

ELIZABETHANS ON MODERN STAGE. SHAKESPEARE AND
MARLOWE VERSUS MAROWITZ AND BOND

MARTA WISZNIOWSKA

University of Silesia, Katowice

Modern drama, performed or merely read, can be a rewarding experience in spite of the voices about a prolonged crisis it has found itself in. Perhaps the crisis in the theatre is not as crippling as some people believe it to be.

Out of a variety of trends and names, a guiding principle becomes evident. We do not come across 'famous playwrights' as naturally as we used to in drama history. British leading dramatists are likely to become stars of one season or, at best, they write a couple of plays for which they are genuinely famous for some time. This is the case of Robert Bolt. He, more than anybody else, is the playwright of one play — *A man for all seasons*. We can add his follow-up play, *Vivat! Vivat, regina*, knowing very well that it failed short of the standard set by the earlier drama. The same principle holds true about such playwrights as Edward Bond, known as the author of *Saved* and *Narrow road to the deep north*, Joe Orton, remembered chiefly as the author of *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and *Loot*; and D. Storey (*The contractor*, *Home*) to mention just a few of them.

The names enumerated above should make us aware of the quickness of change on the theatrical map of Britain (and most probably other countries as well). Owing to the popularity of one play, it seems to be leading the life of its own, with little or no regard to its creator. Separate plays and performances overshadow the man behind the drama. A good stage debut can make or mar the playwright for good. To date we speak more often about the style of a performance than that of a given playwright.

I believe that the change in attitude had influenced the fate of the classical repertoire on modern stage. No longer bound by traditional approaches, freed from the burden of traditional acting, producers and companies were able to take up the initiative of reviving the classics according to their own visions.

The breakthrough came with commemorating Shakespeare's anniversary in 1964. If I were to single out one man who laid the foundations for the new Shakespeare I would point to Peter Brook and his production of *King Lear*. The novelty of his performance lay in the fact that he dared to stage it exposing the elements that until then passed unnoticed. Brook looked back to the theatre of cruelty to show the tragedy of the king, to Artaud and Kott. Yet, an important reservation should be made here, Brook always remained faithful to the text of Shakespeare's play. To the best of my knowledge, he has never offered any version of his Shakespeare for print, either.

Other performances I plan to discuss in this paper have violated the sacredness of the text and both Marowitz and Bond produced their own versions of famous Elizabethan dramas.

Marowitz started with *Hamlet* (1965), *Macbeth* (1969), and followed with *Doctor Faustus* (date of the performance could not be established). More recently Edward Bond came up with his version of *King Lear*, called *Lear* (1971). In course of this paper I will also be referring to the once famous play by Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. This play, however, takes up only a fragment of the original plot and bears little resemblance to *Hamlet*.

The modernized versions I wish to present here fall into two categories according to their use of the original Shakespeare's plays. Marowitz kept Shakespeare's language, while Bond and Stoppard wrote their dramas in everyday English.

The procedure I plan to adopt here is very simple. The originals and the adaptations are going to be compared, taking into account the elements which were left unchanged and those that were changed or added. In both cases I will be trying to establish the significance of these (un)changes for the new versions. This might lead to establishing some principles which the authors adopted in their work. For that I will also use their own opinions on the subject (Marowitz and Bond provided prefaces for their printed versions). Their theatrical claims may be referred, further on, to the common theories in modern drama. I hope to be able at least to point to certain recurrent attitudes and devices common to the majority of contemporary dramas. One may also feel that the proper way of rounding up such essay is to evaluate the phenomenon, which I call a new approach to Elizabethan classics. This is precisely the point not too easy to deal with. A person writing about contemporary drama feels that he lacks the perspective to make sound value judgements; besides, what seems justifiable in e.g. 1975, sounds outdated five years later. Modern theatre is a living organism so that every attempt at a vivisection is an attempt to kill. The process of rereading and reinterpreting the classics is well under way and it can hardly be summed up yet.

1. Marowitz's approach to Shakespeare

The most striking factor in his method is a considerable lack of reverence with which the classics have been treated. From the start Marowitz calls *Macbeth* "a jinxed play" (Marowitz 1968:7). The same holds true about *Hamlet*. Marowitz starts his introduction with discarding the traditional criticism of these plays. He goes to the extremes of consciously ignoring both the critical heritage and traditional staging of the plays. The aim he has in view is an ambitious one, this is to make Shakespeare interesting for contemporary audiences. He also strains to recapture some of the excitement that must have accompanied original Shakespearean productions (Marowitz 1968: 12 - 14).

