As the curtain rises on Samuel Beckett's 1965 play *Come and Go*, the soft light from above dimly illuminates three motionless figures. Flo, Vi, and Ru—friends since childhood—are sitting side by side on a narrow bench-like seat; apart from the fact that each is wearing a differently colored full-length coat, the three figures are as alike as possible. Each woman in turn briefly exits, swallowed up by the surrounding darkness, allowing the two remaining to whisper some unheard, but obviously horrifying, secret about the one who has departed. When the three are once again reunited after their momentary exits, they clasp hands in a kind of chain, and Flo intones the play's closing words: "I can feel the rings." Since they have just been reminiscing about love and "what came after," Flo's comment would appear to refer to their wedding rings. Normally one would have expected this final comment to have come from Vi—partly because, given Beckett's concern with repetition and formal patterning, she was the first to speak, and partly because, as at the beginning, she is sitting in the center, theatrically the most focused position. The fact that it comes from Flo, then, strengthens the wedding ring hypothesis; of the three, she is the only one holding two left hands, and thus the only one who could possibly be in direct contact with all three wedding rings. Yet Beckett clearly states in his notes to the play: "Hands made up to be as visible as possible. No rings apparent."
Come and Go is so brief a play (even by Beckett’s recent minimalist standards) that, in the time it takes an audience to wonder, like the bewildered Mr. Shower or Cooker of Happy Days, “What does it mean? . . . What’s it meant to mean?” the curtain has already fallen. And yet, despite its brevity, the central images of Come and Go continue to haunt us long after the play is over. Who are the three women? What is it that they whisper? What are the nonexistent rings Flo refers to? And why are we so deeply affected by this enigmatic, strangely moving “dramaticule” that takes only a few minutes to perform?

Part of the answer to this last question—and thus indirectly to the previous ones—lies in the fact that, for all its deceptive verbal spareness, Come and Go is dense with literary echoes and mythic resonances. A subtle thread of allusions winds its way through the play—specifically, allusions to Shakespeare. Beckett has always been a great admirer of Shakespeare. Deirdre Bair informs us that, as a child, Beckett kept a small bust of Shakespeare on a bookshelf in his room; as an adult, he honored Shakespeare’s memory in a more meaningful way, incorporating numerous Shakespearean quotations into his writing. From his first published play Waiting for Godot, in which Lucky refers to “the divine Miranda” (p. 28B) of The Tempest, to one of his most recent, A Piece of Monologue, in which the speaker evokes The Merchant of Venice through his description of the rain “dropping gentle on the place beneath,” Beckett’s drama has consistently made use of Shakespearean allusions. Come and Go is no exception. The play is a series of “threes”: three women; three brief movements; a three-word title; a roughly three-minute performance time; and, appropriately enough, three Shakespearean echoes to tie the play’s images together and to help answer some of our puzzling questions.

The first of these echoes, as almost every critic of Come and Go has noted, is the first full line of dialogue in the play—Vi’s “When did we three last meet?”—in which we hear, too insistently for mere coincidence, the opening line of Macbeth: “When shall we three meet again?” (1.1.1). The three women of Come and Go are thus immediately associated with Macbeth’s three witches—“the weird sisters”: 
The Weird Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about;
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine.

(1.3.32-36)

"Weird" is derived from the Old English *wyrd*, meaning "fate"; Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare's source for *Macbeth*, makes the etymological link explicit by referring to the witches as "the goddesses of destiny." Like their Shakespearean counterparts, then, Beckett's threesome—hand in hand, each going about, about—evokes an image of fate—or, rather, the Fates, another trio of sisters, spinning out the web of their life and pondering their destiny.

The first Shakespearean echo thus suggests the theme of the play: *Come and Go* is, on one level at least, about human destiny. And because we are so firmly rooted, from the very outset, in a Shakespearean ambience, we are more prepared to catch the play's subtle second echo: the significance of the characters' names. In an earlier manuscript version of *Come and Go*—or, more precisely, in a tentative first sketch of a dramatic situation that would later evolve into *Come and Go*—Beckett referred to his three women simply as A, B, and C. The dialogue begins with a conversation between A and B, during the course of which they mention C's sister. Beckett apparently could not come up with the right name for the sister, and, instead of merely burrowing further into the alphabet, he gave her the title "Mrs" followed by a dash. In a later draft of the scene, a version he entitled "Good Heavens," the women were still being identified by letter, but Beckett had now chosen a specific name for the sister—Mrs. Flower. In yet a later draft—this one much fuller, and mercifully in typescript—the reference to the sister is dropped, but Beckett kept the "flower" concept of her name and transferred it to his three women, whom he calls Viola (a flower similar to a violet or pansy), Poppy, and Rose.

