

Un-official Political Theatre in Scotland: Fighting Hegemony in Lyndsay's «Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis» and McGrath's «The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil»*

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ABSTRACT

When subversiveness enters the theatrical domain it becomes a powerful weapon to redirect the masses and to display certain unofficial knowledge(s) which have been, to some extent, implicit, hidden or disguised under false appearances, thus becoming distorted. Political theatre aims at criticising from within the flaws of society at a particular moment in time and the abuses of those in power by means of providing their own version of what is "officially" accepted. Lyndsay's "Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis" and McGrath's "The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil" are examples of some sort of political or "agit-prop" theatre that emerged in two different periods of political, social and cultural upheaval in Scotland. In comparing both plays, I will show how these two Scottish plays depict the ways in which subversion enters the stage to undermine authority and how "unofficial" performances provide audiences with different portrayals of a same reality. (KEYWORDS: Hegemony, authority, ideology, subject interpellation, subversion, repression, unofficial knowledge, political agenda and agitation propaganda theatre).

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RESUMEN

Cuando la subversión entra en el terreno teatral se convierte en una poderosa arma para redirigir a las masas y desvelar ciertos conocimientos no oficiales que han estado, hasta cierto punto, implícitos, escondidos o disfrazados bajo falsas apariencias, es decir, distorsionados. El teatro político se centra en la crítica interna de los defectos de la sociedad y de los abusos de aquellos que se encuentran en el poder en un periodo concreto, a través de la creación de una versión propia de lo "oficial". "Una Sátira de los Tres Estados", de Lyndsay y "El cheviot, el ciervo y el negro, negro aceite" muestran un teatro político o de agitación propagandística que surgieron en dos periodos de malestar político, social y cultural en Escocia. Comparando ambas obras, analizare como la subversión se apodera del escenario para desprestigiar así a la autoridad y como representaciones "no oficiales" dotan a la audiencia con diferentes versiones de una misma realidad. (PALABRAS CLAVE: Hegemonía, autoridad, ideología, interpelación a un sujeto, subversión, represión, saber no oficial, agenda política y teatro propagandístico de agitación).

INTRODUCTION

I shall then suggest *ideology* "acts" or "functions" in such a way *it* "recruits" subjects among the individuals (*it* recruits them all) by *very* operation which I have called *interpellation* or *hailing*, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing, "Hey, you there!"

Althusser (1971:162-163)

Interpellation or hailing is the name that Althusser gives to the process by which the text or a fiction in general calls on a reader not only to sympathise but to identify with and therefore to occupy certain subject positions and social roles¹. It is a subjective process in which theatre, or rather, the stage, *become* a kind of mirror where identification on the part of the audience *take* place. As a result, this process of self-recognition has the outcome of particular circumstances being surprisingly revealed in a new light. This is the case with stories of oppression *have* been long silenced and of "alternative" truths having been repressed for being considered subversive and also working against hegemony.

Political or agitation-propaganda theatre is, in this way, very representative for being a kind of theatre directed at the masses which aims at making people think and act towards change, especially in periods of social, cultural and political upheaval. Ideological forms, one may say, are determined by the underlying realities of the economic structure of society so, in this way, subversive responses may arise as an outcry against systems of exploitation and oppression. In

this paper. I will show how the *stage becomes a powerful site of subversiveness and at the same time a mirror for the audience which aims to turn the world upside down for the sake of change.* I will concentrate on and, later on, compare two particular cases in the Scottish "tradition" of drama. The first one is Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, from the sixteenth century, and the other one is John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, from the nineteen seventies.

