

A Critical Approach to Laughter in Peter Barnes's *Laughter!*

DR. ÖĞR. ÜYESİ EMRAH ATASOY*

Abstract

Peter Barnes's historical play, *Laughter!* (1978) deals with the notion of laughter in a critical way through its representation of two parts, Tsar and Auschwitz. Laughter in Barnes's play does not solely function to relieve misery or pain, but, rather intensifies the suffering of the characters who are exposed to various challenging situations in the course of the play. Through the analysis of ideology and the use of power, the aim of this article is, therefore, to discuss the portrayal of laughter and its problematic nature with its double sides in Barnes's play *Laughter!* in order to reveal how laughter can also be a source of agony and misery rather than elation and happiness.

Keywords: Peter Barnes, *Laughter!*, laughter, ideology, power, drama

PETER BARNES'IN LAUGHTER! OYUNUNDA GÜLME KAVRAMINA ELEŐTİREL BİR BAKIŐ

Öz

Peter Barnes'ın 1978 tarihli *Laughter!* oyunu, Tsar ve Auschwitz başlıklı iki bölümün temsili aracılığı ile gülme kavramına eleőtirel bir bakıő açısı sunmaktadır. Barnes'ın oyununda gülme, yalnızca ıstırabı ve acıyı hafifleten bir unsur olarak karşımıza çıkmamaktadır. Aksine, oyun boyunca çeőtli zorlayıcı durumla karşı karşıya kalan karakterlerin acısını artırmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın bu bağlamda amacı, Peter Barnes'ın *Laughter!* oyununda gülmenin tasvirini ve bu kavramın sorunlu doğasını, kavramın iki boyutunu da ele alarak metinde önemli bir yere sahip ideoloji ve erk kullanımı analizi üzerinden tartışmaktır. Bu tartışmanın nihai amacı ise, gülmenin, mutluluk ve sevinçten ziyade nasıl acı çekmenin de bir kaynağı olabileceğini ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Peter Barnes, *Laughter!*, gülme, ideoloji, erk, tiyatro

INTRODUCTION

L*laughter!* (1978) by Peter Barnes, the English playwright, author, and director, is a historical play that reflects the two aspects of laughter through its two parts, Tsar and Auschwitz. This portrayal illustrates both the constructive and destructive sides of laughter by representing the reign of Tsar Ivan IX, sixteenth century Russia and the reign of Hitler in Berlin in 1942 with officers discussing to construct crematoria of Auschwitz. Barnes demonstrates that laughter can either alleviate pain and misery or deteriorate suffering by means of his depictions of two

different worlds that exert violence over people. The aim of this study is, therefore, to discuss the representation of laughter with its double sides in Barnes's play *Laughter!*.

Brief insight into Peter Barnes's life will be useful in comprehending his literary background prior to the discussion of the play. Barnes was born in London in 1931 and died there in 2004. He became well-known for his comedy, *The Ruling Class* (1968), which was performed at the Nottingham playhouse. Rabey's insight into Barnes's drama is useful in understanding his style:

Barnes's drama was, is and will always be a startling and exhilarating combination of uproarious comedy and fierce defiant enquiry; a testimony of moral faith in language and an anarchic joy in formal experimentation and transformative visual spectacle. His plays set out to show how more things can co-exist pleasurably than the received wisdom of authorities maintain, and they do not just *argue* this, they *demonstrate* it on the stage. They subvert both conventional sympathies and habitual ironies, are unstopably persistent in their irreverence and inclusiveness, and explode the orthodoxies by which a national spirit degenerates into the routine of social associations and exclusions which add up to a deathliness (and, ultimately, the order and logic of the *auto-da-fe* and death camp), identifying the consequences of political repression in sexual pathology. (2005, p. 252)

His remarkable plays are *Leonardo's Last Supper* (1969), *The Bewitched* (1974), *Red Noses* (1985), *Sunset and Glories* (1990), *Lunar Park Eclipsis* (1995), *Corpsing* (1996), *Dreaming* (1999), and *Jubilee* (2000). Through comedy, Barnes communicates his implicit or explicit satire on which he comments as follows: "You can work in a comedic vein, and be intensely serious, which I am. I would never attempt to do a play unless I had something to say which I considered important. One is using the theatre as a moral platform" (Barnes qtd. in Barnes and Hennessy, 1970-71, p.120).

