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T. W. ROBERTSON’S CASTE: A BRIDGE BETWEEN VICTORIAN AND REALIST THEATRE

T. W. ROBERTSON’İN CASTE ADLI OYUNU: VİKTORYA TİYATROSU VE GERÇEKÇİ TİYATRO ARASINDA BİR KÖPRÜ

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Abstract

Thomas William Robertson (1829-1871), who is a Victorian playwright, made use of melodramatic techniques in his plays just like his contemporaries. The basic aim in melodramatic plays, which are marked by a tight plot structure, exaggerated characters and sensational events, is undoubtedly to move audience members emotionally. As an inevitable result of this aim, most playwrights attempted to make audiences be affected by the events in the play rather than showing an effort to reflect the realities of their time. Although in his plays Robertson embraced most of the techniques mentioned, he possessed a significant characteristic which differentiated him from most of his contemporaries; Robertson went beyond his time’s dramatic conventions and added realist and naturalist elements in his plays. In this respect, it can be said that Robertson’s plays carried the quality of being a bridge between Victorian theatre and realist theatre. The aim of this study is to investigate Robertson’s theatre career and the novelties he brought to Victorian theatre and to show how and to what extent he succeeded in being a precursor of British Realist Theatre in his play *Caste* written by the playwright in 1861.

Keywords: T. W. Robertson, *Caste*, Victorian theatre, melodramatic plays, British realist theatre

Öz

Viktorya dönemi oyun yazarlarından biri olan Thomas William Robertson (1829-1871), tiyatro oyunlarında tıpkı çağdaşları gibi melodramatik yöntemlerden faydalanmıştır. Sıkı bir olay örgüsü, abartılı karakterler ve sansasyonel olayların hüküm sürdüğü melodramatik oyunlarda temel amaç hiç şüphesiz seyirciyi duygusal anlamda etkilemektir. Bu amacın kaçınılmaz sonucu olarak çoğu yazar, içinde yaşadığı çağın gerçeklerini yansıtma çabasından çok seyircinin oyunda yer alan olaylara kapılıp giderek heyecanlanmasını sağlamaya çalışmıştır. Her ne kadar Robertson, içinde yaşadığı çağın bir sonucu olarak sözü edilen yöntemleri benimsemişse de bir oyun yazarı olarak onu çağdaşlarının pek çoğundan farklı kılan çok önemli bir özelliğe sahiptir; Robertson bahsedilen tekniklerin ötesine geçip oyunlarına gerçekçi ve natüralist öğeler eklemiştir. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, Robertson’ın oyunlarının Viktorya dönemi tiyatrosundan gerçekçi tiyatroya uzanan bir köprü niteliği taşıdığı söylenebilir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Robertson’ın tiyatro kariyerini ve Viktorya dönemi tiyatrosuna getirdiği yenilikleri ele almak ve yazarın 1861 yılında yazdığı *Caste* adlı oyununun gerçekçi Britanya Tiyatrosunun öncüsü olmayı nasıl ve ne ölçüde başardığını göstermektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: T. W. Robertson, *Caste*, Viktorya dönemi tiyatrosu, melodramatik oyunlar, gerçekçi Britanya tiyatrosu

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INTRODUCTION

> Poor Thomas Robertson—it is, even today, the universal phrase of sorrow and affection that is used in speaking of him; of affection, because they who love the stage easily allow good fellowship to become a legend; of sorrow, because fate seemed always to have a blow prepared for Robertson while he lived ... (Emeljanow 1987: 90)

These lines, written by an unnamed drama critic of the *Times* to mark the centenary on 9 January 1929 of Robertson's birth, clearly show how exceptional the life and career of Thomas William Robertson was. He was born in 1829 into a family with a theatre background and his formal education finished at the age of twelve. He began practising writing plays soon. Being a product of Victorian era, Robertson was surely making use of melodramatic conventions in his drama. He was one of those playwrights who was naturally keen on producing well-made plays. A well-made play is a genre of drama popular in particularly the second half of the nineteenth century which has a tight plot structure, a keen emphasis on exposition of events happening before the action of the play. There is usually an emotional climax containing a revelation of a secret. Although Robertson is most often labelled as a Victorian playwright who remained loyal to melodramatic conventions, he still "made many innovations in his dramas, particularly in terms of realistic or naturalistic convention" (Wolfreys, Womack, and Robbins 2014). This article aims to explore how and to what extent Robertson and his play *Caste* have succeeded in becoming a precursor of British Realist Theatre.

