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FOREWORD

It should not sound strange that any mention of the hero requires an oral or written narrative. When it is a narrative that is in question, it is the myths, legends and epics that first strike one's mind. Traditionally, heroes are usually described as superhuman beings with supernatural abilities and powers. They possess godly or semi-godly qualities. Indeed, they should because the beings that they struggle with and have to overcome are at least as strong and powerful as or stronger and more powerful than they are, not to mention how monstrous and terrible these beings are. Even though it is said that, with Don Quixote of Cervantes, the concept of the hero began to get away from myths, legends and epics to a more realistic and rationalist identity, thus gaining a completely different appearance, it might as well be observed that the philosophical dimension of the hero has not changed much in its essence. It is the styles of describing them and the roles they are assigned rather than the philosophical essence that have changed. One can realize that the concept of hero, which has come to the fore with his realistic, romantic, comic, indifferent, depressed and self-alienated attitudes and qualities at different times, still preserves, in a way, the quality of sacrificing himself or being a victim for what or who he defends or protects, a quality of antique mythology that can be seen with the heroes in many tragedies of Sophocles inspired by this mythology. Although Cervantes' Don Quixote appears to be fighting against the windmills in vain, Flaubert's Madame Bovary to prepare her end by herself as she confuses reality with dream, Camus's Mersault to be anomic and emotionally detached, Proust and Sartre's heroes to be incomprehensible, they are, in a sense, victims like Oedipus, Prometheus, Theseus and Heracles in terms of their mirror quality that reflects the period in which they live and the problems of their societies. This is because they stand, with the role they take over, as representative of the whole mankind, not just a specific person or a given community. They have the ability to say something to the whole mankind. They portray and depict the universal for us. It is for this very reason that everybody knows and appropriates them. They are usually evocative of the heroes of the mythology. Were this not the case, there would not be so many references to the myths and heroes of the antique mythology in order to describe and identify the heroes who are claimed to have changed since Don Quixote and to be much different.

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I NEED A HERO: WHERE HAVE ALL THE GOOD MEN GONE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH DRAMA?

Özlem KARADAĞ

Shoot/ Get Treasure/ Repeat is an epic cycle of plays, written by Mark Ravenhill in 2008. This epic cycle of seventeen short plays is based on the contemporary history of war, terrorism, the quest for democracy and freedom. Mark Ravenhill explores the contemporary situation of the individual and society, his choice of titles and his motivation behind writing these plays are also an attempt to illuminate the human condition in the last decade and the im/possibility of heroism in its classical sense. He is also able to demonstrate how detached we are from the heroic ages with our changed definitions and ideals about heroism, and religious/ethical/social/moral norms.

Mark Ravenhill is one of the forerunners of the 1990s' theatre movement "in-yer-face" and along with him Martin McDonagh, Philip Ridley, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Rebecca Prichard are seen to be both forerunners and the most productive writers of the movement. According to the critic Aleks Sierz who also coined the phrase:

> It is a theatre of sensations: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative.
> [...]
> The language is usually filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each another, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent. (4-5)

The playwrights of in-yer-face do use these tactics to be able to reach their audience in a more effective way. In fact, modern British drama has made this attempt to reach the private sides of the individuals by disturbing them since the beginning of the twentieth century. It is not only "in-yer-face" but also the drama after the First World War, the Theatre of the Absurd, the Kitchen-Sink Drama and the Political Drama of the 70s and 80s all endeavour to show the rotten condition of human beings, society and the systems they base themselves upon. The

playwrights of the twentieth century all choose characters from ordinary life and show that we no longer believe in heroic quests and achievements. Yet what distinguishes all these plays of the twentieth century from "in-yer-face" is their portrayal of the characters under certain (mostly the present situation of their times) circumstances. While Sean O'Casey's Harry in *The Silver Tassie* was once a beloved and powerful character he goes deep into depression because of being paralysed from the waist down after the First World War. Beckett depicts dystopian and claustrophobic atmospheres with characters who – like Hamm in *Endgame* – had successful times but later stuck into vicious circles, repeating the same patterns. John Osborne, Beckett's contemporary, represents more rage against the system but no action in his characters, Jimmy Porter *in Look Back in Anger* once an activist is no longer able to get out of the daily routine that repeats itself. When we come to the times of Political Drama, we can see that the roots of "in-yer-face" are being seeded. The violence, the filthy language, the ordinary life depictions constitute the drama of the 70s and 80s, yet the playwrights find the roots of all the problems in the system which is forced upon the individuals and wrongly applied, be it Capitalism or Socialism. Yet even in Edward Bond there are rights and wrongs, even if it is delusional there is a system or an aim to hold on to or fight for. Characters are either abused or misdirected by the system, as it can be seen in the characters from the labour class in *Saved* or there are ideals they believe in and fight for or at least die trying as in *Lear*.

