

Bennett's *The History Boys*: Unnoticed Ironies Lead to Critical Neglect

JOHN J. STINSON

Any one, or a combination of the following, may be the reason why Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* (2004) has received virtually no serious attention to date from academic critics: it's an unusual hybrid; it's middlebrow; its politics are dubious; it's hard to label; it has attractive surfaces but no depth; it's not sure about what it wants to say; and why should a seventy-year-old playwright make a breakthrough to genuine accomplishment? (Of course, these are only surmises based on some probabilities: no one has reason to write about why s/he has not written about the play.) The disparity between the effusive praise from newspaper and periodical critics on both sides of the Atlantic, and its neglect in the academy, is not an unprecedented phenomenon, but it is an interesting one nonetheless. Without any insinuation that this alone validates claims to genuine merit as dramatic literature, we might, purely observationally, note that the play won the Tony, the Drama Desk, the Olivier, the Outer Critics' Circle, and the London Critics' Circle awards for best play (July 13; "Royal Performance").

Excessive modesty on Bennett's part does not help his case with those critics who feel, legitimately enough, that it is their job to dig deep beneath surfaces. About his first play, *Forty Years On* (1967), a play set within a boys school, Bennett has written, "I listen to the BBC Critics. They all say it is very funny, but what it is about, what I am trying to do, is there a message? Nobody knows, and I certainly don't" (*Writing Home* 416). The general judgment of reviewers and literary journalists is that *The History Boys* (2004) is funny, endearing, and meaningfully serious, and that, indeed, this second play set in a boys school does have a message or messages. This time Bennett has

made no move to dissuade critics from the idea of 'message'; that is to say, no dissuasion outside the text of the play itself. The idea of reviewers generally, and, it seems, of most audiences, is that the message lies in an unequivocal endorsement of all save one or two of the ideas, teaching methods, attitudes, and sympathies of Hector, the charismatic teacher operating within a liberal humanist tradition. While this view of the play is not outlandish or hopelessly naïve, it does, despite the critics' beneficent intentions, deny the play much of its irony, nuance, dialectical force, and ideational density and compression.

Whatever the ultimate merit of *The History Boys* as a piece of dramatic literature, it has a much more complex and ironic structure than has been commented on to date, and it is, in fact, the skillfully embedded ironies that give the play a weight and depth that do indeed make it a respectable contribution to serious theater. The play's deep ironic structure not only saves it, unquestionably, from didacticism and sentimentality, but also, in my contention, makes it ideationally challenging and intellectually humorous. Failure to apprehend the full depth and extent of the irony within the play causes a significant depreciation of its worth as dramatic literature. If the irony goes unrecognized, the play then seems only to make the totally unsurprising point that substance and integrity are to be preferred to superficiality and expediency, and that there is no problem in distinguishing the genuine from the counterfeit. Critical neglect seems almost justified if, in fact, the play's intellectual content is as thin and dubious as all that.

The History Boys, a play full of performances of various kinds, is, in fact, a play about performance(s), including a bit of self-reflexivity as Bennett encourages us to interrogate his own performance in the writing of the play. People who begin to contemplate the meaning of this play sooner or later come to realize that it cannot simply be an endorsement of all that Hector seems to represent. At this point, though, they may meet, at least temporarily, a quandary. Assured critical judgments about any element of the play may seem at first to be in doubt because of questions about slippery and ambiguous per-

spectives and the extent of ironic dimensions. I hope to show, however, that the play is in fact remarkably cohesive: that Bennett is not only making a statement about modern relativism, but also causing his viewers/readers to recognize their own conflicting attitudes. With the performances in the play being pleasing and arresting, and the issues raised all being especially timely or timeless, Bennett has positioned himself well to make his thematic point. The correspondence between the play's form and its content has been carefully prepared.

Hector: An Ambiguous Hero

What can be said about Hector's ideas and his performance in the classroom? How do these figure within the conflict of the play? If Hector is, as he seems to be, the protagonist, what are the forces against which he must struggle? Are these forces fully represented by Irwin and the Headmaster? To what extent are audiences and readers encouraged to bring their own frames of reference to some highly vexed and fraught issues of our own moment in history? Does the author even suggest that his own frames of reference and shaping of materials are not necessarily the most reliable?

In Act Two the Headmaster (always capitalized in the play) has a brief but intense scene with Mrs. Lintott, the history teacher. He says,

Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher? It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He may very well be doing his job, but there is no method I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing. (67)

The Headmaster's words are, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, even more pertinent than in the early 1980s, the time in which the play is set. Honest though the Headmaster's remarks may be, teachers in the audience today, whether in the U.K. or the U.S., have had near-visceral reactions because of the issues he has raised. Most will immediately feel the oppressive weight of, as they perceive

it, a bloated bureaucracy that sits on them insistently, forcing compliance with niggling, ill-conceived regulations and a lock-step conformity. Terms like *standards, assessment, accountability, learning outcomes, and annual measurable objectives* seem to many more like weapons trained on them than just noun descriptors. The sheer topicality of such issues carries with it a punch and resonance it otherwise might not have, and many audience members, having, for example, already-formed attitudes about the troublesome ramifications of the No Child Left Behind Act in the U.S., find themselves ready to embrace Hector, a heroic rebel and maverick as they are prone, especially at first, to see him.

Hector's first entrance in Act One is onto an empty stage; Bennett provides these directions:

Though the general setting is a sixth-form classroom in a boys school in the eighties in the north of England, when Hector first comes in, a figure in motor-cycle leathers and helmet, the stage is empty.

His sixth formers, eight boys of seventeen or eighteen, come briskly on and take Hector out of his motor-cycle gear, each boy removing an item and as he does so presenting it to the audience with a flourish.

LOCKWOOD *(with gauntlets)* Les gants.

AKHTAR *(with a scarf)* L'écharpe.

RUDGE Le blouson d'aviateur.

Finally the helmet is removed.

