

HISTRIONIC HISTORY. THE STAGE AS A MEDIUM OF HISTORICAL DISCOURSE IN WOLFGANG HILDESHEIMER'S MARY STUART AND LIZ LOCHHEAD'S MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS GOT HER HEAD CHOPPED OFF

Key words: historical drama, performativity, subversive quotation, metatheatre, collective memory.

The biography of Mary Stuart, the Scottish Catholic queen who was beheaded by the order of Queen Elizabeth I, the head of the Anglican Church, enjoyed unflagging popularity among Romantic playwrights. This event offered a unique chance to present on stage a conflict of individuals, whose development and end decided the fate of nations. When in 1971 the German playwright Wolfgang Hildesheimer published his theatrical account of the last hours of the life of Mary Stuart¹, he decided that it was necessary to provide it with explanatory notes to present his point of view.² What could be the reasons for an author who openly declared himself a devotee of the philosophy and the theatre of the absurd returning to a topic which seemed entirely exploited by traditional historical drama? *Mary Stuart*, intended at the same time as a “historical” and “absurdist” play, was to convincingly demonstrate that not only human life, but also the concept of human history sanctioned by the authority of science and scholarship, is deprived of any meaning. For this reason Hildesheimer points, already at the beginning of his notes, to the ambiguity of the word “Geschichte” in the German language. It signifies not only a vision of history, but also of a single event or a given chain of events, as well as a scholarly discipline which turns the raw material of the past into a system of repeatable regularities in order to reveal their hidden meaning. Even if the methodological tools used by historians change, together with the changes of dominant narrative patterns, Hildesheimer has no

doubts that “as time goes by the following model and thesis are confirmed: a causal relationship is enough to bring an event from the domain of utterly absurd to the domain of the eternal, even if it is “an eternal failure”.”³ And he boldly formulates his counter thesis: “In reality it proves that the absurd breeds and feeds the absurd”.⁴ After all, we have no chance to get to know the actual motifs governing the leading and supporting actors who take part in the events that only with hindsight have been deemed historical. Hildesheimer is certain that the actual meaninglessness of reality turns into a seeming and ostensible meaning of history because historians link them with causal connections according to their needs and intentions.

From today's point of view the short essay by the German playwright can be read as a lesson on the principles of performing history according to the concept of performativity put forward by Jon McKenzie.⁵ In comparison to the immanent absurdity of reality, every ordering of past events turns out to be an act of performing history, in the sense that it is a production of the expected meaning in a given context. In *Mary Stuart*, Hildesheimer discloses his own performative gesture as an intentional act of the production of the meaning of history – the meaning which was assumed in advance, even before the action of the play started. He reveals his intentions when he demonstrates that the stage events are his invention and came into being as a result of the intervention of theatre machinery

which materialized a verbal account of past events. His play opens and ends with the voice of an invisible Announcer who, accompanied by the flourish of fanfares, which play slightly out of tune, provides short information in Latin about the life and death of the eponymous heroine. Very clearly the action becomes a contemporary and subjective attempt at transposing raw information into the matter of concrete actions and the intentions that caused them. The manner in which Hildesheimer discloses the principles of functioning of this performance, which in our presence creates a meaningful vision of history, can be understood the moment we compare his play with the canonical model of the historical drama that is Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, which premiered in 1800 and was published subsequently a year after.⁶

There is no doubt that Schiller turned to events that took place over two hundred years before the premiere of his play without the intention of giving a faithful rendition of historical facts by using the authenticating medium of the theatre. Already the critics after opening night pointed out several departures from the existing accounts of the conflict between Mary and Elizabeth which Schiller had to necessarily introduce in order to fill the form of tragedy with historical material. In fact, the action on stage presents only the last three days of Mary's life and shows the final moments when the trap that fate closes behind Mary's back. However, Schiller shows that the events in the play are not determined by ancient divine forces or the will of god, but by political and historical forces which act regardless of the individual decisions of the protagonists. For this reason he borrows the form of a tragedy, reminiscent of, for example, *Antigone*, where two major figures representative of mutually exclusive political stances enter a deadlock which only the death of one of them can resolve. Acts I and II serve, in fact, as a prolonged introduction of the information necessary to put the two protagonists on a par and make clear that they both have equal right to power. This introduction paves the way to the confrontation of Mary with her archenemy Elizabeth in Act III – a confrontation which Schiller is interested in primarily because it epitomizes the dialectic model

of the progress of historical forces.