ROBERTSON'S LIFE, WORK AND CAREER

Being the eldest child, Robertson joined his family's company as a handyman where he managed the box office, performed juvenile roles and acted as a prompter. Because of his father's insistence, he learned French. Victor Emeljanow points out that Robertson's life consisted of a series of professional setbacks and disappointments especially from 1849 to 1860 (1987: 90). He was employed as a translator of French plays by a publisher named T. H. Lacy. In the meantime, he tried to write his original material. He also tried to earn money by performing secondary roles at various minor theatres around London. Later, he called all these his 'starving engagements'. In 1856, he got married to Elizabeth Burton who was an actress. In the following two years, Robertson and his wife performed together throughout the provinces of England and Ireland. It was in 1858 that Robertson made the decision of devoting himself solely to writing. As Emeljanow informs: "While his wife continued to act, he wrote feverishly: articles for magazines like *Illustrated Times* and *Fun*, comic songs on commission, and plays, many of which were destined never to be performed" (1987: 94).

Robertson's short farce entitled *The Cantab* brought him not only a reasonable success in 1861 but also to the attention of the literary Bohemians of the London club world. His contributions to some journals had already introduced him to the world of journalists. He was introduced to E. A. Sothern who was a comedian. Robertson always felt indebted to Sothern since it was him who acted the life of David Garrick very effectively and contributed to the success of Robertson due to the fact that *David Garrick* was adopted from French into English by Robertson himself (Emeljanow 1987: 94). However, soon Robertson began to believe that in order to be theatrically successful, a playwright had to tailor his dramatic cloth according to the abilities of a specific actor. Therefore, he started to work on a play that would offer scope for Sothern's talents and the result was *Society* staged in 1865. All this, however, did not satisfy Robertson and his wife's death at the age of twenty-nine made him even worse. One of his friends, H. J. Byron, who was a successful writer and journalist, told about Robertson's pessimistic mood to Marie Wilton in order to help his friend. Wilton was the manager of the Prince of Wales Theatre in London and so began the intimate relationship between Robertson and the Prince of Wales Theatre that was to bring fame to both parties. Following *Society*, *Ours* in 1866 and *Caste* in 1867 were written by the playwright. By 1867, he was a popular playwright. A touring company was established to play Robertson's major successes and it travelled for the next seventeen years with *Caste* as the centrepiece. During one of his holidays to Germany, he married Rosetta Feist and wrote his next play for the Prince of Wales titled *Play* which opened in 1868. Among his other renown plays, *A Night's Adventure, Home*, *School*, *Dreams*, *Progress*, *Birth*, *The Nightingale*, *M.P.* and *War* can be counted. Since he was diagnosed with bronchitis by the end of 1869 and had one year left to live, he wrote as much as he could in order to guarantee his family some financial security. He died in 1871 at the age of forty-two (Emeljanow 1987: 95-96).

In his very short life, the importance of Prince of Wales Theatre in Robertson's life is worth mentioning. The same is true for the Prince of Wales Theatre as well. The story of the theatre in question begins with a remarkable female manager named Marie Wilton. She was actually acting as a boy in plays and was tired of it since she was sometimes disillusioned by what she saw in the audience: "My heart sank! Some of the occupants of the stalls were engaged between the acts in devouring oranges, and drinking ginger-beer. Babies were being rocked to sleep, or smacked to be quiet, which proceeding, in many cases, had an opposite effect!" (in Booth 1991: 52). Thus, management of a theatre would be an escape for her.

In such an environment and with such a profile of audiences, Marie Wilton was willing enough to change the situation: She tried to exclude this sort of popular audience from her renovated theatre and the price of stalls rose six hundred per cent. In 1867 she married Squire Bancroft who was an actor in her company. After their marriage, Mr. Bancroft took the responsibility of the management to a great extent. As Michael Booth puts, the burlesques and comediettas with which the theatre opened were replaced by Thomas Robertson's comedies, which were sufficient enough for the Bancrofts for twenty years and interestingly enough there "never was a Victorian management more dependent upon the work of one writer" than Bancrofts (1991: 52-53).

