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Rewriting History in John Arden's *Left-Handed Liberty*

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ABSTRACT

In *Left-Handed Liberty* John Arden takes Magna Carta signed between King John and the Barons in 1215, and reinterprets it from a perspective which asserts that it is not, in fact, a milestone on the path to liberty as was officially claimed. Although based on historical documents, Arden's play does not treat history didactically. He is indeed the master of conveying the social and political life of man within the context of real life experiences which always overflow political identities. Hence, for instance, King John is reinterpreted as a weakling rather than a tyrant as the conventional reading of historical documents portrayed him.

Taking an unconventional approach to the Great Charter as the “cornerstone” of the path to human rights, John Arden fills in the “opinions” of the important personages partaking in the shaping of the events during the period and adds, as he says in the introduction to the play, “facts” that cannot perhaps be found among the historical documents but are still justifiable within the historical framework of Medieval Europe.

Keywords: history, Magna Carta, document, imagination, ideology

ÖZET

Left-Handed Liberty adlı oyununda John Arden, Kral John ile Baronlar arasında 1215 yılında imzalanan, Magna Carta adlı belgeye yeni bir yaklaşımla, bu belgenin resmi tarihin belirttiği gibi İngiltere tarihinde özgürlükleri gerçekleştirme yolunda sanıldığı kadar önemli bir dönüm noktası olmadığını, Kral John'ın aslında zalim bir kral olmaktan çok, zayıf bir kişiliğe sahip bir insan olduğunun altını çizer. John Arden oyun kişilerini her zaman toplumsal ve politik gerçek yaşam deneyleri çerçevesinde tarihsel kimliklerini aşan yönleriyle canlandıran usta bir yazardır. Tarihsel belgelere dayanmasına karşın oyun tarihe didaktik bir açıdan bakmaz.

Büyük Ferman adıyla da anılan Magna Carta'yı alışılmışın dışında bir yaklaşımla değerlendiren John Arden, oyuna yazdığı Önsözde de belirttiği gibi, o dönemde önemli görevler üstlenmiş olan kişileri yeniden canlandırırken, tarihsel belgelerde rastlanmamakla birlikte Orta Çağ Avrupası'nın ruhuna uygun bilgiler eklemiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: tarih, Magna Carta, belge, imgelem gücü, ideoloji

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Juvenal

As Malick has aptly observed, Bertolt Brecht said that “the decisive historical events which today’s drama of great issues should be presenting takes place in huge collectives and can no longer be portrayed from the point of view of a single human being” (Malick, 1990:208). Hence, writing in the Brechtian vein, in his play *Left-Handed Liberty*, John Arden approaches the historical events revolving around the signing of Magna Carta (The Great Charter) from the varying perspectives of different people from King John Lackland of England to the Barons who met with him on May 6, 1215 at Runnymede to sign it, from the Archbishop to Pandulph to the Papal Legate who shares the role of the narrator with John, from the Mayor of London to Baron de Vesci’s wife Lady de Vesci, from the Marshal to Goldsmith and his wife. As Javed Malick has pointed out, John Arden following the tradition of Dario Fo, Brecht and Piscator and the early Soviet experiments of Eisenstein, Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, has delineated ‘dramatic agents’ in their dialectical relationship to the society which they are a part of and which they play a significant role in shaping (Malick, 1990:213). We, as the audience, get to know these characters as members of different classes more guided by their ‘concrete material interests’ than by any moral concern for the common good’ (Malick, 1990:211-212).

Left-Handed Liberty was specially commissioned in 1965 by the Corporation of the City of London, as its contribution towards the 750th Anniversary Celebrations of the signing of the Magna Carta. However, in the play, although it is about a historical event that marks a turning point in English history and jurisprudence, John Arden is carried off by his rewriting of the character of King John.

In an interview with the playwright, Georg Guston commented that Arden ended up focusing less on the historical event than on the character of John. ‘ You have said that he had a ‘weird charm’ for you. Can you tell us what the essence of this ‘weird charm’ is ? (Gaston and Arden, 1991:164)

I think answered Arden, the weird charm of King John was although he was a king, and therefore necessarily concerned with what elsewhere is described as the business of good government he refused to take his job any more seriously than than any other job that would have been available to him. He behaved as a king as if he had been a laborer or a craftsman. He is serious, and yet he is not in any way deceived by the pomposity of the circumstances attending him. At least this seems to be true of the historical John (Gaston and Arden, 1991:164).