All drama can be said to work upon the idea of the existence of heroes/anti-heroes successful or not, aristocratic or not and delights to show "how the mighty fall." "In-yer-face," on the contrary, directly engages with the characters that never had the chance to be a hero or to put it more clearly who live in an unheroic age and who are already lost to society. What they put onstage is what human beings really are, without blaming it all on politics, economics or on human nature alone. What "in-yer-face" has come to be in the last few years, especially in Mark Ravenhill's plays, can be seen as a revival of politics in drama but never going out of the boundaries of "in-yer-face" theatre. What makes Mark Ravenhill's twist of the hero image interesting is the revival of the heroism in popular media in the last decade. Mike Alsford in his book entitled *Heroes and Villains* explains this revival of heroism in media as follows:

> The current success of films based on comic superheroes such as Spiderman and the X-Men, the revival of interest in heroic fantasy with the successful translation to film of Tolkien's *Lord Of The Rings*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *the Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* franchises all who speak of this fascination with heroes and villains who navigate their way through the world based upon an absolute value system made manifest via an exercise of power. The confidence and certainty with which these figures apparently make their way through life is enviable particularly to ordinary human beings who, as a rule, tend to find themselves lost in a world of increasing complexity. [...] the myth of the hero, and indeed the villain, represents our desire for a greater sense of

> confidence, personal identity and power to affect the world in which we find ourselves, through no fault of our own. (3)

Ravenhill's epic cycle of plays deals with the same issues, the search for identity, the need for development, power and order in a world of uncertainties where the definition of everything is shattered by the multiplicity of beliefs and ideals. Mark Ravenhill in his introduction to these plays asserts that

> I was driven to write like this because I spotted two contradictory needs in contemporary audiences. We still have that urge for an epic narrative that draws us to the *Orestia* or *Paradise Lost* or Shakespeare's history plays. But also we are the children of the sound-bite age, able to absorb information and narrative in a few quick seconds from the various screens that surround us. [...] We want the mega and we want the micro, the super-size-me and the sushi – all at the same time. (5)

This desire to connect with the heroic works of the past is, as said before, a desire to bring a meaning, an order into the chaos of the modern life. Yet, what Ravenhill creates in his work does not go hand in hand with the popular media that feeds this need. Rather, he destroys expectations of the audience and bombards them with shock techniques, leaves no room for feeling safe. The very first tactic he uses is the names of these short plays. He carefully chooses names from tragedies and epic poems of antiquity, titles of the works of world literature, films and music. The titles he uses from the past works are as follows: "Women of Troy," "Intolerance," "Women in Love," "Fear and Misery," "War and Peace," "Crime and Punishment," "Love (But I Won't Do That)," "The Mikado," "War of the Worlds," "Armageddon," "The Mother," "Twilight of the Gods," "Paradise Lost," "The Odyssey," "Birth of a Nation" and "Paradise Regained." In all these short plays he does not create a direct connection with the original works on the surface but chooses to tell new stories in a contemporary background.

In each of these titles, the central issues are war and love, the same is recurrent in Ravenhill's plays. Some of his short plays demonstrate the condition of people that are under siege, who ask for help to be able to free themselves from the reign of the dictator and despairingly jump out of the frying pan into the fire. Some depict the public of another country who are under terrorist attacks and show its soldiers who subjugate another country as a result of these attacks, not only as retribution but also with a motivation to take their definitions of democracy and freedom to them. While the first group inevitably represents the East, thus darkness and ignorance, absence of freedom and democracy, the second group represents the West, the enlightenment, the cradle of human rights, democracy and freedom. These two groups of plays are intertwined with each other; they both show the interaction between the members of both parties and also show how the situation is at home, in the West. The third group depicts the public of a third country that sympathises with the suffering of this Western

civilization and their fear to be the next one to be attacked, like them. What binds them together is again the need for a hero, the desire to be a hero (who will bring salvation and order, thus meaning in to both his and others' lives), and their failure in reaching at their needs and desires. As it is written on the back cover of the play, "*Shoot/ Get Treasure/ Repeat* is an epic cycle of plays exploring the personal and political effect of war on modern life." What Ravenhill puts on stage makes the audience question the possibility of the revival of heroism in modern life, in which there is no longer a clear and global distinction/definition of good and evil, right and wrong. Ravenhill uses the classical definitions of the "hero" cleverly but in order to distort these ideals in his characters. Margery Hourihan, in her book *Deconstructing the Hero* indicates that,