It is true that Schiller portrays Mary and Elizabeth as fully-fledged individuals and does not hesitate to shed light on the personal animosities between them, especially by introducing the figure of Leicester, Elizabeth's favorite, who is also secretly in love with Mary. But this entanglement in a love triangle is introduced not for the sake of motivating Elizabeth's final decision to sign Mary's death warrant. On the contrary, it makes it clear that individual motivations have little to do with the functioning of political machinery. After all, Elizabeth postpones the execution not because of her compassion for her enemy, but because she is well aware that the manner in which Mary will be killed has a key significance for her own status and the support of her subjects. To emphasize this aspect of the political conflict acted out on stage, Schiller also introduces Lord Burleigh, Elizabeth's advisor and an embodied spirit of reason and political cunning, who at critical moments of action teaches her about the long-term consequences of her decisions. As a result, *Mary Stuart* becomes an in-depth analysis of the functioning of political systems and forces of history, which on the one hand thrives on the Romantic ideology of the earlier *Sturm und Drang* period, and on the other hand presages the Hegelian vision of history as a dialectic development driven by a constant conflict of opposing political forces. Therefore the play becomes an exemplary demonstration of how Mary, as the embodiment of the revolutionary spirit, is subjected to the laws of the rational and pragmatic power of the state, represented by Elizabeth.

Schiller selects events and figures from copious factual accounts and chronicles, in order to use them as a model of historical progress. But this model draws its explanatory power on the concealment of the fact that the events in the play are merely a historical costume for a meditation on contemporary events. Schiller uses the medium of drama as a structure that can reveal the meaning of historical events – a meaning which would otherwise remain hidden in the entangled network of historical narratives. But when looked upon from the point of view of McKenzie's theory, Schiller's historical tragedy

provides a brilliant example of using past events as material for a performance of history – a performance which should not be treated as a revelation of the deep meaning of history, but rather as a production of this meaning. What is more, in the case of this historical play, the structural pattern of tragedy effectively universalizes and naturalizes the conflict between the state and revolutionary forces, which accounts for the contemporary character of Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, written clearly as a voice in a debate on the models of governing at the turn of the 19th century.

Hildesheimer's *Mary Stuart* occupies the antipodes of this model of historical drama, in which the primary task of the author is to reveal the meaning of historical events – a meaning which comes into being “here and now”, the moment the play is written, and not “there and then”, at the time when the action takes place. The German playwright not only manifestly discloses the subjective nature of the image of history, which is constructed always according to the current understanding of the world and human psyche. He also uses all possible means and dramatic strategies to prevent the stage events and characters from gaining any meaning for the audience. For this reason he removes Elizabeth from his theatrical account of British history, whose meaning was conditioned by the conflict between Mary and Elizabeth, who represented two countries, two religions, two world views and two concepts of human character and fate. He leaves only Mary on stage and nobody cares to explain to the audience the reason why she has to go to the gallows. She is surrounded by a group of seemingly faithful confidants who are in fact interested only in getting the contents of her jewelry case and who simply enjoy earthly pleasures, like eating and sex. Schiller replaced the ancient Fate with ghosts of the past who haunt the Queen of Scotland. Quite against historical accounts, he shifted the day of her execution a few days ahead, so that it could take place on the anniversary of the killing, in which Mary was most probably involved, of her second husband. Hildesheimer, very skillfully quoting the structure of Beckett's most renowned play, makes endlessly prolonged waiting the only stage event. We have to wait for Mary's execution,

which is to take place only the moment her maid-servants help her put her ceremonial gown on after her morning defecation. The same scene returns as a persistent leitmotif: Mary is seated on a chair with a hole and then the bowl taken from underneath it is examined.

This, however, is not enough to eliminate traditional projection and identification. For this reason Hildesheimer introduces the character of the Pharmacist who concocts medicaments for Mary, giving her in turns sedatives and stimulants. Their influence makes everything that happens on stage impermeable to any meaningful interpretation. Mary Stuart prays, mumbles or has hysterical fits under the influence of mixtures, while the motivations of her servants are so primitive that they do not need any additional explanation. As a consequence, the events on stage cannot be put into any meaningful pattern, except maybe for the simple conclusion that we watch the last moments of Mary's life before the execution.

Interestingly, Hildesheimer not only blocks the possibility of providing the action with any meaning; he also effectively prevents it on the level of the act of reading. Although he provides the dialogues with short notes about the manner and context of their speaking, he also divides each page in half. On the left he describes stage actions and on the right the dialogues which he sometimes further splits into two columns, because some conversations take place simultaneously on stage. This layout goes against the habits of average play readers and as a result forces them to make a greater effort to put the represented events and dialogues in order. And this ordering never satisfies them. Both reading and watching the play should, according to the author's intentions, produce the effect of getting in touch with a world which is materially present but has no meaning or encompassing structure. We could say it's pure matter of life, self-evident in its absurdity, which the authors of historical plays have so far tried hard to hide.

