

Draft. For definitive version, see *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 43 (fall 2009), 37-50.

Theatrical Performances and the Works Performed

Sherri Irvin

James Hamilton's *The Art of Theater* is an outstanding contribution to aesthetics that fills an important gap, since treatments of theater have been much less frequent than those of other art forms.¹ Moreover, the book's appearance requires aestheticians of many stripes to engage with questions about theater, because it raises issues of ontology, interpretation and appreciation that are relevant to our understanding of works in all art forms.

Hamilton offers a spirited and convincing defense of the claim that theatrical performance is an art form eventuating in performances that are artworks in their own right. Against the type-token model widely accepted in aesthetics, which suggests that the typical theatrical performance is a token of a play-type initiated either by the writing of a text or by an originary performance, Hamilton advocates the *ingredients model*. According to this model, every theatrical performance is composed of a variety of ingredients, which may or may not include a relation to some script, literary text or earlier performance. Since a theatrical performance may be a one-off event with no particular relation to any earlier text or performance, Hamilton observes, it cannot be necessary that a performance be *of* some other work. Moreover, on the ingredients model no theatrical performance is ever a performance of some other work. Even if it does draw on or incorporate elements of some text or earlier performance, it may do so quite loosely; and in any case, the relation to some pre-existing entity is merely one ingredient among others. Since the nature of a theatrical performance is always vastly underdetermined by appeal to a text or originary performance on which it draws, the unique ingredients introduced by a

particular company are always of tremendous aesthetic significance. For this reason, Hamilton suggests, it would be both unduly trivializing and misleading to subordinate the performance to some other artwork by saying that the performance is of that other work. He thus advances what I will term the *complete autonomy thesis*, according to which no theatrical performance is a performance *of* some other work. As Hamilton acknowledges, it is a consequence of his view that “there simply is no theatrical mode of presentation of works of dramatic literature: as works of dramatic literature they are *only* texts to be read.”²

I agree with many of Hamilton’s central claims. Hamilton’s discussion demonstrates convincingly that theatrical performance is an art form in its own right, not simply a quasi-artistic activity that is derivative from some other art form like dramatic literature. For this reason, theoretical analysis of the practices of appreciation and interpretation that are proper to theatrical performance is long overdue. I also agree that in typical cases of professional or serious amateur performance, the performers introduce elements that are highly aesthetically significant, and their performances should be thought of as artworks in their own right. Moreover, Hamilton is surely right to point out that a theatrical performance may be independent of any previously existing artwork, or may bear such a loose relation to another work (such as a dramatic literary text) that to say it is a performance *of* that work would be quite implausible.

However, I do not think that Hamilton succeeds in making the case for the complete autonomy thesis, or the view that no performance is a performance of any other work. I will argue that this thesis should be rejected. Relatedly, I deny Hamilton’s claim that works of dramatic literature lack a “theatrical mode of presentation.” I will suggest that the aesthetic appreciation of both theatrical performances and works of dramatic literature is best facilitated by acknowledging that the former are sometimes performances of the latter. Ultimately, though, I do

not think this is devastating to Hamilton's overall project: he does not need to defend the complete autonomy thesis, or its correlate about dramatic literature, in order to make his case for theatrical performance as a highly significant art form in its own right.

The complete autonomy thesis

Hamilton offers three primary reasons for denying that a theatrical performance is ever of some other work. First, he thinks that when we describe a performance as *of* some other work, we illegitimately disqualify it from being a work in its own right or, at least, from having much significance when considered as an artwork. Second, as Hamilton's examples show, some performances clearly are not performances *of* any work, though they may be inspired by or based on a literary text in some respects. Thus, if we wish to have a unified account of theatrical performance, the model that treats performances as being of literary works must be rejected. Third, Hamilton thinks that the whole concept of "of-ness" is problematic, because in order to establish that a performance is *of* some work we would have to show that it is sufficiently faithful to the work, but the prospects for a workable account of fidelity in relation to theatrical performance are dim. I will consider these reasons in turn and argue that they are not, in fact, sufficient to warrant the complete autonomy thesis.

Hamilton's first reason for the complete autonomy has to do with concerns about the aesthetic trivialization of performance. If we say that a theatrical performance is a performance of some other work, Hamilton suggests, this implies that it is derivative of that other work. If this does not disqualify the performance from artwork status altogether, at the very least it suggests that the aesthetic significance the performance possesses in its own right must be limited. Now, on a certain naïve understanding of theatrical performance, this sort of trivialization might seem appropriate. If theatrical performance were simply a matter of faithfully

reciting dialogue and executing stage directions indicated by a playwright, then it would be reasonable to regard both the activity of performance and the resulting performances themselves as entirely derivative.