TIMMS *Le casque.*

The taking off of the helmet reveals Hector (which is both his surname and his nickname) as a schoolmaster of fifty or so. (3-4)

This is a portentous entrance to be sure. It reveals the unity of the group and the boys' totally easy but respectful attitude toward their teacher, and David Denby is correct when he remarks that the young students' theatricality is a means toward self-realization (186-87). But, more than that, the stylized, nearly ceremonial quality of the scene suggests something heroic about Hector, even apart from his name's suggestion of the noble Trojan hero. The ritualistic quality makes the audience see Hector as something much like a medieval knight faithfully attended by his young squires after he has just ridden back within the castle walls following an adventure, the boys' naming each

article in French as they divest him of it, bringing perhaps the suggestion of French romance. Additionally, the boys' presentation of each item "to the audience with a flourish" (4) breaks the fourth wall and slyly encourages audience members to feel as one with this unified and happy group. In fact, the ritual we have witnessed, although brief, is of the kind termed a "rite of integration," designed to establish an emotional unity or community bond, in this case each of the boys with the others, and all of them with the audience (Trice 656-57). We get the feeling that Hector is lovable, laudable, and imposing.

With the large cast of characters and the number of ideas present in the play, we cannot expect any kind of in-depth characterization of Hector, or any of the other characters. What characterization we have, though, does suggest real flesh and blood, and even the blank spaces add to verisimilitude in that there is an unknowability about real people that we "know." Since this is a drama set in a classroom, some attention is drawn to teaching methods, objectives, cultural suppositions, societal assumptions, preconceived attitudes, and valorized opinions. As it is also an English play, there is the inevitable matter of social class, the resonance of which has been diminished in recent years, but by no means altogether eliminated.

Because Hector seems to be enclosed within an aura of approval adeptly set up and managed by Bennett, the audience is prepared to accept as "right" Hector's enjoinder to the boys that they abandon their ambitions (ignited by the Headmaster) of getting into Oxbridge, and instead set their sights on one of the civic or newer universities. Although Hector gives a theatrical emphasis (including a line from the mouth of Othello) to what he says, he is absolutely serious when he comments on Dakin's announcement that "We're all going in for Oxford or Cambridge" (6). Hector responds:

"Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire." I thought all that silliness was finished with. I thought that after last year we were settling for the less lustrous institutions ... Derby, Leicester, Nottingham. Even my own dear Sheffield. Scripps. You believe in God. Believe also in me: forget Oxford and Cambridge. (6)

The very few and quite vague hints we are given might lead us to suppose that the boys come (like Bennett himself¹) from lower middle class backgrounds. But, whether this or working class, consider the likely viewpoint of the boys' parents. Their sons have a chance of being admitted (and, later, we learn: more than just a chance; they are indeed all admitted) to Oxford or Cambridge. Oxbridge will probably provide for these boys a better chance at upward social and economic mobility than ever enjoyed by anyone else in their family. Hector actively and openly discourages them from thinking about Oxbridge. One might suppose he would be heartily in favor; the ancient universities were often thought to emphasize learning for its own sake while the newer universities were deemed to shift toward practical knowledge. What, then, causes his disapprobation?

Hector might well argue that some other British universities come close to Oxford or Cambridge in academic and overall excellence. 'Proof,' for or against this proposition, entails a long, complex, vexatious, and inconclusive argument that will serve no purpose to enter in here. We might, however, note that *The Times Higher Education Supplement* has annually been surveying "1,300 academics in 88 countries. They were asked to name the best institutions in the fields that they felt knowledgeable about." After a tabulating process the universities are placed in a ranked list of the "World's Best Universities." In 2006 Harvard was #1, Cambridge #2, Oxford #3, and Imperial College London, #9 ("World University"). There is no question that a certain degree of arbitrariness goes into such rankings, but they seem useful if only to provoke discussion. At the same time, aren't they complicit in the tendency to commodify everything, and is it this, perhaps, that Hector (whose exact political beliefs are unknown) deplures? But there may be another reason for Hector's dismissal of Oxbridge for his boys. We learn that Hector was a graduate of Sheffield (6), although, as he tells Mrs. Lintott (9), he tried for admission to Oxford. One may hypothesize that, consciously or subconsciously, Hector wants to avoid the blow to his ego that would occur if his boys were to surpass him, and, obviously, the ego of the

teacher/performer must be fed regularly and never denied. In his book *The Lessons of the Masters*, cited by Bennett in his "Acknowledgments" page (v), George Steiner contends that the Master never wants his students to surpass him (6). The master/disciple relationship, Steiner says, is firmly based on power, and he relates it to teaching in this way: "Teaching could be regarded as an exercise, open or concealed, in power relations. The Master possesses psychological, social, physical power" (4). Steiner's book can speak to the play in several ways; but Hector surely seems one of several characters in the play who are psychologically needy. Another way in which a combination of psychological need and abuse of power is seen is Hector's near-insistence that each day a different boy ride home from school with him on the back of his motorcycle while he "fiddles with" their genitals, surely an abuse of position and trust in today's world. That Hector is able to rationalize his groping of the boys is not unusual for a Bennett protagonist. As Duncan Wu (writing before the appearance of *The History Boys*) puts it: "Bennett's protagonists typically lack the awareness that would enable them to comprehend their foibles, and rectify the wrongs they inadvertently commit against others. Tunnel vision is their besetting sin, and it usually implies a more profound failure" (7).

Some audience members who are familiar with fictions, films, and plays about schools and teachers may put *The History Boys* in the pigeonhole of the 'great teacher' script, their choice likely dependent upon which other works within this category they are familiar with. A very partial list includes *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; *The Browning Version*; *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (the novel by Muriel Spark, as well as the play and film versions by Jay Presson Allen); *The Dead Poets Society*; *Dangerous Minds*. A sophisticated reader/viewer of *The History Boys* who sees no irony whatsoever in Bennett's representation of Hector is likely to see the play much in the way that Robert B. Heilman saw (in this case rightly, I would contend) *The Dead Poets Society*. Heilman's indictment of that film is that it's "old-fashioned melodrama gussied up to look like educational criticism. First you've got this guy on a

white horse charging in to save the place. So you need some black hats to make him look like a hero instead of a moral egotist" (417). In Heilman's judgment the teacher-hero, Keating, "has cast himself as the gutsy, charismatic, infallible, one-in-a-million guide against the system" (418), a "self-romanticizing egotist" (419): "[h]e alerts the young to circumambient evils and neglected truths while colleagues and administrators drudgingly stick to formalistic ruts. He hints that he has to pay a price. The role forced upon him tends to be the central one in the Passion Play. He struggles to push for truth but it is hard going against centurions, Pharisees, money changers in the temple and so forth" (419).

