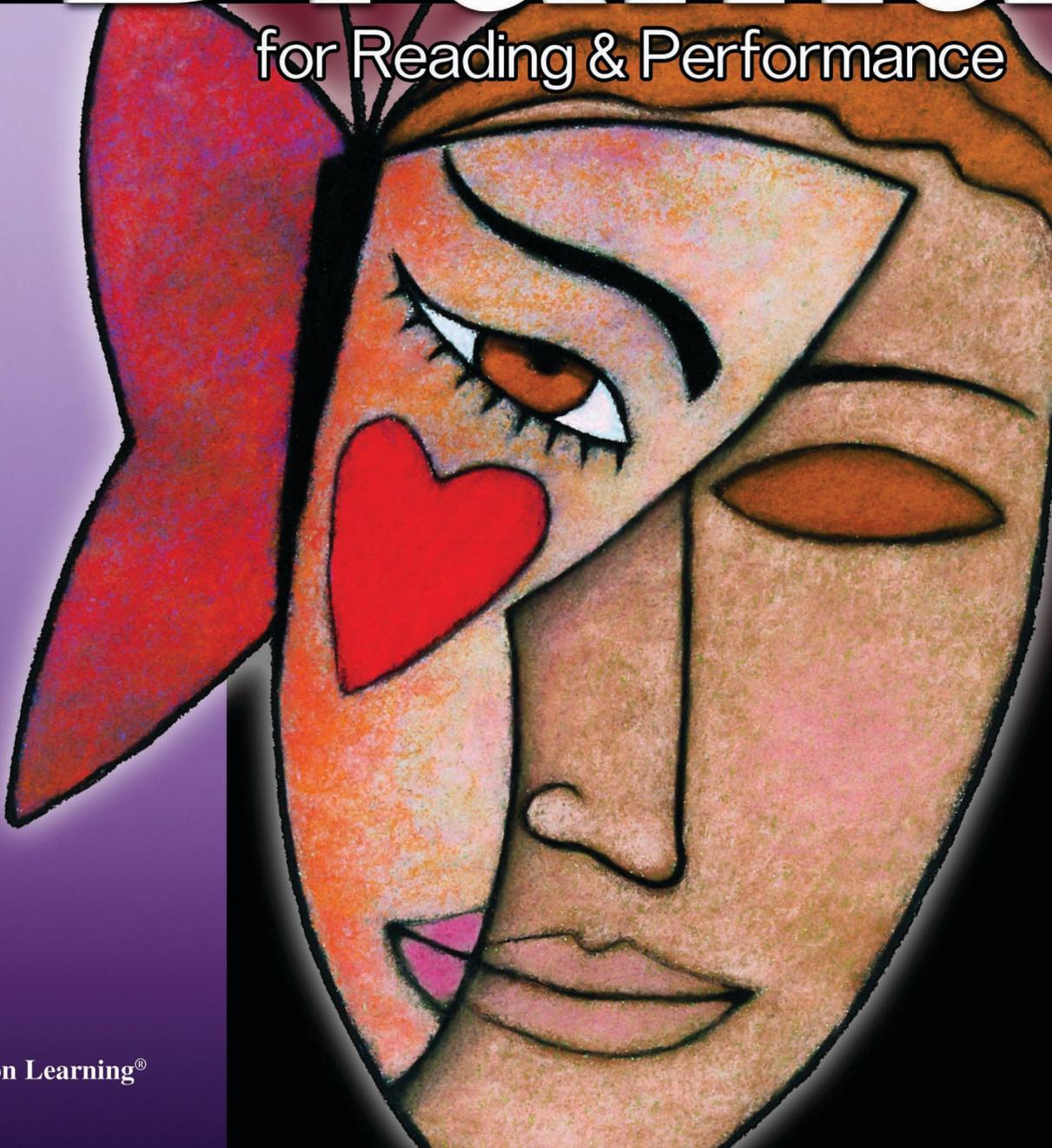


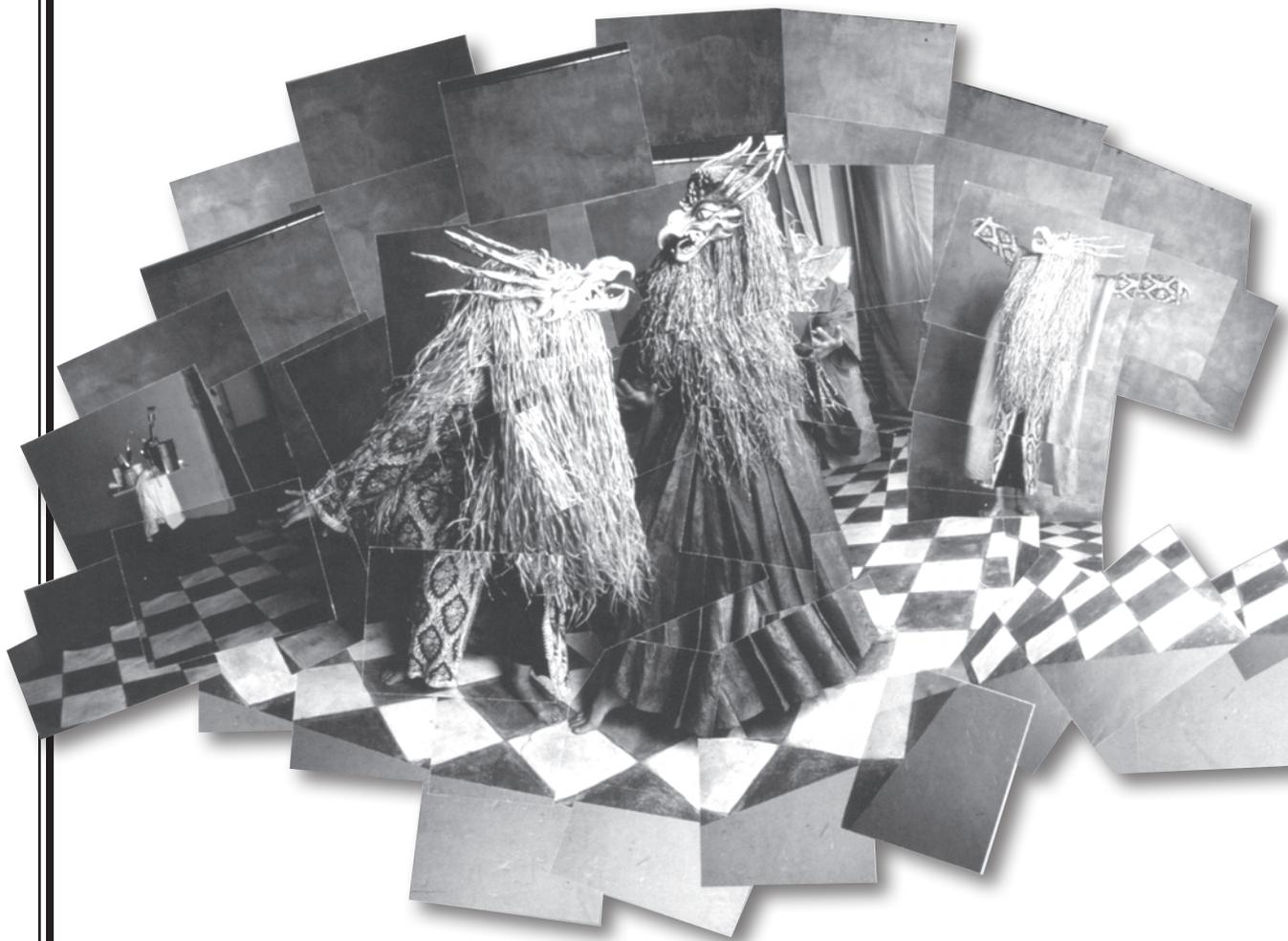
Collection

TWO

# Drama

for Reading & Performance





**Twenty Full-length**

## **Plays**

**for Students**

**including information, lessons, and assignments  
for understanding and performance**



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## How to Read a Play

**R**eading a play is different from reading other kinds of literature because a play *is* different from other kinds of literature. Short stories, poems, novels, and so on, are all complete on the printed page. But a printed play—also called a *script*—is not complete. It becomes complete when it is performed by actors for an audience. The play is what happens on the stage or screen.

