

Tradition And Novelty in 20th Century English Drama

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Abstract

In establishing England's long lasting tradition of drama playwrights almost always deviated from the norms represented in foreign models that influenced them. The elements of native English drama as well as innovations by specific English playwrights interfered with the norm so as to produce a novel approach to the writing of plays in almost every period that marks the development of English drama since Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare violated the unities of time, place and action, and never stuck to the unity of genre. Restoration drama produced a highly novel use of typically English witty dialogue cleverly imposed upon the familiar classical plot structure of comedy of manners, while in the 18th century, the unpromising native genres like heroic drama and sentimental comedy were parodied by other playwrights of the time. In the late 19th century Oscar Wilde updated the traditional form of comedy of manners by a subversive use of its cliches. In early 20th century Shaw came up with his realistic comedy of ideas by leaving out Ibsen's melodramatic plot structures and blending his realistic drama of discussion with the Old Comedy of Ancient Greece represented by the work of Aristophanes. Post-war English drama enjoyed John Osborne's and Arnold Wesker's skillful use of the good old rhetoric in modern dress. Harold Pinter in turn blended the theatre of the absurd with elements of neonaturalism, while John Arden in 'Sergeant Musgrave's Dance' juxtaposed Shakespearean discourse against the Brechtian. Peter Shaffer and Carol Churchill defamiliarised the stage by replacing the 'familiar' with the 'unexpected' through novel approaches to their subject matter. Finally, in postmodernising English drama, Tom Stoppard made full use of the tradition that had reached his time through a 'playful' treatment of all the novel attitudes that had produced the 'playful' quality of English playwriting.

Özet

İngiliz tiyatro geleneğinin oluşumunda, yazarların yabancı etkileri bire bir uygulamaktan kaçındıkları görülmüştür. İngiliz tiyatrosuna ilişkin özellikler yanında yazarların kişisel yaklaşımları da, yabancı et-

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kilerin bir oranda dönüştürülerek, ortaya özgün biçimler çıkarılmasını sağlamıştır. Shakespeare'in 'yer, zaman, olay birliği' ve 'tür birliği' kurallarına uymayışı buna örnektir. Restorasyon döneminde, yüzyıllardır bilinen 'töre komedisi'nin İngilizlere özgü 'nükteli söyleşim'lerle zenginleştirilmesi, 18. yüzyılın 'kahramanlık dramı' ve 'duygusal komedi' türlerinin başka oyunlar yoluyla hicvedilmesi, 19. yüzyılın sonlarında Oscar Wilde'in İngiliz töre komedisini, toplumda moda olan davranış biçimlerini eleştirme adına ters amaçlı olarak kullanması, İngiliz yazarların kullandıkları dram türlerine her aşamada yenilik getirme çabalarının göstergesidir. İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası yazarlarından John Osborne ve Arnold Wesker'in retorik söylevleri sıradan karakterlerin konuşmalarında uygulaması, John Arden'in 'Musgrave'in Dansı' oyununda Shakespeare ve Brecht'in tiyatro söylemlerini buluşturması, Harold Pinter'in absürd tiyatro teknikleri ile yeni-doğalcı dramı buluşturması, Peter Shaffer'in ve Carol Churchill'in kendilerine özgü yaklaşımlar kullanarak oyunlarında 'tanıdık' durumları 'yabancı' kılmaları yoluyla da 'kural' her zaman 'kural dışı' kullanımlarla yeni ve farklı olana açılmıştır. Aynı özellik, İngiliz tiyatrosunun, 'norm'lardan saparak 'yenilik kotarma' geleneğini tiyatroyu postmodernleştirme yolunda 'oyunsu' bir yaklaşımla değerlendiren Tom Stoppard'ın yapıtlarında da gözlemlenmektedir.