The tradition of drama in Scotland has had a history of discontinuity, but also, a history interspersed with chapters of subversiveness and repression. Drama was deeply affected by its social, political and economic circumstances at both times when these two plays were written. Firstly, if we have a look at the early history of drama we can see how it is inseparable from the history of the country itself; on the one hand, the problems with the monarchy, but also, on the other, the developments within the Church. In the early history of Scotland, and particularly, in the sixteenth century, Scotland suffered from long uncertainties over the throne, infant monarchs and long regencies.² The monarchs were not positioned against drama but these events logically prevented a context in which a popular or courtly theatre could flourish. The Church of Scotland, on the other hand, had encouraged drama in the Middle Ages, the same as had happened in Europe, but with the advent of the Reformation it turned its back on it. Although at first only religious drama was being attacked, eventually, most theatre was suppressed altogether and older kinds of drama – tests, properties and church records – destroyed. Very little has survived and that was mostly due to their literary rather than theatrical interest. According to Alan Bold, one of the few surviving examples is *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (1983: 275).

Although there is not much surviving evidence of a drama from the Middle Ages onwards, some kind of popular drama was flourishing from the thirteenth century onwards. These were called "ludi" (games) and involved some kind of semi-dramatic dancing and singing. Organised and financed by the burgh councils and performed by the people themselves, usually, with official support, these events did not take long to be tacitly sanctioned by the church. Later on, when a reaction against folk drama began in the sixteenth century, religious opposition also increased with the Reformation, this led eventually to its disappearance one century later. There were also a series of religious plays based on the Bible, which also flourished throughout Medieval Europe, but also disappeared with the Reformation.

Later on, the sixteenth century itself was a time of political and cultural transition, not only in Scotland, but throughout Britain. In the troubles of the monarchy and the Church during and after the Reformation new forms of drama were used as potent political and propaganda weapons. Serious topical issues were put on the stage and presented to an audience deeply touched as a result of the political events taking place at that time. Interestingly, the surviving evidence is all of drama being used in the interests of reform. It is commonly held that the kirk always considered the theatre a diabolic rival and was determined to fight it. However, "no matter how much the Reformed Church is often blamed for the death of the Scottish theatre, one has to bear in mind that the early reformers were not opposed to drama as such" (Craip,

1988:203). Rather, at first they seemed to have used it seeing the benefit of dialectical reform. Nevertheless, by the time James VI moved down to London, the church was a strong influence against the theatre and, the court, having been the chief patron of Scottish drama and a real source of support, prevented drama from any kind of flourishing. Had the king remained in Edinburgh, this may have given the opportunity for Scottish drama to develop new forms characteristic of the Renaissance. Nevertheless, the king and his keen interest in drama forced the Church to accept public performances by a group of English actors in Edinburgh in 1599. This can be seen, according to Cairns Craig, as "a major step towards the establishment of a commercial, public theatre in Scotland" (1988:210).

I. THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: ANE SATYRE OF THE THRIE ESTAITIS

Sir Robert Lyndsay (c.1496-c.1555), a courtier and a poet, is the author of the only surviving example of a Scottish medieval morality play. *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* is not only an example of a late medieval form of drama aiming at instruction and moral teaching, but also, a political morality play. This play bears a serious attack on the established Church and the authority of the Pope, interspersed with comic episodes highlighting clerical follies and the abuses of the time'. The subject matter of the play lent it special topical force in its day as, as Cairns Craig notices, "it was a play of ideas and its themes were presented in a lively and provocative mixture of allegory and realism that compelled the spectators to think as well as feel" (1988:206). Bearing the mark of some sort of didactic theatre, One of its aims is to provoke the moral indignation of a Scottish audience so, in this way, R. Lyndsay hardly criticises church abuses and those in power, the same as John McGrath would do later on in his play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) in relation to the history of the oppression of the Scottish people.

This sort of "action by disclosure" on the part of the writer renders the narrative as a powerful subversive weapon against authority. According to Jean Paul Sartre, "to speak is to act: anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence" (Walder, 1990:83). In this way, you render visible to an audience a hidden knowledge, you flash into the dark side of the stone the light of truthfulness and that is how repressed authenticities are surprisingly revealed to the public:

The writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has been thus laid bare [...]. The function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say the he is innocent of what it's all about"

Sartre in Walder (1990:83)

Lyndsay was clearly not a writer committed to the Reformation, according to Sarah Carpenter (1988:206). He advocated change from within rather than a rejection of the system itself but his discontentment for all the social inequalities of his time in his satirical attack on all the abuses committed by contemporary society. In my opinion, Lyndsay had a clear political agenda in mind, that is, one of changing the world by denouncing the injustices he sees around him. Again, this is "action by disclosure".