As Hamilton persuasively argues, though, the naïve understanding is badly mistaken. First of all, the traditions of theatrical performance impose no general requirement that the dialogue or stage directions indicated within some existing script be precisely followed. It has long been recognized that the company has significant leeway to modify the elements indicated in the script in order to achieve a desired artistic effect. Moreover, the avant-garde practices of contemporary theater allow that the company may diverge from the script quite dramatically. Hamilton describes a class of performances he calls *Pistols and Other Doors*, in preparation for which “[a] company lists all the sentences and sentence fragments in *Hedda Gabler*, numbers them, and then selects the order of their appearance in the text using some randomizing technique,” with a subsequent stage of editing to bring out certain aesthetic effects.³ The resulting performances, while drawing extensively upon elements of Ibsen’s work, nonetheless exhibit a high degree of aesthetic autonomy from it: they will possess aesthetic properties never dreamed of by Ibsen.

Ultimately, though, appeal to avant-garde practices is not even required to make the case that theatrical performance has non-derivative aesthetic significance. Even a detailed script that is followed to the letter vastly underdetermines the nature of the resulting theatrical performance: the aesthetic qualities of the performance will depend on an extensive array of decisions by the company about such matters as dialogue delivery, the physicality of individual characters, set and lighting design, and movement around the set. The notion that a performance must be aesthetically trivial or derivative, then, is incorrect even when a pre-existing script is closely followed.

Hamilton's case for the aesthetic significance of performance is a solid one, and any view that is unable to account for this significance must, I agree, be rejected. But does the view that there are such things as performances of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in fact condemn all such performances to aesthetic triviality, and perhaps deprive them of any claim to artwork status? I don't see that it does. In the case of music, people sometimes think of the situation as follows: a relatively conventional performance, which treats the original score as a strong constraint and does not add much to performance possibilities for the work that have already been explored in the past, does not constitute or generate a new artwork, since it is largely aesthetically trivial or derivative. However, a performance that does involve a significantly new interpretation of the underlying musical work may well be thought of as constituting or generating a new work. So, while performances of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* by casual amateur pianists typically have not generated new artworks, Glenn Gould's performance practices, because they involved a fresh and new presentation, did generate (at least one) new artwork.⁴ Because of the great accomplishment exhibited in Gould's performances, they may be thought of as artworks of very high quality.

On this sort of account, not all musical performances constitute or generate artworks, since some are excessively derivative. Students just learning to play their instruments, for instance, are unlikely to generate new artworks through their performances. One might think that the situation in theatrical performance is different, for reasons I described above: each theatrical performance involves a vast array of choices about matters that are not settled by script, tradition or theatrical convention.⁵ In consequence, one might want to say that every theatrical performance, unlike every musical performance, is an artwork in its own right (or, if we wish to avoid a multiplication of artworks, that each production gives rise to a new artwork-type, and that each performance within the production is a token of

that artwork-type).⁶ Even so, I don't see that we are forced to deny that the performance may be a performance of some other work, while also being an artwork in its own right. As far as I can see, there is nothing in the locution 'of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*' that disqualifies a performance either from being regarded as an artwork or from having a great deal of merit when thus considered.

In my view, the degree of aesthetic significance a performance possesses and the question of whether it is a performance of some other work are largely orthogonal. There may be highly original performances of *Hedda Gabler* that clearly deserve the status of artworks in their own right, and plodding performances by unenthusiastic high school English classes that clearly do not deserve such status (in large part because no one involved makes the sort of autonomous aesthetic decisions that it is open to a company to make). There may be trivial and derivative performances that bear no special relation to any previously existing script or originary performance, and thus are neither performances of some other work nor artworks in their own right; and there may be independent performances that make great aesthetic achievements and are thus clearly artworks. A concern about aesthetic trivialization, then, is no reason at all for holding that no theatrical performance is ever of any other work.