Because of this, you—as reader—must bring a little more of yourself to reading a play. Of course you will bring your imagination, as you do to reading short stories and novels. And you will also make an effort to visualize the characters and actions and to imagine their thoughts and emotions. What else can you do to help make your reading more complete and satisfying? Here are some tips.

### Reading Tips

- Read the stage directions. (*They are often in parentheses and printed in italic type, like this.*) Stage directions are not meant for an audience; they are messages from the playwright to the people who stage the play. They may tell the actors when and where to move, what emotions to express, what props (handheld objects, such as a newspaper or a coffee cup) to pick up and what to do with them. They may tell the director where to position the actors or what the overall mood of a scene should be. They may tell the designers what the set looks like, what costumes the actors should wear, what music or sounds are heard, or what time of day the lighting should suggest. Stage directions are usually not read aloud, even when the actors rehearse a show.

UR Upstage Right	UC Upstage Center	UL Upstage Left
R Right	C Center	L Left
DR Downstage Right	DC Downstage Center	DL Downstage Left

- Understand the stage areas. Stage directions often include abbreviations like *R* for right or *L* for left. (These mean the actors' right or left sides as they face the audience.) Other abbreviations are *U* for *upstage* or *D* for *downstage* or *C* for *center*. (*Downstage* means toward the audience; *up* and *down* are terms left over from the days when stages actually slanted.)
- Pay attention to the characters' names. They tell who says what speeches.
- Read the speeches aloud. They are, after all, meant to be heard. Read with as much feeling as you can to get the most out of the speeches. Even if you're reading the play by yourself, you can play all the parts, changing your voice for the different characters. This will give you a better understanding of the characters, who they are, and what they are doing.
- Look for a subtext. This is, simply, what the characters are thinking or feeling, and it is not always the same as what they are saying. For example, a character may say, "Of course I'll take my little sister to the movie, Dad," but actually be thinking, "How can you do this to me? What will my friends think?"

## Theatre Conventions

A **convention** is an accepted way of doing things. The more plays you see on stage, the better you will understand the conventions, or the things that make a play a play. Here are some common conventions.

**Narrator** Sometimes an actor will speak directly to the audience, to explain who the characters are or what is happening. Sometimes a character will speak directly to the audience and then go back to speaking to the other characters. When they do, they serve the function that a narrator serves in short stories or novels.

**The "Fourth Wall"** In realistic plays, the actors may behave as if the audience simply isn't there. It's as if the audience is eavesdropping on the action through an invisible "fourth wall" of a room, whether the set is actually an enclosed room or not.

**Dramatic Time** The time an action is supposed to take onstage isn't necessarily the time that same action would take in real life. For example, actors may take seven minutes to eat a meal that they would spend twenty-five minutes on in reality. Just accept what the play tells you about how much time has elapsed.

**Lapses of Time** If you go to the movies, you're probably familiar with the convention that several minutes or days or even years elapse from one scene to another. It's the same with plays—a curtain or change of lighting may suggest that any amount of time has passed. When you read a play, the stage directions will usually specify what is happening.

**The World Offstage** Actors are trained to keep in mind, when they enter or exit, just where it is they're supposed to be coming from or going to. This helps them create their characters more realistically. When you're reading a play, try to imagine the lives the characters are leading when they're not onstage. This will help you understand the characters and their subtexts better and will give you a better understanding of the play as a whole.

### **Sharing the Experience**

Seeing a play performed live onstage can be a truly thrilling experience. As a reader, you can share some of that thrill if you read attentively, with imagination, and if you try actively to enter into the world of the characters and of the play. In this book are many different kinds of plays in different styles from playwrights all over the world. Enjoy them.



# Before Reading

## *The Actor's Nightmare*

### **The Play as Literature: Style**

What's your style? Whether it's bold or bashful, it's part of who you are—and a signature by which people know you. The same is true for writers. Writers each have their own style, characterized by the vocabulary, sentence structure, diction, and literary tools they use.