Viewers who find Keating wholly admirable will probably feel that Hector is nearly so too. Others, whose thoughts about Keating run along a track similar to Heilman's, may either find Hector a false and pretentious creation in a rather poor play, or they might find him an ironized figure in a play more subtly balanced than at first appears. The latter group would no doubt see the representation of Hector as a noble and formidable knight as an early and strategically placed indicator from the author that we must have serious reservations about him. The directions tell us that he is a man of "studied eccentricity" (4), suggesting, perhaps, a certain quotient of fakery in him. He is a teacher nearing retirement age² who begins to lose out to a much younger man (Irwin) in powerful sway over the boys (thus definitely vincible?), and who breaks down one day (65) and cries in class (a recognition of his own weaknesses or imposture resulting in pathos?). After a while, Hector may begin to seem something less than the repository of strength, wisdom, and virtue that he appeared to be at first. Some may be inclined to see Hector as a pitiable type, a homosexual who came to maturity in a U.K. where homosexual acts were still a crime, living now in a sham heterosexual marriage, as indicated by his telling the headmaster that his wife probably won't care at all about his fumbling with the boys (52).

If some audience members have few doubts about Hector while in the theater, they might find themselves confronting some upon later

reflection, perhaps after reading the play or reading a thoughtful commentary. This has been suggested by Nicholas Hytner, the director of both the stage and film versions of *The History Boys*:

On stage, the central argument can seem unfairly weighted in Hector's favour, as if there were no disputing Housman's dictum, quoted in Hector's first lesson, that "all knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use." The truth is that much of what Hector teaches is entirely self-indulgent, and his insistence on inflicting on his class the culture, high and low, of his own youth, is at least questionable. (*History Boys: the Film* xiii).

The last three words that I have quoted, i.e., "at least questionable," may seem to some both a bit of waffling and a tacit admission by Hytner that Bennett's play lacks clarity and logically supported development of argument. Such a judgment, though, rests on the supposition that *The History Boys* is, or should be, a drama of Shavian argument. With a good deal of redesign the play could be that, but it would then have a ponderousness that the present play, agile, well-paced, and multi-formed does not. Note that Hector and Irwin have only the most fleeting moments of direct verbal tilting. The audience is left to imagine the lines that a vigorous debate would take, and over which issues one man would score points over the other.

The Hector/Irwin Opposition

Irwin, no villain and no fool either, might, despite his youth, win a decision over Hector in a debating contest. Irwin is adept at 'performance,' at examinationship, at winning. But by no means should he be viewed as reprehensible, and Bennett does, in fact, allow Irwin, intellectually arrogant but psychologically vulnerable, to engage our sympathies. (Stephen Campbell Moore, portraying Irwin in London, New York, and on-screen, has won near-unanimous praise for his sensitive conveyance of this mixture.) Presently a supply teacher, he is a young man in hopes of a permanent job; at the outset

he is given a gruff and condescending greeting by the headmaster, and, yes, while his forte is technique for passing examinations, he mirrors in this the author himself. When Bennett was only seventeen, he had published in *The Owllet* magazine a playful piece titled "Examinationship (or the art of succeeding at examinations without actually cheating)" (Games 32). But, less than three years later, he put his examinationship skills to work not for public amusement but personal gain. Bennett writes in the "Introduction" to *The History Boys* that in preparing for a scholarship examination at Exeter College, Oxford (which he was to win), he arrived at some practical and effective techniques. For one, he

reduced everything I knew to a set of notes with answers to possible questions and odd, eye-catching quotations all written out on a series of forty or fifty correspondence cards, a handful of which I carried in my pocket wherever I went. (xxiii-xiv)

For another, he

also twigged what somebody ought to have taught me but never had, namely that there was a journalistic side to answering an examination question; that going for the wrong end of the stick was more attention-grabbing than a less unconventional approach, however balanced. Nobody had ever tutored me in examination techniques or conceded that such techniques existed, this omission I suspect to be put down to sheer snobbery or the notion (here ascribed to Hector) that all such considerations were practically indecent. (xv)

Hector closely adheres to the idealized picture of the great teacher in fiction, theatre, and film, and he plays that role steadily and, it seems, without change. Steadfast or, perhaps, stubborn, in his methods, he evinces a paradox: he is both flexible and unchanging. He appears never to have a lesson prepared, but rather 'wings it,' showing his flexibility, and this day-to-day classroom adaptability is an ego-enhancing practice he will not change. Irwin, on the other hand, is highly disciplined, goal oriented, mentally agile, and acutely intelligent, although also a bit of a fraud: he is not, as he had claimed (11), an Oxford graduate at all (99). An advocate of the expedient and

practicer of the pragmatic, Irwin might be the better of two very good, but differently accomplished teacher/performers.³

Whether Irwin's advice to the boys to enter an exam question by the back or side door is a "trick" or not, it does strongly encourage critical thinking and imagination, a gathering of informed perspective, and artfulness. Late in the play he explains to Dakin that "Thinking about what might have happened alerts you to the consequences of what did" (90). He is a kind of creator even if he is not quite innocent of the charge of having prostituted his talents, of practicing and abetting the cheap, the 'flash,' and the meretricious. But the text gives us enough reason to conclude that Bennett wishes his audience to ask themselves who has not made accommodations and compromises with the-world-as-it-is. Many American academics today find themselves doing something akin to what Irwin was hired to do: when, for example, it is found out that some of their best undergraduates have no idea of how to write an effective personal statement on a graduate school application, they find themselves providing practical hints or whole mini-courses of advice. Probably the way of the world was always thus; what is interesting is Bennett's manipulation of our sympathies and perceptions to make us think—if only temporarily—that we are on the side of an absolutist purity and truth that resides within Hector.

