

**THE USE OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL OR HISTORICAL SETTING IN
JOHN ARDEN'S *ARMSTRONG'S LAST GOODNIGHT*: A STUDY OF
SELECTED PLAY**

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ABSTRACT

An interesting feature of post-1956 British drama is the concern of many playwrights to explore problems of contemporary relevance from an historical perspective. The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of historical situations in the select plays of John Arden and to show that John Arden best understands the problems posed by the dramatic use of historical material. One could study the political or ideological orientations as revealed in the critical and non dramatic writings of the playwrights and then relate such concerns to similar consideration in their history plays. The result would be relevant to study of the use of historical material. However, because the topic is concerned primarily with the dramatic use of such material and because of works of John Arden are under consideration; neither approach is employed. Instead, the method is constituted principally of in-depth studies of the plays. The aesthetic and thematic aims of the author are give full consideration, of course, but so far as possible aims are related to the plays at hand rather than to broader and hence less manageable consideration.

Arden's Armstrong's Last Goodnight illustrates that a happy combination is possible, for both an historical and dramatic point of view. The play suggest that a playwright's success with the use of historical material is best achieved if he is conversant with both the academic aspect of the period and the vast array of artistic conventions by which the various issues may be exploited to great dramatic effect. In other words Arden shows that intelligent historicism and theatrical craftsmanship must be molded in such a way that neither dominates nor submerges the other. Arden demonstrates that an historical remains a valid-and often exciting-venue by which problems of contemporary relevance can be explored.

Key Words: Historical play, Conversant, Historicism, Contemporary

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The use of historical situations or historical setting in the Drama is as old as the art form itself. Moreover, its persistence in contemporary British drama is indicative of a continuing shared interest on the part of playwrights and playgoers alike. The purpose of this paper is to examine the sum depth of selected play by John Arden to show the use of historical material in relation to its dramatic possibilities. The play is fairly representative of the various use of historical material in contemporary British drama. Arden's *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* is widely divergent aesthetic values and has attracted critical attention or enjoyed commercial success. Moreover, in this play the author employs the varying degree of success-forms and techniques which are at variance with the more familiar fourth wall conventions of naturalistic drama.

Episodic structures, music, songs, the mixture of poetry and prose, direct addresses to the audience and candidly theatrical stage images, characterize the play as a group, whatever the

differing artistic ends of the playwright. The fact that the play constitutes – at least for all purposes of this paper- a reasonable manageable group, it is still necessary to find a suitability definitive term by which the group may be designated. The play embody historical situations or settings, but the absence of any clear cut definition of what constitutes “history play” raises a critical problem initially at least.

Though Ronald Peacock suggests a definition, but in terms of contemporary history plays it is also unsatisfactory. Taking a broad view of dramatic history, he discerns “well marked type,” with the history plays as a tentative adjunct:

Four in special may be clearly distinguished, recurring with great persistence through the centuries and in widely separated cultures: tragedy, comedy, romance, and allegory, using this term to cover all didactic drama. A fifth should perhaps be added: the historical plays as “dramatized narrative”, though in Shakespeare’s elaboration it is not so much a separate type as an amalgam of two or more of the others. They are all represented in Shakespeare, significantly enough.

Even a playwright’s choice of subject matter is an arguable criterion particularly in relation to contemporary plays Eric Bentley suggests that

A glance at history plays that have had success of any sort will reveal that they are not about the great figures of history taken indiscriminately, but only about few, like Julius Caesar, Joan of Arc, and Napoleon , whose names have become by words. Another paradox: only when a figure has become legendary is he or she a good subject for a history play.

The central figure in Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Joan Little-Woods production of *Oh What a lovely War* are historically anonymous. Does this mean, as Bentley seems to contend, that such may not be designated as history plays? The question is particularly relevant to in respect to Arden's play *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* deals with a minor and largely unknown, Scottish diplomat. Must this play, too, be designated as something other than historical drama?

In terms of this of this paper, however such questions are to a large extent academic. It is perhaps significant, however, that M .H .Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, offers no definition of such plays according to genre. While G.B. Tennyson, in "A Drama Glossary," refers to historical drama in starkly simple terms: Broadly, any play about an historical event. Within the context of this paper then, "history play" refers to any play in which author uses an actual historical situation or an historical setting. Unlike Bolt, Shaffer and John Osborne, John Arden has always been interested in the writing of history plays where as former playwrights were interested primarily in contemporary settings and only later directed their attention in other direction. In the play *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* provides superior illustrations of the aims and methods inherent in the author's use of historical material. The genesis of ideas and motivations which led to the writing of *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* are indicative of two principals concerns on Arden's part: the desire to illuminate problems of past in a manner which renders them relevant to contemporary life and the desire to verify past poetic and dramatic traditions which the author fears are in danger of being lost to, or ignored in, contemporary theatre. Stimulated by Tyrone Guthrie's 1949 production of Sir David Lindsay's *The Three Estates*, "a highly romantic renaissance spectacle,"

Arden notes:

...I could discern the possibility of a modern drama that would deal as pertinently with the present ills of the world as Sir David Lindsay had dealt with those of the sixteenth century and yet would not be compelled

to renounce the excitement and splendor of the old theatre I had been brought up to believe in.

