

SARCASTIC INTERTEXTUALITIES AS ANGRY SPEECH IN JOHN OSBORNE'S *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*

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Abstract

Starting from John Osborne's negative reaction to theatre critics' and journalists' perception of Look Back in Anger's idiosyncratic language as "angry", as well as their perception of the protagonist Jimmy Porter as a representative of the Angry Young Man movement, this paper considers sarcasm as one of the key aggressive rhetorical devices used in the language of the play. Osborne thought that the specific, even revolutionary rhetoric of his play was in most cases misunderstood and wrongly conveyed in theatre adaptations as "angry", which made the performance lose the edge that the language of the play had the potential for. Look Back in Anger provides an insight into the Porters' lower-class mundane dailiness, charged with verbal aggression and intertextual allusiveness stemming from deeper political, historical and social issues of mid-twentieth-century Britain. This paper focuses on Jimmy Porter's prevalent use of sarcasm as a weapon in his personal battle, by taking John Haiman's Talk Is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language, to illustrate how the language of Look Back in Anger coincides with Haiman's conclusions on the theoretical and applied characteristics of sarcasm in contemporary society.

Keywords: theatre, verbal aggression, sarcasm, intertextuality.

Öz

John Osborne'un Öfke Adlı Oyununda Metinlerarası Alaycılık

Eleştirilenler ve gazetecilerin dilini "öfkeli" bulduğu ve başkahramanı Jimmy Porter'ı 'Genç Öfkeli Adam' akımının temsilcisi olarak gördüğü John Osborne'un Öfke adlı oyuna odaklanan bu çalışma, ortaya koyulan öfkenin büyük ölçüde bir söz sanatı olarak değerlendirilen iğnelemeyle gerçekleştirildiği ortaya koyulacaktır. Osborne'a göre ise oyunundaki 'devrimci' söz sanatı yanlış algılanmış ve bu doğrultuda tiyatro sahnesine "öfkeli" olarak yansıtılmıştır. Jimmy Porter'in alt sınıf günlük hayatını gözler önüne seren Öfke, ağırlı olarak Britanya'daki sosyal, tarihsel ve toplumsal konularından kaynaklanan sözel saldırganlıkla ve metinlerarası kinayeye yüklüdür. Bu çalışmada Porter'in kişisel savaşında iğnelemeyi kullanma

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biçimi, günümüz toplumundaki iğnelemenin teorik ve uygulamalı özelliklerine odaklanan John Haiman'ın Talk Is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language ışığında incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *tiyatro, dilsel saldırganlık, iğneleme, metinlerarasılık*

After the Second World War, the central position in the plays and the films created as a part of the British New Wave is taken by the working class (anti)heroes, with the accent on tempestuous transitional relations between the social classes. Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* points to the social anxieties of the post-war period in which, despite the increasing possibilities of social mobility, Britain still remains a society of strong class divisions in which the new economic circumstances clash dramatically with the old traditional values. The revolutionary rhetoric of *Look Back in Anger* was, in the author's opinion, in most cases misunderstood and wrongly conveyed in theatre adaptations as "angry", which made the performance lose the edge that the language of the play had the potential for. This article centers on the language of the play and suggests sarcasm as one of its key aggressive rhetorical devices, the use of which implies a specific interaction of the "act of mention" and "act of pretence" that form intertextual relations in the text. The research focus of the article is on the intertextual allusions in the play that refer to the socio-political and cultural picture of post-war Britain, and the sarcasm as a discursive strategy of "angry" rhetoric and a manner in which the intertextual allusions are conveyed.

Different critical views of the play, such as Kennedy's study of Osborne's language in *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, clearly state that Osborne wrote primarily for the theatre and was against the anti-verbal approach to theatrical communication. Osborn saw the status of language in the plays of his continental contemporaries as a verbal breakdown, increasingly threatening for the dramatists that wished to write for the theatre. The commentary of Aleks Sierz that "Osborne not only explored feelings: he flung them at the audience"(1996) illustrates Osborne's insistence on the authenticity in feeling and the uniting of thought and feeling in theatrical discourse. The hypersensitive and irreverent language of Osborne's most famous character Jimmy Porter is perhaps the best proof of Osborne's view of language as indispensable and irreplaceable in attempts at communication. *Look Back in Anger* and Jimmy Porter's character produced a whole cultural phenomenon known as "Angry Young Man"; however, Osborne very openly disagreed with the critics who saw the idiosyncratic language of *Look Back in Anger* as "angry". Osborne maintained that anger

is not an emotion that could adequately define the British lower-middle class youth of the mid-twenty century, and that it was not anger, but a loud and provocative articulation that insists on the inadequacy of political, social and cultural circumstances in which that youth lived. No solution came out of that insistence; however the awareness of the existence of the problem was continually raised.. Osborne mocked those who saw protest as vulgar and pioneered for the creation of authentic feeling as opposed to the mechanical reality of mass culture.