Both adaptations are considerably shorter than Shakespeare's dramas. Yet they use the original texts in the most intriguing manner. Marowitz called *Hamlet* "a collage" and the same applies to *Macbeth*. The texts are sliced and reshuffled, acts and scenes abandoned in favour of a cut-in technique. The chronology of events is kept but roughly, that is, the protagonists die towards the end of the play, the ghost and the witches are presented towards the beginning, but otherwise scenes and events that constitute the plot are mixed up. In *Hamlet* the ghost stays on the stage (and talks) throughout the play. Since there was no part for him in Shakespeare, he often utters Polonius's lines and behaves as if he were the courtier and informer Polonius was. In *Macbeth* the witches are kept on the stage, mainly as waiting women to Lady Macbeth, but also as messengers and courtiers. One of them takes up the part of messenger who comes to warn Lady Macduff of the coming danger (Marowitz 1971: 88). Lady Macbeth herself is presented as a witch, for at the very beginning of the play she plays with an effigy of her husband (sic!).

The continuing presence of the supernatural world should not pass without a comment here. For those who know Shakespeare well it will provide a comic side-effect, with the ghost playing Polonius, etc. But such effect is lost on the audience who has no intimate knowledge of the prototype play. So the idea behind the whole endeavour must have been different. Marowitz observes quite rightly that the ghost is terribly unconvincing in the theatre, besides being very difficult to render (Marowitz 1968:26). Both the ghost and witches are made more human. Resigning from the supernatural world proper, which nobody believes these days, he offers another vision instead. The natural and supernatural are much closer together. In fact, there is no sharp distinction between them. Besides, we still live in the world full of hidden fears and open atrocities, so the very idea of the terrifying supernatural is not foreign to us. Incorporating these apparitions into the mundane helps to accept them as part of it. At the same time these apparitions become more life-like and less mysterious. The supernatural world is thus demystified but not cut off from

reality. Ultimately, its original function is kept, but the means of expressing it have been changed.

The next important innovation that the director introduced was stripping the characters off their traditional heroic costume. Consequently, Hamlet is presented as an accomplice in the murder of his father, as the players in Elsinore have it. He himself administers poison into his father's ear. Ophelia, whom Marowitz compares to Lolita in his preface (Marowitz 1968: 22 - 26), is a cunning slut who tries to seduce not only Hamlet but also king Claudius. As a matter of interest I hasten to add that according to Marowitz she succeeded with Hamlet before the play had begun.

The unquestionable depth of Hamlet's character is jeopardised by excluding all his monologues from the collage. Now and again Hamlet uses clusters (a line or half a line) made of his most famous and catching phrases from the monologues. Yet the familiarity of these phrases makes his feeble efforts at gaining some dignity even more deplorable. Hamlet shrinks to a figure of fun, a non-entity, or perhaps to what Marowitz defines as a playboy who fiddles with the situation in order to avoid action and responsibility (Marowitz 1968:13 - 15).

Macbeth offers a different device which serves to belittle him in the eyes of his audience. His character is split into three Macbeths. Their function does not seem clear (though humorous it can certainly be) until it comes to the murder of Lady Macduff and her son, performed by two Macbeths (Marowitz 1971: 89). Banquo, in turn, is stabbed by Lady Macbeth. By splitting Macbeth, Marowitz achieved a clear-cut vision of his personality. Macbeth is popularly taken for a good but weak man, who yields to one, and consequently, to a series of temptations. Here he seems weak and wicked, and also cowardly. By doing away with his famous monologues the play offers no grounds for treating him in the accepted way. For me, the essence of this traditional approach has been summed up by Sir A. Quiller-Couch in "there but for the grace of God go I".

The good and innocent play very unimportant role in the dramas, for they are either changed (Hamlet, Ophelia), or their parts considerably shortened (Duncan, Banquo, Macduff). Levelling down all characters makes Marowitz productions very much a group endeavour, in contrast with the star system, for which nineteenth and twentieth century productions were famous. The idea of a group performance seems more in accord with the spirit of Shakespearean theatre.

The importance of company as a whole might bring suspicions that it has been achieved at the cost of psychological depth, for which Shakespeare tragedies have been renowned. Yet this is not so. By materializing ghosts and witches Marowitz brought hidden fears into the daylight. In Shakespeare's criticism there is also an opinion that these apparitions are figments of imagination of the protagonists. This idea lies behind Marowitz's conception (Marowitz

1968:37). According to the knowledge common to contemporary man, we all have hidden fears. We are as much in the midst of the hostile universe as Shakespeare's characters had been, or we believe it to be so. Thus, the virtue of the adaptation lies in the fact that these fears, thoughts, hesitations, turning over problems, are made convincing to contemporary audience.