England has enjoyed a markedly long tradition of drama and theatrical activity. In the shaping of this tradition, foreign influences as well as native developments have played a crucial role. It is important to note, however, that the playwrights of England hardly ever produced plays truly based on models exported from Europe or elsewhere. Even when they adopted the traditions established in a different culture, they never fully yielded to them. They took them and treated them in such a way that there was always a deviation from the norm, which pointed at some kind of novelty. This may be one of the reasons why important English drama has always preserved its quality of being distinct from the dramas of other cultures since Shakespeare's time.

Even the two basic traditional genres, tragedy and comedy, had changed shape in the hands of Elizabethans. While the writers of the Italian Renaissance tried to stick to the rule of three unities -of time, place and action- and unity of genre that distinguishes clearly between what is tragic and comic, most English playwrights, including Shakespeare, allowed themselves the freedom of treating their plots in various spaces and within a wide span of time. Shakespeare was also frequently accused of violating the rule of the unity of action because of his subplots. What is more, like some of his contemporaries, he upset the classical understanding of tragedy and comedy, by blending elements from both genres.

This novelty of form owes greatly to England's tradition of native medieval drama which, freely bringing the serious and the comic together and not minding the restrictions of time, space and action, appealed to the imagination of the audience for full perception of what was going on on the stage. Shakespeare's drama which depended as much on this popular native tradition as the foreign classical influence, thus remained a novel enterprise much criticised by classicists in his own time and almost banned in France for violating the basic principles of tragedy and comedy, during the French Renaissance in the 17th century. It was only in the early 19th century that, thanks to Victor Hugo's efforts to revolutionise the French theatre, Shakespeare was accepted in France.

Shakespeare's contribution to contemporary English drama, however, turns out to be his treatment of tragic and comic potential together in his comedies, so as to produce a vision of life, in which comedy turns black and tragedy becomes tolerable.

Shakespeare's novel contribution to 'comedy' has also been a major influence on later English drama. Although he made full use of the stock characters and typical plot structures received from Ancient Greek New Comedy via the two Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence, Shakespeare gave his comic plots a more 'playful' twist by increasing the number of intrigues and farcical scenes through more intricate arrangements of event and character. He also combined John Lily's elegant handling of romantic courtship through witty repartee with the traditional form of Roman comedy. His brilliant use of witty dialogue presented a novelty that would in turn become a long-lasting tradition in English drama.

Accordingly, when in the Restoration Period the stage conventions of neo-classical French theatre were imposed upon the English stage, what emerged was comedy of manners, which, in the best representatives of the genre, imposed upon the good old classical plot structure the special quality of the English sense of humour through a subtle use of verbal wit in dialogues.

English playwrights were highly critical of forms of drama that they thought had moved too far in exploiting their virtues. Just as Beaumont and Fletcher parodied the extravagant use of rhetoric in Elizabethan tragedies, in the 18th century the heroic play and sentimental comedy, two genres that promised no future for good drama were satirised in plays like Sheridan's 'A Tragedy Rehearsed' and Henry Fielding's 'Tom Thumb'. On the other hand, comedy of manners, which for almost half a century had kept on entertaining the audiences by depicting high-life in London, was in turn satirised by John Gay in his 'Beggars Opera', in which he depicts the underground life in London, by using the very elegance of manners and language as employed in the polite society mirrored in comedy of manners. This ballad-opera was so novel in its critical attitude both in form and content that almost two centuries later, Bertolt Brecht adapted it in his famous 'Threepenny Opera.'

The greatest 19th century figure in English drama was Oscar Wilde, who, instead of giving in to the realistic/naturalistic movement that swept through Europe, chose to update the English comedy of manners by a subversive use of its well-known cliches. Wilde used the conventional plot structure and the characters of comedy of manners to bring forth the artificiality of manners and false morality of Victorian society. His brilliant witty dialogue served to 'emphasise the artifice of comedy, turning it into a mirror of an artificial society.' (Innes: 1992, 217) His technique was novel in the sense that he overthrew the false moral standards of middleclass audiences by using the very weapons that had served to glorify them since Restoration times.