In the "Author's Note" to his last play *Déjà vu* (1996), Osborne says that seeing Jimmy Porter's character as angry is a fallacy and a "vulgar misconception" of the press, critics and academics, which is why his character was widely misunderstood and the result of which was "often a strident and frequently dull performance" (Osborne 279-a). With regards to the mode of verbal expressiveness intended for Jimmy's character in the stage adaptations of *Look Back in Anger*, the author states, in the same preface, that although the play "is bristling with stage directions, most of them are embarrassingly unhelpful" (Ibid 279). He is quick to add that:

[...] something must be said about J.P.'s speeches, especially the later ones. Sometimes, these achieve an almost stiff, calculated formality. This is quite intentional. They have the deliberateness of *recitative* and it may not be always easy to spot where the 'aria' begins. However, when these passages occur, they must be deft in delivery and as light as possible. J.P.'s particular artifice but casually knocked off. Read, memorize and discard. (Osborne 279-a)

Further in the "Author's Note" to *Déjà vu*, Osborne continues:

J.P. is a comic character. He generates energy but, also, like, say, Malvolio or Falstaff, an inescapable melancholy. He is a man of gentle susceptibilities, constantly goaded by a brutal and coercive world. This core of character is best expressed, not only theatrically but truthfully, by *mild* delivery. In other words, it is not necessary or advisable to express bitterness bitterly or anger angrily. Things should be delicately plucked out of the air not hurled like a protester's stones at the enemy. This was true of the original. (Osborne 279-280-a)

Osborne does not see Jimmy Porter's character as an embodiment of anger, nor does he perceive his "arias"¹ as a moment for a noisy and agitated performance. On the contrary, the lightness that Osborne demands excludes anger, and the author underlines his opposition to stridency, clamorousness that inevitably stems out of it and renders the performance dull. Osborne underlines the intentionality of the "stiff, calculated formality" of Jimmy's speeches as well as the inconspicuousness of the precise moment when Jimmy's "highly theatrical and ego-charged rhetoric" begins (Kennedy 192). Having in mind that both intentionality and inconspicuousness are two core characteristics of sarcasm, combined so as to provide a vehicle for mocking or conveying contempt, the guidelines that Osborne gives seem to indicate something that may be interpreted as very close to the sarcastic mode of communication. Although sarcasm is often seen as "simply the crudest and least interesting form of irony" as Haiman states in his study *Talk Is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language* (20), sarcasm is also seen as a "sophisticated" and "decadent" aggressive rhetorical device by means of which a message is conveyed with even greater impact and intensity than it is the case with the simple "angry" speech.

In order to be able to define Jimmy Porter's "non-angry" aggressive discourse as potentially sarcastic, it is important to define the aspects of sarcasm that can be linked to the affective domain of anger. In the article *Irony: a Practical Definition* Gray mentions irony as "a simulation of ignorance", and sarcasm with regards to irony saying that "[i]rony is also defined as a trope in which an intended meaning is opposite to, or nearly opposite to an apparent meaning as in deliberate understatement and in some kinds of sarcasm" (220). In his explanations Gray emphasizes the polarity of intended and apparent meaning in the use of irony, as well as in sarcasm, adding that "[i]n sarcasm [...] the speaker is fully aware that his statements embrace overtones that may or may not be understood by his listener" (221). Haiman refers to what Gray terms "apparent meaning" as "ostensible message" that is conveyed directly, and to "intended meaning" as "metamessage" that is "framed", i.e. formulated, summed up in a succinct way in the form of the ostensible message to imply "I don't mean this: in fact, I mean the exact opposite". Haimain explains that in the use of sarcasm we always do two things at the same time: "To sum up, sarcasm is characterized by the *intentional production of an overt and separate*

¹ The examples of provocative articulations of Jimmy Porter's feelings are numerous, leveled against Alison (Osborne 36-b), Alison's brother Nigel (Ibid 14-15), Alison's parents (Ibid 52-53, 55-56), women (Ibid 19-20), homosexuals (Ibid 34), general conditions in Britain (Ibid 11), etc.

metamessage 'I don't mean this' in which the speaker expresses hostility or ridicule of another speaker, who presumably does 'mean this' in uttering an *ostensibly positive* message [...]" (25).

