CHAPTER VII.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CHRISTOHER FRY.
1. Charges against Fry.

The purpose this chapter is to estimate the achievement of Fry by placing his entire dramatic work in its proper perspective, in the light of the foregoing argument. Before assessing Fry's achievement as a dramatist it is necessary to consider the charges frequently levelled against him. As said at the beginning of this enquiry, Fry has been extremely unlucky in his critics. As Kenneth Muir puts it, "The verbal pyrotechnics of *A Phoenix too Frequent* and *The Lady's not for Burning* led to such extravagant estimates of his achievement as a dramatist that there was an inevitable reaction. Critics complained that his imagery was decorative rather than organic, that he was drunk with words, that he was lacking in seriousness, that his lines were often impossible to scan, that his plays were badly constructed and his characters puppets." One of the common charges is that he is a 'wordsmith' and indulges in too many words. His verbal varnish and 'his grand prodigality of expression' came in for much criticism. Fry himself answers this charge in one of his essays. He says, "What do I think I am doing, then so painfully creating a false impression? Why so many words, why so many apparent interruptions on the relevant action of the play? There is no doubt that looked at from many

points of view, these are most reasonable questions to ask, and I can only try to explain what was in my mind. So many words for instance. We know this. Criticism does not precisely mean what it says. There are the same number of words as in any other play. You have only to count them. It means often enough or else or as well, that the words are an ornament on the meaning and not the meaning itself... I have meant the ornament to be dramatically or comically an essential part of the meaning: as in mere sanguine moments I think the words are as exact to my purpose as I could make them at the time of writing." Pry firmly believes that he has something to say. The forcefulness with which he answers the charge shows his seriousness of the purpose. The axiom that a wealth of words must inevitably go with poverty of thought does not apply to Christopher Pry because as shown earlier he has a viable world-view which is expressed coherently and forcefully in his drama though at times as he appears to be merely flippant. Derek Stanford says, "that he[Pry] should appear preeminently in the image of a word-smith"—as a popular journal recently termed him— is of course only natural when we look at his plays. Perhaps no characters in modern drama possess as do the characters of Pry, such voluble sources of self-explanation. But the fact that his characters


are very vocal—— and often colourfully so—— does not mean that they merely indulge in talk for its own sake.

Denis Donoghue also levels the same charge against Fry and says, "Christopher Fry has acquired some reputation as a dramatist on the strength of such plays as Venus Observed and The Lady's Not for Burning is one of the most disquieting facts about the contemporary theatre." If acquiring reputation is disquieting to a critic, a dramatist cannot obviously help it. Donoghue adds, "the main difficulty in dealing with Mr. Fry's early plays is that one often has the feeling that as a dramatist he has little to say and therefore little to take seriously: if this is even partly true to accuse him of verbal flippancy is to point to a really fundamental triviality." And he continues that "through the plays up to A Sleep of Prisoners the discrepancy between the language and the over-all tone of the one hand and the other the chosen decorum of the play, appears to be a defect. This cannot possibly accepted because as maintained throughout this enquiry the essential seriousness of Fry's purpose can be felt unmistakably in all his plays, including the earlier ones.

5. Ibid., p. 183.
6. Ibid., p. 186.
Surely, a writer who projects effectively ideas like man's unshakeable faith in life and the 'unrevealing revelation of mystery', life's rest and its triumph over death, cannot be accused of being merely a juggler with words.

When questioned what his reaction is, when he appears 'in the image of a word-smith', Fry answers that 'any writer is a word-smith' since he works with words, just as a musician is a 'note-smith' since he works with notes. But words are also thought and meaning and (just as important) the sensation of living out of which understanding can come."7 Also when questioned about the 'ornamental' language of his plays, he replied that, "I question the word ornamental which suggests that the words are being used as embellishment but I have tried to keep them to the purpose, part of which is to reflect the polyphony we live in."8 A possible justification for Fry's prodigality with words is that it comes naturally to him. There is no straining after effect. It is a product of his lively imagination and suggests the seeming prodigality of life itself, its great abundance and variety, that this exactly is the one grand theme of Fry's work.

7. Christopher Fry, "Personal Correspondence", 10th April, 1975.

vide, Appendix-1.

