

Irony and Restructuring: Greig's Postmodern Rewrite of Macbeth

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Abstract: Dunsinane is a postmodern rewrite adapted from William Shakespeare's play Macbeth by David Greig. This article mainly deals with the problem that specifically, how Dunsinane is rewritten from Macbeth. The article firstly analyzes from rhetorical perspective that irony, the frequently-used literary device in Macbeth is also a prominent rhetorical strategy of rewriting in Dunsinane. The restructuring of the characters Macbeth, Malcolm and Siward from Scottish perspectives as well as the the restructured theme behind the rewrite are also introduced.

Keywords: Dunsinane; Macbeth; Restructure; Irony; Postmodern rewrite

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1 Introduction

Dunsinane, adapted by David Greig from Shakespeare's play Macbeth, was premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 2010. Dunsinane began from Act 5, Scene 4 of Macbeth. After Macbeth's enemies were exiled to England, they persuaded the King of England to send an army to Scotland in an attempt to bring the Scottish king's reign to an abrupt end. The army, under the command of Siward, was invincible all the way to Dunsinane castle where Macbeth was, and finally destroyed his rule. Since then, Greig's plot was parted from Shakespeare's. Different from the portrayal in Macbeth, in Greig's play, the Queen did not die and Siward became one of the main characters. The story tells that after Macbeth's death, the English army under the

leadership of Siward occupied Scotland, and expected to elect a new ruler of Scotland. At first, Siward was a righteous and moral intruder. He refused to plunder and massacre and hoped to establish justice and order by peaceful means. However, the establishment of a new order was not as simple as these Englishmen thought. Various problems came one after another. This paper will analyze specifically how Dunsinane is rewritten from the play Macbeth from the Scottish perspective based on close reading and explore the restructuring of the theme behind the rewrite.

2 Rhetorical strategy of the restructuring in Dunsinane: irony

One of the most effective of dramatic devices is the use of "irony." The most recognized definitions of irony comes from Cicero and Quintilian. (Colebrook 12) According to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian, despite its unwieldy complexity, irony has a frequent and common definition: saying what is contrary to what is meant.(Quintilian, 401) Irony is also an important critical post-modern writing strategy, which can be further divided into three main types: verbal irony, dramatic irony and situational irony. Just as Macbeth is remarkable beyond any other of Shakespeare's plays for the frequency and power of its tragic "irony" (<http://shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/dramaticironym.html>) , in Dunsinane, irony is also a frequently-appeared rhetorical strategy adopted by Greig for the rewrite of Macbeth.

2.1 Dramatic irony

In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth was barbarous, cruel and developed tactics according to the three

witches. Dunsinane was rewritten from the Scottish perspective and alluded to the description of Macbeth:

“Boy Soldier: They say that your husband would
– Gruach: Would what?

Boy Soldier: They said he’d murder people and when he’d murdered them, he’d ...

Gruach: Yes?

Boy Soldier: Subdue their wives and – And that when there was a baby

– Gruach: What?

Boy Soldier: They say he’d give it to you – and you would eat it. (Greig 46)

.....

Siward Maybe you really are a witch.

Gruach: I am not a witch but I am the Queen of Scotland. (Greig 54)

.....

Egham: They like fighting. In fact – they’re fighting us partly because we’re stopping them from fighting each other.(Greig71)

No matter it is for the description that Scots are barbarous, Scottish women are witches, or Scots would eat babies, the audience of course know that Greig did not use these sensational remarks to vilify the image of Scots. Instead, Dunsinane is rewritten from the Scottish perspective to reassess the description of Scottish people in Macbeth. As dramatic irony is defined as "the sense of contradiction felt by the spectators at the sight of a character acting in ignorance of his true condition" (Blissett, 398), it can be found that dramatic irony is used to point out the biases towards Scottish people in Macbeth and ridicule the self-righteous, arrogant and prejudiced English rulers in Macbeth.