Still, the new Hamlet we watch on the stage is different from the Hamlet of Shakespeare. As I have already mentioned, the degrading in moral statue has contributed to this change.

Marowitz also maintains that "Hamlet takes place in Hamlet. We see the sights because they are reflected through Hamlet's sensibility. Elsinore is a figment of Hamlet's imagination; so are Gertrude, Claudius, and the Ghost. So is poetry; so is pleasure, and pain. Hamlet's cerebrum is our cyclodrama, his forehead, our proscenium arch. The recess of Hamlet's mind are our flies. An 'interiour' is not simply the 'insight of a room', but the inner perspective of the people who inhabit that room. A colour is an emotional hue" (Marowitz 1968:37).

Later on Marowitz opposes the continuity in the theatre as obsolete and psychologically false (Marowitz 1968:38). But this standpoint about *Hamlet* is dropped in *Macbeth*. He finds the play "incontrovertible" and very much a plot (Marowitz 1971: 9): "*Macbeth* is a plot; a series of inescapably chronological incidents which defy reshuffling or reduction. To play *Macbeth* is to embroll oneself in the mechanics of that murder-mystery, that detective, that horror story which is the play".

He also accounts for the forces of good and evil in the play by quoting a well known interpretation about the wheel of fortune and phrasing it as "inescapability of retribution" (Marowitz 1971: 9). He offers his own interpretation of the wheel of fortune in *Macbeth*. For him Macbeth's tragedy lies in his state, in being an uncomplicated character, a soldier who is chosen to assassinate a head-of-state, or a human being assigned to murder God. If Macbeth consents to murder, Marowitz reasons, he does it for the sheer thrill of committing sacrilege. Macbeth, in the adaptation, is treated as a man unambitious and a scapegoat the evil powers have picked up (Marowitz 1971: 10 - 11). According to the author, there is no evidence of Macbeth's concealed ambitions. To bring out Macbeth as such a character, Marowitz introduced similar cuttings as in *Hamlet*. Divided into three separate Macbeths, the protagonist is even more belittled and helpless. Marowitz admits that Lady Macbeth is made diabolic on purpose and with the witches they make for the ritual witchcraft of the play. Macbeth is at home with this side of reality, but is never able to understand the causes of his downfall (Marowitz 1971: 12 - 13). Incidentally, the original Macbeth could not understand them, either.

The method of making up a collage is in both cases seemingly identical, but Marowitz uses it for different purposes and also achieves different results.

By cutting monologues, degrading the protagonists, changing their relations to other characters, he made up a neurotic Hamlet, full of fears and pretences. By doing the same to the original Macbeth he narrowed his psychological depth, pushed him down in his awareness of crime, reduced him to a tool.

As was mentioned already, the original texts have been moulded up. Marowitz resigned from the original rhythmical pattern of Shakespearian stanza. Instead, he introduced cuts in the length of the line, often splitting it into two and combining with another half line. Consequently, the text does not sound like blank verse at all. On the whole, the line is shorter and the rhythm falters. The speech of the players in Elsinore is preserved carefully, owing to its simplicity of rhymes and rhythms. That unheroic verse comes out more forcefully than in the original *Hamlet*. Similarly, the protagonists who chant what is known to be fragments of their lengthy speeches sound very much like the players. Thus Marowitz makes it evident that he aimed at degrading Macbeth and Hamlet and he managed to doubt their sincerity on a purely linguistic level, which certainly is a considerable achievement.

2. Marowitz and *Doctor Faustus*

The tragical history of doctor Faustus was prepared by Marowitz for the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow (Marowitz 1968: 101). While working on it, he said he realized that "not only was FAUSTUS a flawed masterpiece but the enormity of those flaws almost invalidated the qualities which made it a masterpiece at all".

Marowitz, then, is invariably critical about Elizabethan dramatists. Needless to say that such an opinion is better suited for Marlowe than for Shakespeare. Marowitz understands *Doctor Faustus* as a Christian parable, the quality of which he wished to keep, but also sees a strong contemporary element in it. This regards "the assaulted conscience of a scientist who trespassed the bounds of permissible knowledge, has almost exact parallel in the case of J. Roberts Oppenheimer and certain other nuclear physicists who first enthused and then abominated the making of the atom and hydrogen bombs" (Marowitz 1968: 101). To make sure that the similarity between the scientists does not pass unnoticed he added a short dialogue between Faustus and Oppenheimer, which is conducted in purgatory. The dialogue is a kind of theatrical prologue to the play and is certainly a very risky innovation to make. The very idea sounds unconvincing and the parallel, if existing at all, appears far-fetched. Besides, the dialogue in purgatory is bound to be static, which is no virtue in the theatre, either.

