

Reading Tom Stoppard's *Travesties* as A Serio-comic Genre

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to argue that Stoppard's *Travesties* exemplifies a serio-comic work, a kind of genre whose emergence and development were theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin in his attempt to account for the rise of the novel. Known for his conception of language as dialogic, Bakhtin traced the rise of the novel back to Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire, two genres heavily influenced by the carnivalistic folklore that inculcates a carnival sense of world. He believed that dialogism and polyphony, as the defining characteristics of the novel, were the products of carnivalization as the shaping influence of the carnival. My discussion will proceed along similar lines demonstrating that *Travesties* contains features and elements that qualify it as a serio-comic genre. To do so, I will first provide an introduction to carnival and carnivalization and then elaborate on the defining features of serio-comic genres with a view to reading *Travesties* in light of them.

Keywords: dialogism, polyphony, carnival, Menippean satire, Socratic dialogue

Introduction

Tom Stoppard is known for his idiosyncratic form of drama which often involves postmodernist ethos of parodic rewriting. In fact, this predilection for parody at the expense of originality has placed him at the receiving end of criticism.¹ *Travesties* (1974/1975) is a parodic rewriting of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) simultaneously combining fiction and history using historical and fictional figures. The play is therefore a medley of different postmodernist features ranging from double-binds to anachronism and apocryphal history. A distinctive characteristic of this play is the presence of renowned historical figures who have been brought together in a particular time and place engaging in spurious interactions and

¹ For a relevant discussion on this point see chapter five of *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard* by Anthony Jenkins (1989).

conversations. Such anachronism results in fictitious sparring and debates among the three major characters of *Travesties* including James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Vladimir Lenin. These characters who are portrayed as eccentrics with their weird and quirky habits and attitudes, often become embroiled in debates about art and politics that, considering their historical importance and intellectual influence, not only create a comical and humorous effect, but also, a polyphonic and dialogical narrative. This also evokes a carnivalistic quality in a Bakhtinian sense. The concentration of these elements within *Travesties* qualifies it as a serio-comic genre which is the thrust of my argument in this paper. To this end, I will first present an overview of critical studies related to *Travesties* hoping to reveal the gap that I hope to fill through my argument. Then I will proceed to elaborate on the historical development of serio-comic genres which dates back to the carnivalistic folklore, and its shaping influence on literature. This will constitute the theoretical framework which will also include explanations about Socratic Dialogue and Menippean Satire, two genres that, according to Bakhtin, derive from the carnival and embody carnivalized literature. Finally, having described the basic components of these genres, I will examine *Travesties* in view of them.

Literature Review: Understanding Stoppard through Bakhtin

As a text known for its prismatic quality, *Travesties* is a forum for debates about art, history and politics. It is no wonder Stoppard intended to title his play *Prism* (Whitaker 1983, 112) alluding to its propensity for dispersing views. This diffusion of opinions does not happen straightforwardly but is marked by refraction and divergence creating an atmosphere of confusion and chaos resembling polyphony. Additionally, because *Travesties* makes use of real historical people alongside fictional characters who become involved in often ludicrous debates and farcical situations, it opens up a space for clashes of ideas and opinions. The fact that the

space where such collisions and conflicts take place is the mind of Henry Carr does not lend any coherence or cohesion to the play. Carr's faulty memory not only fails to serve as a unifying and organizing medium but problematizes the search for truth.

By highlighting the role of memory in narrating history Stoppard managed to create a play resembling a historiographic metafictional text that seeks to problematize reality, history and fiction. Following this line of argument, Zekiye Er believes that *Travesties* can be read in light of new historicism, which highlights the porousness of the boundary between fiction and history. In her analysis, Er focuses on the way Stoppard's play invites the readers to pay critical attention to "textuality, intertextuality, historicization, and contextualization" (Er 2005, 233). As a result, "Stoppard with his own representations of history, life, literature, mathematics, sociology, philosophy, gardening, music, et al., is another new historicist" (Er 2005, 230). According to Anna Stegh Camati, as a post-absurdist playwright, Stoppard "does not merely juxtapose the bits and pieces that he takes from various sources; he uses parody as a linking device to achieve a new synthesis" (Stegh Camati 1990, 196). She believes that Stoppard's drama is "genuinely seriocomic" because his "parodic world-view . . . could be compared with Bakhtin's carnivalistic vision of the world" (1990, 197). Similarly, she argues that in *Travesties* Stoppard