At the turn of the century George Bernard Shaw emerged as one of the four great realists of modern drama. He was well acquainted with the work of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov. He was greatly impressed by Ibsen's work and almost infatuated by Chekhov's. All the same, he was on his way to establish his unique kind of realism. He borrowed from Ibsen the element of discussion, but left out Ibsen's melodramatic plot structure. He went as

far back as the fifth century B.C. and found in Aristophanes, the long forgotten master of Old Comedy in Ancient Greece, his driving force toward creating a 'comedy of ideas', which allowed the employment of political/social satire and polemics. His target audience was the well-off middle classes that preferred to remain ignorant of social and economic injustice. It was for Shaw the socialist to bring out the reality hidden behind well-preserved 'appearances.' In attacking the false moral standards, and the fake romanticism or sentimentalism of his society, Shaw's weapon was his wit and his masterly use of witty dialogues -drawn from the heritage of English comedy- that turned his 'not-at-all-true-to-life' characters into lively stage figures, who, most of the time, functioned as his mouthpieces. The critical distance he established between the audience and the stage by preventing emotional attachment to any one of the characters, produced a model for Brecht in formulating his socialist-realist epic-dialectical theatre.

After the II. World War, at a time when the theatre of the absurd and epic theatre appeared in Europe, John Osborne was the new champion to revive the English stage. His 'Look Back in Anger' is revolutionary not only in depicting young Jimmy Porter's frustration and sense of alienation in the post-war situation, but mainly because of this character's masterful use of rhetoric in long speeches that produced more violence on the stage than any single violent act would. In this play John Osborne has combined English post-war naturalism and its concern with working class sensibilities with the sentimental love plot of the well-made play and has wrought a novel form by imposing upon the domestic framework of his play the power of rhetoric he has inherited from the old masters of English drama. Jimmy Porter's highly stylised speeches were novel in the sense that they were wrought with irony and parody, which all at the same time pointed to a critical attitude and an immense amount of suffering. This is a quality that would perhaps match the speeches and soliloquys of Hamlet. This attitude of highlighting neo-naturalistic drama with long speeches has also been characteristic of the work of Arnold Wesker.

Harold Pinter was the first important absurdist in English drama. He was a great admirer of Samuel Beckett, whose 'Waiting for Godot' (1953) originally written in French and first produced in France, was more European than English. When in 1957 Pinter's two one-act plays 'The Room' and 'The Dumb Waiter' appeared, however, the outcome of his absurdist vision was seen to be a combination of Beckettian characteristics -fragmented dialogue, pauses, silences, ambiguity of situation, character and event- and the prevalent neo-naturalistic clarity of setting, every day language of contemporary English working class as well as references to contemporary life in England. Pinter has built his career as dramatist by incorporating the native hue of neo-naturalism with that of European absurdism. Even his later plays that tend towards political commentary are wrought, in varying degrees, with these two contrasting dramatic attitudes.

In the 1950's Brechtian theatre had reached its peak. Yet, socialist though many were like Brecht, English playwrights refrained from directly applying the well-defined formula of Brecht's epic theatre. The first great English play that was built upon Brechtian premises was John Arden's 'Sergeant Musgrave's Dance', first produced in 1959. Regarded generally as an ambiguous play, Arden's work was no direct imitation of epic theatre in spite of its

anti-militarist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist stand. Arden went back to his Shakespearean heritage and incorporated the emotional and psychological dimensions of the Shakespearean hero as well as the Shakespearean soliloquy, scenes of sleeptalking and the technique of 'play within the play', into the cool intellectuality of Brechtian dialectic and Brechtian type-characters with social gestus. What is more, in formulating 'the play within the play' which Musgrave stages on a platform in the market place 'to catch the conscience of the' people of the town -in the manner that Hamlet sought to 'catch the conscience of the king'- Arden went far back to the tradition of morality play and presented a perverted allegory of the commandment 'You shall not kill.' In short, Arden's treatment of the epic style was novel rather than true-to-the genre, because he had drawn on his native resources rather than merely sticking to the German model. When Peter Shaffer later came up with plays in which he utilised the epic attitude, he also had his native tradition of tragedy in mind. In his most widely known plays like 'Equus' (1973) and 'Amadeus' (1979) as well as the more recent 'The Gift of the Gorgon', he took good care to insert tragic potential in his plots and present an insight into the psychology of his characters.