It can therefore be said that Hildesheimer writes *Mary Stuart* as a meta-historical play, because he uses the stage as a medium of revealing the

workings of historical narratives. The action of his play very clearly demonstrates that our expectations towards a historical play as a disclosure of the meaning of history, in fact hide the basic absurdity of everyday events. Liz Lochhead in her play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987)⁷ also takes up a deconstruction of historical narratives, but she carries it out from a different perspective and with a different consequence for the audience's response. This basic difference can be observed in the use of the meta-theatrical frame. In Hildesheimer's play the Announcer, who delivered crucial bits of information at the beginning of the play, marked the distance towards the events on stage that enable the appearance of the comic effect. Lochhead also introduces a figure that mediates between the stage and the audience, but rather in order to achieve a greater involvement in the stage events. Scenes from the life of Mary and Elizabeth are shown played out by a procession of characters which – as the author herself suggests in the opening stage directions – should resemble animals on a circus ring. They are introduced and shown to the public by La Corbie – a *meneur du jeu*, whose name bears clear references to the country's national bird – the crow. La Corbie not only opens the play with an introductory monologue, setting the action of the play, but also significantly begins the story with the “once upon a time” phrase, clearly turning the historical narrative into a fairytale told in the theatre and by theatrical means – a fairytale told “here and now” by a figure who is on the one hand a jester who discloses the hidden motivations of the characters and the irony of their actions, but also a trickster who tells the story in order to capture the attention of the listening audience and lead them astray with every consecutive scene.

Undoubtedly, Lochhead cares little about full comprehensibility of the historical accounts, although she retains the chronological order of events from Mary's arrival in England to her beheading. But at the same time she uses a number of meta-theatrical strategies to make sure that we are watching a re-enactment of these historical events, which at the same time suggests (but never directly spells out) their possible interpretation. Although La Corbie

announces that the two queens never met face to face, Lochhead writes a series of scenes in which the two protagonists play each other's maids (Marian and Lizzie), and later also two beggars (Mairn and Leezie) who admire the splendor of royalty without the slightest knowledge of politics, and thus providing another angle on the stage events. This multiplication of roles and hierarchies between the characters serves as a simple but effective means of introducing multiple perspectives on the existing historical narratives. What contributes to the fragmentary character of action on a different level is the use of Scottish dialect, which makes it more difficult to follow what is said on stage even for native English speakers (about which some critics complained right after the premiere of the play). This strategy, however, was deliberately chosen by Lochhead to demonstrate to what extent the understanding of history re-created on stage as a live interaction is crucially dependent on the language spoken by the characters – to what extent it is the language which provides a point of view on what is watched and determines its comprehension.

But there is more to Lochhead's meta-theatrical structure. The overarching metaphor of history as a circus ring turns consecutive scenes into numbers played for the amusement of the audience and reminiscent of various performative styles and aesthetics (which Lochhead clearly names in the stage directions preceding every consecutive section, suggesting also the painting styles which the stage imagery should evoke). And by changing theatrical conventions, acting styles and dialects from scene to scene she achieves a different effect from Hildesheimer, who wanted to confront the audience with the fundamental chaos hidden underneath the ordering of historical narratives. Lochhead's play is rather a meditation on the performative nature of history understood as a contemporary experience – a repetition of the past which is undertaken in order to make sense of it. In other words, she forces each spectator to find their own way in the labyrinth of mirror images and thus problematize their relationship with history as a lived, collective memory; and she understands history not so much as a story that is told or written, but as a histrionic experience

and a performative act. This is very clearly underscored by the play's finale, in which, quite against the expectations aroused by the previous action, the beheading of Mary is shown in yet another way – as a cruel game played by children who mock one of them – a scapegoat. Distinct from all previous scenes, which were stylized as historical and only sometimes featured contemporary props (like a typewriter used by Mary's secretary), this one is entirely set in the latter half of the 20th century. It is here that the historical events in their basic dramaturgical pattern find reflection in a repeated performative act that is clearly set in the present moment and shows – as Lochhead claimed in an interview – the shade cast by the past on the present.