The second reason for the complete autonomy thesis has to do with theoretical unity. As Hamilton demonstrates through a variety of examples, there clearly are some performances that are *not* of any literary work: a performance may be only very loosely derived from a literary work (as in *Pistols and Other Doors*, described above), or it may bear no special relation to any previously existing text or originary performance. Moreover, as Hamilton argues, we cannot simply derive a script from any given performance, thereby creating an instant literary work of which it is a performance: briefly, this is because there is no non-arbitrary way of determining which of the infinitely many features of the performance should be

regarded as belonging to the script and which should be regarded as optional elements introduced by the company on a particular occasion.⁷ Thus, there clearly are some performances that are not of any other work. And if we wish to have a general, unified account of theatrical performance, we must hold that theatrical performances are independent of previously existing artworks.⁸

The degree to which the concern about theoretical unity should convince us depends, of course, on the degree to which we regard a unified account as preferable to one that allows that different performances may stand in different relations to pre-existing works of dramatic literature. I tend to think that we should seek the sort of account that best reflects the phenomena to be accounted for: to the extent that all performances possess a common set of central characteristics, we should seek a unified account; but to the extent that their central characteristics vary, we should adopt an account that acknowledges such variation. Hamilton's examples show that the relations between theatrical performances and previously existing artworks may be quite diverse: a company may choose to be substantially constrained by an existing work, as has been quite common in some strands of theatrical tradition, may choose to use some literary work as a springboard for new creative thinking, as in many of the examples Hamilton describes, or may eschew reliance on any previously existing work. The nature of a performance's relation to, say, a dramatic work of literature is, I will argue, a central characteristic of that performance: knowledge of the degree to which a company has chosen to be constrained by or to make use of material supplied by the playwright gives us a great deal of insight into the nature and extent of the company's own aesthetic contribution, which is relevant to appreciation of the performance. The fact that one performance adheres closely to the script of *Hedda Gabler*, while another presents the lines of dialogue from *Hedda Gabler* in random order, is relevant to grasping the nature of the resulting performance artworks. Moreover, it is no mere quirk of certain performances that

they adhere rather closely to an existing script: such adherence has played a very significant role in some strands of theatrical tradition that continue to the present day. It is thus reasonable to expect that rather different practices of appreciation will be required for performances that adhere closely to existing literary works than for those that treat such works merely as loose source materials or break away from them altogether. It seems relevant, here, to bring out an analogy with improvisation in music: the fact that free improvisation has become a widely accepted performance practice in music does nothing to show that there is not also a central tradition of performing existing musical works. The fact that there are performances occupying a variety of positions on the spectrum defined by these two endpoints gives us no reason to treat all musical performances as though they were independent of existing works of musical composition. Moreover, it seems clear that appreciation of a performance is greatly enhanced by knowledge of the relation (if any) it bears to a pre-existing musical composition.

Happily, even if we allow that some theatrical performances are of other works and others are autonomous, there is no reason to see this as threatening the core of the ingredients model. An ingredients model similar to Hamilton's can, it seems, readily allow that different performances may have different kinds of ingredients: some may have an "of-ness" ingredient, while others lack it. Each performance should be appreciated, as an artwork, in full recognition of the particular ingredients it has, and these may well vary on a case-by-case basis. Some ingredients are so important as to play a significant role in determining the kind of appreciation that is appropriate to the work, whereas others will play a more minor role. We may embrace central tenets of the ingredients model, then, even if we reject the complete autonomy thesis. Indeed, the ingredients model seems an attractive alternative to a strictly unified account that would attempt to force all performances into a single mold.

Hamilton's most compelling reason in favor of the complete autonomy thesis, though, has yet to be addressed. Hamilton is concerned that we cannot ultimately make sense of the idea of a performance's being *of* some other work. For a performance to be of some other work requires it to be sufficiently faithful to the constraints imposed by that work; and there is, Hamilton suggests, every reason to doubt the possibility of an adequate notion of a theatrical performance's fidelity to a literary work (or to a play-type initiated by an ordinary performance).