If members of the audience feel some degree of uncertainty about the methods, goals, and purposes of those three of the teachers whom we meet (let us now add Mrs. Lintott), so too do the boys eventually come to feel this. Early in the play Hector says to Mrs. Lintott (seemingly a caustically formidable woman in her dealings with the other teachers; in her history classroom a conventional teacher with a heavy emphasis on "fact," and in her function in the play something of a *raisonneur*) that "You give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it" (23). Hector says this in a lightly bantering way and Mrs. Lintott appears to take no offense, but Hector's egoistic self-regard for being a last bastion of the true and the good and his refusal to be a 'team player' surely makes him act in ways that pro-

duce some dissonance, cognitive and otherwise, in his students. When Hector and Irwin, at the Headmaster's order, jointly teach a class, the boys are discomfited and thrown off balance; they need to find out whose class it really is so that they can get their bearings and set the proper mode for their responses (70). Of course, this brings up another question: At what stage in the educational process are students ready, intellectually and emotionally, for sharply divergent approaches grounded in wholly different philosophies? And this is one of those places where, in rereading the play, we wonder to what extent the classroom is a microcosm of England or the Western world of today. Diverse views and histories pull strongly at us from all directions, and an historically unprecedented degree of readiness seems to be demanded of us in a world where change seems to come almost instantaneously. Ambiguity and undecideability are not terms that apply only to literary criticism or theory.

Various Kinds of Performances

Forty Years On, Bennett's first play, produced in 1968, is set "in a public school in the South Downs" (*Plays One* 27) and, as Bennett has written, and critics have noted from the first, "the school itself [is] a loose metaphor for England" (*Plays One*, "Introduction" 77). More to the previous point, however, much of the play consists of the school play that lies within the larger play. Bennett may have been ingenuous when he wrote in 1991 that "the form of *Forty Years On* is more complicated than I would dream of attempting now. It is a play within a play in which the time-scale of the first play gradually catches up with the time scale of the second, one cog the years 1900-1939, the other 1939-45, and both within the third wheel of the present day" (*Plays One* 9-10). But, in 2004, with *The History Boys*, Bennett recovered his daring. Here, we do not quite have a play within the play, but, richly and entertainingly, we have the inclusion of scenes enacted by the boys as well as other types of performance. The first scene of the

second act (58), set five years later than that of the main action, shows a crippled Irwin, now a popular historian, delivering, from his wheelchair, his own slick script for the cameras filming a TV documentary series that is, according to Bennett in his "A Note on the First Production," titled *Heroes or Villains?* (xxix). That question mark is telling. In its pointing toward subjectivities and ambiguities of interpretation, the play is involving us thoroughly with questions about our guiding philosophies, epistemologies, and cultural foundations as they give rise to, or collide with, a current worldview, and that this questioning itself is the point.

Many other 'performances' are also present, intelligently dispersed throughout the play, giving it the buoyancy and humor that have delighted audiences, which is obviously a carry-over from Bennett's early days of comic sketch and revue writing. The longest 'performance' within the play is the brothel scene, in French, improvised by the boys in Hector's class. When the Headmaster and the newly-hired Irwin unexpectedly enter the room and find the handsome young student Dakin without his pants on, Hector, quick off the mark, says that Dakin is playing the part of a wounded soldier (not a customer in a bordello). Ideas of prostitution, false representation, self-deception, and inappropriateness—important motifs in the larger play—are presented to the audience in this comically memorable and successful scene that may both produce some subliminal reverberations and provide a bit of foreshadowing. Memorable too are the several scenes in which the students play an identification/guessing game designed by Hector. The boys perform scenes from films, sometimes with song and piano accompaniment; the films are usually from the 1940s and are generally melodramatic even if also of some artistic value. Hector must name the film. There may be a suggestion here that Hector (very much a classroom performer in his own way) has a penchant for theatricality because he comes from an age in which gay men had, of necessity, to act and pretend in their everyday lives. Irwin, a somewhat shy gay man still in the closet, also transforms himself in the classroom and performs his role of superior intellectual wit, replete

with insult and condescension, in a way that is assured and arresting in its arrogance. Whether Hector's and Irwin's propensities for classroom performance are in any way connected with their sexual orientation is uncertain, but Alan Sinfield has noted that

An essential link between homosexuality and theater is sometimes proposed but the project eludes precise definition. Kenneth Plummer argues that while all people play social roles, homosexuals are likely to be aware of 'passing,' 'presenting a self,' 'keeping up an act'; hence they have dramaturgical consciousness [...]. More often and in contradistinction to the 'passing' theory [of Plummer and others], homosexuals are simply supposed to be histrionic, flamboyant [...] one way of dealing with stigma. (43)

Irwin's style of presentation is twice referred to in the play as "meretricious," once by Irwin himself as he briefly talks with Posner (60) during the outdoor filming of his TV documentary (the proleptic scene in which we learn that Posner's life has turned out unhappily). It is unclear whether Irwin is simply acknowledging that he knew this was the view of the boys five years before when they were his students—Dakin said to him then, "We decided, sir, you were meretricious but not disingenuous" (75)—or whether he is confessing that he is indeed meretricious. There are more ironies and a puzzle, though, connected with this meeting with Posner five years in the future. It is now Posner who is deceptive and meretricious in hopes of making a bit of money from a scandal sheet: he has a concealed microphone on his person in an effort to record something that the now-famous Irwin might say about a relationship with Dakin in the past. Consider, though, this oddity. There are three basically homosexual men in the play: Hector, Irwin, and Posner. Posner, like the other two, is a performer; thrice we hear him sing in the classroom (12, 79, 106). And Posner, like them, is made to suffer. Hector is killed in the motorcycle accident in which Irwin is crippled for life; and Posner, those five years later, is the loneliest and most troubled of the former students. He "lives alone in a cottage he has renovated himself, has an allotment and periodic breakdowns [...] He has long since stopped asking himself where it went wrong" (108).

