrote: "His [Elia Kazan's] notion that some of the words, of

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say, a Christopher Fry do not get you and do things to you nearly as much as Simon Legree's whip or Greasy Joe's revolver is hereby awarded a dunce-cap of handsome design."\(^8\) Nathan called Fry a creditable dramatist, but interprets Fry's placement of *A Sleep of Prisoners* in a church a piece of slick showmanship. Nathan gives no evidence of grasping Fry's ideas from the plays, or of even surmising what they might be. In the play mentioned above, this critic objected mainly to the use of a church as setting. He is not alone in this, but as will be seen later, others did not object for the same reasons as Nathan. Said Nathan, "You cannot arbitrarily establish a mood by putting on a play in a church any more than you could by putting on a sermon in the Roxy."\(^9\)

In *Venus Observed*, it would seem that Nathan missed Fry's point entirely. He found the plot tried-and-true. As for any deeper meaning, the old critic commented: "And there is also some rather forlorn symbolism. . . . If there is—I'll be blown if I can make out what it is—it recalls the definition of symbolism as being the last refuge of a despairing playwright."\(^10\) He comments on a few passages that he likes, but it would seem that he did not see Fry's drama for a vehicle of any sort of ideas.

Gilbert Highet is also found among those who do not think that Fry is a serious dramatist. But Highet's idea of Fry's main themes is that they are religion and fancy. He does not seem to grasp that for Fry existence itself is the main theme, which Fry sees in the terms of its relation to God, and

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9 Ibid., p. 126.
10 Ibid., p. 129.
expresses in the language of fancy. For Highet, Fry remains "essentially a comic poet." Commenting on Fry's style, he also notes that the articulateness of Fry's characters in forming metaphors blurs their individuality and tends to make the characters fuse together. This does seem to be a justified criticism, as was noted in the last chapter.

Walter Kerr has high praise for Christopher Fry's verse, and finds in Fry "much of the impudent love of paradox, the passion for plain sense, and the hopeful irony of his prose forbear [Shaw]." He criticizes the plays mainly as dramatic actions and not as conveyors of ideas. Kerr believes that Fry has begun to subdue his style to his theme, especially in *The Dark Is Light Enough*.

Raymond Williams also criticizes Fry's verse from the standpoint of dramatic action and finds that Fry's ideas do not come across very forcefully. "The sense of loss of origin is genuine," concedes Williams, "but as an element of the drama it is offered diffidently, almost casually. There is a certain concern with death, but Mr. Fry's is an essentially genteel eschatology. He is frequently surprised by the nature of existence, but he keeps his surprises under control, and permits himself only a few well-bred and perfectly unexceptionable doubts." It is hard not to feel that what brings such criticism on the head of Fry is his refusal to be gloomy. However, it is a valid criticism if this good humor reaches to all the characters and takes away their individuality.

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12Kerr, *Pieces at Eight*, p. 137.
13Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, pp. 263–264.
Frederick Lumley's criticism is substantially the same as that of Williams. He thinks that Fry does not get across any ideas in particular. "His style," says Lumley, "may be idiosyncratic, his themes unusual, but his plays have no destination. They neither reveal nor illuminate."\(^4\) Lumley says that in Fry's plays nothing is defined, and that the dominant mood of the plays is bewilderment.\(^5\)

Harold Clurman makes the point that Fry, like the French dramatists, is using the dramatic form to embody general ideas. In this he finds the French different from American playwrights, who take their impetus from direct contact with life in terms of character and environment. But Clurman has a strange interpretation of Fry's general outlook: "There is in Fry something of an affable acquiescence to the prevailing pessimism of the Continental world view. He seems to take for granted that every intelligent person agrees that life is terrible and that to be a blithe optimist nowadays is to set oneself down as an idiot."\(^6\) If Fry's plays have given this impression, it is almost certainly not the intention of the playwright.