Yet the dialogue is a *tour de force*, for the characters reveal all our possible misgivings about putting their crimes side by side. Faustus observes that his

experiments brought misfortune only to him personally, while Oppenheimer is responsible for the destruction of large numbers. Oppenheimer defends himself that it was Faustus who paved the way for scientists to seek forbidden knowledge. He also puts forward a belief that scientist should be absolutely free in his inquiry. Oppenheimer also observes that his responsibility was in fact no longer his in the time of war, for final decisions belonged to the government and not to him.

The dialogue ends with a touch of humour. Oppenheimer mentions new kinds of destructive weapons still manufactured to date. One of them is a bomb which destroys humans and leaves property unharmed. Faustus as a true scientist is thrilled with the idea and asks Oppenheimer to explain to him how it works. Being a scientist, too, Oppenheimer cannot let go such an opportunity, so the two damned men leave the stage deeply involved in a discussion (Marowitz 1968: 102 - 108).

The changes introduced to the original play are also considerable. The drama is reshaped as a court hearing, in which the judge and prosecutor are figures invented by Marowitz. A character of diplomat is also added. The setting is modernized. Mephistophilis appears as a well dressed business man, carrying an attaché case. In the scene of signing the compact with the devil, when Faustus's blood refuses to flow from the stab, Mephistophilis comes with a gold lighter instead of a chafer of coals which he brings in Marlowe.

The modernizing is not consistent, though. Faustus is encircled by monks in the court, so it looks like the Inquisition. Yet the idea of trial provided a good frame for that chaotic and episodic drama. Marowitz's version gained in clarity and speed. It also escapes the charge of Faustus not using the forbidden knowledge in any intelligent and convincing way. In Marowitz the crimes Faustus committed are mentioned in the court as charges and the tricks he performed are presented as very spiteful and violent. This applies to the scene with the Pope (Marowitz 1968: 138 - 139). Other offences when enumerated in courtroom sound grave and are more likely to be taken for granted, without being illustrated with appropriate episodes.

Marowitz remains faithful to his idea of humanizing the supernatural. The devil is benevolent and threatening at the same time. He can be accepted as an evil man; the amount of evil being countless in our experience.

It seems to me that *Doctor Faustus* is the best adaptation, out of the three discussed here, that Marowitz had written. As for the language of the play, he employed the same criteria as before. He used original texts from both surviving versions of *Doctor Faustus*, and also some speeches from *Tamburlaine the Great*, only the dialogue in purgatory is written as an independent piece of drama. Marlowian rhetoric has been preserved owing to the setting of the play. The courtroom invited lengthy and flowery speeches and thus Marowitz found a very suitable form for his performance.

3. Edward Bond, *Lear*

Bond moved his *Lear* into an epoch unrecognizable from historical point of view, but full of cruelty, corruption and violence. He made it into a study of corrupt government. The playwright also admits that every government has violence and murder as chief weapons. Lear is depicted as an absurdly cruel king, and so are his daughters when they come to power. Before that they are compassionate and just, and it is Lear who instructs them that he cannot afford to be just and forgiving (Bond 1972 : 4 - 5). The third cabinet reshuffle takes place after Lear's daughters are defeated. The new government consists of Cordelia, who is not Lear's daughter in the play, and a carpenter, her second husband. It comes as a shock to the audience that Cordelia let the same crimes be committed in her name as her father and sisters did before. Lear dies at the end of the play; he is shot dead while working on the wall that had been built during his reign and never finished. This wall was Lear's pet idea for it was to protect the country from the two dukes his daughters married eventually, thus starting the war with their father. The new government under Cordelia is gradually reconciled to the only way ruling can be conducted, by indiscriminate violence. In the play, Bond changes names, the plot, and the sequence of events and remains faithful to his vision of the world as a place of injustice and violence. We are spared no gory details, such as torture, rape, shooting innocent people dead, absurd cruelty of prison wardens and soldiers, even an autopsy conducted on the body of Fontanelle (Bond 1972 : 58-59). The play is a rather inconclusive study of violence and cruelty, akin to Bond's former plays, such as *Early morning* or *Narrow road to the deep north*.

The corruption of the original is very considerable, indeed. The names of the daughters have been changed into Fontanelle and Bodice. The part of Cordelia is nullified. The same happens to such Shakespearian characters as Gloucester, Edmund, Edgar, and Kent. Certain resemblance, however, can be traced between Kent and the gravedigger's boy, whom Bond invents and introduces as Cordelia's first husband, murdered in the course of events. Cordelia and her husband are the only ones who show Lear compassion and kindness. Yet this does not last, either. The gravedigger's boy is killed and Cordelia completely changed when she takes up leadership.