The Prince of Wales Theatre was a small theatre when considered by mid-Victorian urban criteria. It had a seating capacity of about eight hundred. The Bancrofts stayed in this theatre for fourteen years and were highly accomplished with their techniques of attracting the attention of audiences to a comfortable, well-run house performing well-rehearsed and well-acted comedies with an emphasis on the drawing room. As Booth refers: "The *Times*, reviewing Robertson's *M.P.* in 1870, noted that the actors are 'almost at arm's length of an audience who sit, as in a drawing room, to hear drawing room pleasantries, interchanged by drawing-room personages' (25 April 1870)" (1991: 53). When the Bancrofts became aware of the fact that the Prince of Wales had a very small capacity, they decided to take a larger and more central theatre and thus bought the Haymarket with double seating capacity. At the Haymarket, their success in economic terms even doubled and it was only after five years that they retired (Booth 1991: 53).

The relation between Robertson and the Bancrofts was actually on a mutual advantageous basis. Robertson knew the theatre inside out and the Bancrofts were wise enough and glad to entrust him with the stage management of his own plays. On the part of Robertson, it can be said that he was at ease with the Bancrofts since he was most of the time free in creating his own style and novelties. Robertson's comedy includes all the important thematic material and much of the style of a previous generation of Victorian comedy (which inherited much of it from pre-Victorian dramatists) such as:

> the animosity between a new emerging moneyed class and an old aristocracy or land-owning gentry, money, social aspiration, romantic love, the co-existence of the pathetic, the melodramatic and the comic, the idealisation of the Victorian womanhood, and a marked reluctance to explore social and moral issues with any real depth or seriousness [...].What *was* new in Robertson was a delicacy and restraint in the handling of the inevitable love scenes and in much of the dialogue, although he could write a wildly emotional passage with the best of them. Also novel was his simple domesticity and the attractive goodness of perfectly ordinary characters. (Booth 1991: 182)

Critical opinion about Robertson's plays has always been controversial: While he was regarded as the most influential dramatist in the English theatre for fifteen years after his death, he was also considered especially by critics and playwrights led by Henry Arthur Jones as a writer who lacked serious intellectual values in his plays. Again, as far as Daniel Barrett is concerned, while E. B. Watson elevated Robertson to the status of a major playwright in his seminal study entitled *Sheridan to Robertson*, some other critics attempted to discount Robertson's plays questioning his innovations. Barrett, in his exclusively researched book *T. W. Robertson and the Prince of Wales Theatre*, goes on his account of the critical background on Robertson as follows:

> Robertson suffered from hyperbole on the part of both his admirers and detractors. Influential critics like Clement Scott, with a highly selective view of theatre history, equated Robertson's plays with a renaissance of English drama, a beacon of light and hope amid the prevailing darkness. Writers like Jones and Bernard Shaw corrected this favourable impression by judging Robertson against the themes and standards of the New Drama of the nineties. The most common critical stance has been to view Robertson as a revolutionary writer, a notion encouraged by the sympathetic portrait of Tom Wrench (for whom Robertson served as a model) in Pinero's *Trelawny of the Wells* (1898). (1995: 1-2)

As a matter of fact, whatever criticism Robertson received from scholars or audiences, positive or negative, the wisest way to understand him and his plays would be possible by remembering the fact that he was a dramatist in the Victorian era. Therefore, it is impossible to think of his plays independent of the cultural and theatrical environment in which they were produced. According to George Rowell:

> In nineteenth-century England the audience shaped both the theatre and the drama played within it, [...]. Polite society, when patronized the theatre at all, favoured the opera; a large section of that society, however shunned the theatre altogether" (1978: 1). Rowell also informs that the playwright's place in the Victorian theatre was not different from the place of a handyman to the company. He was there to make a performance possible (rather than the company to interpret his work to an audience). Thus, the audience and dramatist being hand-in-hand was what made the evolution of the Victorian theatre possible. "As the audience's behaviour improved, so did the playwright's position. (Rowell 1978: 2)

