

Amanda Grissom

Prof. Vanessa Campagna

THEA272: Classical Theatre

18 March 2016

The Glass of Water Critique

Eugène Scribe, a talented French playwright, wrote over 300 plays, worked in many different genres, and popularized “the “well-made play” formula,” or *pièce bien faite* (Brockett 375). This formula was used with great success by Scribe, and also had an influence on later playwrights such as Alexandre Dumas *fils* and Emile Augier (Brockett 374-376). Some of what were considered Scribe’s finest plays were *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *Marriage for Money*, and *The Glass of Water* (Brockett 375). *The Glass of Water* is a prime example of a *pièce bien faite* because its plot hinges on secrecy, revelations, and reversals of power or *peripeteia*. In this essay, I examine *The Glass of Water* for these *pièce bien faite* aspects and discuss how the play satisfies the expectations of audiences in both the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

The first *pièce bien faite* aspect shown in the play is secrecy, when Masham and Bolingbroke discuss Masham’s mysterious protector or, as Bolingbroke suggests, “protectress” (Scribe 39). The secret identity of Masham’s protectress is not revealed to be the Duchess until the second scene of Act I when Masham becomes an officer (Scribe 64). This reveal is a satisfying and shocking one given that the anticipation of it is built for 25 pages, or over a third of the play’s length. Another, less anticipated, secret and reveal is that of Abigail’s jewelry store customer being the Queen (Scribe 42-43). Two other secret identities are that of the “snap-finger man” and the man who kills him (Scribe 51). The audience learns that the man’s killer is Masham (Scribe 51) and that this man is Bolingbroke’s cousin (Scribe 59). While the audience is aware of these

identities, there are characters that are not, thus building suspense as Masham's guilt is hidden. This suspense continues to grow until Masham's guilt is revealed to the Queen, who has Bolingbroke accept his sword as an act of confession and willful resignation (Scribe 93).

Another *pièce bien faite* aspect that Scribe utilizes heavily in *The Glass of Water* is moments of *peripeteia*. The power in the play is constantly being shifted between Bolingbroke and the Duchess. The Queen defies the Duchess's wishes at one point and gains power over her as well, but this is due to Bolingbroke's interference, and thus is truly his power and agenda which are aided (Scribe 78). The transferences of power between Bolingbroke and the Duchess often happen suddenly, right after another. For example, Bolingbroke gains power when he sends the Marquis de Torcy's propositions with Masham to the Queen (Scribe 45), but the Duchess quickly regains it when she informs Bolingbroke that "I read [the propositions] first [... and] the fire has done them justice by now" (Scribe 48). Another example is when the Duchess gains control of Bolingbroke's debts (Scribe 50) only to have Bolingbroke become heir to his family's fortune shortly thereafter (Scribe 58) and then repay his debts (Scribe 64). The Queen also refuses to sign "the passports for the Marquis de Torcy" (Scribe 78), which gives Bolingbroke power, only to later sign them in exchange for her brother's return to England, which returns the power to the Duchess (Scribe 80). These moments exemplify the reversals of power that keep audiences of *The Glass of Water* engaged, curious, and expectant.

In addition to the *pièce bien faite* aspects, audiences in the nineteenth century would have been engaged in the spectacle of *The Glass of Water*, which something that was expected at the Boulevard Theatres in France. Scenic designers could have accomplished this expected spectacle in a similar fashion to the way that the plot unfolds: "little things [... being] responsible for great effects" (Scribe 46). Although the climactic moment, or *scene à faire*, of the play rests on the

simple spilling of a glass of water, this small occurrence has great consequence; it is the final act that severs the relationship between the Queen and the Duchess (Scribe 92). Similarly, potential sets of *The Glass of Water* could have been made spectacular, or made to produce “great effects,” through attention to detail and the combination of “little things” (Scribe 46). The descriptions of the two locations in the script call for a “*beautiful, regal room, done in exquisite Queen Anne style*” (Scribe 35) and a “*simply but exquisitely furnished*” boudoir (Scribe 93). Because *pièce bien faite* plays were precursors to Realism, it is likely that these two rooms would have been furnished using antiquarianism (Brockett 375). It is these realistic, small details that scenic designers would have included in the furniture, curtains, doors, etc. that would have combined to create a beautifully dazzling set.

While modern, twenty-first century audiences would surely enjoy spectacular sets as well, it is not something that they necessarily demand or expect. Audiences today seem to be more invested in the story itself: is the plot engaging and are the characters entertaining? The plot of *The Glass of Water* would certainly engage a modern audience; attention spans in the twenty-first century are extremely short due to technology, but the fast-paced action and intriguing secrecy of the plot would hold their attention. As for characters, while Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy argue that *pièce bien faite* plays “sacrifice depth of characterization,” this does not seem to be the case in *The Glass of Water* (Brockett 375). Although some of the characters, such as the Queen, seem shallow and one-dimensional, there are many layers to the characters of the Duchess and of Bolingbroke. These two are enemies, and yet there is significant sexual tension between the two (Scribe 67), which culminates in kisses and slaps at the end of the play (Scribe 102). There is also a mutual respect present, despite the trickery and blackmail exchanged between the two, as

Bolingbroke comments on the Duchess's skillful "warfare" (Scribe 50), and, after admitting her defeat, the Duchess offers Bolingbroke her "deepest respects" (Scribe 102).

The Glass of Water truly is a well-made play. From a plot that captivates its audience, to surprisingly complex characters, to humorous and serious moments, to romance, it is not surprising that this play was so well-received in the nineteenth century and that it has survived to the present day. Scribe's talent as a playwright allowed him to create a play that can be enjoyed by many audiences, no matter what century they are from.

Works Cited

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