points at the arbitrariness of all norms and rules, laughing at the historically limited judgements which tend to stand for eternal verities. He travesties reality as carnival does: crowning and uncrowning, inverting rank and exchanging roles, making sense from nonsense and nonsense from sense. (Stegh Camati 1990, 197)

Stegh Camati does not elaborate further on the carnivalistic elements of *Travesties* including polyphony and dialogism but agrees with Enoch Brater that the seriocomic quality of *Travesties* is the result of the "interplay of parody and travesty that produces both critical distance and comic effect" in it (Stegh Camati 1990, 198). A more relevant and detailed investigation of Bakhtinian polyphony and dialogism in Stoppard's oeuvre has been carried out

by Ian MacKenzie who differentiates between Stoppard's political and nonpolitical plays. In "Tom Stoppard: The Monological Imagination" (1989), Mackenzie points out that by reviewing Stoppard's "conception of playwriting in several articles and interviews" we realize that it is at least on the surface "Bakhtinian" (1989, 574). Mackenzie later argues that "Stoppard's overtly political plays are dialectical rather than dialogical" (1989, 580) and he concludes that though Stoppard "is arguably dialogical in *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, elsewhere, when his politics intervene and the villains become 'Marxist relativists,' Stoppard becomes distinctly monological" (Mackenzie 1989, 585).

As it was demonstrated above, critics who have approached *Travesties* via Bakhtin either did not advance their argument thoroughly or made some passing reference to concepts popularized and formulated by Bakhtin including polyphony and dialogism. Thus, none attempted to probe this play as a serio-comic genre by seeking to tease out the carnivalistic elements that first materialized in Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire and then evolved into more sophisticated dialogized and polyphonic genres.

Theoretical Framework: Serio-comic Genres and Carnivalization

Bakhtin presented his ideas on the emergence of the novel in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929/1999). According to Bakhtin, the rise of the novel was occasioned by a series of developments as part of the carnivalistic folklore or carnivalized literature. Thus, all carnivalized genres are indebted to the ancient festivities of carnival which were staged in accordance with the Christian calendar first as a religious ritual and then as a cultural ceremony with sociopolitical implications. Bakhtin considers the carnival not as a mere festivity or an isolated calendrical occasion but as a historical phenomenon whose significance and influence transcend social and cultural dimensions of a particular era. Closely related to the carnival is what Bakhtin

defines as carnivalization which is “the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precisely on literary genre” (1999, 122). For Bakhtin, carnival is not a literary phenomenon but rather a “syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort” that has “complex and varied” forms creating “diverse variants and nuances depending upon the epoch, the people, the individual festivity” (1999, 122). As such, the carnival has its own peculiar language of “symbolic concretely sensuous forms” that cannot be adequately translated into “a verbal language, and much less into a language of abstract concepts”; however, “it can be transposed into the language of literature” (Bakhtin 1999, 122). The point about the carnival is its evocation of a sense of “joyful relativity” (Bakhtin 1999, 124) which follows from the suspension of “hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette” leading to a “free and familiar contact among people” (Bakhtin 1999, 123). Bakhtin mentions four categories associated with carnival that play a pivotal role in its effectiveness and influence. The first has already been mentioned which is the ‘familiarity’ brought out through the removal of “impenetrable hierarchical barriers” (1999, 123). Thus, an inherent property of the carnival is its elimination of the distances that have been created and maintained due to social ranks and statuses among different strata of society. As the “behavior, gesture, and discourse ... are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions”, ‘eccentricity’ emerges inevitably as a second category of carnivals as “the latent sides of human nature” are brought to light (Bakhtin 1999, 123). The third issue associated with the carnival sense of the world is the coalescence of the antithetical categories that, in non-carnival life, are naturally deemed irreconcilable. These include the convergence of “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin 1999, 123). The fourth and final carnivalistic category is profanation which includes “carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth, carnivalistic