Clearly, not every theatrical performance is a performance of *Hedda Gabler*. Thus, anyone who would claim that some performances are performances of *Hedda Gabler* must have some account of which performances are and which are not, and this can only be an account of which performances exhibit sufficient fidelity to *Hedda Gabler*. However, Hamilton presents three fundamental reasons to doubt that an adequate account of fidelity will be forthcoming.⁹ First, standards of fidelity differ from culture to culture and are subject to evolution; it seems, then, that it will be difficult to secure a stable fact of the matter about whether a performance with particular characteristics is sufficiently faithful to some underlying work. Second, dramatic works of literature tend to be unstable and exist in multiple versions, so there might be no fixed entity to ground judgments about fidelity even if a set of workable standards turned out to be possible. Third, and relatedly, expectations of fidelity in theater are misguided from the outset. Scripts are not, and never were, meant to be followed to the letter. Instead, they are properly understood as source material for companies to interpret and manipulate in order to secure the artistic effects they desire. This is why performances like those described in *Pistols and other Doors* are both possible and appropriate: a company does nothing wrong by using *Hedda Gabler* as raw material for a performance that diverges markedly from anything Ibsen might have foreseen or intended. Indeed, a company would err in thinking that they are strictly bound to Ibsen's dialogue and stage directions; they

would thereby deprive themselves needlessly of the aesthetic autonomy that is proper to the creators of a performance. The second and third reasons find expression in the following passage: "most scripts are provisional, subject to change by performers and directors, and frequently improved upon as vehicles for the stage by this process. Many plays exist in multiple 'authoritative versions.' So it is not clear to *which* work a performance is to be judged faithful."¹⁰

These issues undoubtedly complicate the picture of a performance's fidelity to a dramatic literary work. However, they do not strike me as fatal, either individually or collectively. With regard to the first reason, I believe that Hamilton would agree: he notes that it may be possible to develop a historicized notion of fidelity, such that fidelity standards will depend on the conventions and audience expectations of a particular historico-cultural moment.¹¹ Thus, it could be a fact that a particular performance satisfies the fidelity standards in effect at the time and place of its creation, even if a qualitatively identical performance would fail to satisfy the standards of some other time and place.

The second and third reasons, clearly, are intertwined. Scripts, Hamilton suggests, contain guidance rather than requirements, with the results that (a) they are unstable and evolve over time and (b) companies are right to see perfect compliance with any given version of a script as optional. In my view, though, Hamilton overstates the impact of these points on the matter of whether there can be standards of fidelity in theater. Even in advance of the concerns Hamilton raises, it is clear that fidelity standards cannot require perfect compliance: if they did, this would mean that any performance containing even the slightest error could not count as a performance of the underlying work. In music, this might well imply that there are no performances of most musical compositions, since even a note that is off key to a minuscule degree or held ever so slightly too long would disqualify the

performance from counting as faithful to the work.¹² Standards of fidelity in any domain, then, must exhibit some degree of tolerance for variability and error.

Hamilton's discussion about the practices of theatrical performance, in which companies are free to alter dialogue and stage directions, does not force us to the conclusion that there can be no principled distinction between performances that are faithful to the script and those that are not. Instead, it suggests that the degree of tolerance relevant to fidelity standards in theater is considerably greater than, say, in pre-Romantic classical music. It would be unreasonable, for instance, to insist that a performance of *Hedda Gabler* adhere to every line of some particular authorized version of Ibsen's play; for there may be more than one authorized version, and mature performance practice suggests that fidelity may be preserved even with some alterations to an authorized script. If we wish to deal with Hamilton's second and third concerns simultaneously, we may hold that fidelity to the work is a matter of preserving enough of the significant elements of a disjunctive entity (where the disjuncts are particular authorized versions) or a somewhat fluid entity (in cases where the situation is one of gradual evolution rather than a succession of authorized versions).¹³ What will count as enough? Which elements will count as significant? The precise answers to these questions cannot, of course, be stipulated through philosophical argument: they will require sensitivity to just how much variability performers and sophisticated audience members actually take to be consistent with the notion of performing a particular work, as opposed to creating a performance that is merely inspired by or based on that work. Presumably, though, fidelity to the work will involve preservation of plot and character elements as well as a significant portion of the originally scripted dialogue.¹⁴

Undoubtedly, particular accounts of what is required for fidelity will be disputed by some, and will generate a variety of borderline cases. If we make the

fidelity standards appropriately flexible, though, we will have a decent number of clear cases on both sides of the line: we will end up with some performances that clearly are of *Hedda Gabler*, many performances that clearly are not of *Hedda Gabler*, and some performances such that their being of *Hedda Gabler* or not is in dispute. Without further argument, there is no reason to think that the existence of such borderline cases threatens the viability of the fidelity standards themselves.

Performance, dramatic literature and appreciation

I have suggested that I am not convinced by Hamilton's reasons for holding that no theatrical performance is a performance of any other work. But it would seem perfectly fair for him to turn the tables and ask me, what would we gain by seeing some performances as performances *of* works? What is the point of defending this territory?