However, there is no doubt that drama in the mid-nineteenth century, in which Robertson took his place, was unable to produce any great dramatist like Ibsen. Ernest Reynolds argues this point by giving reasons regarding the pre-Victorian atmosphere: "The dramatists were in the grip of hostile cultural and theatrical conditions. A new uneducated public was growing up which demanded pageantry and brilliant exhibition of stagecraft to relieve the drabness of industrial life" (1965: 1). Besides, there was a great increase in the number of theatres and 'hack dramatists' who were made responsible to write tragedy or farce to immediate order. It is therefore apparent that "the whole trend of Victorian literary expression was hostile to dramatic development because its intellectual background was not of the kind from which drama springs" (Reynolds 1965: 2). Reynolds wholeheartedly believes that there was not any 'real' dramatist in the Victorian era until Robertson emerged (with the production of *Society*) who "inaugurated the realism which cleared the stage for modern drama" (1965: 2). One, however, should not forget that, apart from the hostility of the intellectual background to the dramatic development, there were other things: legal control of the theatres, the restraints which were imposed, the improvements in stage effect which resulted in drama's keeping itself in the background, and the audiences as a half-illiterate crowd (Reynolds 1965: 25-26).

In such a period when the audience, managers and playwrights were in the full grip of melodramatic conventions, Robertson and Bancroft developed a kind of naturalistic staging. Actually, there was a break with the Georgian theatre now. For example, the accuracy of the kitchen tea party in *Caste* led the critics to name Robertson's plays as "cup and saucer comedy". What Robertson actually attempted to do was to "convey delicate emotions that dialogue alone could not provide" (Courtney 1982: 171). It is true that Robertson is a true Victorian in the traditional sense. He may be considered sentimental and even artificial. However, he was able to take "the audience of his time as far as they could go. He got rid of the black villains and distressed maidens" (Courtney 1982: 171). Richard Courtney is also of the opinion that his plot construction is perfect and he is able to combine "a keen power of observation and an acute sense of theatre" (1982: 171).

CASTE

Obviously, one of the plays which brought fame to Robertson is *Caste* which was based on the plot of Robertson's short story titled "The Poor Rate Unfolds a Tale" published in 1866. It is still unknown whether Robertson wrote the story as a draft for his play script or the idea of adapting the story into a stage comedy appeared later. Barrett, like many other critics, argues that Robertson, in his short story, borrowed partially from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and therefore *Caste* can be regarded as Robertson's tribute to and partial dramatization of that novel with major changes, though (1995: 112).

Caste is a three-act play which revolves around one main plot. As the title suggests, *Caste* is a play in which the theme of caste and class division in the Victorian society is handled. Although the play "only partially challenges the status quo" (Epplett 2017: 173) speaking on the caste system was something brave when Victorian theatre is considered. The play has characters who are classified according to their social and economic status: Esther and Polly are two sisters from the lower class and work as dancers with a drunken father, Eccles. Polly's sweetheart, Sam, also belongs to the same class. The aristocracy group consists of George D'Alroy, who is madly in love with Esther, his friend Captain Hawtree and Marquise de St. Maur, D'Alroy's mother. Actually, this is a situation "constantly explored and varied in melodrama. To balance this view, George's friend, Captain Hawtree, offers a far more cynical and worldly attitude which he vindicates by referring to Esther's father, Eccles" (Emeljanow 1987: 19). The play takes place in a circular setting: It begins in the Little House of Esther in Stangate and this time span is referred to as "courtship". After a lapse of eight months, Act II takes place in the Lodgings in Mayfair and is referred to as "matrimony". The last act is set again in Stangate after one year has passed and is called "widowhood". The readers, if not the audiences, are thus, able to guess the plot structure of the play from the very beginning: Ester will marry George and lose him. This is what almost happens: Speaking plotwise, the play proceeds fast. George, in spite of Hawtree's warnings about the dangers of inter-class marriages, decides to get married to Esther upon the arrival of a letter showing that she will have to leave Stangate for Manchester to earn more money. Forgetting all his conversation with Hawtree on the issue of caste, George proposes to Esther without thinking of his mother's possible reactions. But the act does not end in this moment of happiness. The door is open, and a drunken Eccles comes into the room. In Act II, Esther, who is a lady now, seems happy as opposed to George, who is in low spirits. It is soon revealed that George is about to leave for India on military duty and is not strong enough to let Ester know about this situation. Act II has comical scenes especially when George's mother arrives without advance notice. George finds himself trying to hide his wife upstairs together with Polly. There arises a tension when George's mother constantly attempts to utter words of his son's bravery in leaving the place. George becomes really nervous and excited about the situation fearing that Esther will hear his mother. Funnier is the scene when Eccles appears with Sam. After the realization of the Marquise that his son has been married to a lower-class poor dancer, she leaves. In Act III, the audience watches a mournful Esther who has lost her husband, back in her poor house, together with her newly-born baby boy. Her condition has even worsened, and she is seen extremely sorrowful. She is also exposed to her father's financial irresponsibility and her sister's noisiness. She becomes vexed when George's mother suddenly arrives, upon the letter of Eccles, and proposes her to give her the baby for the future of the child. Then, all of a sudden, it is revealed that George is not dead since he reappears. The play ends with everyone being overjoyed about George's reappearance and the Marquise's promising suggestion to Esther: "My dear daughter, we must forget our little differences" (Robertson 1972: 404). In this play, class war is presented in essentially comic terms. Therefore, it seems harmless and acceptable. As Barrett comments, *Caste* is a happy-ending comedy "not without moments of pathos and sentiments, but with many scenes of great humour leading slowly but inexorably towards his finest climax" (1995: 114).