obscurities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc.” (Bakhtin 1999, 123). Bakhtin emphasizes that these categories are not abstract thoughts but “concretely sensuous ritual-pageant ‘thoughts’ experienced and played out in the form of life itself” which is “why they were able to exercise such an immense formal, genre-shaping influence on literature” (1999, 123).

Carnivals also include acts and images such as the crowning/de-crowning of the fool, the prevalence of laughter, the use of fire, etc. All these elements, themes, motifs, images and actions have important implications that serve to remind us of the transience, ambivalence and joyful relativity that are part and parcel of life but have been ignored or suppressed. There is an interconnectedness among all these concepts. For example, ambivalence or duality of carnival images, which include opposite poles such as birth and death, praise and abuse, or stupidity and wisdom, constitutes a deconstructive gesture that defies absolutism and essentialism. In other words, they point to the fact that nothing is permanent, absolute or indefinitely authoritative.

The two major spin-offs of serio-comic genres which will be introduced below are imbued with a joyful sense of carnivalistic relativity that also resonates in *Travesties*. In the following, I aim to flesh out this argument through an introduction on two serio-comic genres, namely, Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire and then examine *Travesties* against this conceptual background.

Carnivalization in Ancient Genres: Socratic Dialogue and Menippean Satire

First and foremost, Socratic dialogue is representative of “the dialogic nature of truth” (Bakhtin 1999, 110), meaning that truth is not to be dictated but arrived at via conversation and interaction, through a collective endeavor and not unilaterally. In Socratic dialogue, there are two

devices employed to facilitate the delivery of truth: syncrisis and anacrisis. The first term refers to the “juxtaposition of various points of view on a specific object” and the second one involves provoking the interlocutor to express their thoughts with the aim of exposing “their falseness and incompleteness” (Bakhtin 1999, 110). Socratic dialogue features ideologists in a heroic capacity. The physical feats that were indispensable in epic or tragedy are supplanted by the intellectual vigor and enterprise needed to advance an argument convincingly. In such a polyphonic context, characters can almost embody ideas leading to an anachronistic exchange of opinions as “people and ideas which in historical reality never entered into real dialogic contact (but could have done so) begin to come together in dialogues” (Bakhtin 1999, 112).

Socratic dialogue did not last long as it disintegrated and created different dialogic genres one of which was Menippean satire. Being a derivative of Socratic dialogue, Menippean satire represents a genre whose “roots reach directly back into carnivalized folklore” (Bakhtin 1999, 112). It differs from Socratic dialogue on some major points. For example, as Bakhtin elaborates, Menippean satire is more comic and humorous. Similarly, as a satiric genre it makes a freer use of the fantastic not for its own sake but to serve the noble goal of “provoking and testing a truth” by means of placing characters in “extraordinary life situations” (Bakhtin 1999, 114). What is being put to test is not a character but an idea. To this end, the story might entail a character’s coming into contact “with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression” which Bakhtin calls slum naturalism (1999, 115). Another important component of Menippean satire is experimental fantasticality which involves observing a situation, place or phenomenon “from some unusual point of view, from on high, for example, which results in a radical change in the scale of the observed phenomena of life” (Bakhtin 1999, 116). The insertion of differing points of view is complemented by the introduction of dreams, and

unpredictably insane behavior of a character. The revelation of a dark and unknown side of a person carries psychological and psychoanalytical implications as the character “ceases to coincide with himself” (Bakhtin 1999, 117). According to Bakhtin, “this unfinalizability of a man, his noncoincidence with himself ... is facilitated by the appearance . . . of a dialogic relationship to one’s own self” (1999, 117). Closely connected to the concept of unfinalizability is the notion of indeterminacy, a term that has frequently been used in postmodernist debates about historical truth, the nature of reality and the knowledge of self. The indeterminacy and uncertainty associated with the discovering of truth about oneself, history, and reality are, to a great extent, concerned with the question of language as an epistemological tool which I will touch upon later.