The Ending and Its Attendant Ambiguities

Whatever the reason might be for Bennett's meting out misfortune to his gay characters, he (and/or his director, Nicholas Hytner, listed as co-author of the film adaptation from the play) withdraws a good deal of the misery in the film version. Here, the most serious injury that Irwin appears to have suffered in the motorcycle accident is a broken leg (although Hector remains killed). The last time we see Irwin (*The Film* 106), he is walking easily, without wheelchair or crutches. And in the film scene corresponding to the one in the play version that represents Posner as a tortured, maladjusted loner, we have him, at a class reunion, say in answer to Mrs. Lintott's question to each of the former students as to what they are doing now, "Slightly to my surprise, I've ended up like you, a teacher. I'm a bit of a stock figure ... I do a wonderful school play for instance ... and though I never touch the boys, it's always a struggle, but maybe that's why I'm a good teacher. I'm not happy, but I'm not unhappy about it" (*The Film* 107, ellipsis marks in the original). Some may see here (more particularly in the stage version) what they think is the author's sadly retrograde attitude about sexual orientation, one involving some self-loathing on the part of the homosexual author himself (Bennett seems never to use the term "gay"). Whether Bennett intends any irony here, and if so, how it is directed, are questions that lead only to speculations of dubious value.⁴

The largest question as regards the ending is whether Hector's death and Irwin's crippling have any interpretable meaning. Does it have some logical integrity within the overall structure of the play? Or must we be forced to conclude that it is a melodramatic contrivance, a 'cheesy' ending by an author said, not entirely unfairly, to have difficulties with endings, or, as Stephen Schiff has said, with plot in general (97)? Are there convincing ways to defend the ending? Are thematic ironies at work again? Judgments about what constitutes success or 'success,' about what being 'true' to oneself means, or what it is that makes for a happy and fulfilled life are, of course, relative to

individuals, here both the characters in the play and the members of the audience. So, even the question whether the play ends happily or unhappily for the gay characters is an open one. We can note that Irwin enjoys astonishing success with what he was hired to do (all of the “history boys,” eight out of eight, gain entrance to Oxford or Cambridge), and Irwin himself goes on to a very successful, albeit possibly meretricious, career as a TV presenter, his success abetted, he thinks (60), by his wheelchair. But what of Hector? It can be argued that Hector achieves his foremost wish; at least if we accept the judgment of Mrs. Lintott, who says to Irwin, “Forgive Hector. He is trying to be the kind of teacher people will remember. Someone they will look back on. He impinges” (50). Whether or not Mrs. Lintott offers, here and elsewhere, a validly objective view of Hector (I think she does), it has to be said that Hector’s longtime teaching performance was successful in the eyes of the boys (even if they had begun to come more heavily under the sway of Irwin), and that his consuming desire to be remembered has been fulfilled. His sudden and dramatic death certainly aids in this. He gets, from the grave, the last lines of the play, right after receiving the testimony of Scripps about his [Hector’s] type of education: “Love apart, it is the only education worth having” (109). Hector’s lines, “Pass it on, boys. / That’s the game I wanted you to learn. / Pass it on” (109), precisely because they are the last words of the play, appear to provide a strong ratification of Hector—that he did indeed have something well worth passing on.⁵ It is, then, of the three homosexual men, only the ending for Posner that is unrelievedly (and poignantly) sad.

Does the ending have some simple, interpretable meaning? The evidence strongly suggests that it does not. The simple formulation that Hector must die on his motorcycle because of the clear association with his *hamartia* (his sexual groping of the boys), is naïve in its simplicity. Besides, the play is definitely not a tragedy. To say that Hector must die⁶ because the values and philosophy for which he stands have been superseded by the crippled and crippling values symbolized by the now-paralyzed but soon-to-be influential Irwin has some plausi-

bility, but this jarring intrusion of the symbolic into the realm of day-to-day realism seems strained.

A variant and extension of this theory resides in the idea that the play can achieve significance only if Hector (again seen as the protagonist) dies by some conscious choice, rather than by accident. Support of a kind for this idea is given by the character Kafka in Bennett's play *The Insurance Man* when he says, "Accidents as we well know, are never an accident" (*Plays Two* 155). In this theory the motorcycle crash is seen as suicide and attempted murder. Hector, feeling that he and what he represents have been conquered by Irwin and all that is represented by him, decides that physical death is preferable to the spiritual one that he would otherwise suffer. Detesting the newly dominant ethos embodied in Irwin, Hector attempts to take him with him. A few supporting lines of evidence may be found for this theory, but, mostly, it is not sufficiently convincing. Bennett is not quite interested in psychological realism or naturalistic representation in the play. Too much argues for the simple acceptance of the accident theory, particularly if we see it as just the culmination of Hector's personal history, and we keep in mind Rudge's dictum (not really original with him) that "history is just one fucking thing after another" (85), or Mrs. Lintott's conclusion about "the utter randomness of things" (93). Besides, Hector shows no sign of personal animus toward Irwin; rather he treats him with respect and offers him understanding and kindly advice. Ironically, perhaps, we must conclude that Mrs. Lintott's randomness theory is as convincing as any other. Hector outlived his time, a long age in which absolute values were thought not only to exist, but to have a good chance of prevailing. He leaves a new world where randomness and relativism hold sway.

"Maybe this was irony"

Irony, ambivalence, and paradox are rampant in the play, giving it its intellectual texture and largely supplanting any emotional compo-

ment. Why we can still enjoy the play as much as we do, is a most useful but not easily answerable question. Peter Wolfe, writing before *The History Boys* was ever performed, briefly alluded to Bennett's use of Brechtian, metatheatrical, or postmodernist techniques (29). Does he, in *The History Boys*, deny the audience the opportunity for much emotional connection or response because he wants his audiences' minds alert, not for instruction, but for the beginning of intellectual contemplation incited by ambivalences and ironies?