Haiman continues by providing two basic differences between irony and sarcasm:

First, situations may be ironic, but only people can be sarcastic. Second, people may be unintentionally ironic, but sarcasm requires intention. What is essential to sarcasm is that it is overt irony *intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression*, and it may thus be contrasted with other aggressive speech acts, among them the put-on, direct insults, curses, vituperation, nagging, and condescension. (Ibid 20)

What Haiman underlines as one of the key characteristics of sarcasm is its calculated usage, in other words that it is impossible to use sarcasm in an inadvertent or random way. Furthermore, the enhanced expressiveness that is aimed at in the use of sarcasm bears a distinct quality of what Haiman calls "verbal aggression". In the context of anger in Osborne's play, the deliberate verbal aggression, "these carefully rehearsed attacks" (Osborne 17-b), which Jimmy's character inflicts upon other characters, "(his) present interlocutor(s), an absent third person, or a conventional attitude" alike (Haiman 25), serves as the main catalyst of the merciless battle between Jimmy and the two female characters, Alison and Helena. Words are Jimmy Porter's strongest weapon, and although his main target is Alison's and Helena's high-class background, personal traits and attitude to life, Jimmy's discourse is charged with heavy sarcastic provocations that very consistently imply intertextual allusions to the wider social, historical and cultural context. *Look Back in Anger* "creak(s) under the weight of other people's memorable quotations" (Ibid 3), although modified to a higher or a lesser degree and assimilated in Jimmy's conversational rant.

Almost every sentence in the play uttered by Jimmy Porter has at least a tinge of sarcasm. Jimmy's sarcastic remarks are leveled at the characters from his immediate surrounding, Alison, Helena, Cliff, the absent ones, such as Alison's "Mummy and Daddy" and her brother, as well as socio-political occurrences, "vague" behavior of the ones who refuse to "live" and conformist attitudes (Osborne 4-b). Helena is "this saint in Dior's clothing" (Ibid 56) who is "suffering from a bad case of virginity" (Ibid 58), while Cliff is a "whimsy little half-wit" (Osborne 29). Alison's and Helena's familial and social context of upper-class girls receives merciless blows: "Oh dear, oh dear! My wife's friends! Pass Lady Bracknell the cucumber

sandwiches, will you?” (Ibid 51). Special resentment is directed towards Alison’s parents; Jimmy recounts the ceremony of his and Alison’s wedding, saying: “And Daddy sat beside her, upright and unafraid, dreaming of his days among the Indian Princes, and unable to believe he’d left his horsewhip at home” (Ibid 56), or he refers to the general relationship that he has with his wife’s family: “You know Mummy and Daddy, of course [...] They’ll kick you in the groin while you’re handing your hat to the maid” (Ibid 15). Even the sarcastic remarks that allude to the extra-familial sphere and that go beyond the husband-wife relationship seem to have their point of reference in the Porters’ domestic life. When Jimmy comments on the Bishop of Bromley’s “moving appeal to all Christians to do all they can to assist in the manufacture of the H-Bomb”, he says:

Let’s see. What else does he say.
Dumdidumdumdidum. Ah yes. He’s upset because
someone has suggested that he supports the rich against
the poor. He says he denies the difference of class
distinction. ‘This idea has been persistently and
wickedly fostered by – the working classes!’ Well!”
(Ibid 6)

This remark is followed by his turning to Alison and asking: “You don’t suppose your father could have written it, do you? [...] Sounds rather like Daddy, don’t you think? [...] Is the Bishop of Bromley his *nom de plume*, do you think?” (Ibid 7) The sardonic remark of Jimmy’s epitomizes how his discourse concerning the socio-political circumstances of post-war Britain never fails to take a turn and is in the end always leveled at his personal “enemies”—his wife, Helena and his wife’s family.