The unpredictability which was mentioned above can also manifest itself in scandals and eccentricities that cannot be easily accounted for, as they are not reasonably motivated or warranted. This, according to Bakhtin, “make(s) a breach in the stable, normal (‘seemly’) course of human affairs and events” (1999, 117). Menippean satire also features contrasts and oxymorons in the form of “abrupt transitions and shifts, ups and downs, rises and falls” (Bakhtin 1999, 118). Along with these thematic features, Menippean satire contains an important formalistic aspect involving the use of different genres and styles of writing embedded in the text. The insertion of prose, verses, speeches, letters, etc. is carried out with a parodic intention that intensifies “the multi-styled and multi-toned nature” of the satirical text (Bakhtin 1999, 118). The last characteristic of Menippean satire is its “concern with current and topical issues” which transforms the text into a forum where “contemporary or recently deceased public figures. . . unravel and evaluate the general spirit and direction of evolving contemporary life” (Bakhtin 1999, 118).

Having elaborated on the defining features of Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire, I now turn my attention to exploring these elements in *Travesties*. My purpose is to show how this play is informed by a tendency to relativize, in Bakhtin's words, "everything that disunifies people and imparts a false seriousness to life" (1999, 174).

Discussion: Serio-comic Elements in *Travesties*

Travesties has a peculiar structure because the bulk of the play unfolds within the senile mind of Carr, who through his faulty memory, in fits and starts, relates his interactions with important historical figures including Joyce, Lenin and Tzara. As Stoppard explains in a preface to the play, Carr had a short and unsuccessful relationship with Joyce as they entered a partnership to stage Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Their partnership did not go well due to some disagreement over monetary issues which resulted in legal entanglements for Carr and Joyce. Aside from this piece of historical evidence, whatever transpires among the characters in the play is the product of Carr's erratic memory. By placing the play within the mind of Carr and vacillating between the young Carr and his older self, Stoppard manages to create a complicated narrative that is interwoven with irony and indeterminacy. This temporal oscillation occurs in two locations, the library and Carr's room alternating throughout the play.

***Travesties* and Socratic Dialogue**

To begin with, I would like to focus on those aspects of the play that derive from Socratic dialogue. As mentioned earlier, Socratic dialogue is centered on discovering of truth through an interactive process that necessitates reciprocation among interlocutors. Truth then is not dictated by one party but is helped to be born by all the parties involved. Bakhtin explains that Socrates called himself a 'midwife' due to his assistance with the birth of truth while calling his method

‘obstetric’. Through this nomenclature, Socrates wanted to show that he is not “the exclusive possessor of a ready-made truth” (1999, 110). Such an approach to the understanding truth is adopted in *Travesties* where we witness the eruption of heated debates among characters over different issues. For instance, the definition of art and the role of the artist are explicitly discussed by the famous trio and the young Carr. The insertion of such divergent points of view within the context of the play invokes ‘syncrisis’. Such episodes of syncrisis are imbued with polyphony because no voice seems to be favored by the author or takes precedence over others. In other words, Stoppard refrains from imposing his authorial voice or stance on any character. Reviewing some critical analyses, we cannot miss the fact that there is disagreement among critics over deciding who serves as Stoppard’s mouthpiece. For example, Roger Scruton (1983) in “The Real Stoppard” believes that Joyce’s view of art is representative of Stoppard’s ideas. Mary Doll (1993) in “Stoppard’s Theatre of Unknowing” considers Tristan Tzara as Stoppard’s “mouthpiece.” Enoch Brater (1981) in “Parody, Travesty, and Politics in the Plays of Tom Stoppard” argues that Stoppard has affinities with Marxist stance advocated by Lenin. According to David Rod “Stoppard creates a balance among the four opposing aesthetic viewpoints presented in the play, a balance that does not tip in Carr's favor even though his memory controls most of the events in the play” (1983, 541).