Among those who have found more to praise in Fry than his style is R. A. Scott-James, author of *Fifty Years of English Literature, 1900-1950*. In almost direct contrast to what Clurman said above, Scott-James finds that Fry "is serious enough, but he will not be so serious as to disbelieve in the joy of


\(^5\)Ibid., p. 199.

life or run his head into a blank wall." Scott-James calls Fry both a poet and dramatist and recognizes that Fry is most serious when he is gay, and gay when he is serious. These are two ideas that some of the other critics seem to think are not compatible.

William Arrowsmith also appears as a defender of Fry, although he does not think Fry is without defects as a dramatist. In an excellent essay written in 1950, Arrowsmith says that Fry had so far received no detailed criticism but had been merely catalogued with various labels, "an irrelevant rhetorician... a fancy phrase-maker... writes plays based on bubbling words alone... a happy marriage of Shaw and Shakespeare." Arrowsmith's point is not that the critics have been wholly unfavorable but that they have not made a study of his work. Arrowsmith is aware of Fry's main purpose and his use of paradox in theme and language. He believes that Fry's most serious defect is that he never has a really evil protagonist. This was written before the appearance of The Dark Is Light Enough; it is possible that Arrowsmith would find Gattner really evil. Arrowsmith's criticism seems to be the creative sort which Fry urged in his An Experience of Critics; he tries to see Fry's plays in the light of what Fry has set as his main theme.

Another short but good study of Fry's work is that of Erwin Stural in Stimmen Der Zeit. Stural calls Fry a metaphysical while Arrowsmith says that he is not. In general, Stural gives Fry credit for perhaps more definite af-

17 R. A. Scott-James, "Christopher Fry's Poetic Drama," The Nation, CLXXI (October 7, 1950), 315.
firmations about God and existence itself than any other critic; it is possible that he sees in the playwright more depth than he possesses. Nonetheless, taking Fry's main ideas as they are evident in his plays and as Fry himself has written of them, he comes up with a much more illuminating picture than exists in the available British criticism.

But the dean of Fry's admirers is Derek Stanford. Stanford has written a full-length critical biography of Fry, in terms of glowing praise. He has also written a paper-back Christopher Fry for the Writers and Their Work Series. A Christopher Fry Album is also Stanford's product. In the critical biography, Stanford is enthusiastically laudatory of Fry and his work. In Chapter IX Fry is compared to other poetic dramatists and does not suffer in the comparisons. The last chapter is called, exuberantly enough, "The Triumph of Fry." Stanford's books are excellent but they give the impression that he is writing with reference mainly to the printed texts of the plays rather than to the plays as they are presented on the stage.

Finally, some criticisms of the religion of Fry's plays might be pointed out. It has already been seen that Fry's creed as a Quaker does not make definite demands of him. After Stanford has shown that Fry is against materialism, he says of the playwright: "Another hostile factor, as he sees it, is the presence of spiritual dogma, which by its overassertiveness may bludgeon tentative credibility." 19 But there are some of Fry's critics who do not consider dogma a hostile factor. Hugh Ross Williamson insists that although A Sleep of Pris-

19 Stanford, Appreciation, p. 32.
="was a brilliant and brilliantly produced 'religious' play, it is not
Christian." 20 He notes that its performance was forbidden in Anglican churches
in Australia for this reason. Williamson was an Anglican at the time he gave
the lecture in which he made this statement. Walter Kerr also believes that
Fry would do better if he avoided this sort of inspirational play, and stayed
with his comedies. Kerr notes, as have others, that the play ends "in a burst
of hopeful rhetoric meant to give mankind some confidence in itself and some
hope for the future." 21

John Gassner also thinks that Fry is making a mistake in trying to be a
religious poet. Fry and Eliot, says Gassner, cannot write memorable religious
pieces because their religion is only a semi-religion. Gassner says of Fry and
Eliot, "Their plays are watery because their religion is." 22 He contrasts
these poets with Gerard Manley Hopkins, who "had to twist and hammer the metal
of his poetry, in order to express the seizures of the spirit." 23 Gassner in
a few pages presents his viewpoint well, that these poets are "mainly devotional-
rather than religious poets, and a religious drama without religion is not
more exciting than most merely devotional poetry." 24 Gassner also makes plain
that he is not accusing these poets of hypocrisy, but he concludes that in
spite of their maximum zeal and good will, they fall short of the mark in writ-

21 Kerr, p. 143.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 430. The entire section "Fabianism and the British Play-
wright," pp. 427-432 is well worth consideration.
ing religious drama.