8. ibid.
It is also said that Fry's imagery is decorative rather than organic. As Gerald Weales points out, "Most of the critics feel that plays so filled with gaiety and verbal rooping can hardly be as serious as Fry intends them. Fry like any original playwright makes a demand on the audience. In his case the demand is that they realize that his verse is not merely decoration (although it can be that) but that if an expression of his view of the world, Fry's strained and straining metaphors are as much a part of his approach to man and God as Eliot's increasingly spare and prose-like verse is an indication of his attitude." In Fry's best scenes his imagery is actually a part of the meaning and brings out the basic themes of the plays. Fry's language and imagery are the effective instruments of expression through which the various themes are presented. For example, in *Venus Observed,* when the Duke refers frankly to the woman with whom he had previous connection, Rosabel replies:

"your moments of revelation: I only wonder
What we revealed, certainly not
What goes on in other hearts than your own
That's as remote to you as a seaside lodging-house
To a passing whale."10


The Duke's self-centredness and his isolation from others is very well brought out in this image, which is not a mere decoration but forms an integral part of the thematic strategy. Again in The Dark Is Light Enough the Countess describes Richard, employing, what is almost like a traditional epic simile. She says:

"Richard sometimes reminds me of an unhappy Gentleman, who comes to the shore Of a January sea, heroically Strips to w swim, and then seems powerless To advance or retire, either to take the shock Of the water or to immerse himself again In his warm clothes, and so stands cursing The sea, the air, the season, anything Except himself, as blue as a plucked goose. It would be very well if he would one day Plunge, or dress himself again."

Now this long simile is obviously not merely ornamental because it sums up vividly the character of Richard Gettner as a man who is not basically bad but one who behaves as he does "Because he thought that God rejected him."

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11. The Dark Is Light Enough, Plays (London, 1971), p. 120.
12. Ibid.
As Rudolf Stamm points out, "It is true, some have suspected him of being a mere juggler of words, a punster who strives to beat the Elizabethans, the metaphysicals and the great talkers in the plays of Synge and O'Casey at their own game of inventing surprising grotesque and outrageous similes and metaphors. We can readily admit that he is a punster and that he is acquainted with these authors. As he knows how to control his punning and his image-making faculty has created too many delightful things to be denied the quality of originality."\(^{13}\)

It has been also said that "fundamentally what Mr. Fry lacks is a histrionic sense, a feeling for those actions which deemed enactment."\(^{14}\) To say this is to forget the important fact that long before he took to writing, Fry was a man of the theatre and had considerable experience on the stage. As Stanford points out, "On quitting teaching for a second time, Fry became what fifty years back might have been termed 'a strolling player'. During these days he acted as a kind of theatrical jack-of-all-trades putting himself to any task providing, it had connections with the stage."\(^{15}\) Fry also worked with the Repertory players at Tunbridge Wells. In 1940 he served the Oxford Playhouse in the capacity of Director. His keen

dramatic sense is evident in all his plays. As noted earlier, his opening scenes themselves reveal a keen sense of the theatrical value for they immediately arrest the attention of the audience. And it has also been shown how deftly his plays are constructed. To say therefore that he lacks a feeling for those actions which are 'deemed enactment' is similar to the statement that King Lear cannot be staged. King Lear was written for the stage and was actually staged and the Elizabethans enjoyed it. So also Fry's plays were meant for the stage and they have been successfully enacted on it also.

Another charge is that Fry's plays are deficient in plot. This too argues a curious insensitivity to changing ideas about drama and the theatre. Modern Drama— particularly, the plays of Fry— can never be judged in terms of the traditional dramatic structure, comprising exposition, development, denouement and conclusion. In his plays, the whole structure depends upon a successful fusion of his themes, characters setting and colourful verse. A typical Fry play is conceived as a poem or a sort of a musical symphony which organically develops its own form and structure. Apart from this, the detailed analysis of structure attempted earlier, reveals how Fry's plays are plotted with much care and expertise while he is not shy of experimenting also.
Denis Goacher even seems to feel that the experiments of all modern verse dramatists with the language appear to be directed towards a wrong course. Commenting on poetic drama, he says, "One can say dogmatically that the basis of drama is not language but action; if a question of meaning should arise here, I see by action that which is done or performed to carry the narrative forward towards a conclusion; language in the theatre is truly appropriate only when it grows out of and clarifies the action. Therefore the real problem is not one of refinement of language or of forging a poetic diction encompassing colloquial speech; it is not a literary matter at all." The obvious answer to this is that in the best specimen of modern verse drama (whether the author is Eliot or Fry) the language does 'grow out of' and qualify the action.

2. Fry's limitations.

While most of the commonly levelled charges against Fry can thus be satisfactorily answered, this does not mean that his art suffers from no limitations. As Derek Stanford points out, "the two defects I find in his (Fry's) drama are those of prolixity and sentimentality. The former defect I don't find in the structure of his plays as a whole; but in certain protracted speeches...

which by their length—though interesting in themselves—appear irrelevant or impending. Such is Merlin's fifty-eight line soliloquy in *Thorn with Angels* (a speech which puts using possession of deeper and wider meaning of the play but which is in its context is undramatic). Another is Perpetua's forty-four line flirtation with the Duke in *Venus Observed* starting 'there's not any reason'. The second fault—that of sentimentality seems to me grave matter—Coincidence is one of the oldest devices of playwrights and story tellers but it can sometimes affect us being a facile way of making an impression. This perhaps is all the more so when coincidence of action or event is combined with over-sympathetic expression.  

