**Ending *Dear Brutus* on stage and in print**

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Endings often caused J.M. Barrie trouble whether he was writing novels or plays. The close of *Sentimental Tommy* (1896) – which in a sense is not an ending at all since an older Tommy reappears in *Tommy and Grizel* (1900) – was originally (in the manuscript version housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University) much longer, recounting some of Tommy’s experiences on the farm to which we see him leaving in a cart in the final chapter of the published version entitled ‘The End of a Boyhood’. So many endings. When we meet Tommy again at the beginning of the sequel he has come to London with his sister having answered an advertisement from a novelist in search of an amanuensis. We learn nothing of his life on the farm. The close of one novel and the beginning of another allowed Barrie to skip over his character’s early manhood.

Ending a play often proved more difficult. It is less easy to skip in the theatre. Barrie’s trouble can be attributed in part to the open-endedness of the ideas that underpin many of his major plays. This is especially true of those that follow a characteristic structure of a fantasy scene enclosed within acts set in the real world, a feature of such works as *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), *Peter Pan* (1904), *Dear Brutus* (1917) and *Mary Rose* (1920). How should the characters behave when they are returned to the real world having experienced an altered state? *The Admirable Crichton* proved especially difficult to resolve. R.D.S. Jack traced no fewer than eighteen different conclusions in the many revisions to the play, both in the composition phase and in revisions made during rehearsals and following early performances and revivals.[[1]](#footnote-1) *Peter Pan* is an even more complicated case. The ‘Afterthought’, *When Wendy Grew Up*, is only one of many different endings penned by the author. Performed in Barrie’s lifetime only once (22 February 1908), it was not published until 1957 but is now widely adopted in modern productions of the play.

To speak of the multiple endings of Barrie’s plays as evidence of ‘difficulty’ or ‘trouble’ is to do the author a disservice, however. Barrie’s dramatic practice made revision to the texts of his plays both necessary and inevitable. This was not solely because the playwright was always open to the views and suggestions of cast and director, or because the experience of rehearsal and performance exposed new opportunities for, or practical limitations to, a scene or idea. Revision was part of Barrie’s whole conception of theatre. For Barrie, the ‘text’ of a play was always the text in performance. Since meaning was created at the point of reception, each new performance offered fresh possibilities for evolving the language, characters, dramatic situations and stagecraft of a play. As Peter Hollindale rightly notes, Barrie’s ‘unending revisionism is not just the obsessive tinkering of a perfectionist’ but ‘the artistic projection of a philosophical stance which was sceptical of fixed and permanent truth.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

That scepticism is strongly apparent in the author’s ambivalent attitude towards publishing his plays as books, which is another crucial factor in Barrie’s problem with endings. The act of printing a play is itself a way of establishing the ‘fixed and permanent truth’ of a text which, in performance, is always fluid and changing. For this reason Barrie was reluctant to allow his plays to be printed, in spite of repeated pressure by his British and American publishers, Hodder & Stoughton and Charles Scribner’s Sons. The novelisation of *Peter Pan* as *Peter and Wendy* in 1911 had solved one problem, but the publishers knew well that printed editions of Barrie’s plays would sell in considerable numbers. Shortly after the publication of *Peter and Wendy*, the author was persuaded to issue *Quality Street* and *The Admirable Crichton* in large format editions with colour plates and black-and-white illustrations in the text. These appeared in November 1913 and November 1914 respectively, pitched to the Christmas market. In each case the books were issued in a ‘popular’ edition priced at fifteen shillings and a *de luxe* edition limited to 1000 copies priced at two guineas. But even the ‘popular’ edition was a costly, luxury item at a time when Duckworth was issuing John Galsworthy’s plays as soon as they were out of the theatre in editions priced at one-shilling-and-sixpence in paper and two shillings in cloth.

In December 1914 the publishers had a small breakthrough when *Half Hours*, a volume of one-act plays which had been performed over 1905 to 1913, was issued on both sides of the Atlantic in a smaller format at the more popular price of six shillings. Still more of a breakthrough was *Der Tag*, the short, baffling, one-act play on a war theme, performed at the *Coliseum* on 21 December and published by Hodder immediately afterwards in a volume of forty pages at one shilling. It was not until 1918, however, that Barrie’s publishers succeeded in beginning a systematic printing of most of his *oeuvre* when they began the ‘Uniform’ edition of his plays and prose works. This was not a collected edition in the sense that the books were not issued together as a set. Rather, volumes of plays and prose works (some of which were published by Cassell) were added periodically over a number of years in a uniform blue binding. The first three volumes, issued in 1918 at three-shillings-and-sixpence, were *Quality Street*, *The Admirable Crichton* and *What Every Woman Knows*. Further titles were added in the following years (with new impressions appearing as printed supplies ran out) and a leather binding later became available. A similar edition, printed from the same plates, appeared in the United States through Scribner’s. The texts prepared by Barrie for these editions later formed the basis for the twenty titles printed in *The Plays of J.M. Barrie in one volume* (1928). When expanded posthumously in 1942 with the addition of six further plays, mostly from Barrie’s early phase as a dramatist, this collection acquired on its spine and dustwrapper the problematic phrase the ‘Definitive Edition’.