> The most simplistic of the dualism implicit in popular hero stories is the good/evil opposition. Often these terms mean a little more than 'us and them': the hero who represents the Western patriarchy is 'good' by definition and his opponents are necessarily 'evil' because they *are* his opponents. (32)

In all the plays that show the clash between two cultures, this artificial superiority is repeated over and over again by the characters that represent the West. They cannot understand either why they are attacked or why they are not welcome in the country they "saved." In "Women of Troy" the women try to understand why the others bomb them, "the good people":

> - [...] why do you bomb us?
> - You see. We are the good people. [...]
> [...]
> - You EVIL EVIL EVIL EVIL EVIL –
> - Democracy and freedom. Freedom and democracy. I offer them to you. I'm giving them to you. Don't be frightened. Don't be alarmed.
> - And the Lord made His earth for us, His earth with its resources and its... coffee, the bombs, the shops... they are for us. For us to use the good people. And we will use them, we will. (8-15)

And the Soldier's speech in "Crime and Punishment" depicts this need for being acknowledged as a hero by "the other":

> Cruel life under the dictator. Freedom. Democracy. You shouted it out?
> [...]
> Well, we are here now. History is happening. Freedom. Democracy is happening. Happening. And you won't even – frigid bitch. You don't even feel a little bit of love?
> [...]

What Ravenhill does in passages like these is a play on the characteristics of the hero, what is expected from him or what he expects from his environment. The hero is a character who is not only physically powerful but also strong in spirit and mind. A hero is the representative of light and knowledge; he suffers for his people and struggles for their well-being. In return, he is respected, he becomes the object of desire and lives a life of comfort or to die as a hero he continues his quest. According to Margery Hourihan's definition:

> The hero is white, and his story inscribes the dominance of white power and white culture. (57) [...]
> The whites are also morally superior. (58)
> [...]
> [T]he hero is also dominant over the lower orders of his own people. He is the symbol of an elite. In early legends he is typically a king or a prince, the leader and representative of his people, and his quest involves their aspirations. (61)
> [...]
> Historically the hero opposes darkness. He stands for the power of reason, the transforming strength of human intellectual energy. [...] In early legends the hero's task is to defeat the forces of chaos, fear and ignorance and so ensure the survival of the state, the realm of civic order and rational behaviour. (87)
> [...]
> The hero is a man of action and it is in action that he expresses his nature – skill, courage, dominance and determination. (95)

Setting off from these definitions, one can say for the soldier characters of these plays that they readily play the role of the hero. They are white, they are male, they seem to believe that (although they themselves are at a loss about the real meaning of these words) they are the protectors and missionaries of reason, freedom and democracy. They also believe they deserve a reward, as the soldier in "Love (But I Won't Do That)" who as a hero "saved" and protected Marion, asks for his "rights": "The rules are changing, okay? Okay? If I say strip – you strip, no questions asked. If I say legs open, the legs open – no fucking about. If I say enjoy yourself, you will enjoy yourself." (102)

However, there is more to the definition of the hero than what they represent. The hero is inevitably a representative of a religion, an ideology or a system, and anything that he is part of is the provider of order that makes him the protector of it. Yet at the same time as Mike Alsford notes, "[F]or Nietzsche the true Superman is the one who no longer slavishly adheres to either the ethical absolutes of religion [...] or the moral conventions of Enlightenment [...]." (38) Thus to be a hero takes a more difficult turn; it is easier to protect and superimpose the rules of religions or systems on people and believe to be rightful and successful by conforming to its ideals. Yet, to free oneself from all these obligations, from all pre-determined rules and

definitions bring out a more objective heroism that is based upon equality. What Ravenhill's characters lack in these plays are objectivity and belief in equality. What makes the audience feel disturbed about this kind of heroism is not only the cruelty of the war hero characters but also the desperate situation of the oppressed characters who are captivated by another system while they were expecting to be freed from the coercion of the dictator. In "The Twilight of the Gods" Susan who has to live with her seven year old son in Zone Eight without food and clean water is asked to help for a report, in return she will be given coffee and breakfast. She says to Jane the commissioner: "Tyranny was bad. I wrote articles. I protested. I did what I could. But every morning I had coffee and a breakfast roll." (160)

This is one of the points Ravenhill shows concerning the problematic side of the modern illusion of heroism which believes to be the bearer of freedom and democracy. Such people inevitably rip people off their most natural and essential rights and are not able to see their faults. The Woman in "Crime and Punishment" also stresses the same point; she talks about the Dictator as follows:

> He was a very bad man.
> [...]
> But a strong man. Maybe sometimes a country needs a strong, bad man. This is what we debate late into the night: was it better for our poor country to have a bad man but no civil war? So much argument. I think you say frying pan or fire. But I say: in our world, there is a Hell with a Devil in it, below that another Hell with another Devil in it and below that another Hell with another Devil. There are only Hells and we are angels with broken wings and we are all burning in these Hells and which one do we choose? (84)

These words of the character not only displace the other characters from heroism, for a hero should bring order, welfare and peace to his people, but also destroy the hopes for salvation because all systems repeat one another in inequality and chaos.