While at his best Fry's language and imagery have a functional role to play as shown in this discussion, the fact remains that at his worst, he seems to make his characters speak volubly, without achieving much by way of dramatic necessity. Often, a point already made effectively through a memorable image is laboured in a long speech which then appears to be largely redundant, for instance, a speech of Dynamic in *A Phoenix too Frequent*, dilating upon her dead husband runs to 39 lines:

"No, if you wish, you may cry, Doto:

But our tears are very different. For me

The world is all with Charon, all, all.
Even the metal and plume of the rose garden
And the forest where the sea surfers overhead
In vegetable tides, and particularly
The entrance to the warm baths in the Arcite Street
Where we first met

Similar is the case with the thirty-line speech of Thomas in
The Lady's not for Burning which begins thus:

"I
It really is
Beyond the limit of respectable superstition
To confuse my voice with a peacock's. Don't they know I sing also bass in Hell's madrigal club.
And as for you, you with no eyes, no ears,
No senses, you the most superstitious
Of all—for what greater superstition
Is there than the mumbo-jumbo of believing
In reality?"

Here the idea of Thomas' existential despair is spun out by means of
images. Another example of this kind is the fifty-one line speech

of the Countess in *The Dark Is Light Enough* when Col. Janik comes in search of Richard Gottmer. To quote a few lines:

"I have no weapons to prevent you, Colonel.

The house will go down before you like matchwood.

Your victory will be complete, if not glorious.

..."

... 20

here the Countess' pacifism is recounted at inordinate length, thus impending the action.

Apart from this, one occasionally finds coincidence of situation and action in Fry's plays. For instance, the strange coincidence by which Teseus enters the very grave in which Dynasen is starving herself to death can be accepted because it is the very basis of action; but when we are also told that Dynasene spent her childhood at Pyza where Teseus also lived as a boy, we cannot but feel that the strong arm of chance has been wrenched out of its socket. Another example of coincidence is in *The Firstborn* the sudden death of Ramesses which takes place exactly at the time when the Syrian Princess, to whom he is engaged to marry, arrives. Similarly in *Thor: with Angels* Holm is killed just when Cymen is converted and metamorphosed. Here also is an accident too many, as if the dramatist was determined to end his play tragically, some what say

In the same play occurs the incident of wolf-killing in which the largest is killed by Noel the prisoner, who is later paraded on the stage with his bloody body severely mauled. This gives an impression that the playwright wants to play on the emotions of the audience. A similar example of an attempt to move the audience to tears is to be found in the last act of Curtmantle. Here the King dies at the end but seems to take too long a time to do so, because more than one half of the entire Third Act shows him dying.

Furthermore, one cannot but accept the fact that Fry is a dramatist with a restricted range and scope in spite of his apparent variety of scene, setting and character. Many areas of life and experience do not appear to interest him, e.g. the socio-political concerns which are so prominent in Auden. It is not possible to expect in Fry's plays the panoramic sweep of humanity which one gets in Shakespeare. In this respect one can liken him to Jane Austen whose vision and range was strictly limited and restricted.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER FRY.

Denis Donoghue has stated that Fry's permanent contribution to the theatre is likely to be slight.21 One is surprised that so sensitive a critic as Donoghue should have developed an outside critical blind spot in evaluating Fry. For when one sets out to assess Fry's achievement as a dramatist, one cannot ignore the

following stark facts: Fry restored poetry to the theatre and brought back melody and colour, felicity and exuberance to verse drama. Secondly, Fry is a rare combination of a poet and a wit. Thirdly, he is a dramatist with a coherent world-view which is of great significance to the modern man, Fry's is essentially a unique blend of comedy of values, comedy of wit and verse comedy.

Eliot advocated that language in poetic drama must not be flamboyant and must look like prose; Fry differs from him and raises dramatic speech to higher levels. The London audiences of the early fifties were accustomed to listening to the dull prose utterances of realistic plays. The glittering exuberant and Elizabethan style of Christopher Fry, making his plays appear as though "apparelled in celestial light", served as a welcome deviation from the dull and metallic prose style of realistic drama, and this has contributed in no small measure to the success of his plays. At the same time Fry also has tried to "make his words firmer, more intimately related to current speech patterns."22 Fry's joy in handling the language reflects his affirmation and glorification of life; his heart seems to leap up in wonder when he confronts the mystery of the world and he tries to give expression to this