Humane virtues are rare in this world. This attitude is held by Bond in the preface to the play (Bond 1972 : V - XIV). He speaks about aggression in society against a much wider context than that in the play. He considers aggression as human ability and not necessity, necessitated, however, by social structure, especially by social morality. Social morality supports the interests of the privileged. Morality is the repression of basic human interests and thus creates a need for countermeasures.

Bond devoted very little space to the actual analysis of his play. At least

one thing he said should be noticed. He maintained that the introduction of about 70 characters into his *Lear* aims at showing man in society. This is a similarity he shares with Marowitz as to the importance of a group acting.

As far as the presentation of the original goes, Bond transgresses the limits set by Marowitz. He uses contemporary idiom, introduces new characters and new subplots. The story of Lear and his wicked daughters ends with death, which is almost the only resemblance it bears to the original story.

4. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*

Stoppard went a long way from the original, since he turned his play into comedy. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* is a kind of collage, consisting mainly of two elements on the lexical level. There are some unadulterated dialogues from *Hamlet*, mixed up with colloquial ones. The humorous vein is carried by two would-be spies, whom Stoppard showed as pathetically stupid and naive. They play heads and tails and make imaginary dialogues with king Claudius, then they enact their prospective meeting with Hamlet, and still later with the king of England. Thus, the play is full of dialogues, real and imagined. The characters turn to Shakespeare's language when dealing with other Shakespearian characters. When talking with each other they use newly written dialogues.

Similarly to Marowitz's method, the lines have been cut so as to resemble irregular verse, thus losing the rhythm of the original. But, unlike Marowitz's, the dialogues are presented in a lump, so that the audience soon finds whether they listen to Shakespeare or to Stoppard.

Stoppard uses the plot very freely, adding such hilarious scenes as the heads and tails game, the players, their complaints and their shameless attempts of getting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern interested in the teenager boy, Alfred. Very funny, indeed, is the scene of the sea storm, non-existent in *Hamlet*.

The mixing of comic and serious elements corresponds with the use of Shakespeare's text for serious parts, and colloquial prose for the comic ones.

All plays discussed here bear some similarities concerning the technique of making adaptations. The form of collage is commonly used, though the name is very general and covers various manipulations with the text. The technique is popular to date, not excessively in the theatre, but more in prose.

The application of this technique for Shakespeare reveals a new aspect of the problem. Shakespeare has been treated in the way famous myths are treated, such as Oedipus, or Orestes. These myths have come to be treated as separate stories which can function outside their proper context.

The endeavour Marowitz and Bond have undertaken may have the same aim in view concerning British culture.

Both authors have been working within the popular convention of the time, that of Artaud and the theatre of cruelty. One can also detect some elements of Brechtian theatre in the adaptations.

Other affinities with common conventions may be mentioned. Stoppard uses the absurd in drama, to some extent Marowitz does this as well. The plays are also characteristic for their functional treatment of evil. The evil comes to us in very convincing terms. It is a character, as evil doer, a devil personified, but always shaped as a human being or acting as one. The idea of evil has lost its metaphysical value, turning towards purely functional. As the popular proverb has it, handsome is that handsome does, the reverse applies to the idea of evil in the plays.

Reducing excesses is another feature shared by Marowitz and Bond. They prune down the heroic in the plays. The lack of heroic stature and the diminishing of characters' royal dignity is a rule. This phenomenon is interwoven with the change in the language to suit the new ideas.

Sheer statistics makes us unable to draw any far reaching conclusions. Examining the plays I was trying to point to the originality of the new approach and also to the affinities with the current dramatic practice. I believe that these experiments with the classics show their timeless value and are important for the very fact of being experiments conducted on Shakespeare and Marlowe.

REFERENCES

- Artaud, A. 1964. *The theatre and its double*. London: Calder and Boyars.
 Bond, E. 1972. *Lear*. London: Methuen.
 Brook, R. 1968. *The empty space*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
 Kott, J. 1965. *Szekspir współczesny*. Warszawa: PIW.
 Marowitz, Ch. 1968. *The Marowitz Hamlet, The tragical history of doctor Faustus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
 Marowitz, Ch. 1971. *A Macbeth*. London: Calder and Boyars.
 Stoppard, T. 1967. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. London: Faber and Faber.
 Taylor, J. R. 1971. *The second wave. British drama for the seventies*. London: Methuen.