Thus, by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others in order to change it. I strike at its very heart. I transfix it, and I display it in full view: at present I dispose of it: with every word I utter. I involve myself a little more in the world, and by the same token I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it towards the future.

Sartre in Walder (1990:83)⁴

What we find in *A Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* is a play divided in two parts. In the first more abstract part we find the vices corrupting Rex Humanitas. The vices are portrayed conventionally and the sorts of temptations they provide are offered to all humans and not only to those in power. Part I is truly allegorical, representing moral forces such as Chastitie, Wantonnes, Sensualitie and Good Counsel (Lyndsay, 1989:xxvi). Different dictions being employed, one can notice how the narrator in the play calls attention to the three states: the clergy, the nobility and the merchants. Later on, in the second part of the play, the trial of condemnation of the three groups takes place in Parliament.

After this play, the history of Scottish drama was "...one of steady decadence from the end of the great Jacobean period until the end of the nineteenth century". Gifford argues (1988:429), Scottish drama would see a big production of plays by Scots between 1800 and 1900, plays for and about Scotland and the Scottish people, nevertheless, later on, there would be a period when Scottish writers would virtually vanish from the stage so that:

By the end of the [nineteenth] century, the only place where the Scottish plays, performed in Scots and by Scottish actors, were regularly mounted was in the "geggies", portable wood and canvas theatres which toured the small towns and poor areas of the country. On the other hand, "the national drama" once written mainly for the upper-classes in Edinburgh ended up as part of the staple theatrical fare, for the working classes in the city and country. However, the features of "the national drama", its mixing of genre, its use of music, its direct audience involvement, and above all its use of Scots, lived on in Pantomime, Variety and Music Hall and this tradition eventually fed back into the mainstream of Scottish Theatre in the twentieth century.

Gifford (1988: 439)

A theatre play like *The Cheviot, the Stag and The Black, Black Oil* would later on feed on these theatrical characteristics, which I will later refer to, characterised by a display of singing, dancing—all in the form of a ceilidh (Scottish traditional folk dance)- in the company's marvellous tour of Scotland.

Puritanism, Reformation, the court itself, were indeed major sweeping forces against

drama and its survival. Also, another period of social upheaval, the same as in the sixteenth century, was the 1960s and 1970s when there was a potentially revolutionary climate in Scotland. These years were an important turning point in Scottish drama because of the proliferation of theatre and especially of propaganda and political works. Glasgow had had its antecedents with Unity Theatre, a left-wing amateur group formed in 1941, which was a company committed to social realism⁵. Then would come the English theatre of the 50s and 60s with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and, finally, in the 1970s, John McGrath's company 7:84. This was a reaction against bourgeois theatre, television and film as the all-pervasive trend in cultural life at that time.

II. THE 1970s : *THE CHEVIOT, THE STAG AND THE BLACK, BLACK OIL*

The 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) was first formed in London in 1971 and took its name as the result of a statistic asserting that 7 per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the capital wealth. John McGrath, a founder-member of the London-based company, then moved to Scotland to develop 7:84 as a touring group of players. In 1973, McGrath toured Scotland with his play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, characterised by his recreation of the tragi-comedy of Scottish history. The actors were encouraged to participate in the making of the play and in this way *The Cheviot* used songs, jokes, music hall sketches, parodies, anecdotes, documents and plain propagandist statements to remind Scotland of the dark story of the Highland Clearances. In this way, serious political issues alternated with knock-about farce, thus it participates in the tradition of "national drama", sharing the characteristics of the "geggie-style" kind of drama taking place by the end of the nineteenth century, as has been discussed already.