A first answer has to do with appreciation of dramatic literary works. As he acknowledges, a consequence of Hamilton's view that a theatrical performance is never of some literary work is that "there simply is no theatrical mode of presentation of works of dramatic literature: as works of dramatic literature they are *only* texts to be read."¹⁵ This claim has unfortunate consequences for the critical evaluation of works of dramatic literature. What is often of interest, in assessment of a work of drama, is the nature of the possibilities it creates for performance. After all, such works are typically written with the express aim that they be incorporated into performances; and even when they are not written with this aim, the choice to write a work in dramatic form rather than, say, a work of narrative prose generates a warranted association between the literary work and the tradition of theatrical performance. It seems perfectly appropriate to observe, of a dramatic work of literature, that it fails because it tends to generate performances that are flat or stilted, that lack a trajectory of development, and so on. It might function well as a

work to be read, yet fall short as a work to be performed; and because it is in the genre of dramatic literature, this latter fact is highly relevant to its assessment. I take it, then, that the appreciation of dramatic literary works is enhanced by the thought that there are, in fact, performances of such works; but Hamilton's view seems to foreclose this sort of appreciation.

I also hold that acknowledging that many performances are of particular literary works is the best way of doing justice to our practices of identification and appreciation of performances themselves. Hamilton suggests that it is possible to give an account of the identification of theatrical performances that does not depend on seeing them as of other works: one can establish one's "basic theatrical understanding" of a performance simply by demonstrating, either through description or through appropriate non-verbal responses, that one has grasped the central elements of the presented story;¹⁶ and, in general, different spectators do come to offer common accounts or display similar responses to a given performance, partly because they understand that their task as spectators is to notice elements that have been presented for everyone to apprehend. Hamilton also suggests that "if I have seen only one performance of *Hedda Gabler* that is what *Hedda Gabler* is for me; if I go to another play billed as 'Hedda Gabler' I will conclude I saw the same play as on the first occasion if I think the same story was presented and if I and other people come out talking about the story and characters pretty much in the way I did on the first occasion."¹⁷

If Hamilton is to defend an account on which no performance is a performance of any other work, it does seem incumbent on him to (a) establish that it is possible to grasp a performance without linking it to a work performed and (b) explain why it is that people speak of different performances as presentations of the same work. But the accounts he offers do not strike me as optimal. First, it seems indisputable that our actual practices of identification of many (indeed, I suspect, the

vast majority of) theatrical performances do rely on seeing them as of literary works. We speak of performances of *Hamlet*, of *Hedda Gabler*, of *Oklahoma!* Most performances are billed as performances of some literary work; others are billed as adaptations, generating a different set of expectations on the part of the spectator. Performers speak of themselves as participating in performances of works, and audiences see themselves as viewing performances of works. When we speak in this way, we are conveying a great deal of information about central elements of the performances we have seen: who the central characters were, what the central plot elements were, and, to a certain extent, what dialogue was presented. (How much we are conveying will depend, of course, on the nature of the relevant fidelity standards, as discussed above.) It is surely true that audiences *can* retrieve much of this information just by viewing a particular performance.¹⁸ But our actual practices of identification tend to rely heavily on attributions of of-ness. This is not to say that identification of the work performed is *sufficient* to identify a performance; indeed, it clearly is not. In identifying performances, particularly those we regard as artworks in their own right, we also make reference to such elements as the director, the company and the performance site, since all of these may make very significant contributions to the character of the performance. But the work performed is a central element we typically use in such identifications, and to deny that a theatrical performance is ever of some literary work is to accuse us of misspeaking in a rather vast array of cases. In fact, I think that the complete autonomy thesis implicitly accuses both viewers and performers of seriously misunderstanding what they are seeing and doing on many occasions; and I take it that we should avoid attributing such errors to people if there is any other reasonable option.