Layers of irony are present in *The History Boys* in ways not always easily discernible. Bennett does, though, provide a few clues. Most significantly, perhaps, he employs a metatheatrical device to draw attention to his own artifice. In Act II Mrs. Lintott, left briefly alone on stage, turns directly to the audience and says, "I have not hitherto been allotted an inner voice, my role a patient and not unamused sufferance of the predilections and preoccupations of men. They kick their particular stone and I watch" (68). At other points Scripps and Posner serve as one-man choruses. Amidst all the many performances that we have been watching, we are now reminded that we are watching another one, that of the author writing the play. Implicitly we recognize that his performance may, like all the others in the play, be called into question. Does Mrs. Lintott, in her brief address to the audience, not make a valid point? Note all the authors mentioned, by either Hector or the boys, in his classroom: A. E. Housman, Philip Larkin, W. H. Auden, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rudyard Kipling, Franz Kafka, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Stevie Smith, T. S. Eliot, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, Shakespeare, Marcel Proust, Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Storey, Jean-Paul Sartre, George Orwell. Only one of these, Stevie Smith, is female and she chose to change her name from Florence Margaret Smith. Women writers, then, are definitely scanted, although gay and bisexual writers are perfectly adequately represented.⁷ Admittedly, the near-total maleness of this list (and its total whiteness) may not have attracted much attention as recently as even forty years ago, but Bennett is surely aware of its distinctively old-fashioned quality today, and it

serves as one more example of the subtly ironic representation of Hector. Interestingly, Virginia Woolf does happen to be mentioned, but this occurs when Dakin, talking with Scripps and Posner outside of class, describes the room he stayed in at Oxford while taking his entrance examinations. The regular resident had “an Arsenal [English football team] scarf draped around a photograph of Virginia Woolf, only I think maybe this was irony” (96). The last phrase—“I think maybe this was irony”—is a notable one because it seems slyly self-referential: as suggested earlier, anyone paying careful attention to the play has to wonder where Bennett's own irony begins and ends. The phrase might well provide an authorial alert for viewer and reader to be on the lookout for irony.

Bennett has a well-known relationship with ambivalence. Kara McKechnie, writing just before the appearance of *The History Boys*, saw it as the necessary form of tension in much of his oeuvre: “In Bennett's work, close observation often results in ambivalence. He has effectively presented himself as politically left-wing, socially right-wing, and a strong sense of being in two minds runs through his whole body of work [...]. This sense of ambivalence provides the crucial tension within Bennett's work” (McKechnie, *DLB*). This ambivalence is made explicit (with functionality and humor) in *The Lady in the Van*, a largely non-fictional play. Two characters (played by two different actors) named “Alan Bennett” appear on stage, often together, with Alan Bennett 1 facing off against Alan Bennett 2 (as they are referred to by the author) with digs, insinuations, and opposed points of view. And a character in the play called Pauline tells one of the Bennetts that she saw a “particularly perceptive review about you.” Bennett responds, “Really? Saying what?” Pauline replies, “That you couldn't make your mind up.” “What about?” asks Bennett. Pauline says, “Anything really. It meant in a good way” (56-57).

Bennett clearly has a nostalgia for a time past in which people were generally inclined to believe in many absolutes, and he seems to feel that many in his audience will share a sense of longing for a world now past. However, he is clearly aware that the door cannot be

slammed and held shut against the intrusions of the present, and that no one should try. Hector literally locks his classroom door, and Irwin asks the boys why he does this. Despite their respect, and even affection for Hector, each gives a humorously satiric response that shows their sophisticated and balanced judgment. Lockwood answers, "It's locked against the Forces of Progress, sir" (36). Crowther adds, "The spectre of Modernity" (36). And Akthar puts in, "It's locked against the future, sir" (36). Hector is thus the target here of some gentle and genial satire on the part of the boys and also on the part of the author himself. The nostalgia is real and is sometimes given an elegiac feel, but it is accompanied by today's recognition that this old world, seemingly so innocent, was complicit, sometimes consciously, often only vaguely, in various types of oppressiveness and unfairness, if not blatant and outrageous injustice. That it should be the homosexual Hector who seems least inclined to see yesterday's shortcomings is ironic, but in the full context of the play quite believable; another attestation to its emotional complexity.

Much the same sort of attitude prevails in *Forty Years On*. Daphne Turner is exactly right when she says of this play, "If Bennett knows that the England of 1914 deserved to die and did, the Romantic tug toward it goes deep and has to be resisted" ("North and South" 562). So while Bennett does seem to give us a character who is nostalgic for what he thought a better time, Bennett desists from sentimentalizing Hector himself. Joseph O'Mealy, writing in 2001, saw Bennett as "a writer who refuses to sentimentalize his characters by exempting them from his satiric scrutiny" (157). Hector does not avoid the satiric searchlight; Mrs. Lintott, his friend, shows herself capable of training it on him rather easily (*History Boys* 50, 69, 95).

Bennett is never heavy and never dull. His work is characterized by a kind of classical lightness and ease, a sense of never trying too hard or being too insistent. One manifestation of this is the ease with which he blends what used to be called "high culture" with "popular culture" or "mass culture." In fact, he was just slightly ahead of his time with his untroubled combination of the two; it was not really until the

arrival of "cultural studies" that this false binary was broken down. Like Stoppard, Bennett flatters his audience with a seeming assumption that they have a rather thorough knowledge of various levels of culture. Also noteworthy is the fact that Hector and Irwin, teachers with antithetical philosophies, both find a place for popular film (although, in both cases, films of the past). Hector plays, a few times each day, it seems, the film scene identification game, and Irwin advises Rudge (33) to get acquainted with the "Carry On" films (a long-running series of low budget films featuring slapstick and parody).