If Hildesheimer discloses the absurdity of past life lying hidden under the ordering of historical narratives, and thus reveals the functioning of the mechanism of performing history in McKenzie's sense of the term, Lochhead seems to illustrate a different aspect of the performative character of the narratives about the past, more in line with Judith Butler's concept of performativity and subversive quotation.⁸ Although Butler's theory was worked out primarily in the context of sexual identity, her analysis of a subversive quotation of an existing normative scenario can also describe the strategy chosen by Lochhead. *Mary Queen of Scots* provides an overtly theatricalized repetition of the story of Queen Mary, although she manifestly prevents the appearance of a single frame of reference which would endow the action with meaning. But she does not absolutize the absurd as the hard core of history, as Hildesheimer still did, when he wanted to disclose the chaos beneath ordering narratives. Lochhead quotes historical accounts in the theatre and at the same time emphasizes the gesture of quoting, by presenting the action from multiple perspectives and in various styles and conventions. Therefore she discloses the performative nature of any gesture of recalling past events and at the

same time offers a chance to see that the meaning of each narrative that sanctions the political and social present depends on the perspective, the form and even the language in which this narrative is retold and thus re-experienced. In this sense her play discloses another dimension of the performative nature of history. In her interpretation, to perform history means to repeat the patterns of thinking and behavior that are passed down from generation to generation – to repeat with a chance of change that appears when the scenario is performed with slight variations and modifications. And it is in this sense that Lochhead perceives the function of theatre as a medium of historical discourse – as a place where the vision of the past can be re-examined by each of the spectators and perhaps re-evaluated according to present needs and expectations, thus changing the course of the future events.

Notes

¹ Wolfgang Hildesheimer, 'Mary Stuart' in: *Spectaculum 14*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971, pp. 260-328.

² Wolfgang Hildesheimer, 'Anmerkungen zu einer historischen Szene' in: *Spectaculum 14*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971, pp. 329-332.

³ Ibid., p. 329.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London, New York: Routledge, 2001.

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *Maria Stuart (Mary Stuart)*, trans. by Witold Wirpsza, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 1972.

⁷ Liz Lochhead, 'Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off' in: *Mary Queen Of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off. Dracula*, London: Penguin Books, 1989, pp. 7-68.

⁸ See Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' in: Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Writing on the Body. Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 401-417.

Mateusz BOROWSKI, Małgorzata SUGIERA
Jogailaičių universitetas, Krokva

Suvidinta istorija. Scena kaip istorinio diskurso erdvė Lizos Lochhead dramoje *Marijai, škotų karalienei, atsisveikinti su galva teko* ir Wolfgango Hildesheimerio *Marijoje Stiuart*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: istorinė drama, performatyvumas, ardomasis citavimas, metateatras, kolektyvinė atmintis.

Santrauka

Performatyvumo kategorija kultūros ir teatro tyrimuose bei pačios teatro praktikos pokyčiai, prasidėję XX a. aštuntajame dešimtmetyje, negrįžtamai pakeitė istorinės dramos konvencijas. Tiek teatrinių tekstų autoriams, tiek ir mokslininkams, tyrinėjantiems šiuolaikinės dramaturgijos tendencijas, reikšmingą įtaką padarė Haydeno White'o atradimas, kad nuo XVIII a. vidurio istorija buvo rašoma pagal kanoninių dramaturgijos žanrų – tragedijos ir komedijos – konvencijas. Atrodo, kad šiuolaikiniams dramaturgams rūpi metaistorinė refleksija, o istorinius įvykius ir pačius istorijos rašymo būdus jie linkę laikyti politiškai ir ideologiškai sukonstruotais.

Tokios istorijos, kaip fikcijos sampratos, pavyzdžiu straipsnyje pasirenkama ir analizuojama škotų autorės Lizos Lochhead parašyta drama *Marijai, škotų karalienei, atsisveikinti su galva teko* (1987). Metateatrinių strategijų, perimtų iš škotų žodinės pasakojamosios tradicijos, panaudojimas leidžia autorei paversti teatrą istorijos rašymo ir sklaidos modeliu. Sujungdama skirtingus pasakojimus apie škotų karalienės gyvenimą ir mirtį ir ypač apie jos konfliktą su Elžbieta I, Lochhead parodo, kaip istorinis diskursas pateisina Anglijos valdovės hegemoninę politiką. Tam, kad geriau suprastume šiuolaikinės metaistorinės dramos specifiką, straipsnyje siūloma Lochhead kūrinį palyginti su kanoniniu tekstu, kuriame vystoma ta pati tema, tik šįkart įvilktą į klasikinę tragedijos rūbą, t.y. su Friedricho Schillerio *Marija Stiuart* (1800). Lygindami šiuos du pavyzdžius – vieną parašytą tais laikais, kai formavosi moderniosios istorijos samprata, ir kitą, liudijančią post-istorines tendencijas – straipsnio autoriai parodo, kaip teatras ir dramaturgija reaguoja į paradigminius humanitarijos pokyčius, ir kaip šie lemia naujas dramaturgijos formas.

Gauta 2010-05-19

Parengta spaudai 2010-08-30