Barnes's play, *Laughter!* is "a collection of two one-act plays" and each play attempts to "address the issue of the place of laughter in a world filled with atrocity," and each play is written "as a comedy, filled with sight gags, one-liners, farcical business, [and] witty reversals of identity" (Skloot, 1988, p. 63). It is about the two historical periods, the reign of Ivan the Terrible in Russia and Hitler's period in Germany in 1942. The first part of the play takes its story from a real historical period, the reign of Ivan the Terrible, and his Oprichnina, the period between 1565 and 1572 during which Ivan exercised secret police policy, mass oppression, the confiscation of land, and public execution. They threatened Russian gentry, peasants and clergy for about seven years. Barnes took his inspiration from this historical figure and presents his version of Ivan who takes delight in boasting about his deeds, but is worried about his soul. He wears the robe of a monk, not of a Tsar, and is obsessed with power and authority in the play.

The second part of the play is concerned with more recent history since the year is 1942, and the setting changes to the office of government contractors in Berlin, like the office in WVHA Department Amt C (Building) Oranienburg, Berlin. It portrays "Branch C of the Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt, the Economic and Administrative Main Office of the SS ([Protection Squadron, paramilitary organisation under Hitler, and the Nazi Party])," which was an office "in charge of coordinating camp slave labour and collecting booty from prisoners" (Kremer, 2003, p. 98). The setting illustrates the atmosphere of the time with a photograph of Adolf Hitler, and a Nazi flag with the Nazi motto, *Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles*. It is interesting to point out that the play was not initially welcome by the audience. Barnes comments on this point as follows: "When the show [*Laughter!*] was on at the Royal Court I used to feel the hatred of the audience for me, during the show and

after the show, they actually loathed being confronted with it, particularly in that form" (Barnes qtd. in Golomb, 1998, p. 219).

CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO LAUGHTER IN *LAUGHTER!*

Barnes depicts officers that seem to be bored with their jobs and frustrated with their lives in *Laughter!*. These officers cannot give up their jobs due to several reasons such as loans, getting by and retirement, thereby indirectly contributing to the massacre in a way. In this part, mass killing, the massacre of the Jews, the Holocaust, gas chambers and the cruelty of the Nazi period are represented with certain figures such as Cranach, Else, Stroop, and Gottlieb. Laughter, which can "carry ethical judgments, affiliate as easily as deride, and readily be misread" does not cure pain and suffering, but, on the contrary, it increases pain and contributes to self-destruction in the play's Auschwitz part, as in the case of Gestapo's secret tape-recording through certain traps (Houck, 2007, p.51). As can be seen, historical periods and events become inspirational sources in both parts, Tsar and Auschwitz for Barnes.

The set of *Tsar* starts with the character, author's comments on comedy and laughter, and illustrates an executioner's block later on. Ivan the Terrible enters the stage in the shape of a monk. It is expressed that he has left Russia due to the ineffective reign of Semeon Bekbulatovich, whom Ivan the Terrible actually calls Grand Prince of All Rus'. In this period, Ivan tries to lead a religious life so that he can be saved from his sins: "Torment scours you clean, turns me rancid. You go down purified, I putrify [sic]. My pain's infinite, yours has a stop" (Barnes, 1989, p. 345). These remarks are highly significant in that they draw attention to "the historical Ivan's apparently conflicted soul which drove or licensed him to commit the most egregious acts against individuals and with equal vigour, command his victims' souls to God" (Golomb, 1998, p. 196). He is, on the one hand, presented as a devout figure looking for forgiveness and mercy, whereas, on the other hand, he kills many people. Therefore, both sides of Ivan are conveyed and juxtaposed together through numerous examples in the play.