Irwin and Bennett Himself: Ironic Similarities

An additional reason for the play's success is connected with another bit of self-reflexivity, namely, that the advice that the seemingly amoral Irwin gives to the boys is essentially the same, very useful as it turns out, advice that Bennett gave himself in writing the play. This is a prime irony, of course, especially since Irwin initially might seem to come near to being the villain of the play:

1. Remember Irwin's advice to the boys about "useful gobbets" (48) and eye-catching quotations, and then consider how much of the play's ambiance and intellectual flavor, its aesthetic feel, is provided by quotations from poets and philosophers.
2. Recall Irwin's admonition to the students that they must hold nothing back that could be to their advantage on the Oxbridge exams (38-39), and then note how Bennett was not above relying on and revealing something of his own self both in the play and his introduction to it: that, like Scripps, he was a very religious adolescent who thought he would probably take Holy Orders (x, xiv); that, like Posner (although Bennett was then a bit older), he was hopelessly in love with another male student (xiv), and that, as with Posner, puberty came late (*Untold Stories* 130); that, like Irwin, Bennett had devised his own "flash" method for succeeding on ex-

ams, especially in history, and that it worked (xv-xvi); that, like Irwin, Bennett, during some teaching stints at Oxford after receiving his degree, “did at least try and teach my pupils the technique of answering essay questions and the strategy for passing examinations—techniques which I’d had to discover for myself and in the nick of time: journalism, in fact” (xvii). Bennett holds back little, even if it is sensitive or embarrassing, that is to the artistic advantage of the play.

3. Irwin teaches the boys how to get and hold examiners’ attention by turning some usual concepts or understandings inside out or upside down, and by teasing and beguiling the reader through irony and paradox. Note how Bennett manoeuvres the reader toward thinking Hector is a hero of sorts, then soon after something close to an old pervert, and then back toward a basically good but flawed man, and probably a fairly accomplished teacher. Most of all, the idea of a molester of boys being held up for an audience as an admirable figure is certainly a twist on what might be expected. The extent and final destination of Bennett’s irony is debatable (I conclude that the ironized figure of Hector is only qualifiedly admirable), but, in any case, the apparent approval of the near-pederastic Hector provides a twist that gets audiences’ attention.
4. Irwin, the pseudo-villain, advises Rudge that it will be a good tactic for him to get some acquaintance with popular culture through the “Carry On” films; Bennett, through the tactic of Hector’s movie identification game, involves the audience in a kind of play that pleasantly tests their own knowledge of popular culture.
5. In his professional life Irwin is all about presentation, performance, and polish. “History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It’s a performance,” he says (35). In his introduction to *The History Boys*, Bennett maintains that the reason some students excel on examinations is that “doing well on examinations is what they do well; they can *put on a show*” (xxiii, my emphasis). Later in the introduction Bennett says he came to realize “that teaching history or teaching the self-presentation involved with the examination of

history was not unrelated to presentation in general" (xxv). People like Irwin, then, are showmen—they "put on a show." They are skilled and polished in their craft of self-presentation. The plaudits that Bennett, a professional showman, has won with *The History Boys* are due to polished craftsmanship, an unerring sense of pace, a sure balance of disparate types of material, and an unusual approach—in short, the manner of presentation is more important than the content. Some readers or viewers, feeling this is a 'play of ideas,' might find the play somewhat deficient because the ideas are shallow or underdeveloped, 'tricked up,' or, in Dakin's term, a bit "flash." Is Bennett, through his presentation of Irwin, confessing his own limitations, and also confessing that Irwin had his origins, and now has his continuance, in Bennett's own self? Or does the very form of the play, with its quick, unrelenting, and criss-crossing ironies, the final destination point of which is arguable or uncertain, prove its thematic idea about the inevitable triumph of relativism?

Shy in personal encounters, Bennett is, in his writing, possessed of the easy confidence and professional assuredness said to characterize the Oxford graduate, which Bennett, unlike both Irwin and Hector, is. Like virtually all his other plays, *The History Boys* is meticulously crafted, with irony figuring in the plan even more heavily and integrally than it usually does for this author celebrated for irony. By and large, the irony is quite successful here, although even sophisticated audiences can debate, at times, its purpose and limits. Less sophisticated audiences may be puzzled, or even oblivious of its presence. Ben Brantley, writing in the *New York Times* several years before *The History Boys*, was fully aware and appreciative of Bennett's irony, but somewhat apprehensive that it might not serve him all that well in America:

Irony, a particularly gentle variety that by no means excludes compassion, is Mr. Bennett's element, and it is an anomaly in a country [the USA] where audiences prefer their drama writ large and confessional and their comedy

on the knee-slapping side. Even in his native England, Mr. Bennett is perceived as unusually oblique. (14)

Irony and paradox are common in Bennett plays, even if not deployed quite so heavily as in *The History Boys*. It is quite different, though, from his plays in general, except for *Forty Years On*. Think of the fast pace, the exuberance of character and of speech, the general vitality and intellectual energy of the rather extraordinary characters in *The History Boys*, contrasted with Bennett's more usual characters, with "the banality of their speech" and "plebian ordinariness" (Cattling 28). Whether British or American reviewers traced it all to successful ironies or not, the great majority bestowed abundant praise on the play, some seeming to equate it with a quite different kind of play, Kushner's socially-committed *Angels in America*, a means of salvation for the serious theater. Some may say that Bennett, using the 'Irwin side' of himself, found a winning formula for filling seats in the non-musical theater. Others may say that, as with Irwin, there is something fake and "flash" about this play so successfully hyped in middle-class media. Neither fakery nor shallowness, though, should be necessarily equated with stylistic polish, a smooth veneer, and skillful integration of disparate elements. Humor, 'performance,' debate, dialectic, and even bits of melodrama and didacticism are made to work together with calculated and effective smoothness throughout this play. As produced by the National Theatre, it has become a theatrical phenomenon. The play has enough complexity and intricacy to allow productive academic discussion; it is surprising that university English and theater departments have, at least in print, been silent to this point.

SUNY Fredonia
Fredonia, New York

NOTES

¹Bennett's father was a butcher in Leeds as we learn in the first paragraph (3) of his *Writing Home*. This first section of this book, "Past and Present," contains some selective and finely styled evocations of the author's early life.