In *The Actor's Nightmare*, Christopher Durang presents his own wacky style alongside parodies of other playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Noel Coward, and Samuel Beckett. (You can read more about parody on p. 17.) As you read the play, try to pick out features that characterize each author's style.

### **The Play as Theatre: Costumes**

Costumes, like sets, help establish the time and place in which the action of a play occurs. In addition, costumes contribute to the mood and overall style of a production. They can also provide clues to the personalities of the characters. Costuming can illuminate a character's status, suggesting his or her physical, emotional, and economic condition. Costumes can also show alliances with other characters and provide clues about choices that a character will make.

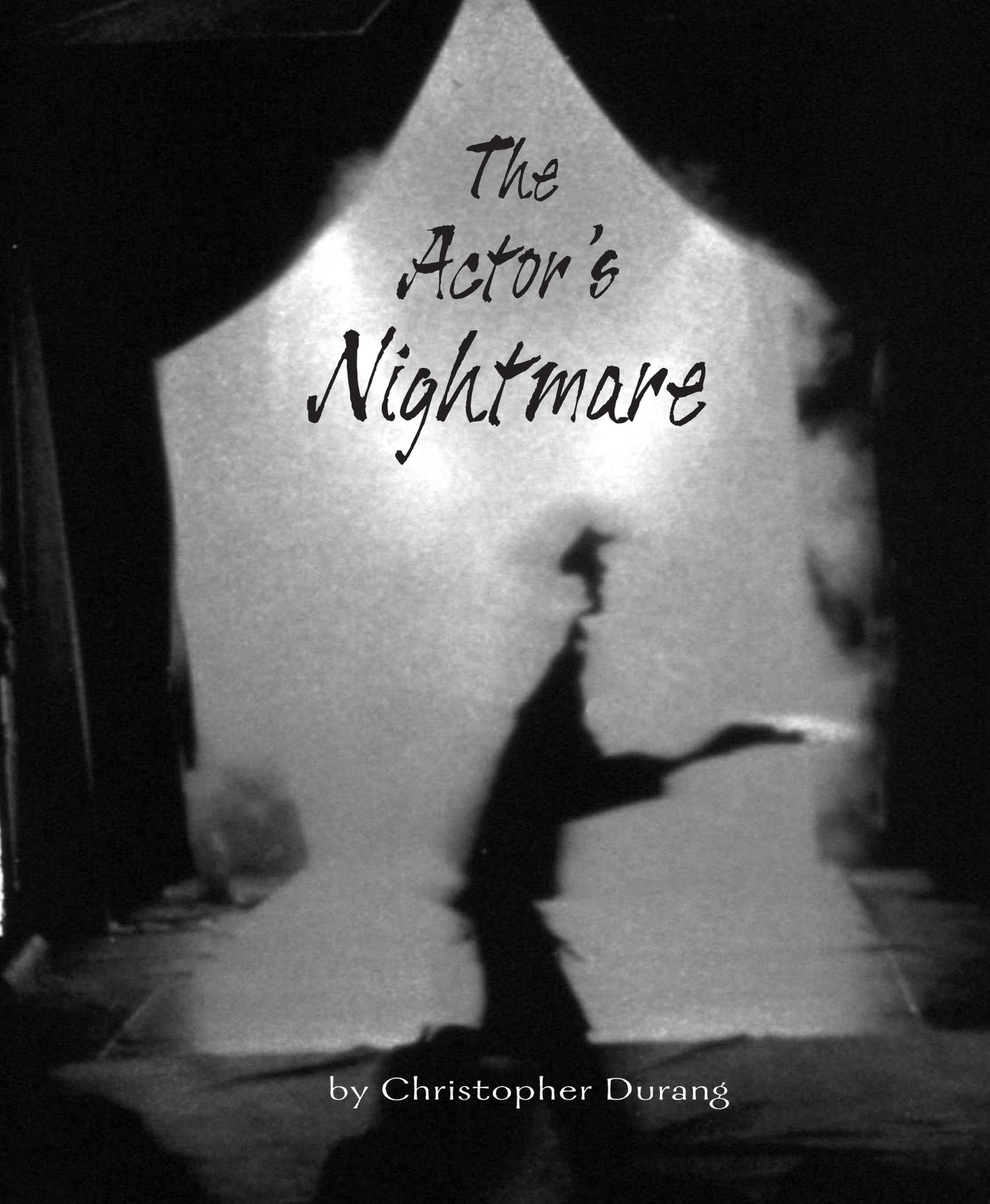
A play like *The Actor's Nightmare* offers a wide range of costuming opportunities—and challenges. As you read the play, think about how you would costume a character for a role that spans roughly 400 years and five distinct styles.