The coming signs of realism in *Caste* are what a great number of critics agree. Oscar Brockett in his *History of the Theatre* asserts:

> The distinctive Robertson-Bancroft style—a form of domestic realism—first appeared with *Caste*. While several earlier producers had emphasised realistic visual detail, they had used spectacle primarily as embellishment. In Robertson's plays, on the other hand, character and stage business are inseparable, for the attitude and emotions of his personages are revealed primarily through the minutiae of everyday life. Without spectacle Robertson's plays scarcely exist, and the printed versions require lengthy and detailed stage directions to be comprehensible. They marked the advent of a new kind of realism. (1987: 511)

According to Courtney, the major dramatic event of the 1860s was the dramatization of Robertson's comedies. His plays were about "real people of the time in real situations" (1982: 168). As Courtney explains, naturalism (which Courtney seems to use interchangeably with realism) began with Robertson's plays: "real knobs on real doors, real carpets on the floor, real curtains at the window, and the correct period furniture" (1982: 166). From the outset of the play, it is possible to observe realistic elements in *Caste* although it would be improper to assert that the play is totally realistic. Robertson was a wide reader of French drama and according to George Freedley and John Reeves, he may have acquired "the realistic virus, which infected his plays and made them stand out as the beginning of a new school" (1955: 562). As a matter of fact,

> Robertson looked at life and reported it in the theatre, proving that it was possible for the two to mingle. His speeches were characterized by a naturalness which was hitherto unknown to the English playhouse. Native drama did not have to wait for Ibsen for its first naturalistic stirrings. (Feerley and Reeves 1955: 562)

Moreover, as indicated by Marvin Carlson, “Robertson's scenic descriptions begin to suggest the elaborate indications of Bernard Shaw” (1972: 234). Shaw praised all the novelties, especially the scenic ones, Robertson brought to British theatre in *Caste*. As far is Shaw is concerned,

> After years of sham heroics and superhuman balderdash, *Caste* delighted everyone by its freshness, its nature, its humanity. You will shriek and snort, O scornful young men, at this monstrous assertion. "Nature! Freshness!" you will exclaim, "In Heaven's name (if you are not too modern to have heard of Heaven) where is there a touch of nature in *Caste*?" I reply, "In the windows, in the doors, in the walls, in the carpet, in the ceiling, in the kettle, in the fireplace, in the ham, in the tea, in the bread and butter, in the bassinet, in the hats and sticks and clothes, in the familiar phrases, the quiet, unpumped, everyday utterance: in short, the commonplaces that are now spurned because they are commonplaces, and were then inexpressibly welcome because they were the most unexpected novelties. (in Carlson 1972: 234)