When Beckett finally came to write what we now know as *Come and Go*, he retained relatively little of his previous rough sketches. But he did retain, I suggest, the "flower" names for
his characters—names that sum up their fate: “As for man, his
days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For
the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof
shall know it no more” (Psalms 103:15–16). Beckett has evoked
this psalm frequently in his writings, but in *Come and Go* he
strengthens and particularizes the image—first, by personify-
ing the flower in actual characters; and second, by selecting not
just any flower names but very deliberate ones. In *Hamlet*
the mad Ophelia, mourning the death of Polonius, offers flowers to
the characters assembled on stage, alluding specifically to *rue*
and *violets*, both of which are implicitly linked with death:

> There’s rue for you; and here’s some for me. We may call it herb of
grace a Sundays. . . . There’s a daisy. I would give you some
*violets*, but they wither’d all when my father died. (4.5.177–82)

*Flo(ower), Ru(e), and Vi(olet)—Beckett’s three women bear
the cryptic traces of Ophelia’s death-flowers; the secret they
share is embodied in their very names. Thus the words they
dare not speak aloud compose a threnody, whispered intima-
tions of mortality: each of them is suffering from the same
terminal disease, the inevitability of death. In “Good Heav-
en’s,” Beckett had made the point explicit:*

> A  Mrs Flower told me C was condemned. 
    *She whispers in B’s ear.*
> B  *(appalled)* Good heavens!
> A  The worst kind. *(Pause.)* Three months.
    *(Pause.)* At the outside.
> B  Does she know?
> A  Not a suspicion. She thinks it is heartburn.9

In *Come and Go*, however, Beckett wisely opted for a more
oblique approach. The horror of the characters’ whispered
secret does not need to be spelled out; it is more palpably,
powerfully evoked in being left unspoken.

By naming his women Flo, Ru, and Vi, Beckett thus associ-
ates them, through an allusion to *Hamlet*, with both natural
phenomena (flowers) and death. A similar association under­
lies Flo’s image of “rings,” except that the natural phenomena 
are now different ones. For the characters in Come and Go, time 
is running out. Only yesterday, it seems, they were young 
girls, sitting together “in the playground at Miss Wade’s. On 
the log.” Now they have become like the log itself, the age of 
which is determined by the number of rings etched in its wood. 
“I can feel the rings,” comments Flo, her veined hands clasping 
the others’. On one level, this is a brooding reference to their 
lost youth, to the rings of the log she recalls in her mind. On 
another, it is an image of the pain and hellishness of their life, 
for the rings suggest both the movement of Macbeth’s weird 
sisters circling their “hell-broth” (“Round about the cauldron 
go” [4.1.4]), and the circles of hell in Dante’s Inferno. And on 
still another level, the most profound level, it is a haunting, 
implicit acknowledgement of the characters’ inescapable com­
mon destiny: the “rings” of inevitable aging culminating in 
their death. (Compare Beckett’s description of the Elsner sisters 
in Molloy: “Two old hands, veined, ringed, seek each other, 
clasp” [p. 163].)

And what do we do while awaiting this destiny? As the 
play’s title suggests, we come and go—shuffling aimlessly back 
and forth, marking time with the sound of our footfalls, moving 
somewhere but getting nowhere. It is an image Beckett has 
used repeatedly in his work. Malone, for example, comments: 
“Yes, I leave my happiness and go back to the race of men too, 
they come and go, often with burdens” (p. 23). Similarly, 
Camier remarks “I sense vague shadowy shapes, . . . they 
come and go with muffled cries.”