This religious criticism of Fry on dramatic grounds is quite worthy of consideration. It may serve to unify a great deal that has been written about Fry's work. Fry is trying to make statements about the meaning and wonder of existence, about God, about life and death. Yet, as has been pointed out in this chapter, some critics find that he has little to say on these weighty topics and would urge him to remain with comic drama. Others who themselves would not demand a specific creed still find that Fry's plays lack definition. Others, like Sturzl, who have a creed and philosophy of their own, seem to make Fry more explicit than Fry. Perhaps each of these three groups fails to find Fry's wonder at the mystery of existence a sufficiently compelling theme in itself. Questions alone cannot illuminate; man as rational seeks for an answer.

In this chapter have been presented opinions of fifteen critics who have considered Fry's work in more than a passing review of one play. In the next and final chapter, the points of the thesis will be summarized and a few conclusions will be drawn.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The function of this chapter will be to draw some few conclusions from the foregoing material. No complete evaluation of Christopher Fry's drama will be attempted, since this would involve many questions of dramatic criticism which have not been discussed in this thesis.

It has been seen that Fry definitely has certain ideas that he wishes to convey. It is doubtful, however, that his ideas are sufficiently clear to be striking. Fry's concept of God, for example, is not a clear one, even if allowances are made for the poetry. If his ideas on existence are poetic and dazzling in their expression, it would still seem that to a large number of people they are not completely intelligible. For example, Fry's statement in *A Sleep of Prisoners* that "the enterprise is exploration unto God" has won praise from one Catholic commentator,\(^1\) another has called it a negation of Christianity,\(^2\) and still another critic (whether Catholic or not is not known) finds that Fry has become too didactic in this section of the play and that some may complain that the drama has become a religious tract.\(^3\) It seems safe

\(^{1}\)Sister M. Maura, S.S.N.D., *Renascence*, VIII, 8.


\(^{3}\)Ferguson, *English*, I, 46.
to judge from examples such as this one, and from the varied criticisms, that some of Fry's ideas themselves are not in sharp focus. Consequently, materialistic critics will find him too spiritual and unreal, and really religious critics may condemn him for being vague. It would seem Fry could more easily sort out his enemies from his friends if he would make his views a little clearer.

A second conclusion follows from Fry's style. It seems to be a fairly constant phenomenon that an author who writes of the immaterial or the spiritual in humorous terms is automatically catalogued by a great number of people as frivolous or unrealistic. Such people will always feel that Fry is merely bandying words about. They are dissatisfied with an author who maintains an essentially optimistic view of life. This is the price exacted from any prophet of joy.

But on the other side of the same coin, Fry's good humor can backfire when all the characters in a play deal it out in large doses. When there is never a really evil antagonist, there is never any real conflict. And without conflict in the drama, it is difficult to see how any ideas can be brought out. Fry, it would seem, is going to have to get angry with some of his characters if he wants to bring his ideas clearly into the light.

As yet, Christopher Fry has not been completely successful in uniting big ideas with an expansive style. But Fry's work is not yet finished; better things may be in the making. For the time being, looking at Fry's works, these words of his are apropos: "In a world which tends, with some difficulty, towards creation; be ready to find the truth in any aspect, and so plunge on
through the darkness carrying the world, if possible, in full fig."

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Edward Joseph Mattimoe, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 1, 1959
Date

Signature of Adviser

[Signature]