CONTEMPORARY DRAMA
AND THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

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By the end of this article, if I have done nothing else, I will have changed your view of Leiden Railway Station. Like all good pieces of theatre, there is a climax in store.

Tom Stoppard in an article, entitled “Pragmatic Theater”, wrote:

I am going to argue now that grown-up art is art that withholds information. I am able to perform this somersault thanks to the limitations of vocabulary – the number of concepts we can hold so far exceeds the number of words available for them that certain words – “information” being one of them – have to serve for quite different ideas, and the way I am using “information” now is not do with the elements of a narrative, but, the possible meanings of the narrative. Art which stays news in Ezra Pound’s phrase, is art in which the question “what does it mean?” has no correct answer. Every narrative has, at least, a capacity to suggest a metanarrative, and art that “works” is highly suggestive in this sense, as though the story were really a metaphor for an idea that has to be almost tricked out of hiding into the audience’s consciousness. But what idea? There is no correct answer.¹

Tom Stoppard goes on to discuss The Fire Raisers by Max Frisch, Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, and Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party. I want to go further back because the ideas he is discussing seem to me just as relevant and interesting in relation, for example, to Sophocles’ Antigone, and to provide a connection between the origins of the Western dramatic tradition, and a play like Michael Frayn’s Copenhagen (1998) with which this essay will conclude.

Antigone dramatizes the conflict between Antigone and Creon, as ruler of Thebes, as to whether she has the right, against his orders, to bury her brother, Polynices, who has led an attack against Thebes. Creon has ordered him to be left unburied in the desert to be eaten by wild animals. Antigone, as the play opens, is explaining to her sister Ismene that she is about to disobey Creon’s command, exposing herself to the punishment of death.

The sentry enters to tell Creon that Polynices has been buried:

Sentry: Yes, I will tell you. Someone just now
buried the corpse and vanished. He scattered on the skin
some thirsty dust; he did the ritual,
duly, to purge the body of desecration.

Creon: What! Now who on earth could have done that?
Sentry: I do not know. For there was there no mark
of axe’s stroke nor casting up of earth
of any mattock; the ground was hard and dry,
unbroken; there were no signs of wagon wheels.

The doer of the deed had left no trace.
But when the first sentry of the day pointed it out,
there was for all of us a disagreeable
wonder. For the body had disappeared;
not in a grave, of course; but there lay upon him
a little dust as of a hand avoiding
the curse of violating the dead body’s sanctity.

The Chorus at once ask:

My lord: I wonder, could this be the God’s doing?
This is the thought that keeps on haunting me.

As often in Greek drama, the Chorus expresses the audience’s own uncertainty. It enrages Creon: “... do you see the gods as honoring / criminals. This is not so.” Creon lives, or wants to live, in the world of pragmatic theatre. And this is not pragmatic theatre, because Sophocles chooses to present the question as undetermined, leaving the audience’s imagination to attempt to resolve the problem.

In the next Chorus, one of the greatest Sophocles wrote, they ponder the wonder and strangeness of things, where nothing is stranger than man, sometimes evil and sometimes good. The world,