Having read deeply into medieval history, John Arden found King John “an unusual type of character to find at the head of affairs of a great public office.” “To me,” he said, “he was far more interesting than his alleged villainies. In fact he was no more villainous than any other king, and in many respects less so than many kings who were described as good kings” (Gaston and Arden, 1991:164).

In his rewriting of the history concerning the signing of Magna Carta, John Arden does not only alter the established view of King John as a villain. As he expounds it in the ‘Introduction to the play’, when he was commissioned to write a play about the Charter, he realized how little he really knew about it from the history books.

Although most of the play can be “justified historically” he says that “he transposed a few episodes ...such as Pandulph’s correspondence on behalf of the king with the Flemish recruiting agent (of mercenaries); young Marshal’s love for Lady de Vesci and Lady de Vesci’s relationship with John . “The latter intrigue” says John Arden, “is supposed to have taken place at an earlier date in John’s reign, and in fact to have been foiled by the substitution of a woman of the lower orders, in the manner of a folk-tale. But John was often accused of seducing the women of his nobility-he is also said to have violated (Baron) Fitzwalter’s daughter-and the story is convenient for the play, so I put it in” (Arden, 1965:ix.).

Young Marshal’s love for Lady de Vesci is again true to the spirit of the times Arden constructed in *Left-Handed Liberty*.

According to Albert Hunt, Pandulph “plays a role familiar in Arden plays- that of the man who presents events to the audience. Arden’s master-stroke lies in making this compere the spokesman of one of the most alien ideologies imaginable-that of the medieval, Aristotelian high cleric” (1974:99). To Pandulph, the Papal Legate who looks at the events of the period from the point of Rome and sees everything settled and static ordained by God until the Second Coming of Christ, John Arden sets this view dialectically in opposition to one of the most turbulent years of European history. Pandulph after explaining how God has meanwhile “...left the Church as central to human life, as the world is central to the organization of the universe-“ (Arden, 1965:2).

The Church will not concern itself with material circumstances but spiritual ones (Arden, 1965:2) he says. Yet, contradictorily he goes on to say that “...without Divinity, man is little more than meat and bones and water on the slab of a butcher’s shop, it must therefore be clear that no alternation, no betterment, no human improvement, no progress is going to be possible: unless it comes through the Church or the Saints of the Church. Which would be intervention indeed, but indirect and inevitably spiritual rather than material. (Arden, 1965:2) In fact as the Papal Bull which has forbidden women from joining the Crusades after Eleanor of Aquitaine’s legendary participation with 300 women in armor and lance in the Second Crusade (Eleanor of Aquitaine), the power of the Church presides not only spiritually but directly:

So, therefore, we concern ourselves only with the sins and repentance of individual men, and, instructed by Our Lord take no thought for the morrow, what raiment we should put on or what food we should consume, or how we should organize the government of nations. (Arden, 1965:2)

Yet, Pandulph succinctly declares the direct involvement of Rome in the political affairs of far away nations by declaring that “John, King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy, born Anno Domini 1167, is an anointed King and therefore requires the obedience of his subjects. That is all the Church has to say upon the matter.” (Arden, 1965:2). The famous quarrel between King Henry II and The Archbishop of Canterbury over matters of law as to who had the right over the judgement of criminals under the wings of the Church that ended with the martyrdom of Thomas Becket is

historically fresh within the collective memory of the audience (Carter and Mears, 1960:121-124).

Albert Hunt has commented that the play is mostly a dialogue of confrontation between Pandulph and King John. *Left -Handed Liberty*, however, as pointed out at the beginning of the paper referring to Malick, is like a Brechtian choral symphony of many characters voicing different opinions and not merely a duet of confrontation between Pandulph and King John (Hunt, 1970:104).

Pandulph ends this Brechtian Prologue at the beginning of Act I by leaving the stage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, King John's mother: His widowed mother, of course, being of a subordinate yet blessed sex, may choose to say more, but remember the words of Jesus: 'Woman, what have I to do with thee? My hour is not yet come' (Arden, 1965:3).

Considered to be a controversial translation, as well as a controversial interpretation of the meaning of 'Woman', Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with you and me? My hour has not yet come" (World English Bible). These words attributed to Jesus Christ as spoken by Pandulph here are meant to diminish the superiority of women over men in Medieval Europe despite their economic power, the cult of Virgin Mary and the courtly tradition of chivalry.