The fact that Stoppard has left critics pondering over whose argument he sides with speaks volumes for his success in invoking syncrisis. An example of comparing and contrasting of stances occurs in the discussion about art. As a defender of anti-art, Tzara believes that “an artist is someone who makes art mean the things he does. A man may be an artist by exhibiting his hindquarters. He may be a poet by drawing words out of a hat” (Stoppard 1975, 21). Such a definition of art is underpinned by chance and the use of words “in a purely private sense”

(Stoppard 1975, 21) which jars drastically with Carr's traditionalist view emphasizing commitment and pragmatism. For him, modern art is the distillation of the "*ingratitude* of artists ... and failure of talent" as artists are enjoying "the freedom ... to be hostile, self-centred and talentless" (Stoppard 1975, 22; emphasis in original). According to Carr, the artist's duty is "to beautify existence" (Stoppard 1975, 20). Similarly, for him "[a]n artist is someone who is gifted in some way that enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is not thus gifted" (Stoppard 1975, 21). This classical view of art and artist is later tempered by the belief that art has been absurdly overrated not only by the artist but everyone else (Stoppard 1975, 28).

In opposition to this view, Tzara places considerable importance on the contribution artists have made to human history. They have lifted us from the baseness and vulgarity of material concerns such as "Hunt – eat – fight – grind – saw the logs – shit" (Stoppard 1975, 29; emphasis in original). Tzara is a rebel whose rebelliousness finds an outlet in his artistic radicalism embodied by Dadaism. Bordering on nihilism, such a view of art and the artist is grounded in randomness and aleatory production rather than genius. Artists in this light, become "vandals and desecrators" (Stoppard 1975, 41) who "jeer and howl and belch at the delusion that infinite generations of real effects can be inferred from the gross expression of apparent cause" (Stoppard 1975, 20).

Joyce presents a different conception of art and artists as he argues that "an artist is the magician put among men to gratify – capriciously – their urge for immortality" (Stoppard 1975, 41) for which an artist needs to "acquire some genius and if possible some subtlety" (Stoppard 1975, 42). He also tends to assign a mythological status to art making it superordinate to history:

The temples are built and brought down around him, continuously and contiguously, from Troy to the fields of Flanders. If there is any meaning in any of it, it is in what survives as art, yes even in the celebration of tyrants, yes even in the celebration of nonentities. What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust. (Stoppard 1975, 41-42)

The presentation of such differing views without the authoritative intervention of the author constitutes a centrifugal force that invokes polyphony and dialogism. Closely related to syncrisis is anacrisis which entails conversing provocatively to disprove a point that has been put forward by one of the interlocutors. According to Bakhtin, "Syncrisis and anacrisis dialogize thought, they carry it into the open, turn it into a rejoinder, attach it to dialogic intercourse among people. Both of these devices have their origin in the notion of the dialogic nature of truth, which lies at the base of the Socratic dialogue" (Bakhtin 1999, 111). This stratagem is cleverly devious because it aims to gradually undermine the premises upon which a claim or an argument has been erected. Although this device is not directly used in the play, the fiery debates that flare up among Carr, Joyce and Tzara serve to foreground their inability to sound convincing to everyone. There are moments in which characters fail to persuade the other side, and, as a result, they resort to vituperation and vilification, which undercut their impartiality and intellectual cogency. The fact that Joyce, Carr and Tzara perform such outpourings of frustration resonates with the joyful relativity of a carnival sense of the world. Lenin is an exception in this regard as his views are either mildly expressed by others or put forward by him but not in a vehement way.