Second, I would suggest that appreciation of a particular performance neither typically is nor should be divorced from the question of its relation to some dramatic work of literature. The claim that "if I have seen only one performance of *Hedda*

Gabler that is what *Hedda Gabler* is for me," taken to mean that audiences do not recognize a distinction between a particular performance and the work performed, strikes me as misleading at best. In fact, audiences typically understand performances as presentations of some entity that is subject to multiple performances with certain variations among them, and they will assume that *Hedda Gabler* is a considerably more abstract entity than the performance they have seen. They may assume, for instance, that the presented dialogue belongs to *Hedda Gabler*, but they will recognize that many aspects of its delivery – timing, intonation, and so forth – were introduced by the performers and do not belong to *Hedda Gabler* itself. Similarly, they will assume that many physical attributes of the performers, particularly those that play no role in the unfolding story, are irrelevant to the nature of *Hedda Gabler*. Moreover, any audience that is not rather culturally naïve will enter the theater aware of the existence of a play titled *Hedda Gabler* written by Henrik Ibsen, and they will assume that central elements of the plot, characterization and dialogue of the performance are derived from that play.

If I am right, actual audiences do not see a typical theatrical performance as a one-off entity, even when they are seeing a particular play performed for the first time. But it remains for me to show that consideration of the relation between a performance and the work performed (where such a relation obtains) actually enhances appreciation of a performance. Before undertaking this task, I should acknowledge an important way in which consideration of such a relation might detract from appropriate appreciation. One way to understand the idea of a performance's being of some literary work would be to invoke a transparency model, according to which the point of viewing a performance is simply to get access to the underlying work. Someone under the sway of such a model might fail to appreciate the many aspects of the performance that do not directly contribute to a grasp of the literary work on which it is based. This would clearly constitute a failure to

appreciate the performance appropriately as an artwork in its own right. A rejection of the transparency model is, I think, at the heart of Hamilton's annoyance with the critic Charles Isherwood, who complained that a performance of *Hedda Gabler* failed to "let the text speak for itself."¹⁹

One can acknowledge that a performance is of a literary work, though, without falling victim to the transparency model of the relation between them. Indeed, acknowledging that a performance is of a literary work allows us to have a better appreciation of the true nature of the company's achievement, which Hamilton holds is central to deeper theatrical understanding. The decision to produce a performance of a particular work (rather than an adaptation of the work, a performance roughly based in some elements of the work, or a performance completely independent of any pre-existing work) is a decision to be constrained by a script and the elements it contains. Such constraints help to explain some aspects of the content of the performance: it would be wrong, for instance, to credit the company with creation of the characters and major plot elements in a performance of *Hedda Gabler*. But they also help us to see just what sort of challenges the company created for itself by accepting a particular set of constraints, and how it addressed those challenges. Considering this performance work in the class of performances of *Hedda Gabler* allows us to make relevant comparisons to other performance works by companies that have imposed similar constraints on themselves, and thus to recognize ways in which the present performance work exploits the material of the script in new and exciting ways (or fails to do so). For this reason, "performances of *Hedda Gabler*" picks out a relevant and useful comparison class, a class of performance works that partake of a common tradition and a set of constraints derived from that tradition, which form part of the challenge companies face in creating the performances. Moreover, it is useful to distinguish between the class "performances of *Hedda Gabler*" and the class "performances

loosely based in or inspired by *Hedda Gabler*," since members of the former class undertake, in an important sense, a different project than members of the latter.

Earlier, I mentioned Glenn Gould's performances of the *Goldberg Variations*. To appreciate Gould's performance works, I take it, is in part to appreciate precisely that they *are* performances of the *Goldberg Variations*, and that they make use of the underlying material supplied by Bach's composition, previously used so often by so many others, in completely surprising and unexpected ways. The fact that Gould managed to do more than many others had done with the same material should increase our esteem for his achievement, and thus for the performance works he produced. I see no reason why similar considerations should be excluded in cases of theatrical performance.

Hamilton seems concerned that allowing that theatrical performances may be performances of other works, rather than simply works in their own right, commits us to a false conception of the relation between performances and dramatic works of literature: namely, a conception according to which companies are enslaved to the very strict constraints embodied by the literary work they aim to perform, and thus have little creative leeway to do anything distinct from what the playwright envisioned. In fact, though, no commitment to such an incorrect conception follows. To acknowledge that there is a significant tradition of companies' choosing to be constrained by fidelity to literary works is not to suggest that such constraints are mandatory (though it might be a step toward acknowledging that there have been times and places in which it was regarded as mandatory, even if the standards of fidelity were not so strict as to require a word-for-word match between the dialogue presented in the performance and that in the written script). It is also not to suggest that performances that reflect a choice to operate under such constraints are preferable to those that don't, or that performances that eschew such constraints thereby fail to perform a sacred theatrical duty. It is, though, to acknowledge that

companies choosing to be constrained by a literary work are engaging in a legitimate project that is relevant to how their performances should be understood and assessed, not simply deciding, as Hamilton suggests, "to constrain their choices as *though* certain false views were true."²⁰