2.2 Verbal irony

Verbal irony occurs when a speaker’s intention is the opposite of what he or she is saying. In Dunsinane, verbal irony is an important conversation strategy in Gruach’s speech. For example:

Boy Soldier: Subdue their wives and – And that when there was a baby

–Gruach: What?

Boy Soldier: They say he’d give it to you – and you would eat it.

.....

Gruach: What they say –

Boy Soldier: Yes.

Gruach: It’s true.

Boy Soldier: Jesus.

Gruach : Have you never eaten baby meat?

Boy Soldier: Me–no.

.....

Gruach: You should try it.

.....

Gruach: It’s delicious. Very tender. (Greig 46)

The Queen of course wouldn’t eat baby meat. However, she still fooled the boy soldier into believing her baby-eating habit. Gruach here used verbal irony to satirize the foolishness of the English soldiers.

2.3 Situational irony

Situational irony occurs when the actual result of a situation is totally different from what one would expect the result to be. In the play Dunsinane, both the characteristics of Siward and the theme of the play are achieved through situational irony.

Siward always stated that all he wanted was peace. Siward said, ” I have to clear away the past now. I have to uproot now and clear away all past claims and – That way there is a chance that we can establish a fair peace in Scotland in which every clan can flourish - including yours.” However, the fact is that after England won, the English soldiers began to steal and sell the properties of Scotland. Moreover, after seeing that his soldiers were killed severely, Siward did not stick to his original idea anymore. Instead, he became ruthless: “Every day one or other of our boys comes back to us laid out on a cart and marked with wounds which come from her arrows - cuts which come from her knives. She is ruthless. So we have to be ruthless.” (Greig 71) Siward sent troops to Scotland with the aim of restoring peace. However, in the end, it was also his intrusion that made Scotland into a mess. Situational irony was used to remind later generation that although the original intention of helping a country at war seems to be sensible, forcible control is actually destroying the country.

3 Restructured characters in Dunsinane: Macbeth, Malcolm and Siward

3.1 The restructuring of Macbeth

In Shakespeare’s play, Macbeth is uglified as a bloody and devilish tyrant. Scotland under Macbeth’s rule was dark and full of cruelty:

Macduff: Not in the legions

Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned
In evils to top Macbeth

Malcolm: I grant him bloody

Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful,

Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin
(Shakespeare, 72)

However, in *Macbeth*: a true story, historian Fiona Watson points out that Macbeth in Shakespeare's works is actually a demonized image, which is totally different from historical reality. (Zhao Zhiyong, 116) Greig in his rewrite provided us with a new image of Macbeth from the Scottish perspective. Though Macbeth wasn't arranged in the play nor was there any direct description about him, the brave, assertive and firm image of Gruach can be seen as an embodiment of her husband. In their enemy's eyes, Macbeth was a bloody tyrant. However, if reconsidering from the Scottish perspective, it was also his responsibility and his interests to defend and save his country against the English invaders.

3.2 The restructuring of Malcolm

To avoid the intentional murder from Macbeth, Malcolm escaped to England. According to the description of Macbeth, Malcolm was manly, assertive and principled. He encouraged Macduff to revenge on Macbeth:

Malcolm: This tune goes manly.

Come, go we to the king. Our power is ready:

Our lack is nothing but our leave. Macbeth

Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above

Put on their instruments. Receive what cheer you may:

The night is long that never finds the day.
(Shakespeare, 77)

However, in Greig's restructuring of Malcolm, the puppet monarch Malcolm always considered his own interests and remained "weak" in order to secure the throne. Under his reign, the Scots who lived in the occupied land suffered humiliation. They would get killed even because of a little joke of the English soldiers. The coward and weak characteristics of the monarch Malcolm and the mess caused by him in Scotland also showed that forcible control of the politics in the country at war may only lead to more trouble.

3.3 The restructuring of Siward

In Shakespeare's play, Siward did not function as an important character. However, in Greig's rewrite,

Siward became one of the central characters and was injected into new meaning.