However, Jimmy’s sarcasm, unless it is intentionally ignored, often goes unnoticed. In the example with the Bishop of Bromley and his “moving” appeal to help produce the H-Bomb, Jimmy asks Alison: “Yes, well, that’s quite moving, I suppose. Are you moved, my darling?” and Alison responds “Well, naturally” (Ibid 6). A subtle yet distinct note of mockery in Jimmy’s formulation of the question, with the moment of “my darling” in the middle of just another one of his harangues, escapes her. In his study of sarcasm, Haiman emphasizes the evident difficulty of grasping the metamessage of a sarcastic discourse. Haiman states that even “[o]rdinary human language [...] is symbolic, not instrumental. Even the most seemingly instrumental “performative” speech act [...] requires social mediation and psychological interpretation” (Haiman 4). Bearing in mind that the sarcastic message sent ostensibly has one import and that the metamessage that lies in the subtext of it conveys ‘I mean exactly the

opposite from what I have just said', the recipient of the message may very easily miss it. Haiman explains that:

[i]t is possible to be ironic or sarcastic without any overt sign of the speaker's insincerity. The put-on, or deadpan act of sarcasm, still differs from a lie in that the speaker wants his or her actual meaning to be understood at least by some happy few members of the target audience from their knowledge of the world or from their knowledge of the speaker's character and opinions."
(18)

After giving an overview of the expressions of sarcasm in various different languages and cultures, Haiman questions the problem of the "nongrammaticalization of affect", i.e. of the fact that the standardization of any language has not gone as far as grammatically institutionalizing sarcasm, and states that "[...] there is considerably more overlap between English, Berber, and Japanese ways of sounding sarcastic than between English, Berber, and Japanese ways of naming cats and dogs" (Ibid 58). Haiman sees the potential reasons for the fact that it is not easy to define sarcasm as a grammatical category in the interconnectedness of the trope with the emotion of anger. Anger and sarcasm belong to the same communicative domain of affect, and since very similar, often overlap.

In Haiman's study on sarcastic behavior and its belonging to the contemporary cultural contexts, the author underlines the extremely strong connection between the use of sarcasm and what might be defined as a mode of intertextuality, i.e. quoting. Haiman points out that the use of sarcasm involves two main acts that are pertinent for its understanding. The first one is the act of pretense, where the sarcastic person makes believe that they support a particular attitude of belief and expect the audience, or just the chosen audience, to realize that it is pretense that is taking place. The other one is the act of mention: "the sarcastic quotes or otherwise repeats other people's words (or possibly just the very words he or she used earlier) and, by repetition, draws attention to their peculiar inappropriateness" (Ibid 25). In other words, it is by means of repetition of one's own or somebody else's utterances, which comprise a certain belief, attitude or emotion, that the attention to them and to their unsuitability is drawn. In the use of sarcasm, the notions of mention and pretense imply one another, or better pretense implies mention. In order for there to be pretense, there has to be mention and repetition, and thus sarcasm is brought forth. If Jimmy makes a comment about Helena calling her "Lady Bracknell" or proposes that Alison's brother Niger should receive a medal "For Vaguerly in the Field", in

the first case he is alluding to a Wilde's character and in the second he is transforming a common expression in both cases by repeating them, and in that way performing the act of mention. By mentioning Lady Bracknell while using formal, elevated diction and syntax or changing "Bravery" into "Vaguery" in the above cited expression, Jimmy is performing the act of pretence, making believe that he is serious and courteous in his addressing Helena while in fact emphasizing the inappropriateness of her prudish upper-class attitude, or underlining the opposition between the meaning of "brave" and "vague" and actually saying "No, I don't think that he should be given a medal for bravery because, although he is a member of the privileged social circle, he is vague and futile". In Jimmy's sarcastic language, Alison's father is not referred to as "Colonel Redfern" or "Sir", but "Daddy". By using "Daddy", referring to his father-in-law in the same way Alison does, Jimmy nominally adopts and uses Alison's language and the style of communication, and in that respect her opinions and reasoning, but intends to communicate exactly the opposite. It would be much easier to simply say "your obnoxious father", nevertheless by using "Daddy" and not some very simple and rude reference, the challenge that Jimmy as the sender of the message puts poses before the recipient, namely Alison, is much higher. The possible outcome of Alison decoding Jimmy's sarcastic message would provide him with an intensified feeling of gratification. However, Jimmy's vehement eloquence, his "highly-theatrical and ego-charged rhetoric" (Kennedy 192) is seldom gratified with a response. What frequently makes the "comic declaratory note", which Osborne proposes as the key to successful performance of Jimmy's character on stage, interpreted as anger is the insurmountable difficulty that his sarcastic provocations encounter—Alison's unresponsiveness, even when the sarcastic message gets across.