Barrie’s authorised biographer, Denis Mackail, records that the experience of preparing his texts for publication opened up ‘a new form of expression’ for Barrie, ‘a new game, with new scope for ingenuity. The author as showman as well as playwright.’[[3]](#footnote-3) As a writer Barrie was acutely conscious of literary form, and it was impossible for him not to respond to the challenges posed by transforming his texts from one artistic medium to another. The much-cited prose passage inserted at the start of *Alice Sit-by-the-Fire* – where the author reflects on the freedom granted to the novelist and denied to the playwright of revealing a character’s inner thoughts – demonstrates his awareness of the different ways in which impressions and reality are conveyed on the printed page and on the stage. Barrie’s ‘new game’ in revising his texts for printed form was to introduce extended – often wry and elliptical – stage directions, as well as lengthy prose passages throughout, inserted mainly at the start of each new act or scene. Mackail is right to state that the motivation behind many of these insertions was a desire to ‘bring both scenes and characters to the reader’s eye’, yet as Hollindale and others have concluded, the texts revised by the author are not designed for reading purposes only. The inserted passages often serve as direct instructions to actors and directors, instructions that nevertheless retain a ‘speculative openness’ about the ways in which a stage performance might present and interpret (just as a reader might imagine and interpret) a character or a dramatic situation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Modern productions of Barrie’s plays based on the texts of the Uniform edition are thus confronted with the problem of how to interpret the embellished stage directions, and how to convey in the theatre passages of prose that have been introduced for the printed page and (at least in part) for the act of silent reading. But the Uniform editions were not the only texts of Barrie’s plays that circulated in the author’s lifetime. Some titles were included in Samuel French’s series of ‘Acting Editions’. French operated out of London and New York and was the main supplier of printed texts and performance licences for amateur and professional productions in Britain and America. Compared to other dramatists of the period, however, Barrie’s plays were not widely printed in acting editions during his lifetime. A 1938 French catalogue lists only eleven titles, three omnibus volumes of one-act pieces and eight full-length plays. (Compare that with the twenty-two Somerset Maugham and twenty-seven A.A. Milne titles available in the catalogue.) One play that French controlled entirely was *Walker, London*. Barrie had sold the copyright of this early play to J.L. Toole, the actor-manager and theatrical producer in whose theatre the play was first performed in 1902. On Toole’s death in 1906 the copyright passed to French who printed an edition of the play in 1907. The fact that rights to *Walker, London* remained in French’s hands means that the text of that play in the ‘Definitive’ edition contains none of the elaborate prose insertions found in most of the other printed plays. (This is also true of some of the other early plays, such as *The Professor’s Love Story* (perf. 1892) and *The Little Minister* (perf. 1897), which had not been prepared for publication by Barrie.)

Among the full-length plays published in French’s Acting Editions was *Dear Brutus*, which was added to the catalogue in 1934. The text of this edition varies significantly from that prepared by Barrie for the Uniform edition published in 1922 and is much closer to the original performances of 1917. It seems unlikely that Barrie, in his seventy-fourth year, had any hand in the preparation of this edition, and further research is required to determine its exact place in the textual history of the play. But its ready availability in the French catalogue raises intriguing questions about the performance history of the play. With two variant texts circulating at the same time it is likely that some performances of *Dear Brutus* after 1934 were based on a text that differed in significant respects from the text as revised by the author. A brief analysis of the different endings to *Dear Brutus* found in the Uniform and French editions helps bring into perspective the complexities of the textual history of Barrie’s plays. It also takes us back to that persistent trouble with endings, with what Hollindale has aptly termed the author’s ‘restlessness with the provisional forms and closures which constituted his dramatic statements’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Dear Brutus* was first performed at Wyndham’s Theatre on 17 October 1917. An instant success, the play charts the growth to self-awareness of a group of characters each of whom believe they have taken a wrong turning in life and long for a second chance. The echoes of Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are evident in the central character of Lob, the enigmatic, mischievous, Puckish host, who has gathered the characters together in his house on Midsummer’s Eve and persuades them to enter an enchanted wood. Granted their second chance, they discover more about themselves than they had anticipated, and the play appears to endorse the message implicit in the title’s allusion to Cassius’s speech in *Julius Caesar*, that ‘the fault, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves’.