Ivan's prayers to God seem to find answer; however, he is so much worried about what happens with the axe and hammer that he asks for help since "a giant six-foot Nail with two legs, dashing in, pursued by a seven-foot Hammer" terrifies him, and the Hammer strikes him down. A giant two-legged Axe that is running after a seven-foot Tree also attacks Tsar, which leads Ivan to utter the following words: "I'm Cain-marked! Who canst save me?" (Barnes, 1989, p. 345). He believes that he is surrounded by assassins, the hatred of objects, and stones following and attacking him. Semeon is very willing to take the role of Ivan as the authoritative figure, but he is rejected by people although he wears the crown. He is ultimately met with ridicule. Therefore, laughter, which provokes "a disconcerting identification with the being who laughs" is not something positive for Semeon (Simpson, 2017, p. 2). Rather, it decreases his esteem in the eyes of people, and turns into a dangerous weapon working against Semeon. This demonstrates Barnes's argument that laughter does not always ease pain, which he states as follows: "What I questioned was the old cliché that runs if we can laugh at our miseries and at the injustices that afflict us, somehow laughing alleviates those injustices and those miseries that make it bearable" (Barnes qtd. in Golomb, 1998, p. 199). As can be seen, Barnes highlights the other side of laughter as opposed to the traditional understanding of its positive affect in that it may play a functional role in "destabilizing the status quo and offering a welcome instrument of propaganda" (Rüger, 2009, p. 27).

Ivan puts those whom he thinks have betrayed him into a ridiculous position, and has them killed on the grounds that they might someday rebel against him on which he comments as follows:

“A computed 120.000 grimed t’ death, yold’ the sword. All were about t’ betray me, there’s nothing too cowardly f ‘em t’ ha’ the courage t’ do. I knew their certain guilt by a certain sweating étween my fingers, *here, here*. I’ve never lacked judgement dealing final death” (Barnes, 1989, p.350). His remarks demonstrate his paranoiac state of mind since he chooses to have entire families killed based solely on his prejudices and personal opinions.

Furthermore, Ivan the Terrible is obsessed with power and authority to such extent that he even kills his own son Tsarevitch. The son believes that he is old and qualified enough to take over the crown, which he expresses as follows: “You can’t say I’m not fitted t’ take thy place, rule in God’s name, not pity-purged” (Barnes, 1989, p. 357). However, this is rejected by Ivan, as he is of the opinion that his son is not qualified enough yet. During his conversation with Tsarevitch, it is possible to observe how Ivan does not see anything wrong in killing because he considers it to be a natural process: “What difference if sixty thousand die natural, scattered across the Urals in a day, or unnatural i’ a city called Nvogrod. We re-multiply . . . All’s in heavenly balance” (Barnes, 1989, p. 359).

It is obvious that Ivan regards dead people as numbers and does not pay attention to their personality or to their lives. When the son demands the crown, they get into a fight, and Ivan kills his own son. The world is a battlefield for power and authority, which Tsarevitch points out as follows: “This world’s a world o’ power and those out o’ power’re out o’ this world” (Barnes, 1989, p. 361). In the end, Ivan hits his son with the iron tip of the staff and he dies. This is due to the fact that his son has posed an obstacle to his authority and power. His following words reveal that he has killed his son: “I confessed t’ the Council I cut the cedar, slew my heir . . . Holy Father, Lord god Almighty, I sleered my son” (Barnes, 1989, p. 363). This time, he gets the answer from God through Samael that stands for Death. Samael is an auditor, and dying for him means “[d]ebit entries in the ledger, mathematical equations of pain and guilt, nets woven from accrued balances . . . It’s a matter of good book-keeping; hygiene” (Barnes, 1989, p. 363). The time has come for Ivan, and Samael asks for the crown so that he can let him fall into his grave.