The ceilidh, a lively Scottish group dance, was the vehicle chosen by the Company to perform the facts that shaped a known history of oppression in the Highlands and in Scotland as a whole. As the only truly form of popular entertainment in Scotland, past and present, the ceilidh provided the ideal kind of social gathering for open discussion as "what we were struggling to say was what they, and masses of people in Scotland, wanted to say. Now" (McGrath, 1993:v). In the preface to his work, McGrath emphasised the political side of these social gatherings but also their helping hand in preserving the Gaelic culture. McGrath wanted to keep this "assembly of songs, stories, scenes and talk, music in general and general entertainment- and to tell through the story of what had happened and is now happening to the people" (McGrath, 1993:x). After more than a hundred shows in Scotland, 30.000 people having seen the play and 17.000 miles of travel, he well reached his objective.

One of the reasons of the success of 7:84 was the way the cast drew the audience into the action as if all the people present at a given performance were involved in an open conspiracy

against authority. Taking a political and revolutionary stand, the actors were not really performing, but rather, expounding an argument they all believed in. As Umberto Eco once noted, "theatre is, among the various arts, the one in which the whole of human experience is co-involved so not only human bodies, but also artifacts, music and literary expressions take place at the same moment" (Walder, 1990:15). This is what happens in *The Cheviot*. The actors worked together a great deal and were able to combine an enormous number of skills, acting, singing, dancing, playing the guitar, the tiddle and the pipes which originally helped to shape and create the actual play⁶. McGrath stressed the fact that his company wanted to present in Scotland the realities of working-class people and history directly to working class audiences without translating it into the language of the bourgeois theatre which had dominated the stage until the 1890s. So he relied on a theatre whose roots were in the popular tradition of entertainment while he seriously upheld working class values as part of his system of beliefs.

Obviously I, as a writer, had a very clear idea of exactly how I wanted the show to be. I knew who it was for, and I know what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. But I also wanted everybody in the company to be intimately involved in the actual process of creating it.

McGrath (1993:viii)

What was intended with *The Cheviot* was that the audience was not meant to be passive spectators of a play, but rather, potential participants in the political action dramatised before their eyes. They had to come to grips with a reality shaped by political issues in which they lived immersed and thus, confront a political proposition via entertainment. It was some kind of dialectical theatre that uncovered history and taught the people in the audience not to forget a past of oppression. McGrath's concept of the theatre as a place of class conflict had its genesis in the Epic Theatre developed by Brecht and Piscator in the 1920s⁷. The same as Brecht, McGrath used drama to make people think and, as Theodor Adorno says, I would also agree with him in the fact that "it is futile to try to separate the beauties, real or imaginary, of [his] works from their political intentions" (Walder, 1990:94).

The vivacity of his work no doubt made him and his company something of a cult in Scotland during the revolutionary decade of the 1970s. The performance itself starts with a song being played on the tiddle: "These are my mountains" and with a first allusion to the battle of Culloden and the condition in which the Highlands were left after it, with the subsequent forbidding of the Gaelic speech. The narrator, M.C., is just one generic name which may stand for the authorial voice of John McGrath and which, in any case, is accompanied by a series of characters all of whom appear to have generic names as they stand for generic people. These characters are signs, they are "representations intentionally produced by human beings in order to communicate" (Walder 1990:119). This refers to a process of ostension which is, according to Umberto Eco, "one of the various ways of signifying, consisting of de-realising a given object in order to make it stand for an entire class..." (117).

The figure of the cheviot - a new breed of sheep able to endure cold winters- becomes

then very representative in this climate of oppression. The period in which it was introduced signalled the time when people were expelled from their homes either by way of migration or draining to the coastline where the fishing industry was flourishing. Surprisingly, the Gaelic language still pervades in an oppressed atmosphere where the communication between the older and the new generation of Gaelic speakers still takes place. Gaelic speech acts, then, as a powerful site of resistance against giving up their land and language, thus becoming a subversive weapon against hegemony. Making the audience aware of their own true language, McGrath is pointing towards the necessity to be rebellious in the face of a foreign language. In this way, subversiveness enters the linguistic domain.