Like Barrie’s other works, *Dear Brutus* underwent extensive revision during the rehearsal period and the original run. The Barrie archive at the Beinecke Library holds, in addition to the autograph manuscript, four typescripts (two incomplete), three of which contain autograph revisions by Barrie. The other includes a lighting plot and properties list, and is bound with a cast list from the New York Empire Theatre production of 1918 to which performance it probably relates. The play was revived at Wyndham’s over May-December 1922, and in November of that year it was added to the Uniform edition of Barrie’s works. For this, the first printed edition, Barrie introduced his now customary new stage directions and prose passages. He also, as explained below, made several changes to the text of the play including a radical alteration to the ending.

The textual variants between the Uniform edition and the French edition are considerable. Although an acting edition, the stage directions in the latter are not exclusively restricted to instructions to actors and actresses, as they largely are in *Walker, London.* Some convey impressions of the characters beyond the physical phenomena of age, appearance or demeanour. For example, Joanna Trout is described as ‘sentimental but a good sort’ and Alice Dearth ‘fascinating and dangerous’.[[6]](#footnote-6) A performance based on the French edition requires a director or an actress to find ways of conveying these character judgements, which in the Uniform edition are greatly extended in the lengthy introduction to the ladies that takes up pages 5-8 of the text. There are many other examples where the stage directions in the French edition are, unexpectedly, *more* ambivalent than the Uniform edition. At one point, for example, Lob is described as ‘wickedly innocent’ (14) when he falls under the gaze of the ladies, a statement that is absent from the Uniform edition which at this point in the play makes no observation or comment about its most elusive character.

Another variation in a stage direction points up a subtle difference in the way each edition presents the character of Lob. In Act 1 of the Uniform edition, when the characters (following their host’s manipulative display of tears) have resolved to go and look for the enchanted wood, there is a moment when Lob is left alone on stage. The stage direction reads: ‘He clucks victoriously, but presently is on his knees again distressfully regarding some flowers that have fallen from their bowl’.[[7]](#footnote-7) As he replaces them in the bowl, he talks to them affectionately. References to the flowers elsewhere in the Uniform edition present them as collusive agents in Lob’s trickery. The opening stage directions prompt us to imagine them rustling when the ladies first enter the stage in the dark (4); when the servant Matey declares that he ‘would give the world to be able to begin over again’ we are told that the flowers ‘would, here, if they dared, burst into ironical applause’; and when the snobbish Lady Caroline is affronted by Matey’s suggestion that she herself might take a wrong turning in life, her speech is followed by the insertion ‘the flowers rather like him for this; it is possibly what gave them a certain idea’. This suggests that the flowers are responsible for the pairing off of Lady Caroline with Matey in the fantasy scene of Act 2. None of these ideas are to be found in the French edition where the scene when Lob talks to the flowers is occasioned by his having dropped the vase himself when Alice Dearth, who is described as ‘the only one who really suspects Lob’ (16), has noticed him gloating over his success. At this moment in the French edition, therefore, Lob comes across as more vulnerable, but also more obviously the stage manager of the dramatic events within the play. Indeed, he is altogether a more enigmatic figure in the Uniform edition. In the French edition the very final words in the stage directions offer a clue to his character: ‘Perhaps he is a sprite who has lost his way among the mortals.’ The Uniform edition, by contrast, ends more inscrutably, with ‘our queer little hero’, who is described as ‘the elusive person’, in his garden ‘busy at work among his flowers’ (140).

Beyond the stage directions, there are numerous differences in the dialogue. These range from one or two word variations in the characters’ lines to whole passages unique to each edition. Though some of the details are tiny, they often alter the effect of the dramatic situation. For example, at the very end of the play, Joanna enquires of Matey whether exposure to the magic wood has ‘any permanent effect’. In the French edition, this is prefaced by the words: ‘A strange experience’, which suggests Joanna is still immersed in her own experiences in the wood. In the Uniform edition, however, her words read: ‘A strange experiment, Matey’ (130), which suggests she is viewing the situation more objectively and is less preoccupied (at this point) about its effects on her own character.