Furthermore, Carr, Joyce and Tzara are presented in contrasting versions of themselves displaying antithetical personalities including clownishness and gentility. This not only enhances the comicality of the play but also harkens back to the intermingling of opposites featured in the carnival. According to Bakhtin, the carnival image

strives to encompass and unite within itself both poles of becoming or both members of an antithesis: birth-death, youth-old age, top-bottom, face-backside, praise-abuse,

affirmation-repudiation, tragic-comic, and so forth, while the upper pole of a two-in-one image is reflected in the lower. . . It could be expressed this way: opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another. (1999, 176)

The quirks and eccentricities of these characters are presented at different points and in various ways throughout the play. The old Carr and his younger self are not only different in terms of age but also in terms of credibility, veracity and mental stability. While his older self is subject to bouts of mnemonic failure and inconsistency, the younger one, despite his level-headedness, bursts into diatribe against both Joyce and Tzara. Because of his legal dispute with Joyce, the old and the young Carr generally have a low opinion of him, disparaging him as an “Irish lout” (Stoppard 1975, 5), while describing him in “a carnivalistic fusion of praise and abuse” (Bakhtin 1999, 161):

A prudish, prudent man, Joyce, in no way profligate or vulgar, and yet convivial, without being spend-thrift, and yet still without primness towards hard currency in all its transmutable and transferable forms and denominations, of which, however, he demanded only a sufficiency from the world at large, exhibiting a monkish unconcern for worldly and bodily comforts, without at the same time shutting himself off from the richness of human society, whose temptations, on the other hand, he met with an ascetic disregard tempered only by sudden and catastrophic aberrations – in short, a complex personality, an enigma, a contradictory pokesman for the truth, an obsessive litigant and yet an essentially private man who wished his total indifference to public notice to be universally recognized – in short a liar and a hypocrite, a tight-fisted, sponging, fornicating drunk not worth the paper, that’s that bit done. (Stoppard 1975, 6-7)

At another point, the young Carr subjects Tzara to a similar barrage of derogatory remarks, though not entirely devoid of self-contradiction. Similar instances of outpouring of deprecatory remarks occur between Joyce and Tzara, illustrating that no one is immune to criticism and censure and can remain inviolable. Consequently, all forms of authority are questionable and no kind of absolutism remains unquestioned. Thus, *Travesties* allows various voices to be expressed, to come into collision and to be put to test. As Bakhtin has argued, the means by which such a feat can be accomplished is to create “an extraordinary situation” such as

a dream which is “quite impossible in ordinary life, a situation that serves ... the testing of an idea and the man of an idea” (1999, 147). Though *Travesties* does not unfold specifically in a dream, through his inconsistent recollections, Henry Carr conjures up historically important figures whose portrayals are incongruous with their historical charisma and authority. Such incongruity in characterization has a defamiliarizing effect because these individuals have been generally revered for their exceptional qualities or contributions (Er 2005, 236). By portraying these characters in a ridiculous light, Stoppard presents a parody of them that is fraught with ambivalence as it invokes the mock crowning and decrowning performed in carnivals. The result is that the audience is caught between two contrary states of consciousness as they are supposed to reconcile the frivolous with the serious or vice versa. This is because the serious and the frivolous beckon to each other, demonstrating their interdependency. Such flip-flopping between negation and affirmation or levity and earnestness results in the joyful relativity and ambivalence because “[c]rowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start” (Bakhtin 1999, 124).

Socratic dialogue also involves the clashes of ideological thoughts among their progenitors and apologists. In *Travesties*, almost all key characters are given the opportunity to lecture on their ideas. As mentioned above, regarding the role of the artist, Carr, Joyce, Tzara and to a lesser extent, Lenin, are permitted to express their opinions from a traditionalist, mythologist, nihilistic and socialist perspectives. Compared to others’, Lenin’s thoughts are not given much airing. Aside from his brief appearance at the beginning of the play where he is informed by his wife in a conversation entirely conducted in Russian that Tsar has abdicated, he never speaks extensively about his ideas on art, artist and revolution. Instead, his ideas are

indirectly voiced by others. For example, Bennet, Carr's manservant is the one who elaborates on historical and dialectical developments as the cornerstone of socialism:

According to Marx, there is no way for a country to leap from autocracy to socialism: while the ultimate triumph of socialism is inevitable, being the necessary end of the process of dialectical materialism, it must be preceded by a bourgeois-capitalist stage of development. When time is ripe, and not before, there will be a further revolution, led by the organized industrial workers, or 'Proletariat'. (Stoppard 1999, 13-14)

The idea of having a manservant explain the tenets of Marxism so elaborately cannot be taken at face value. By having a manservant deliver such an exposition, Stoppard is effectively placing Bennet on a par with the rest of the supposedly elite or intellectual characters of his play. In this way, his words carry the same weight as others.

Elements of Menippean Satire in *Travesties*

Travesties also includes features that are elemental to Menippean satire. Such features are much more varied and dispersed compared to Socratic dialogue because they are essentially derivative. First and foremost, *Travesties* is undeniably humorous and comical. Being a travesty of different people and their contrasting opinions, it is naturally intended to make light of ideas that have been historically reckoned with. The force of the play lies in its brutal and unceremonious mockery of grandiose thoughts that have proved groundbreaking in their own times. By bastardizing such thoughts and visions, Stoppard ushers in laughter. This kind of "ambivalent carnivalistic laughter", as Bakhtin puts it, is indeed a celebration and recognition of relativity, because it

could grasp and comprehend a phenomenon in the process of change and transition, it could fix in a phenomenon both poles of its evolution in their uninterrupted and creative renewing changeability. . . . Carnival laughter does not permit a single one of these aspects of change to be absolutized or to congeal in one-sided seriousness. (1999, 164)

While the play can be read as a stand-alone text, it benefits the readers to know that *Travesties* contains the subtext of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Underpinned by such a subtext, *Travesties* evokes a stronger sense of humor. Part of this hilarity is due to the fact that these characters are being placed in a particular setting or socio-historical context *vis-à-vis* those who are authorities in a similar or specific realm. Such a fanciful encounter is fantastic, in a Bakhtinian sense, as it allows the full exposure of ideas to critical scrutiny and contrastive analysis. Through this critical investigation readers and the audience are permitted to view ideas not in their abstraction but in light of their practicality and relevance.

The experimental fantasticality pointed out by Bakhtin is reflected in the way people and their ideas are seen from the vantage point of Henry Carr. His erratic memory wreaks havoc with the historical eminence and respectability of especially Joyce and Tzara through the biased portrayal of them as unscrupulous swindlers and impostors. From a carnivalistic standpoint, such a portrayal is comparable to a dethroning of kings and rulers. The split between the old Carr and his younger self problematizes the understanding of characters. The inconsistency of Carr's memory is exacerbated by the iterative structure of the play rendering change a constant in it. There are moments in *Travesties* that are essentially iterations of previous scenes as a result of the character's divergent mode of speaking and acting. For example, Tzara is presented as an idiotic simpleton, as an earnest and zealous proponent of anti-art as well as a Wildean 'Earnest'. The contrast between these versions of Tzara alludes to the unfinalizability of a character's personality. From the standpoint of poststructuralism, the differing personalities of Tzara speak to the absence of a stable self or the existence of a fragmented self. Unfinalizability problematizes the understanding of characters as they remain inscrutable and unfathomable. This aspect of characterization has been noted by Oscar Wilde in the works of Dostoevsky. He has

praised Dostoevsky for refraining from presenting finalized characters who “always astound us by what they say and do, and preserve within themselves to the end of the eternal secret of existence” (qtd. in Bakhtin 1999, 76). As a parody of Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Travesties* enters a dialogue with not only history but also the literary canon. This dialogue is in no way finished and finalized but remains open to investigation as long as the intertextuality of both texts is acknowledged. This links *Travesties* to the question of truth and the extent to which truth can be ascertained.