amusement in words worthy of his experience. In the history of drama one rarely finds such uniform brilliance of words and such a 'thesaurus of fine phrases'. Referring to 'the king-fisher-flash phrase' with its peacock like verbal dazzle which catches the eye of any reader, Stanford says, "For the first time, for several centuries we were made to realise that here was a poet addressing the audience from the boards with that immediacy of effect which had seemed to have deserted the muse as far as its dramatic office is concerned." The same critic has also pointed out how Fry's magic of words transforms even unpleasant ideas into 'a thing of beauty'. "In dealing with boredom he (Fry) has dealt with one of our deepest contemporary issues, and what is more has given to it a significant poetic expression. Unlike other interpreters of boredom who attempted to express their subject at its own verbal level, Fry has assayed its interpretation by giving to it the tone of speech which we normally associate with rest. While still expressing the essence of ennui he has verbally enthused upon its nature; out of flatness he has brought forth gusto, out of the banal, a poetry is born." The character (Hendip) gives expression to ennui as though he enjoys it of course it is willing resignation to it." As J.G. Treadn notes "Christopher Fry has brought back to

24. Ibid., p. 219.
the modern stage the melody of the spoken word. .. and his work has proved to people, who have been little responsive, a little doubtful that after all they can use their ears, that it is reasonable to hear a play as well as to see it."

Secondly, Fry combines successfully poetry with wit. This has been discussed in detail earlier; suffice it to say here that in Fry's dramatic success his wit is one of the major factors.

Thirdly, it is important to note that Fry provided a new dimension to comedy. It is comparatively easy to define tragedy in general in that it depicts the fall of a man from his 'wondrous glory to the lowest level of abject fortunes'. But comedy defies any such definition and its scope and sphere are too wide to enable one to enclose it into the circumscription of a single definition, for we have a bewildering variety of comedies such as Romantic comedy, Comedy of Manners, Dark comedy, Comedy of Ideas etc. Fry stretches the definition of comedy still further by combining comedy of wit, Verse Comedy and Comedy of Values. Fry's comedy of values differs from the Comedy of Ideas in that, unlike the latter it does not project certain ideas on the intellectual plane, but emphasises certain values of life illustrated in situation and characters and clothed in the imaginative robes of colourful poetry.

Hence, while Fry's comedy sparkles with brilliant wit on the surface, at a deeper level it turns out to be also a comedy of values, in which a thoughtful reading of life is presented. As a master of comedy Fry naturally invites comparison with Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. Wilde's plays glitter with surface brilliance and coruscate with witty paradoxes like 'divorces are made in heaven' and 'washing one's clean linen in public'. Wilde staunchly believed in the theory of 'art is for art's sake' and starved his drama of intellectual content. Excepting the surface wit, one does not today find anything that can sustain interest in Wilde's plays, which remain a blend of farce and Victorian melodrama. Beyond the presentation of upper-class leisure and emptiness, Wilde does not present any values nor does he seem to project any vision of life in his plays. Like Wilde, Shaw too cannot offer us genuine poetry, but unlike the former he never believed in the theory that art is for art's sake; on the contrary he felt the necessity of educating people through art. The artist-moralist in Shaw is seen in almost all of his plays. He has a staunch faith in the social utility of art.

Hence, Shaw's comedy also takes the form of satire. In addition to this, his theory of the Life-force compels him to subordinate both action and character to his ideas.

27. Ibid., p.9.
Fry differs from both Wilde and Shaw. He neither says art is for art's sake nor professes that didacticism and art should go together; he believes in certain values in life— to which he gives memorable expression in his plays. Fry believes in the supreme importance of life, and is convinced that goodness, sympathy and love ultimately triumph over evil hatred and violence. Fry's comedy is not merely a comedy of superficial wit like that of Wilde, nor a satirical prose comedy with a restricted and water-tight theory of life like that of Shaw— it is an imaginative comedy in which poetry, wit and serious vision of life are blended together, which as far as sheer wit is concerned, he can certainly hold his arm against both the earlier masters.

The final impression produced by Fry's drama is that he is a high-priest of an affirmative reading of life; a crusader in the cause of life; and a laureate of lyricism and hope in this dark, dismal modern world. His zestful assertion of life is based on unshakable belief that life is good and meaningful and that with all the hardships besetting it, it is worth living. It is essentially a vision of hope and faith and celebrates man's capacity to live, his capacity to endure, to overcome obstacles and perpetuate life under all circumstances. He makes one of his characters say,
"I'll honour myself by continuing to live
And honour you by hoping you live indefinitely." 29

Another character of his tells us:
"Deny
Life to itself and life will harness and ride you
To its purpose." 29

"The desire to find a reason for living" 30 is highlighted in all
Fry's plays. And this is exactly the kind of message that the modern
man desperately needs, since he is often compelled to think of his
civilisation in terms of Eliot's 'Hollow men':

"This is the dead land
This is the cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's head
Under the twinkle of a fading star." 31

31. T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Man", The Complete Poems and Plays of
Fry on the other hand, believes with Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* that

"This world's no blot for us
For blank, it means intensely and means good."