"A Castle in Aquitaine, 1204" (p. 3).

Pandulph "resumes his seat" (p.3), the stage directions read.

Arden has been criticised for the insertion of the sections concerning women into an otherwise political play based on man. However, historical facts inform us otherwise. Eleanor of Aquitaine, King John's mother had enormous economic and political power. By no means "subordinate" she was esteemed highly with her inheritance at the age of fifteen with the Duchy of Aquitaine after her father's death. From The House of Poitiers (The Ramnulfids), Aquitaine grew up in the Ramnulfid House which "did much to encourage art, literature and piety. Under William V, William IX, and William X, Aquitaine became the center for the art of poetry and song in the vernacular, the troubadour tradition was born and raised there... and the ideal of courtly love invented" (Ulwencreutz, 2013:217).

In fact the first scene of Act I introduces us to King John's mother Eleanor of Aquitaine. We see "A Figure of the Virgin and the Child" referring to the Cult of the Virgin of the Middle Ages who is not only symbol of the mother of God but also a softening figure of the mother taking care of her son. Eleanor is seated on a throne wrapped in furs. In contradistinction of the ageless Virgin captured forever young in the picture, Eleanor is "[e]ighty –two years old, which is very old indeed by the standards of the time." As Arden portrays her in Notes on the Characters, she "[h]as been a fascinating dark Mediterranean beauty who has introduced into Western thought and poetry the concept of chivalry in the service of romantic love" (Arden, 1965:v).

Contemporary writers praise Eleanor's beauty, when she was young, she was described as *perpulchra*, meaning more than beautiful. When she was around 30, Bernard de Ventadour, a noted troubadour, called her "gracious, lovely, the

embodiment of charm," extolling her "lovely eyes and noble countenance". William of Newburgh emphasized the charms of her person, and even in her old age, Richard of Devizes described her as beautiful. (Notes for King Henry II PLANTAGENET Of England)

Ironically Eleanor of Aquitaine is not like Virgin Mary at all. Married at the age of fifteen to Louis VII she became Queen of France. The elder daughter of William X, Duke of Aquitaine, she inherited enormous wealth, the whole of Southwestern France.

Her criticism of Henry's John is first depicted as a son scolded by his mother before he appears on stage as a king of the Plantagenets, the King of England about to sign a document of agreement with the barons ceremonially at Runnymede, a document that was going to have an impact on English Law later in history.

ELEANOR: Our son was late. Very late. Two hours late.

JOHN: I have already apologized, mother, with (I thought) a very fair address of courtesy. Matters of state, matters of alarm of state detained me and the roads were extremely bad. (he calls to someone offstage) . Tell my Clerk of Works it is time they were attended to! But I have arrived in your Hall, I was not too late for the consumption of wine and spices. (Arden, 1965:4)

However, Eleanor's reproach is not only personal, but continues to gain political ground:

ELEANOR: No. And with a very fair address of courtesy. Queens are susceptible to it. Stone walls have never heard of it. For our son has been late elsewhere; has he not? He failed to save his castle from the enemy. Saucy Castle on the borders of Normandy. The King of France flies banners from the roof... Normandy tomorrow will belong to France. (Arden, 1965:4)

The place of woman in Medieval Europe is given here first in Eleanor's lines—reality versus the ideal. If only kings had listened more to and co-acted with their wives: without 'wives' kings are "sufficient in the end for nothing but a mortal loss of temper" which accounts for the death of William the Bastard who burst his own belly when France laughed at it calling him a pregnant woman. He should have had a wife" continues Eleanor, "to laugh with him and to laugh at him instead of that unfortunate lady who spoke two words to him once, and having incontinently been dragged by the hair of her head at the tail of his horse from one end of the city to the other, preferred ever after to remain silent" (Arden, 1965:5). "He did have a wife" retorts John. *I have a wife* (Arden, 1965:5).

About to die, Eleanor finally talks about her imprisonment by Henry II, John's father who "was about to have been the greatest king the English had ever heard of" if he had not decided to be self-sufficient, and dispensed with his wife" (Arden, 1965:5).

ELEANOR: ...Why, he put her into prison. He divided by force the twin flesh that had been made one, and the sons of her poor huge belly turned upon him with their adolescent chaos, and it burst his own belly for him and that was the end of him (Arden, 1965:5).

On the brink of death that she feels is approaching, she asks her son John: What way will you go? After what manner are you making?

JOHN: I am making what I want to make.