In Endgame we find the following exchange:

Hamm: How are your legs?
Clov: Bad.
Hamm: But you can walk?
Clov: I come . . . and go. (Pp. 35–36)

And Watt, attempting to emphasize the distinct “other­
worldliness” of his employer, Mr. Knott, describes him signifi­
cantly as “one who neither comes nor goes . . . .” (p. 57).
In the play *Come and Go*, however, Beckett uses the image somewhat differently. It is now not simply something to do while awaiting our destiny but rather an evocation of that destiny itself, an evocation of death. Our third Shakespearean echo is from *King Lear*: “Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither” (5.2.9-10; my emphasis). When each of the women in turn leaves the light and disappears into the darkness, we see acted out in that symbolic movement what is simultaneously being whispered about her. The verbal death verdict is thus translated into visual terms—a “going hence.” Come and go—birth and death. For Beckett it is this entire birth-death cycle that is ultimately shown to be meaningless. When the three women clasp hands at the end, the unbroken chain they form becomes an ironic emblem of eternity. The monstrous treadmill never ceases: eternity is one endlessly repeated cycle, a coming into life followed by a going into nothingness.

Between the coming and the going, amid the coming and the going, there is nevertheless always time for pain and suffering. No wonder, then, that the three women of *Come and Go* are basically interchangeable. Each may have a slightly different “color”—the shade of her coat, the shade of her flower-name—but, as in physics, the apparent color-spectrum is in reality merely a single color, variously refracted. Their individuality has narrowly constricted bounds: each is free to speak her “appalled” “Oh!” in a slightly different tone and inflection; each is free to suffer and die in her own way. (Ophelia: “O, you must wear your rue with a difference” [4.5.179-80].) Like all Beckett’s characters, they are victims of a heartless metaphysical ruse difficult to endure, an infinitely cruel divine hoax—specters from an abandoned work.

The final English-language text of *Come and Go* contains 127 words, most of them monosyllables, many of them repetitions; interestingly enough, the word most frequently repeated is “not.” In an attempt to dramatize nothingness, Beckett has pared the play of all superfluities, has shed layer after excess layer until what remains is only the barest minimum of dramatic form. As Hugh Kenner has commented, “Beckett has
very nearly made a play out of silence.”¹⁴ Very nearly, but not quite. The words are few, but they have powerful reverberations. Kenner notes elsewhere that the title of the play evokes T. S. Eliot: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.”¹⁵ The allusion is doubtless there, but if I had to choose a line from Eliot’s poetry that best relates to Come and Go, I think I might be tempted to choose instead “Those are pearls that were his eyes”—Eliot’s allusion in The Waste Land to The Tempest.¹⁶ For in the play’s reverberations, what I hear most hauntingly are the traces of three Shakespearean quotations.

Come and Go is skeletal drama of a very remarkable kind: a five-act Shakespearean tragedy played in three minutes by three ghosts playing with three echoes—Beckett’s art of allusion at its most delicate and its most cunning.

1. All references to Come and Go are to the “final,” most complete text of the play, published in Modern Drama 19 (September 1976): 257–60. See Breon Mitchell’s accompanying article, “Art in Microcosm: The Manuscript Stages of Beckett’s Come and Go,” pp. 245–54.


5. Samuel Beckett, A Piece of Monologue, Kenyon Review 1 (Summer 1979), p. 2; Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, 4.1.180–1. All references to Shakespeare are from Peter Alexander’s edition of Shakespeare: The Complete Works (London: Collins, 1951), and will henceforth be cited in the body of my text.

6. Ruby Cohn has noted that, in Beckett’s own production of his French translation of the play, Va et vient, at the Odéon, Paris, 1966, he “slowed the playing time from three to seven minutes, so that each gesture seemed wrested from stillness” (Ruby Cohn, Just Play: Beckett’s Theater [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980], p. 235).


8. I am grateful to the librarians at Reading University for allowing me to consult these manuscripts, which are in their Samuel Beckett Collection.
Note, by the way, that Richard L. Admussen, in *The Samuel Beckett Manuscripts: A Study* (London: George Prior Publishers; Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979), p. 29, lists these manuscripts incorrectly. What Admussen labels draft A ("Good Heavens") is, in fact, two separate drafts, and thus should be labeled A and A₁; A₁, the manuscript entitled "Good Heavens," is an emendation of the earlier, untitled manuscript A.

9. Ibid. "Heartburn" is an emendation; Beckett originally wrote "acidity," but then struck it out and wrote in "heartburn."


12. In Beckett's own production of *Va et vient*, even this minute color differentiation was muted: the coats were three shades of gray (see Ruby Cohn, *Just Play*, p. 235).