The end of the first part in this regard provides a transition to the second part, which is related to the Holocaust. Ivan’s voice is heard in the end informing about the statue built in honour of Ivan IV’s memory, Tsar of Russia (1530-1584). The Russian national anthem is played with Ivan leaning in the same position as before, the Spot now grey, his hands and face turning the colour of stone, as he has become a statue. The Spot slowly fades, and *Deutschland Über Alles* is heard, which takes the play to the second part. Thus, the first part demonstrates that laughter does not always bring joy and happiness as in the case of Semeon, and Ivan, as Semeon is ridiculed and mocked by people when he takes the crown. In a similar vein, Ivan’s laughter ends in the killing of entire families, the confiscation of land, and his oppressive reign.

The second part starts with the administrator, Viktor Cranach dictating a memo to Fraulein Else Jost, as he presents several letters and numbers reducing people to numbers. This is significant in that Barnes represents “the practice of divorcing the real from its referent” (Patraka, 1999, p. 29). It gives information about keeping records and writing everything down at the time since administrators were responsible for these issues. Cranach comments on this point as follows: “They tell us what’s been done, what we can do, what we have to do and what we are. The civilisation of the Third Reich’ll be constructed from the surviving administrative records at Oranienburg, 1942 A. D.” (Barnes, 1989, p. 370). Furthermore, Cranach touches upon the values of the Third Reich: where there’s a will

there's a Gestapo. The government needs these officers since the system is built upon the idea that "a multitude of bureaucrats must perform their jobs without dissent for the system to function properly" (Plunka, 2009, p. 33). Thus, they are not expected to rebel against the system. If they demonstrate opposition to the state, they are severely punished accordingly.

This part depicts a later stage of war in Berlin, and the office-workers suffering from personal difficulties, as they do not have enough food and other necessary commodities. It seems that they are without critical awareness. Stroop, an ancient clerk, for example, is curious about the two tons of Kylon B rat poison ordered by the government: "There can't be that many rats in the whole of Germany" (Barnes, 1989, p. 373). Cranach in return answers by saying that "Kyklon B isn't being used to kill rats but to discredit this department" (Barnes, 1989, p. 373). It is clear that they use that poison in order to kill people, but Stroop does not seem to comprehend the purpose of the poison, which puts him into a mocked position. This does not evoke joy in the reader, but, shows the reader that such a historical event was experienced with the "contributions" of the administrators that were not even aware of what they were contributing to (emphasis added).

In the light of these specific examples, it can be pointed out that laughter does not bring joy in the second part, and leads one to fall into entrapment, especially in the case of Cranach since Gottleb is successful in his entrapment. He therefore proposes the following question: "What do you call someone who sticks up the Führer's arse?" (Barnes, 1989, p. 395). Cranach answers as follows: "No, a brain surgeon" (Barnes, 1989, p. 396). Gottleb has recorded everything now, which can give him the opportunity to blackmail Cranach to award the contract to Krupps. In this case, the author implicates that laughter can be lethal and put one into a highly risky position during the reign of Hitler. This is because they recorded and wrote everything down, thereby controlling almost every aspect of social life in order to maintain the totalitarian state structure.

As can be observed, Gottleb is depicted as a figure that supports the values of the Third Reich. When the tape recorder fails in the play, he reveals the truth about Auschwitz as follows:

Auschwitz is where it's happening, where we exterminate the carrion hordes of racial maggots. I'd come into my own there on the Auschwitz ramp, making the only decision that matters, who lives, who dies. You're strong, live; you're pretty, live; you're too old, too weak, too young, too ugly. Die. Die. Die. Die. Smoke in the chimneys, ten thousands a week. (Barnes, 1989, p. 401)

It is obvious that Gottleb is a proponent of exercising violence like Ivan the Terrible. He is not even disturbed by thousands gassed, and the skull-cracking of the people. Although the other administrators witness the truth, they cannot admit it due to several reasons: Cranach has a second mortgage; Stroop is about to retire; and Else has an old mother who needs care. Thus, although they do not wholeheartedly take part in such a Holocaust, they feel that they have to carry out their job since they have no other choice but to practice what they are told due to these reasons. The end of the second part, in this regard demonstrates the reactions of Stroop, Else and Cranach, especially with Cranach's criticism: "[T]hey'll find it hard to believe they weren't heroic visionaries, mighty rulers, but ordinary people, people who liked people, people like them, you, me, us" (Barnes, 1989, p. 409). His remarks indicate that the Holocaust was realised by ordinary people themselves.