The result is an Arden play in which Lindsay himself –a sixteen century diplomat, poet, and playwright appears as a central protagonist in confrontation with a legendary and/or fictional Scottish border lord.

Regarding the splendor of the “old theatre,” Arden’s play embodies many of its characteristics. Its colorfully costumed characters and episodic narrative, combined with simple set and action –packed plot, are reminiscent of Shakespeare, as well as nineteenth century romantic drama, while its use of simultaneous staging recalls the medieval theatre.

On the whole, it’s the ballad tradition which appears to be the strongest single influence on Arden here. He feels it to be the “bedrock of English poetry” and finds it regrettable that the public seems to have lost touch with this source- particularly in the theatre. Consequently, Arden feels that the sixteen century “Ballad of Johnny Armstrong” embodies a situation which –given a writer of talent –is capable of bearing meaning that will be relevance to a twentieth century audience. Arden use of verse and prose –other impressive characteristics of Armstrong, Arden notes that his approach here has been influenced by the ancient heroic legends. Arden brings to bear valid insights into the behavior of not only Armstrong and his allies but of the representatives of the authority that seek his demise at least as a political force.

Our first exposure to Johnny reveals a marked absence of such “humanity” or desire for peace. After swearing friendship with Wamphrary, he has murdered him and was inclined to agree with the later assessment of Lindsay’s secretary, Mc Glass:

He is ane terrible Gogmogog, he is ane Cyclops of the mountain:
begod he has baith his een-but hauf a tongue in the man’s heid...Did
ye listen to his Gaelic? I thinkwe need to cut his throat. (I,ix)

Armstrong and Lindsay are the principals in the drama. Arden makes clear that their actions and attitudes must be considered within the broader political, social and religious context of their lives. The possibility of war with England, the conflicting claims and value system of the clan and centralized forms of government, the clash between heretical evangelism and the established Church: all are important factors that help to clarify the nature of the Lindsay-Armstrong confrontation. A similar difficulty arises in regard to political context. Again, reportage rather than dramatization is used to convey important information. Though we see murderous political methods employed by the border clans, the important conflict of interest between Armstrong and Maxwell (which leads to much strife) and the later reconciliation between Maxwell and Johnstone (which also helps to precipitate much action) are drily described by the secretaries of the principals and hence their significance is dulled. On the other hand, Arden's opinion that both situations embody a conflict between two kinds of received values is assuredly valid. And as Gilliat correctly points out, the parallel emerges quite naturally from the action of Armstrong:

... the two chief characters in the play are themselves separated from each other temperamentally by what seems like centuries; with this sort of time –tug existing between them, the ripple passes long the rope to the present.

Emphasizing this separation, of course, are the historical forces that serve to define the different ways of life represented by two central protagonists. Arden makes abundantly clear that more than a personality conflict is involved. Moreover, his success in illustrating the complexity of the situation encourages us to consider its universal aspects independently of the chronological limits that frame the dramatic action.

Arden's play reveals a rich historical texture. His masterful use of "Babylonish dialect," his relatively objective view of conflicting historical forces, the energetic vitality of the ballads and songs –all contribute to, or embody, the context and substance

of his period and his themes. Arden combines extravagant “theatricalism” and historical “realism” in such a way that our attention is engaged, rather than distracted, in regard to the issue at hand. The play on the other hand, exudes a confident and comprehensive familiarity with the period. The author admits to a studied knowledge of the “bald and prejudiced” chronicles of the period; he differentiates between the historical “facts” and his own “less historical” opinions; and he notes that his attempt to modify the conventional image of John as a “villainous king” is compatible with contemporary historical opinion. Arden like Shaw is also an old fashioned playwright. He also feels that some critics are insensitive to, or ignorant of, the rather traditional forms and techniques that he utilizes for his own particular ends.

To conclude we can say that Arden appears to have absorbed whether directly or indirectly, extraneous influences and fused them with the ideas or styles which are uniquely his own. He draws freely on the sources of academic and artistic history, but easily transcends the limitations of either. Consequently each play exudes an unmistakable period or historical atmosphere, yet each is modern or “Ardenesque”. His play suggests two important criteria. One is that the criterion of a dramatically viable historical context demands an easy familiarity with the period under scrutiny. This enables the playwright to assimilate, discard and even distort the ideas without appearing slavishly imitative. The other is that the ideas themselves more readily engage and hold our attention if the author is conversant with the vast array of artistic conventions that were once used (and continue to be used) to convey and define them. Understandably, Arden is not consistently successful. But his play demonstrate that while the use of historical material is by no means new to drama, an historical approach to the problems of contemporary importance remains a basically sound and often theatrically exciting venue by which such problems can be explored.

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