What do their costumes tell you about these characters?

### *Warm Up!*

In order to practice acting in a variety of styles, form groups of three. Each person should take a turn introducing the other two people in the group to each other. With each introduction, the speaker should invent a new and different identity for the other two. Challenge this pair to act and speak in a style that fits the way in which they were introduced.



*The  
Actor's  
Nightmare*

by Christopher Durang

## Setting

A stage

## Characters

GEORGE SPELVIN  
MEG  
SARAH SIDDONSON  
ELLEN TERRY  
HENRY IRVING

## Time

The present



**S**cene—Basically an empty stage, maybe with a few set pieces on it or around it. GEORGE SPELVIN, a young man (20 to 30), wanders in. He looks baffled and uncertain where he is. Enter MEG, the stage manager. In jeans and sweatshirt, perhaps, pleasant, efficient, age 25 to 30 probably.

**GEORGE.** Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know how I got in here.

**MEG.** Oh, thank goodness you're here. I've been calling you.

**GEORGE.** Pardon?

**MEG.** An awful thing has happened. Eddie's been in a car accident, and you'll have to go on for him.

**GEORGE.** Good heavens, how awful. Who's Eddie?

**MEG.** Eddie. *(He looks blank.)* Edwin. You have to go on for him.

**GEORGE.** On for him.

**MEG.** Well, he can't go on. He's been in a car accident.

**GEORGE.** Yes I understood that part. But what do you mean "go on for him"?

**MEG.** You play the part. Now I know you haven't had a chance to rehearse

it exactly, but presumably you know your lines, and you've certainly seen it enough.

**GEORGE.** I don't understand. Do I know you?

**MEG.** George, we really don't have time for this kind of joshing. Half-hour. *(Exits)*

**GEORGE.** My name isn't George, it's . . . well, I don't know what it is, but it isn't George. *(Enter SARAH SIDDONSON, a glamorous actress, perhaps in a sweeping cape)*

**SARAH.** My God, did you hear about Eddie?

**GEORGE.** Yes, I did.

**SARAH.** It's just too, too awful. Now good luck tonight, George darling, we're all counting on you. Of course, you're a little too young for the part, and you are shorter than Edwin so we'll cut all the lines about bumping your head on the ceiling. And don't forget when I cough three times, that's your cue to unzip the back of my dress and then I'll slap you. We changed it from last night. *(She starts to exit.)*

## *The Actor's Nightmare*

### **Responding to the Play**

1. Do you think this play accurately represents a nightmare? Why or why not?
2. How is George's style distinct from that of any other character in this play?
3. Based on what you read in this play, how would you characterize Noel Coward's style?
4. Based on what you read in this play, how would you characterize Shakespeare's style?
5. Sketch an appropriate costume for Sarah, Ellen, or Henry.

### **More About Parody**

Parody is a form of satire in which a writer pokes fun at a well-known author's work. To write a successful parody, a writer must determine the stylistic elements and the ideas that make the author's work unique, then exaggerate them to shocking or humorous proportions.

Like the parodies found in this play, most parodies pay homage to respected masters of writing. But the form can also be used to ridicule writers or their ideas. Sometimes, writers and actors extend their use of parody beyond the literary realm. They use the principles of parody to poke fun at prominent politicians, business leaders, and celebrities.

### *Creating and Performing*

1. Write a parody of the style in a favorite book or movie. Share it with classmates and see whether they can recognize the target of your parody.
2. Design a basic costume that can be easily altered to represent different characters and historical periods.
3. Write and perform a scene between two favorite fictional or historical characters from different eras. Use diction, vocabulary, and other elements of style to point up the differences between the worlds the two characters inhabit.