Moreover, the epilogue depicts "two Jewish comics in concentration-camp clothing, feebly

telling jokes as they die" (Gentry, 2006, p. 74). Bimko and Bieberstein, dressed in "shapeless concentration camp, striped prison uniforms with the yellow star of David pinned on their threadbare tunics, wooden clogs, and undertakers top hats complete with ribbon," talk about how thousands of people have been killed and massacred in gas chambers (Barnes, 1989, p. 410). They discuss whether they have tried toothpaste or not, and beating hydro-cyanide gas by holding breath for five minutes. Ultimately, they die in darkness with Bimko believing that they are the chosen people. Thus, the part, Auschwitz presents a criticism of the Nazi government, which practiced bribery, mass killing, classifying, documenting, numbering, burning books, and recording. Laughing was even banned, which Cranach draws attention to as follows: "Don't laugh. It's an offence to make people laugh. Jokes carry penalties. So don't" (Barnes, 1989, p. 395). Therefore, as can be seen, the totalitarian state did not want its citizens to laugh, and required absolute obedience to their regime in order to implement their manipulative ideology. In the play, the focus is not the emotional stories of mass killings, but the Nazi government and its administrators especially in Auschwitz, which is represented in a humorous manner.

Both Ivan's and Hitler's governments are totalitarian ones that controlled thinking and laughter, thereby transforming it into "a source of grotesque laughter" (Wallace, 2013, p. 215). Ivan regarded the thoughts and opinions of some people as a possible threat to his power and authority; therefore, he had them killed. In a similar vein, Hitler became the reason for the Holocaust and mass killing of the Jews due to his ideology. His government controlled every field of life and imposed its power through violence. The refrain, "root it out, root it out" in the play demonstrates how laughter should be rooted out, and people should observe extreme blind obedience to their rule. This also indicates the close relationship between ideology, power, and laughter in the play.

Accordingly, the author at the beginning of the play asks the audience to root out comedy and laughter, which he expresses as follows: "Comedy itself is the enemy. Laughter only confuses and corrupts everything we try to say. It cures nothing except our consciences and so ends by making the nightmare worse. A sense of humour's no remedy for evil" (Barnes, 1989, p. 343). He regards comedy as an enemy and argues that laughter does not relax or soothe one's mind, but corrupts and confuses one's mind. He claims that nothing changes through laughter since "fools remain fools, the corrupt, violent and depraved remain corrupt, violent, and depraved. Laughter's the ally of tyrants. It softens our hatred. An excuse to change nothing, for nothing needs changing when it's all a joke" (Barnes, 1989, p. 343).

Thus, laughter becomes a strong weapon at the hands of tyrants. Similarly, Ivan also asks for uprooting laughter four times, and the Nazi government also aimed at uprooting laughter. Hence, it is seen that laughter has two crucial features. Barnes's choice of the title is in this respect functional in that it reflects what Barnes tries to communicate through this play. Barnes accordingly illustrates the "fallacy of laughing away the horrors of human history" (West, 2001, p. 208). The play manifests how humour can turn into a dangerous weapon. It can "assert its users' collective spirit, or it can shield the emptiness which once contained their spirit. Laughter, Barnes suggests, is not always the best medicine; sometimes, it can be the best poison" (Golomb, 1998, p. 194).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Peter Barnes's historical play *Laughter!* illustrates two historical periods, namely the reign of Ivan IV in the first part, Tsar and the Nazi period in the second part, Auschwitz. In the

light of textual discussion through numerous examples from the play, this study has demonstrated how both repressive governments exercised violence, cruelty, and oppression over their people. It has also been highlighted how they practiced mass killings without resorting to sound or real proof. Their restrictive, manipulative, and repressive ideology proved influential in such social engineering.