The scenes with the most substantial variations in dialogue are those between the philanderer Purdie and his wife Mabel. For example, in Act II the scene of their illicit lovemaking (Purdie having married Joanna in the fantasy world) is much longer in the Uniform edition, with extra passages that accentuate Purdie’s false histrionics. The section where he reflects on his childhood, refers to himself as a ‘dark spirit’, and ends with the absurd proclamation that his ‘tragedy’ lies in having ‘expected too much of women’ and having been more ‘touched to finer issues than most’ (68-9), were additions Barrie made for the Uniform edition, as was the speech which concludes with the line ‘I was always so sure that no woman could ever plumb the well of my emotions.’ (69). The additions add to the humour and vanity of Purdie’s character, emphasising how his self-deprecation is just a way of asserting his own self-importance.

By far the most significant change to the play, however, comes at the end, where the French edition documents a substantial variant between the text as performed in the original production and that as revised by Barrie for the Uniform edition. In both the original run of 1917 and the revival of 1922 the finale to the play included a tableau which preceded the final curtain. This presented Dearth, the alcoholic, failed artist, carrying his easel (thus re-invoking the fantasy character of Act 2), apparently reconciled to his wife, Alice. The two kiss and pass across the stage followed by the figure of Margaret, the dream daughter that Dearth was granted in the wood. This redemptive, happy ending for the Dearths is preserved in the French edition, where its enactment on the stage is presented as a ‘spell’ worked by Lob ‘with his hands’ (66), another indication of how Lob’s identity as a conjuror is more conspicuous in the French edition. Earlier in the final scene, a further variant between the two texts again points to a more positive final picture of Dearth and his wife. In the French edition, Alice responds to Dearth’s horrified realisation (as he emerges from his altered state) that Margaret was only part of a fantasy world, by saying ‘I should have liked to have been her mother, Will.’ (65). In the Uniform edition Alice says only ‘I wish –– I wish ––’ (137), stopping short of uttering a line that would have enacted a coming together of husband and wife around a shared sense of regret.

The original ending provoked mixed responses among contemporary theatre reviewers and Barrie’s early critics. In his *J.M. Barrie and the Theatre* (1922), written before the appearance of the Uniform edition, H.M. Walbrook referred to the tableau as ‘a delicious touch’ and praised what he saw as an unequivocally happy ending: ‘the cheered playgoer passed from the bright theatre into the dark streets feeling that the painter’s longing was going to be fulfilled for him after all.’[[8]](#footnote-8) The two endings provoke radically different conclusions about the play’s ambivalent message. With the original redemptive ending, the possibility of there being a second chance in some sort of dream world is left open, encouraging faith in Barrie as an optimist in the therapeutic and corrective power of fantasy. By contrast, the Uniform edition pointedly brings Dearth back to reality in this final act, restoring physical characteristics that we have seen in Act 1. The other characters notice that ‘his hand is shaking again’ and ‘the watery eye has come back’ (138), lines not to be found in the French edition. The idea of redemption through fantasy is not removed altogether in Barrie’s revised text. Dearth’s speech thanking Lob ‘for that hour’ of happiness is retained, and Barrie introduced a new line of commentary which reads: ‘There is hope in this for the brave ones. If we could wait long enough we might see the Dearths breasting their way into the light.’ (140). But the elimination of the tableau removes the actual visual staging of this ‘way into the light’, and instead the play ends with Lob (and no-one else) bathed in ‘the glory of a summer morning.’

George Eliot wrote that ‘endings are inevitably the least satisfactory part of any work in which there is any merit of development.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Change and development are an indelible part of Barrie’s drama, both in terms of the ideas that underpin the plays and the author’s conception of theatrical communication. If his endings cannot fairly be considered the ‘least satisfactory’ part of his plays, it was ‘inevitabl[e]’ that they should prove the most difficult to construct.

1. R.D.S. Jack, *The Road to the Never Land* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Hollindale, ‘Introduction’, *Peter Pan and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, repr. 2002), p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Denis Mackail, *The Story of J.M.B.* (London: Peter Davies, 1941), p. 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hollindale, p. xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hollindale, p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J.M. Barrie, *Dear Brutus* (London: Samuel French Limited, 1934), p. 5. Further references appear in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J.M. Barrie, *Dear Brutus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922), p. 30. Further references appear in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. H.M. Walbrook, *J.M. Barrie and the Theatre* (London: F.V. White, 1922), pp. 143-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *George Eliot’s Life as related in her Letters and Journals*, ed. J.W. Cross, 3 vols (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood, 1885), III, p. 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)