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SHAKESPEAREAN THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY
ENGLISH DRAMA WITH A SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO TOM STOPPARD AND
EDWARD BOND
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INTRODUCTION

In mid-twentieth century Eric Bentley wrote, "All roads lead to Shakespeare, or perhaps it might be correct to say that Shakespeare leads to all roads."¹ Shakespeare has been a source for many contemporary playwrights and many playwrights have resorted to his plays to reveal the relevance of Shakespeare's dramatic fables to our own time.

All these playwrights are motivated by a desire to modernize the Bard. The most frequent aspect of modernization is political. So politics is the motive force behind these modern adaptations of Shakespeare's plays especially King Lear and Macbeth, only Hamlet refrains from politics. Though the main thematic drive of contemporary playwrights is political, they differ in their handling and manipulation of these themes.

Most playwrights who utilize Shakespeare's plays are non-realistic. Expressionism and Surrealism arise

1- Ruby Cohn, Modern Shakespeare Offshoots, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 389.

within the same decade in reaction against realism. Other departures from realism occur in the plays of the absurd, e.g Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Rewriting of Shakespeare is known as abridgments, adaptations, additions and modifications. But the most common term is adaptation. Christopher Spencer defines it as follows, "The typical adaptation includes substantial cuts of scenes, speeches and speech assignments, much alteration of language and at least one and usually several important (or scene-length additions).¹ Most contemporary playwrights maintain that Shakespeare's dramas are for use as raw material to be assimilated into contemporary mould, not to be revered strictly as untouchable museum pieces. John Osborne, Edward Bond and Tom Stoppard are among the contemporary English dramatists who use Shakespeare as a catalyst for their plays.

As a backbone of English dramatic tradition, Shakespeare is a figure Bond can neither ignore nor whole heartedly accept. And when using him as a source, he looks not only to the original texts but to the modern productions which offer Christian or Existential

1- Ruby Cohn, Modern Shakespeare Offshoots, p.3.

interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. According to Edward Bond, Greek and Shakespearean tragedies continue to provide cultural and artistic standards for contemporary playwrights long after the plays have outlived their social usefulness. Audiences can grasp the significance of Lear's actions only by perceiving the way in which Bond reworks the Elizabethan tragic conventions.

Language and its connection with both social and physical manipulation, has been a central concern of a number of writers in the 1960s and 1970s. For Tom Stoppard, the viscosity of language, its ambiguities, its availability as an instrument of social concern and moral evasion, is a clue to a more fundamental betrayal of morale and morality. For Edward Bond, there is a recognition that language is not a simple tool, not a neutral instrument, but it has to be forged, invested with other values, infused with other myths and qualities than those with which it is presently charged. If writers like Beckett, Pinter or Orton suggest that language is exhausted and that words have been drained of meaning, the socialist playwrights have

to respond otherwise. As Sartre maintains, "If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them".¹

The most significant development in British theatre in the decade of 1968 to 1978 was the rise of socialist theatre. Many writers choose to describe themselves as socialists such as John Arden, Edward Bond, David Hare and Howard Brenton. The dominant images of these new playwrights tend to be those of disintegration, alienation and the fixed points are no longer secure either socially or metaphysically. The theatre of 1960s and 1970s reflects more directly than the novel or poetry, the writer's doubts not only about his society, in a state of genuine crisis, but about the function of art, the nature and power of language and the role of the writer, presumed to be so completely a product of the social and cultural system which he observes and with which he is in unceasing conflict.

The British theatre of 1960s, seems to be one where a profound sense of unease has surfaced in disturbing images of violence, of a brutalized landscape, peopled by self deceiving individuals. Almost unanimously

1- C.W.E Bigsby, ed., Contemporary English Drama, Straford-Upon-Avon Studies 19." (London:Edward Arnold, 1980), p. 30.

disturbed by a present in which values are surrendered to the press of the material and the imagination is threatened by a bland technology, they have, over the last decade, created a drama charged with social and cultural alarm.

Shakespeare burlesque has been popular through centuries. The purpose of the present thesis is to trace some Shakespearean themes in some contemporary playwrights. The themes of filial ingratitude, of violence, of appearances and reality, of tyranny and of cosmic chaos are recurrent in Shakespeare's King Lear, Hamlet and Macbeth. In chapter I, the researcher analyzes Edward Bond's Lear to find out how far Edward Bond deviates from the Shakespearean model and what are the political implications which lie behind these deviations.

Tom Stoppard uses Shakespeare's Hamlet as a source for his play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and also for another play, called, Dogg's Hamlet. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, he makes use of Shakespeare's Hamlet to point out man's cosmic predicament and his search for identity which is doomed

to fail in a meaningless universe. So the researcher devotes the second chapter to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Dogg's Hamlet.

Stoppard also utilizes Shakespeare as a catalyst for his play, Cahoot's Macbeth and Cahoot's Macbeth is the second part of the omnious work called, Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth. He uses Shakespeare's Macbeth to shed light on the dilemma of Czech artists in Czechoslovakia who are deprived of their freedom of expression. Stoppard's moral outrage at the utilitarian violation of human rights in the underlying thesis of Cahoot's Macbeth. Thus the third chapter tackles Cahoot's Macbeth and its relevance to Shakespeare's Macbeth.

CHAPTER ONE

EDWARD BOND'S LEAR

CHAPTER I

EDWARD BOND'S LEAR

Edward Bond calls his theatre a rational theatre to distinguish his own literary practice from that of his contemporaries. The political intent and didactic intention of his plays link him to the broader tradition Eric Bentley has labelled "theatre of ideas". His concrete and violent imagery has precedents in both Shakespeare and the agitprop theatre of the 1960s.

The issues which he tackles in his plays, "the dehumanizing, violent effects of a class-structured, technocratic society, the alienation of the individual under capitalism, the destructive contradictions of our social and political institutions; the seeming impossibility of rational and effective political action; the need for a working-class culture",¹ are all recurrent themes in the theatre of his contemporaries.

1- Jenny S. Spencer, "Edward Bond's Dramatic Strategies," in contemporary English Drama, ed., C.W.E. Bigsby, "Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 19," (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), p. 123.

According to Edward Bond, Greek and Shakespearean tragedies continue to provide cultural and artistic standards for contemporary playwrights, long after the plays have outlived their social usefulness.

Edward Bond's Lear is a reworking of Shakespeare's King Lear. In his notes for Lear, Bond reflects both a profound admiration for King Lear and an insistence upon the use of the Lear story in terms which make it intelligible to and a parable for our own time. In spite of his admiration for the play, he thinks it to be flawed, in particular he abhors its stoicism:

To endure till in time the world will be made right, is, he says, a dangerous moral, especially for a world whose time may be running out. 1

In Shakespeare's King Lear, Lear's dilemma is a personal one, it is concerned with family relationships, whereas in Bond's Lear, it is a political crisis. Shakespeare's Lear makes a spiritual journey, whereas Bond's Lear makes a political one. In Shakespeare's

1- Benedict Nightingale, A Reader's Guide to Fifty Modern British Plays, (Heinemann, 1982), p. 40.