Conclusion

In the Prologue to *The Art of Theater*, Hamilton claims that "theatrical performance is, and in reality always has been, an art form in its own right whose works are identified and assessed without reference to the literary texts that ... have been mistakenly taken to be the real works of which theatrical performances were *merely* performances."²¹ While I agree with his rejection of the mereness of performances, I do not think that anything follows about their of-ness. If we take Hamilton's claim that works of performance have always been identified and assessed without reference to dramatic literary texts as an *empirical* claim, I think there are good reasons to believe that it is false. And if we take it as a normative claim, namely that works of performance *should* be identified and assessed without reference to literary texts, I again think it should be rejected as a general claim about all works of theatrical performance. And I believe that Hamilton supplies reasons for this rejection: he thinks that full appreciation of a work of theatrical performance involves grasping what the company achieved; and when the company set for itself the project of producing a performance of an existing literary work, acknowledging this, and seeing the performance in relation to others undertaking a similar project, clearly is relevant to understanding the nature of the company's achievement.

Happily, though, this disagreement about the ontology of the theatrical performance need not translate into a deep disagreement about the aesthetic significance of performances, which is among Hamilton's central concerns. As I have indicated, I agree with Hamilton that theatrical performance is an art form in its own

right which may eventuate in works with a great deal of aesthetic significance, even when they are also performances of other works written by playwrights (or initiated by other companies' originary performances).

In my view, rejecting the complete autonomy thesis, and holding that theatrical performances are sometimes performances of other works, is the most natural way to account both for the features of many theatrical performances and for the practices of both companies and audiences; and, indeed, most elements of Hamilton's ingredients model are perfectly consistent with this idea. Since we do very often speak of a performance as being of a dramatic literary work, since acknowledging the of-ness relationship enhances our appreciation of performances, and since (as I have argued) there is no compelling reason to reject this way of understanding the situation, I hold that there are, in many instances, two works at issue in a theatrical performance: the performance itself, and the literary work performed. As Hamilton convincingly argues, though, this in no way implies that the former should be subordinated to the latter. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the artistic value of a theatrical performance far outstrips that of the literary work performed. It is a great merit of Hamilton's book that he forces us to recognize these possibilities, rather than seeing theater companies as blithely following instructions generated by the "real" artist.²²

¹ James R. Hamilton, *The Art of Theater* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴ At different points in his career, Gould gave two very different original interpretations of the *Goldberg Variations*, so the most plausible view may be that he generated at least two distinct performance works.

⁵ Undoubtedly, some would make a similar claim regarding musical performance; I have no stake in this issue's being settled one way or another.

⁶ If there is a great deal of variation among the performances within the production, we might want to say that each individual performance is an artwork in its own right (or generates an artwork-type of which it is the only token).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ The concern about theoretical unity is expressed most clearly on p. 30, where Hamilton suggests that an account requiring different treatments of performances that token a given play-type and those that do not will be *ad hoc*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹² Moreover, there appear to be some classical works, well established within the canon, containing passages that cannot be played accurately by any human performer; however, many would find unpalatable the claim that there have been no performances of these works.

¹³ Where there are well-defined authorized versions, of course, another option would be to treat each as a distinct work for purposes of establishing whether fidelity requirements are satisfied.

¹⁴ Fidelity may also involve refraining from introducing elements not envisioned in the dramatic literary work. As Hamilton discusses, Samuel Beckett repudiated a production of *Endgame* that, among other things, added music scored by Philip Glass (*ibid.*, p. 11). Whether or not Beckett's objection was warranted, it does seem that addition of elements could, in some instances, defeat a performance's status as faithful to the literary work.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ I will restrict my discussion to Hamilton's account of narrative theatrical performances; he also discusses basic theatrical understanding of non-narrative performances in which no story is presented.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

¹⁸ Hamilton makes a much stronger claim: namely, that "prior preparation with specifically theatrical information, such as having read the script prior to attending the performance[, does] not enhance [one's] ability to gain basic understanding of the performance" (*ibid.*, pp. 74-5). This claim strikes me as implausible, though: having read the script may, for instance, greatly enhance one's listening comprehension, allowing one to grasp dialogue that is crucial to the story being narrated within the performance.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²² I am grateful to Martin Montminy for comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.