One of the truths or subversive knowledges soon to be revealed to the audience sometime during the performance is the enormous importance played by Scottish women in their resistance against domination and subjugation. This is done by the company with their revealing of a series of factual data in relation to the poor performance of men in their resistance against authority. This also becomes another type of subversive knowledge in so far as it attacks not the English but patriarchy in general, and especially the role played by Scottish men in their fight against authority. So, while the police served to enact this repression through physical force as part of the Ideological State Apparatuses existing at the time, the law and the Church also agreed to accept these abuses as part of the system, as can be seen from this extract:

Reader 5: "Sheriff Taylor accompanied by several officers and a police force of about thirty or more arrived at Greenyards, near Bonar Bridge, and found about 300 people, two thirds of whom were women. The women stood in front, armed with stones, while the men occupied the background. The women as they bore the brunt of the battle were the principle sufferers, a large number of them being seriously hurt, the wounds on their skulls and bodies showing plainly, the severe manner in which they had been dealt with by the police when they were retreating."

McGrath (1993:12)

First, it was the cheviot, which stands for the sheep, and, more generally, the Highland Clearances, but then, there appears the stag, another symbol which refers to the Victorian period in which gentlemen from England went up to Scotland to practice their favourite sport: deer hunting. In this way, the proud monarch of the glen becomes a very representative figure of this period, the same as at Balmoral Castle, tartans and kilts have become fashionable items, traditional landmarks for "typically Highland" with the ever increasing growth of the Scottish tourist industry. In this second chapter of oppression of the Scottish people we have the figures of noblemen like the Duke of Sutherland and Queen Victoria who are satirically attacked for their abuses of the Scottish people. Thus, the Company places itself in authority not to directly undermine it but in order to place authority in opposition to the people of the Highlands. In this way, the audience is compelled to find a place for the real judgement of the events that are presented to them. Nevertheless, a critique against authority is continuously taking place throughout the play by the continuous highlighting of the history of oppression undergone by

people in Scotland.

As we find the figures of the Indians standing for the native peoples of Scotland, the sturdy Highlander thus becomes a coloniser himself in the episode of the creation of Hudson Bay's Company during the history of Scottish migration. Funnily enough, the character of Harriet Beecher Stowe in the play is ironically put side to side with the character of Harriet the Duchess of Sutherland, irony and satire always working to undermine authority. Finally, the characters of Whitehall, Texas Jim and Lord Polwarth embody the figures of exploitation in relation to the discovery of the North Sea Oil. So, if in the past it was the clerical abuses, the cheviot and the stag, nowadays it is not only North Sea Oil but also the Skye Bridge problem among the many other issues preoccupying the new Scottish Parliament⁸.

III. PAST AND PRESENT: UN-OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGES AND THE POLITICISATION OF THEATRE

In comparing these two plays worth noting a series of common characteristics that they share with each other. History, some form of capitalism, the abuses of those in power, past and present, are all intertwined in these two plays which are two mirrors held up to society—and the audience—both plays dealing with notions of power and hegemony, culture, identity and processes of self-identification. These two particular episodes of Scottish drama show how historical and cultural conditions from the past still have a stronghold in the Scottish present and how performances provide audiences with stimulating “un-official” portrayals of reality.