²Ambiguity exists regarding Hector's age. In the play's first scene the directions tell us that he is "a schoolmaster of fifty or so" (4). Later, though, when talking with Posner about Hardy's "Drummer Hodge," Hector responds to Posner's question about how old Hardy was when he wrote the poem by saying, "about sixty. My age, I suppose" (55). It is possible that this is one of several intentional ambiguities concerning Hector.

³It seems that only one reviewer has sharp, and, as he has framed them, sensible objections to all three teachers: Hector, Irwin, and Mrs. Lintott. Warren Goldstein, a professor of history writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, asks, "How does a theatergoer turn to his friends, their faces aglow with pleasure, and suggest that the play was great fun, but that its portrayal of history, history education, and historical practice was not only incorrect, but deeply damaging to public conceptions of what he does for a living?" (B11).

⁴Bennett has customarily been discreetly taciturn about his sexual preference. When the actor Ian McKellan asked Bennett publicly at an AIDS benefit whether he was homosexual or heterosexual, Bennett very artfully dodged the question (Games 194). It was a surprise when Bennett, talking with Stephen Schiff, who was writing a piece on him for *The New Yorker*, revealed that in the late 1970s he had had an affair with Anne Davies, "the darkly attractive woman who had been doing his housecleaning" (Schiff 95-96). The evidence seems almost conclusive, though, that this was a stratagem of Bennett's by which he "had managed to reveal that he was gay [...] but only as a byproduct of his relationship with Anne" (Games 252). In his *Untold Stories* (2005), Bennett writes about being a victim, along with a male friend, of an unprovoked physical attack by several young Italian males on a lonely street in an Italian town at night. He writes of this friend, "I am not sure I would have called him my partner, or indeed known what to call him, though partners is what we are now" (562).

⁵Despite his mock-heroic introduction where Hector appears knight-like, maybe a Don Quixote-like figure, he should probably not be seen as fatuous or, like Jean Brodie, dangerous. Leopold Bloom, most famous of twentieth-century alienated men, is not Ulysses, but his generosity of spirit, his thoughtfulness, and his overall humanity are pronounced and worthy of respect.

⁶When I use phrases such as "some may say," I am not entirely giving way to invention. In fact, because of the absence of analytic commentary in print, I am recalling the comments, always interesting, and often very incisive, of students in two sections of my Modern British Literature classes at SUNY Fredonia, to whom I express my gratitude. *The History Boys* was on the list of assigned readings.

⁷A poem of Frances Cornford is partially quoted, but her name is never cited.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Jay Presson. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie: A Drama in Three Acts*. Adapted from the Novel by Muriel Spark. New York: Samuel French, 1969.
- Bennett, Alan. *The History Boys*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2004.
- . *The Lady in the Van*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.
- . *Plays One: Forty Years On, Getting On, Habeas Corpus, and Enjoy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- . *Plays Two: Kafka's Dick, The Insurance Man, The Old Country, An Englishman Abroad, and A Question of Attribution*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- . *Untold Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005.
- . *Writing Home*. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Bennett, Alan, and Nicholas Hytner. *The History Boys: The Film*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2006.
- Brantley, Ben. "Swimming in Irony." *New York Times Book Review* 1 October 1995: 13-14.
- The Browning Version*. Screenplay by Terence Rattigan. Dir. Anthony Asquith. Perf. Michael Redgrave. Javelin Films, 1951.
- Catling, Patrick Skene. "O Uncommon Alan Bennett." *Spectator* 260 (2 April 1988): 27-28.
- Dangerous Minds*. Dir. John N. Smith. Perf. Michelle Pfeiffer. Hollywood Pictures, 1995.
- The Dead Poets Society*. Dir. Peter Weir. Perf. Robin Williams, Ethan Hawke. Touchstone Pictures, 1989.
- Denby, David. "Liberal Education." *New Yorker* 27 November 2006: 185-87.
- Games, Alexander. *Backing into the Limelight: The Biography of Alan Bennett*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 2002.
- Goldstein, Warren. "On the Stage, History Belittled. (*The History Boys*: Theater review)." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.2 (1 September 2006): B1.
- Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Based on the novel by James Hilton. Dir. Sam Wood. Perf. Robert Donat, Greer Garson, John Mills. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer British Studios, 1939.
- Heilman, Robert B. "The Great-Teacher Myth." *American Scholar* 60.3 (1991): 417-23.
- The History Boys*. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Perf. Richard Griffiths, Frances de la Tour, Stephen Campbell Moore. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006.
- Jury, Louise. "Triumph for Alan Bennett as 'History Boys' Wins Six Tonys and Equals 50-Year Record." *The Independent* (London) 13 June 2006, first ed.: 13.
- McKechnie, Kara. "Alan Bennett." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. 2005. Thomson Gale. SUNY Fredonia Lib. 3 May 2007 <<http://galenet.galegroup.com>>.
- O'Mealy, Joseph H. *Alan Bennett: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

- The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Dir. Ronald Neame. Perf. Maggie Smith. Twentieth-Century Fox, 1969.
- Schiff, Stephen. "The Poet of Embarrassment." *The New Yorker* 6 September 1993: 92-101.
- Sinfield, Alan. "Private Lives: Public Theater: Noel Coward and the Politics of Homosexual Representation." *Representations* 36 (1991): 43-63.
- Spark, Muriel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999.
- Steiner, George. *The Lessons of the Masters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003.
- Trice, Harrison M., and Janice M. Beyer. "Studying Organizational Cultures through Rites and Ceremonials." *Academy of Management Review* 9 (1984): 653-69.
- Turner, Daphne. *Alan Bennett: In a Manner of Speaking*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.
- . "North and South: Two Landscapes of Alan Bennett." *Modern Drama* 37 (1994): 551-67.
- Wolfe, Peter. *Understanding Alan Bennett*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999.
- "World University Rankings." *Times Higher Education Supplement: 2007*. 9 November 2007. n.p. 21 February 2008 <www.thes.co.uk/worldrankings>.
- Wu, Duncan. *Six Contemporary Playwrights*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1995.