In the manner I want to make it.

The English are mine.

And what I want I shall take it.

Or provide it, when I want,

In the manner of my father.

ELEANOR: The manner of you mother

Is always much better.

Hide behind the corner

Dictate a polite letter.

So if it has to be done, do it easily and quietly,

Afterwards deny it,

No-one need know it

Sometimes for my lover

Sometimes for my poet

Always I kept the back door unlocked

Never for the king:

He could beat at the great gate

Until the hinges rocked.

John. John. On your left hand

Wear your most beautiful ring

And do not let it show.

The military circumstances

Enforce you to be slow

But you must never be late. (Arden, 1965:7)

As Malick observes “Arden’s drana is characterized by an abundance of verbal and gestic energy which dialogizes his agents as it also enhances their theatrical interest. This technique places his agents among the most communicative fictive beings in modern drama” (Malick, 1990:212).

The chivalric code of courtly love is reiterated in Act II, Scene II where Lady de Vesci, Baron de Vesci’s wife, appeals to Magna Carta in order to defend herself against the accusation of De Vesci for adultery with King John.

DE VESCI: I was under the impression madam. I had ordered you to remain in this lodging . I have just returned from Oxford. You were not here when I came back. Where were you?

LADY DE VESCI: I walked abroad to see the city, my Lord. What is so remarkable about that The citizens’ wives do it every day.

DE VESCI: Very possibly, madam. They have not been forbidden it by their husbands. You have. (Arden, p.42)

De Vesci asks for her defense. Lady de Vesci demands proof that she has been the King's mistress. When de Vesci threatens her with imprisonment and having her flogged by his knaves, Lady de Vesci finds this "extremely outrageous" (Arden, 1965:42) and reads from the Charter:

LADY DE VESCI: 'No free men shall be arrested or imprisoned or deprived of his freehold... except by the lawful judgement of his peers.' I am a free woman, indeed a noblewoman – if you can establish a court of noble ladies of equivalent rank, I daresay they will be prepared to hear your cause against me, and to pronounce a verdict in accordance with the evidence' (Arden, 1965:42).

De Vesci's angry retaliation proves how Magna Carta was interpreted according to the short-term self-interests of the parties in question at the time rather than the first human rights' plea it was later taken to be against the despotic tyranny of the kings.

DE VESCI: ...and what in the name of the Black Blood of Mahound do you mean by putting that sort of interpretation upon a document which-which does not mean what you think it means. No. The clause that you so amused yourself by quaoating at your husband, at your Lord, was specifically intended to prevent men of my class from being hauled before tribunals consisting of persons of inferior rank-commoners and foreigners and God knows who besides. You know very well what the King's been doing with his Law Courts-French clerks, and so forth, mercenary officers, he has had the impertinence to describe them as his Judges-well, he won't do it anymore, we've put the cork in that bottle ! And not in such a way as to give free passage to adultery.

LADY DE VESCI: Adultery with the King.

DE VESCI: He will not protect you here. We are in London now, and fortified (Arden, 1965:42-43).

Arden reminds us of the Marxist view that for any document to be in effect power is essential to substantiate it. King John himself well knew it and expressed it to the Archbishop earlier in the play:

ARCBISHOP: Good government under secure law is in the interests of all classes, my lord.

JOHN: In the interests of all classes with power in their hands, yes... (Arden, 1965:14)

The rewriting of Magna Carta's place in English history in John Arden's play *Left-Handed Liberty* focuses on the universal issue that as Lady de Vesci words it in Act III, Scene 7.

The rewriting of Magna Carta's place in English history in John Arden's play *Left-Handed Liberty* focuses on the universal issue that if words , "ambidexterous" (Arden, 1965:43) as they are, are not substantiated with power in the body politic be manipulated according to interest. In the "Author's Notes" that he wrote to the play, John Arden says "that an agreement on paper is worth nothing to anybody unless it has taken place in their minds as well and that if we want liberty we have to make quite sure that

- (a) We know what sort of liberty we are fighting for:
- (b) Our methods of fighting are not such as to render that liberty invalid before we attain it:
- (c) We understand that we are in more danger of losing it once we have attained it than if we had never had it...(Arden, 1965:xii)

As the Archbishop says “words, bones, hearts-all of them are fragile (Arden, 1965:35). Magna Carta is ‘rhetoric’, mere promises on paper which do not mean anything unless they are internalized by those who realize them.

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