The prominent characteristics of Siward is his dual character. As a conqueror, Siward didn't mean to hurt Scottish people in the first place. He tried to re-establish peace and order in Scotland. He strictly restrained his soldiers, and avoided damaging the interests of the Scottish people. However, after a series of betrayals from Gruach and frustrations from Malcolm, Siward showed the cruel side of his characteristics. He became ruthless and tried to maintain his rule with bloody policies. He even burned the Scottish soldiers alive and killed Gruach's son.

After Siward lifted the dead boy's body walking across the landscape of snow and finally found Gruach with her newly-born baby, he got annoyed, "It's time for us both to do what's best for our people. The Moray claim is over. Accept that or I'll kill this child. And finish it." (Greig, 100) However, when the baby in the arms of his soldier's began to shit and cry, Siward's humanity was evoked. He putted his knife away and walked back into the snow with his soldier.

The restructuring of Siward not only demonstrates the dual characteristics as a striking feature of Scottish plays, but also reveals the complexity between peace and conflicts in a country at war, which adds difficulties for forcible control and would drive foreign invaders into dilemma and a mess.

4 The restructuring of the theme in *Dunsinane*

4.1 The invincibility and vitality of Scotland

Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* started from a desert place and ended at *Dunsinane*, which presented the theme that the Macbeth's tyrannical reign over Scotland had to be brought to an end. In comparison, Greig's play started from *Dunsinane* and ended up with Siward's walking away into the snow, which restructured the theme that Scotland would never be defeated and would extend its land and its life from generation to generation.

4.2 Forcible control over a country at war is dangerous

In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Scotland under Macbeth's rule was messy and full of cruelty. Therefore, it can be justified that England should send

troops to Scotland to eliminate the tyrants.

In the restructuring of Shakespeare's play, Siward explained the aim of his intrusion:

Siward: I came here to install Malcolm as king so as to secure England's northern border. My job is to build a new kingdom - not to settle old grudges. So I have to clear away the past now. I have to uproot now and clear away all past claims and - That way there is a chance that we can establish a fair peace in Scotland in which every clan can flourish - including yours. New government can't be built on top of old wounds. (Greig, 26)

Siward's conception of overturning Scotland's past and build new government to restore peace proved to be a failure. Malcolm's words well reminded Siward of the truth between conflicts and peace:

You seem to think peace is a natural state, Siward, and conflict its interruption, but the truth is the exact opposite. Peace is what the sea looks like in a dead calm – a rare and beautiful moment – something impossible – a glimpse of perfection before the wind comes back again. You can no more force peace into existence than you can wander across the surface of the sea stamping the waves flat.

Peace cannot be forced into being and it has to be accepted that conflict is the normal state of a country. Greig wanted to remind the western politicians and later generations that when they see what's going on in Syria, Iraq or other countries at war, they can't help but have an urge to "do something," but the forcible control is also dangerous.

4.3 Eliminate biases from England and demonstrate the braveness of Scotland people

As what is mentioned in the above text, no matter it is the irony or the restructuring of Macbeth, Dunsinane aims at eliminating the biases from Macbeth and justifying Macbeth's defense over his own country. Moreover, the arrangement of the brave and assertive Queen of Scotland, Gruach, in Dunsinane also demonstrates the braveness of Scotland people.

5 Conclusion

As a postmodern rewrite of Shakespeare's play Macbeth, Dunsinane was adapted by Greig from the Scottish perspective. It can be seen that just as irony is the most frequently used literary device in Macbeth, Dunsinane also used irony as the rhetorical strategy of rewriting. Verbal irony and dramatic irony are the main strategies used in Gruach's discourse to eliminate the biases from England and satirize the foolishness of the English intruders. Situational irony is used to portray the dual characteristics of Siward and elicit the theme of the play that forcible control over a country at war is dangerous.

In Dunsinane, Greig also restructured the characters Macbeth, Malcolm and Siward and also the theme of the play in order to remind the western politicians and later generations that it is always impulsive to do something when seeing what's going on in Syria, Iraq or other countries at war, but the forcible control is also dangerous. Greig in his rewrite also demonstrates the braveness of Scottish people, reveals the inability of the English intruders and eliminates the biases from England.

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