The living room in Act I reflects the sisters’ poverty realistically by means of its shabby wallpaper, plain chairs and scrap of worn paper. Anthony Jenkins clarifies the fact that “the main door gives on to a minute vestibule before emerging directly out to the street” which is also an indication of their poverty (1991: 82-83). Many details reflect the sisters’ place in the class structure: “A plain set chamber, paper soiled. A window with practicable blind; street backing and iron railings...Long table before fire, old piece of carpet and rug down; plain chairs; book shelf back...” (Robertson 1972: 347). When George enters this plain room with his friend Hawtree, who are both dressed in expensive clothes, there appears a sharp contrast between the room and their physical appearance. However, when they begin speaking, “Robertson gives them a particular kind of slang which denotes their easy friendship and their casual elegance...” (Jenkins 1991: 83). Their conversation on the idea of inter-class marriage and caste is noteworthy:

> Haw: Of course, Dal, you're not such a soft as to think of marriage. You know what your mother is. Either you are going to behave properly, with a proper regard to the world, and all that, you know, or you're going to do the other thing. Now the question is, what do you mean to do? The girl is a nice girl no doubt, but as to your making her Mrs. D'Alroy the thing is out of the question.
> Geo: Why, what should prevent me? (Returns to place on table.)
> Haw: Caste! The inexorable law of caste. The social law, so becoming and so good, that commands like to mate with like, and forbids a giraffe to fall in love with a squirrel; that holds sentiment to be a dissipation, and demands the exercise of common sense from all. (Robertson 1972: 349)

Hawtree, as a mouthpiece of Victorian class ideals, speaks what he means. He is a man of good intentions but believes that there must be a caste system for the welfare of each person belonging to a specific class:

> Haw: I don't pretend to be a particularly good sort of fellow, nor a particularly bad sort of fellow. I suppose I'm about the average standard sort of thing, and I don't like to see a friend go down hill to the devil while I can put the drag on. Here is a girl of humble station, poor, and all that, with a drunken father, who evidently doesn't care how he gets money so long as he doesn't work for it. Marriage—pah! Couldn't the thing be arranged? (Robertson 1972: 352)

It should be noticed that Hawtree is not the only person who rejects the idea of inter-class marriage. To the audience's surprise, Esther is also against the idea which makes the play realistic in terms of plot as well:

> Est: Perhaps it will be for the best. What future is there for us? You're a man of rank, and I am a poor girl who gets her living by dancing. It would have been better that we had never met.
> Geo: No.
> Est: Yes, it would, for I'm afraid that--
> Geo: You love me?
> Est: I don't know. I'm not sure, but I think I do.
> Geo: {trying to seize her hand). Esther!
> Est: No. Think of the difference of our stations.
> Geo: That's what Hawtree says. Caste, caste, curse caste! (Robertson 1972: 356)

The small house of Esther in Stangate is a "perfect context for an illustration and discussion of inter-class marriage because of its domestic intimacy yet isolation from the outside world" (Barrett 1995: 122). The room at Esther's house has only one door and one window both of which get a great deal of use sometimes to relieve the frustrations and anxieties inside. As far as Barrett is concerned:

> For as characters of different social stations get mixed up in the room, the tension between them builds because there is no escape. Thrown into this pressure cooker together, they (and the audience) must face the intractable consequences of caste. Robertson in a sense traps his own characters, as they find themselves hemmed in not only psychologically but physically by their societal differences. (1995: 122)

The other person who is fully class conscious is Sam, Polly's sweetheart. His description of class structure seems to belong to a man who has already gained a sort of self-awareness and adds to the realistic attitude of the play:

> Sam: I mean what I say. People ought to stick to their own class. Life is a railway journey, and mankind is a passenger— first-class, second-class, third-class. Any person found riding in a superior class to that for which he has taken his ticket will be removed at the first station stopped at, according to the by-laws of the company. (Robertson 1972: 359)

Although Esther and George are seen already married in the second act, their dialogues on the topic of caste still go on:

> Est: Do you remember our first meeting? Then I was in the ballet.
> Geo. Yes. Now you're in the heavies.
> Est: Then I was in the front rank. Now I'm of high rank. The Hon. Mrs. George D'Alroy. You promoted me to be your wife.
> Geo: No, dear. You promoted me to be your husband.
> Est: And now I'm one of the aristocracy, ain't I?
> Geo: Yes, dear. I suppose that we may consider ourselves
> Est: Tell me, George, are you quite sure that you are proud of your poor little humble wife?
> Geo: Proud of you! Proud as the winner of the Derby.
> Est: Wouldn't you have loved me better if I'd been a lady?
> Geo: You are a lady. You're Mrs. D'Alroy. (Robertson 1972: 363)

This is also realistic in the sense that in only six months, nobody can forget who she or he is. Both Esther and George are still conscious of the gap between one another.

In the second act, the appearance of the Marquise and soon Eccles is both funny and again realistic since it is only in fairy tales that a secret be kept forever without any intrusion. The emergence of the Marquise and Eccles is significant to show that they "represent two social polarities that can only be swept under the carpet in the interests of a happy ending. The focus is on reconciliation and good humour" (Emeljanow 1987: 111). When the reconciliation comes at the end of Act III, the idea of caste is still there:

> Mar: (crossing to Esther, l. c). My dear daughter, we must forget our little differences. (Kisses her.) Won't you? How history repeats itself! You will find a similar and as unexpected a return mentioned by Froissart in the chapter that treats of Philip Dartneli.
> Geo: Yes, mother. I remember. (Kisses her.)
> Mar: {to George, aside). We'll take her abroad and make a lady of her.
> Geo: Can't, mamma. She's ready made. Nature has done it to our hands. (Robertson 1972: 404)

Although the Marquise shows some signs of overcoming her prejudices about her lower-class daughter-in-law, she is determined to "make a lady of her", which is reminiscent of Bernard Shaw's play titled *Pygmalion* written in 1913. Her statement also adds to the realism of the play in the sense that even her regaining George cannot make her forget about caste since she is, after all, a product of the Victorian society.

What is the "most realistic" point in the play may be said to be the very last words of George on caste system. George, who has gone through a kind of self-realisation, now believes that caste should exist:

> Haw: (on music stool, k.). Best to marry in your own rank of life.
> Geo: (c). Yes. If you can find the girl. But if ever you find the girl marry her. As to her station, "Kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood."
> Haw: Yaas. But a gentleman should hardly ally himself to a nobody.
> Geo: My dear fellow, nobody's a mistake. He don't exist. Nobody's nobody. Everybody's somebody.
> Haw: Yes. But still, Caste
> Geo: Oh, Caste's all right. Caste is a good thing if it's not carried too far. It shuts the door on the pretentious and the vulgar, but it should open the door very wide for exceptional merit. Let brains break through its barriers, and what brains can break through love may leap over.
> Haw: Why, George, you're quite inspired; quite an orator. What makes you so brilliant? your captivity, the voyage? What then?
> Geo: I'm in love with my wife! (Robertson 1972: 405)

George's declaration that he is in love with his wife clearly appeals to the audience who is accustomed to and has a passion for melodramatic plot structures. Right from the beginning, George's love for Esther is there no matter what her and her family's background is.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Robertson has a very critical and significant place in the history of British theatre. As Shannon Epplett puts it: "Together, Robertson and Wilton would change the face of Victorian theatre in pursuit of a new type of verisimilitude; theatre history often treats Ibsen as the motive force of modern realism, when in truth, Robertson and Wilton were moving the Victorian stage away from melodrama and toward realism two decades before *A Doll's House* played in London" (2017: 150).

However, it should be remembered that Robertson's *Caste* cannot be considered fully realistic due to the melodramatic conventions it inherits. Yet, the approaching and promising signs of realism are there. Patricia D. Denison rightly observes that Robertson's work merits detailed analysis of a kind it has rarely received and his work has a pivotal place in the "transition from Victorian drama to modern drama, the shape and significance of individual plays is likely to be just as important as the viability of the techniques he tended to employ from play to play" (1994: 401). Even George Bernard Shaw, who was critical of playwrights with melodramatic tendencies, accepted that "introduction of everyday commonplaces in dialogue and setting was the key to his [Robertson's] novelty at the time." (in Emeljanow 1987: 108).

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