In 1966 Joe Orton -a 'nonconformist' throughout- came up with a play called 'Loot', the first brilliant product of English 'black comedy', which, in the long run would sweep through the English stage by the works of Alan Ayckbourn and many other recent playwrights. In 'Loots' Orton achieved novelty by juxtaposing the familiar situation of a family mourning the death of a beloved mother against the familiar plot of a bank robbery. By pouring out his protest against all established assumptions concerning order and peace in society in very polite dialogue, by using the witty repartee of comedy of manners and resorting to some of the elements of classical comedy, Orton manages to shake his audience by producing laughter on criminal acts that escape punishment. His novelty of form reflects the very novelty of his outlook on humanity. 'I suppose I am a believer in Original Sin' he says; 'People are profoundly bad, but irresistably funny.' (Orton, 1990: back cover). The back cover of the play's 1990 edition includes Harold Hobson's brilliant commentary that appeared in Sunday Times: 'Mr. Orton's play is a glittering example of the very best bad taste.'

Juxtaposition of what is 'familiar' in theatre against the 'unfamiliar' has also produced novelties in play productions. Peter Shaffer's 'Dark Comedy' of 1965 depicts a regular situation for conventional boulevard comedy. It is a play that takes place during at night time when electricity has been cut off. By making the scenes to be played in darkness performed under full light and those to be played under light in semi-darkness, Shaffer produces a brilliant farce out of the cliché elements of dialogue, plot and type-characters of the good old well-made comedy. Similarly, Caryl Churchill comments upon social, sexual and racial conditioning in 'Cloud Nine' (1979), a play built upon a familiar Victorian-colonial setting, through the use of 'role reversal' on the stage -by making a Victorian lady played by a man, her adolescent son by a woman, and a black servant by a white actor.

Finally, when Tom Stoppard was postmodernising the English stage, he was fully equipped with all the old and new conventions English drama had kept on updating by imposing new formal attitudes upon them. In 1966 he came out with 'Rosencrantz and

'Guilderstern Are Dead', a comedy of ideas -reminiscent of Shavian drama, yet a 'dark' one - on man's awareness of his existence and whether he has a choice in making his destiny. The driving force for the play was Stoppard's intertextual approach to 'Hamlet' with special focus on the two minor characters, Rose and Guil, whose fate had already been decided by Shakespeare in his tragedy. On the -already known- story of Rose and Guil, Stoppard imposed most of the absurdist aspects of Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', and made his funny/pathetic couple go through an intellectual discussion on the laws of probability in mathematics, while waiting for Shakespeare's story about them to unfold and bring them to their already decided end. In 'Travesties' (1974) Stoppard discussed the idea of 'revolution' in literature, art and politics by bringing James Joyce, Tzvetan Tzara, the champion of dadaism, and Lenin under the same roof and trapping them in the witty dialogues and comic plot of Oscar Wilde's 'Importance of Being Earnest'. The 'epic' touch was not neglected either; for the whole story was introduced and commented on by a narrator-character. In 'The Real Thing'(1982) Stoppard transposed a domestic plot about love, loyalty and deception in married life into a discussion on reality and fiction, by alternating scenes from real life and fiction and an elaborate use of intertextuality by bringing in John Ford's tragedy, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore', a sloganist piece written by a young amateur and the play written by Henry, a professional playwright and the protagonist of the play. Stoppard's work retains its novelty by his juxtaposition of a certain form of drama upon another as well as his juxtaposition of one theme upon another within the framework of the same play. He has certainly decided on the method of preserving the novelty of his drama. The over-all 'playfulness' that characterises his drama joins him with the great masters of English drama, who, by 'playfully' juxtaposing native influences against foreign ones have succeeded in producing novelty in drama.

WORKS CITED

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