The question that we can ask here is about the "payoffs" of sarcasm; in other words, what leads to sarcastic verbal behavior in the first place? It may be concluded that the sending of a sarcastic message challenges the recipient to decode it, or, on the other hand, that the sarcasm desires to send a highly-charged aggressive message in such an adroit manner that it goes unnoticed and its meaning remains known only to him. In that respect, sarcastic language proves to be a very powerful and efficient instrument of verbal aggression, and in the context of *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmy Porter's sarcastic skills put his character in a more powerful position with regards to his surrounding, at least when it comes to verbal battles. Jimmy's sarcasm is his way of rejecting the language register as well as Alison and Helena's upper-class values. In Haiman's view, sarcastic language provides space for "the avoidance of the stigma of non-originality; the scope for putting down

one's interlocutor; deniability, self-camouflage, or the avoidance of commitment; and the opportunity for asserting one's superiority over social conventions while nonetheless adhering to them" (Haiman 64). In that respect, complying with the social conventions while implying to be beyond them stretches over the domain of language, and refers to the fact that, in order to invert the notion of what is being said, for example being sarcastic, one still has to use the same language as the person that they are being sarcastic with. Nevertheless, it can be applied to the social scale too, in the sense that Jimmy is a part of the society he despises. Kennedy sees Jimmy's tirades as "histrionic self-expression and the dialogue of characters intended to be socially, or historically, representative" (194), while Lacey argues that Jimmy's fierce rhetoric is not that much about socio-political protest as it is about his personal war with Alison and Helena, with his "anger" moving "between the public and the social on the one hand, and the personal and the sexual on the other" (30). In that respect, Jimmy's language can be seen both as an expression of superiority over socially established notions and as abusive vulnerability in search of ultimate loyalty on the part of his partners and friends.

Every sarcasm derives pleasure in posing the challenge before the interlocutor to decode the hidden metamessage, to understand an allusion to a certain person or a concept and to link a facial expression or a gesture to the verbal message. Sarcasm is also an expression of discontent and a powerful tool for calling things into question. One of the central drives that make Jimmy engage in allusive and sarcastic language is his intense need to provoke a response most of all from Alison, whose silence thwarts his efforts to the extremes of frustration. Haiman argues that sarcasm takes root in fear of being unoriginal and repetitive, and since language recycling is inevitable, intertextual repetitions that are made sarcastic still acquire some originality. By being sarcastic Jimmy fends off the possibility of melting into the crowd that he despises, in other words, it is by means of language that he manages to keep himself detached from invasive mediocrity of conformism and torpor. Finally, as Jimmy's dissatisfaction transcends the public and is placed in the personal sphere, the sarcastic language is his way of rejecting both the language and the values of Alison and Helena's upper-class circle, and by doing it he redirects his anger and frustration to the personal sphere of his marital discord. As much as Jimmy is aggressive in his insistence on verbal self-assertion by trying to put his interlocutors into the same mould of language behavior, Alison fights back by being aggressive in an extremely opposite behavior, i.e. in her refusal to communicate in the way Jimmy wants her to. Forcing one's values and opinions upon others does not imply

resorting to actual physical force, and, in that respect, language can be seen as arguably “the most implicitly effective instrument of power”, by means of which power is inflicted upon others (Şenlen 3). If Alison accepted Jimmy’s language, in other words if she provided him with a response formulated and expressed in the way he demands, she would also accept his attitudes, and the unflinching request “[e]ither you are with me or against me” would be met (Osborne 91-b). However, the ending of the play proposes a fundamental change of language. The “squirrels and bears” game indicates the defeat of aggressive extremes of verbal insistence, figuring as a compromise between two sides that can never understand each other completely but are willing to abandon verbal aggression, which at one point inevitably becomes an end in itself and loses the original purpose of trying to find a way to communicate.

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