In the early 1990s, British playwright Sir David Hare completed a trilogy that examines and critiques the crises facing three great British institutions: the Church, the Judiciary, and Parliament. *Racing Demon* explores the conflicts faced by the Anglican Church over its mission and pertinent contemporary issues. *Murmuring Judges* continues this public inquiry through an examination of the criminal justice system, illustrating how courts, prisons, and police co-exist in a state of mutual incomprehension, and exposing the clash between corruption and idealism in the system. The trilogy concludes with *The Absence of War*, a thinly veiled account of the campaigns of Neil Kinnock and John Major.

*Murmuring Judges*, the subject of this essay, presents a triumvirate view of the law, examining how, in Hare’s view, the major dilemma of the legal system is the isolation and alienation of the judiciary arm from the two other segments of the legal triad: the prisons and the police. These units neither communicate or connect, nor do they interact or cooperate. The play addresses many of the troublesome issues Hare perceives in this complex legal system, including sexism, racism, internal conflict, insensitivity to clients and colleagues alike, and the impossibility of change within an entrenched structure. At the same time, it grapples dramatically and thematically with the simultaneous unity and divisiveness of this system. Through its dramatic structure and thematic development, *Murmuring Judges* provides valuable and informed insight into the intricacies and dilemmas of the British legal system.

Near the beginning of Sir David Hare’s 1991 play *Murmuring Judges*, a character who is on trial and awaiting his verdict mutters, “God, is there anything in the world slower than a lawyer?” (1). Even as this question scorns the judiciary,

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1 David Hare, *Murmuring Judges*. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent parenthetical page references come from the text of the play.
it foregrounds just one of many issues and dilemmas facing the British legal system that Hare explores in this play, a work that scrutinizes not only the judiciary but the police force and the prison system as well.²

*Murmuring Judges* is the centerpiece of a trilogy of plays Hare wrote in the early 1990s examining and critiquing Britain’s major institutions and questioning the state of their health. *Racing Demon* (1990), the first and most popular of the three, considers the contemporary crises and tensions within the Anglican Church as well as public perceptions of its role and mission. *Murmuring Judges* continues this public inquiry through a study of the criminal justice system, illustrating how courts, prisons, and police co-exist in a state of mutual incomprehension while simultaneously exposing the clash between corruption and idealism within the system. Hare completes his investigation with *The Absence of War* (1993), which addresses Parliament and party politics through a thinly veiled account of the 1992 campaign between incumbent Conservative Prime Minister John Major and Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock—a contest that in itself confronted core problems of political rhetoric and approaches to the electorate.

Besides being the central play of the trilogy, *Murmuring Judges* is in itself a triad, encompassing a triumvirate perspective of the law. In Hare’s opinion, a major dilemma of the legal system—if not the major dilemma—is the isolation and alienation of the judiciary arm from the two other segments of the legal triad: the prisons and the police. They neither communicate or connect, nor do they interact or cooperate. In *Asking Around*, a book by Hare recounting his five years of research for this trilogy, he says he began to realize that “our Criminal Justice System was divided quite sharply into three. At the top are the lawyers. … In the middle are the police, who are constantly aggrieved at the amount of stick they get from both sides. And at the bottom are the prisoners and the prison service, a group who are basically ignored except when … they make trouble” (88).³ Concurring with this view, critic Ruby Cohn notes that “Hare dramatizes British justice as an oxymoron: the overworked police cannot begin to contain crime, the prison is governed by its own brutal laws, and the legal eagles fly by their own rarefied codes.”⁴ *Murmuring Judges* addresses many of these troublesome issues, including sexism, racism, internal conflict, insensitivity to clients and colleagues alike, and the impossibility of change within an entrenched structure. At the same time, it grapples both thematically and dramatically with the simultaneous unity and divisiveness Hare perceives in the complex legal system.

² Hare notes in the text that the play’s title “is from a legal expression, meaning to speak ill of the judiciary” and “is still an offence in Scottish law.”
³ All subsequent references to this book, unless its title is mentioned in the text of the essay, will be cited parenthetically as *AA*, with page numbers.
⁴ Cohn, 38.