When the oppressed characters' speeches are taken into consideration and when one witnesses the cruelty going onstage. As the Soldier "shots the detainee's right kneecap" (91) or "cut(s) (her) tongue" (94) in "Crime and Punishment" or the group of artisans in "Birth of a Nation" bring on stage a blind woman as their first artist out of whose mouth "blood pours" (198) it is so easy to hate these characters and see them as villains. Yet, Ravenhill is very careful about not turning his characters into villains. The heroes and villains are always active figures who try to achieve their goals by opposing one another. The villain in Mike Alsford's words "would appear to lack empathy, the ability to feel for others, to see themselves as part of a larger whole. The villain uses the world and the people from a distance, as pure resource." (120) In the case of Ravenhill's characters, one can suggest that they are also unable to feel for others but what one cannot ignore is the fact that they are a part of a larger whole who feel pity for themselves along with an unbalanced self-confidence. Not only do they use the world and

people from a distance, but they are also the ones who are used by the system. They are made into victimizers yet they are also the victims of other powers. What is more important, they are depicted as human beings; Ravenhill does not leave their human sides out. The mother's postponing the news of the death of her son in war in "The Mother," the anxiety of losing a loved one in "Women in Love", the rage a son feels for her mother's death and the condition of all the soldier characters who are inactive, bemused and deranged, prevent the audience from labelling the characters as good and evil throughout these plays.

In fact what makes these characters tragic and un-heroic at the same time is, contrary to many heroes of the past, their being stuck in the moment, having no real and individual choices although they are symbolising individual freedom. Their conflict about their mission and their ideal civilization are what make them neither good nor bad. The Soldiers in "The Odyssey" who are shocked to be charged with a new invasion while they were expecting to return home to their families say that "This burden is too great. It is not that I don't believe in our core values. [...] But I can't.../ How naïve I was. How stupid. I'll never see my boy again. I'll never see his girlfriend. Of course I won't. Because this battle goes on forever." (187-8) and the Soldier in "Crime and Punishment" has contradictions in his own psyche:

> My country is safe. It's a safe numb place. The people are happy people. Underneath I ache but still I... I can go to the supermarket, I can go to the garden centre, I can go for a cup of coffee. It's alright. Why did I leave that? Shat[1] my pants fighting in the desert. Saw a man have his head blown off beside me [...]
> I will go everywhere. Freedom and Democracy will be everywhere. And somewhere, somewhere [...] someone will say to me: 'I love you.' Is that too much to ask?
> [...]
> My mission is pointless. Nobody loves me. Now I must choose if I shoot my brains. Maybe there is love in another place [...] I wish I had an order from a superior. [...] but there is no order from above. The choice is mine. This is democracy. This is what we call democracy. Democracy – I hate you. (90,91, 94)

Thus the audience has an insight into these characters' psyche. What detaches these characters from the hero/villain identification is their very basic human needs, the need to love and to be loved back, their desperate cry against the system and their individual inactivity. As again in Mike Alsford's words "[I]ndeed, the very power and capabilities of the hero are dependent upon their capacity to transcend the mundane world and thus to bring into it salvific power unavailable to ordinary humanity" (23). Ravenhill chooses to create characters who are

[1] As it is used in the original text.

unable to save either themselves or the ordinary people, because, as said before, he attempts to show the human condition as it is.

The need for an epic narrative, the revival of heroic fiction both on screen and in literature reveal a nostalgia for the times when everything seemed to be fixed and clearly defined. However, there are still two ways of reading Ravenhill's plays: on the one hand, one can suggest that he takes these epic narratives' titles but writes irrelevant new stories in these times of chaos where the Gods, kings and other powers no longer exist and where people live under systems where heroism is no longer possible. We passed that heroic age and will always feel the need of heroes. On the other hand, it can be considered that Ravenhill does not only copy the titles but he also rewrites their stories from a modern point of view by using contemporary history and contemporary characters. He tries to reach out to his audience to make them able to see that those heroic ages that we are enchanted with were not heroic at all because the condition of human beings at war and love has always been the same.

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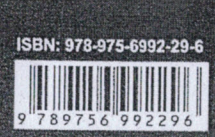
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