First of all, one has to notice their inixture of the comic and the serious as they highlight the abuses of those in power over the underprivileged classes in society. This inspires both writers to make social and political comments aimed at reform. We could also argue, the same as Jean Paul Sartre does, that both Lyndsay and McGrath are committed writers as “the writer is, par excellence, a mediator and his coininitient is to mediation...when he causes the coininitient of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and for others, to the reflective” (Walder, 1990:86). Both share the fact as well that, as Calvino argues, “...society today demands that the writer raise his voice if he wants to be heard, propose ideas that will have impact on the public, push all his instinctive reactions to extremes...” (Walder, 1990:99).⁹

Generally, both plays are instances of consciousness raising and “agit-prop” theatre. However different they are, there are clear similarities between both messages. These two Scottish plays act as thinly disguised political statements of the condition of Scotland. *Ane Satyre* is a morality play in which we have the vices corrupting Rex Humanitas. Its characters are personifications, allegories contributing to make a political critique and satire of the clergy and the society in general of its time. Whereas the three estates which are focused upon and also referred to in the title of Lyndsay's play embody figures of exploitation—that is, the three states

in Medieval society- in the case of McGrath's play the patterns of exploitation are embodied by the figures of the cheviot, the stag and the North Sea Oil and the consequences that these have had in relation to Scottish history and society so far.

Lyndsay, like same as McGrath, uses a wide variety of theatrical techniques to engage his audience but also to convey his points: song, movement, and, in particular, compellingly emblematic action. *The Cheviot* is an example of Menippean satire with different modes being employed: songs, ceilidh material, documentary realism, mythical elements and popular culture, etc. Apart from the common use of a variety of theatrical devices, one cannot forget the linguistic issue in a trilingual Scotland when comparing these two plays. Generally, the Scottish writer has always had to decide whether to write in English, Scots, or even Gaelic. Lyndsay's humorous and expressive use of the vernacular parallels to some extent McGrath's introduction of Gaelic speech and Scots in opposition to English. In the 1970s, as I have already argued, there was something of an explosive revival of dramatic activity in Scotland and, as a result, most of the plays were written in some kind of Scots. In the case of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black, Oil* (1973), its use of Gaelic speech echoes the voices of the Highland peoples of Scotland and their lives, the Celtic tradition and their folklore in general.

Finally, another factor to bear in mind in relation to these two plays is the fact that when they were first presented they were exceptions to the rule as they portrayed a reality that did not relate to a past situation but which, instead, related to present events, hence their engagement with a critique of their own society at a particular time. It seems to me that these two playwrights, as Sartre would probably argue,

speak for freedoms which are swallowed up, masked, unavailable and his audience are people of the same period and community, who have lived through the same events, who have raised or avoided the same questions, have the same taste in their nourish: they have the same complicity.

Walder (1990:84)

Complicity, a sense of community and identity together with the interaction between the audience and what is being performed on the stage may be the key solution to undermine or attack deviations from normality, power excesses and at the same time contest hegemony by bringing up a disclosure of hidden knowledges. The attack may come either from within authority, as in *Ane Satyre*, or from outside it, from the people themselves, as in *The Cheviot*. Nevertheless, when subversion enters the stage the result is that events can only be looked upon in a different new perspective, and thus, simply become unofficial.

NOTES:

In order to know how ideological state apparatuses work and to know more about what Althusser calls "interpellation" read the chapter entitled "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)", pp. 121-173.

For a full commentary on the early Scottish drama, read the article by Sarah Carpenter in *The History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 1, ed. by Cairns Craig, pp. 199-211

³ For a commentary on the play itself, read the introduction to *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, also Sarah Carpenter's comments in her essay "Early Scottish Drama", pp. 204-207.

⁴ Jean Paul Sartre, "Writing, Reading and the Public", pp. 83-89

⁵ For an account on the history of Scottish theatre, and also, Scottish theatre since the seventies, *A History of Scotland*, by Bill Findlay, and also, *Scottish Theatre Since the Seventies*, are very illuminating books.

⁶ Read the introduction to *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* for background information on the creation of the actual play.

For an account of British epic theatre after Brecht and Piscator, read Reinelt and Janelle, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater*.

⁸ *Scotland Series of Debates*. Vote 99 on Scottish Television before the elections for the Scottish Parliament presented a series of main issues and concerns about the future of Scotland, one of them being economy and the question of who owns Scotland.

⁹ "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature", in Walder, Dennis, *Literature in the Modern World*, pp. 99-102.

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