In this regard, the discussion of the play has exposed that laughter does not always alleviate pain and suffering. On the contrary, it also has the potential to increase suffering, and may be therefore attempted to be rooted out. Accordingly, humour can manifest the fact that laughter does not always present jolly feelings, but has the potential to illustrate suffering of the victims, the miserable conditions of the administrators, and the mocked positions of the authoritative political and historical figures.

In short, it can be pointed out that Barnes's play, *Laughter!* presents "a terrifying vision of human suffering and depravity" with its "emotional ferocity and intellectual provocation" (Skloot, 1988, p. 64). This representation draws particular attention to various problematic aspects of laughter, as has been exemplified throughout the study. Thus, through this play, Barnes indicates that laughter is traditionally believed to bring joy but may fail to do so due to its controversial nature, as laughter has the potential to aggravate pain and suffering.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barnes, Peter and Hennessy, Brendan (1970-71). "Peter Barnes: Interviewed by Brendan Hennessy." *The Transatlantic Review* 37/38, 118-124. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41513069>
- Barnes, Peter (1989). *Laughter! Barnes Plays: One*. London: Methuen.
- Gentry, Marshall Bruce (2006). *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*. London: Mississippi University Press.
- Golomb, Liorah Anne (1998). *Peter Barnes and the Nature of Authority* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.
- Houck, Anita (2007). "The Ambiguous Laughter of Reconciliation: Comic Theodicy in Modern Literature." *Religion & Literature* 39,1, 47-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060054>
- Kremer, S. Lillian (2003). *Holocaust Literature. Vol. 1. Agosin to Lentin*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Patraka, Vivian (1999). *Spectacular Suffering: Theatre, Fascism and the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Plunka, Gene A. (2009). *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rabey, David Ian (2005). "Peter Barnes: A Memorial in Correspondence." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15,2, 252-258. DOI: 10.1080/10267160500119069
- Rüger, Jan (2009). "Laughter and War in Berlin." *History Workshop Journal* 67, 23-43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646207>
- Simpson, Hannah (2017). "'Strange laughter': Post-Gothic Questions of Laughter and the Human in Samuel Beckett's Work." *Journal of Modern Literature* 40,4, 1-19. Retrieved February

24, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jmodelite.40.4.01>

Skloot, Robert (1988). *Darkness We Carry: The Drama of the Holocaust*. Madison: Wisconsin Press.

Wallace, Jennifer (2013). "Tragedy and Laughter." *Comparative Drama* 47,2, 201-224.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23526755>

West, Timothy (2001). *A Moment Towards the End of the Play*. London: Nick Hern.

BATI

EDEBİYATINDA AKIMLAR

editör
OKTAY YİVLİ

HATİCE FIRAT
YASEMİN MUMCU
OKTAY YİVLİ
OĞUZHAN KARABURGU
BERNA AKYÜZ SİZGEN
NİLÜFER İLHAN

ÜMMÜHAN TOPÇU
SEFA YÜCE
HANİFİ ASLAN
METİN AKYÜZ
MEHMET SÜMER
YAKUP ÖZTÜRK



Prof. Dr. Önder Göçgün

TİYATRO DENEN HAYAT SAHNESİ



PROF. DR. ÖNDER GÖÇGÜN

Türk Tasavvuf Şiiri

AÇIKLAMALI VE YORUMLU ÖRNEKLERLE



MODERN TÜRK EDEBİYATI

editör
OKTAY YİVLİ

MUHARREM DAYANÇ
OKTAY YİVLİ
MACİT BALIK
MAHMUT BABACAN
SEVİM ŞERMET

YASEMİN MUMCU
BEDİA KOÇAKOĞLU
NİLÜFER İLHAN
MAKSUT YİĞİTBAŞ
SELAMİ ALAN