Stratification of Language in *Travesties*

The idea that language can be used as a medium to understand or convey truth is refuted in this play. The prevalence of puns, wordplay and gibberish is notable in this regard. The characters’ engagement in conversations fraught with digressions, innuendos, and allusions turns the play into a chaotic jumble. Such a welter of confusion serves the dual purpose of jeopardizing the attainment of truth and perpetuating polyphony in the play. This is because language is freed from the centripetal forces of unison and unity which aim to create coherence by suppressing fluidity and variety. In “Discourse in the Novel”, Bakhtin argues that centripetal forces “serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (1981, 270; emphasis in the original). Bakhtin contrasts centripetal forces with centrifugal ones elucidating that “alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification move forward” (1981, 272). These two forces which are at war with each other are present in every language or discourse. The conflict between them is in fact a battle between centralizing and decentralizing tendencies. Unlike Saussure who theorizes language as a hermetic system of signification which is sealed off from social influences, Bakhtin views language as a socio-ideological phenomenon that is inherently stratified:

At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strictest sense of the word . . . but also . . . into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, “professional” and “generic” languages . . . From this point of view, literary languages is only one of these heteroglot languages . . . also stratified into languages [generic, period-bound, and others]. (1981, 271-272)

Along with this generic stratification (including oratorical, publicistic, newspaper, journals, etc.), Bakhtin argues that, there is a professional stratification of language, such as “the language of lawyers, the doctor, the businessman, the politician, . . . [which] sometimes coincide with and sometimes depart from, the stratification into genres” (1981, 288-289).

Language in *Travesties* makes the best of its potential for stratification by various means. The very fact that the play is set in Switzerland during wartime is noteworthy in this regard. The country was home to expatriates and foreigners who had found a fertile soil and a haven for developing their creative ideas and expressing their thoughts. Being a neutral country during the WWI, Switzerland received spies, diplomats, artists, refugees, and intellectuals who came there to work or to escape the war. In such a pluralistic world, the occurrence of dialogues, debates and interactions was inevitable. Stoppard has tried to recreate this same situation in his play not only by bringing together the three revolutionary figures but also by inserting various professional and generic stratifications which turn the play into a stage for demagoguing, heckling, hectoring, interrogating, lecturing and even creating poetry. Stoppard also capitalizes on wordplays and near homophones which crop up in conversations throughout the play. For example, ‘expectoration’ and ‘defecated’ (Stoppard 1975, 30) are used in place of expectation and dedicated, and ‘anti’ replaces ‘auntie’ (Stoppard 1975, 17). All these rhetorical actions happen against a backdrop of revolutionary times which the play seems wryly to pay a tribute to. It is a time of social-political-artistic transformation. All three historical figures are involved in a remolding or a rewriting of a kind: Joyce is rewriting *Odyssey* in *Ulysses* or “Elasticated

Bloomers” (Stoppard 1975, 6), Tzara is reconceptualizing art as anti-art, and Lenin is reinterpreting Marx to serve his political ends. By juxtaposing a variety of genres (such as limerick, farce, a Shakespearean sonnet, etc.) with mistaken identities from Wilde’s play, Stoppard creates a collage of impressions that invigorates stratification in *Travesties*.

Stratification in *Travesties* has been acknowledged by Stoppard himself as he initially intended to name the play, *Prism*, because it “refracts our approach to history, art, and revolution through the triangular prism of Joyce-Tzara-and-Lenin, refracts it again through Carr's memory, and again through Stoppard’s own multifaceted parody” (Whitaker 1983, 114). This refraction is also evidenced on the discursive plane. Language is stretched, bent, twisted and finally diffracted creating a spectrum of semantic, interpretative and discursive variations.

A perfect example for presenting the arbitrary and refracted nature of meaning is demonstrated by the term ‘dada’, used in different semantic and linguistic capacities in *Travesties*. Dada is used to refer to an artistic movement preceding surrealism, as well as an interjection or exclamation, similar to ‘yes, yes!’, which if repeated in a sequence can become nonsensical, as in the following conversation:

CARR: It is the duty of the artist to beautify existence.

[illegible]

CARR (*Slight pause*): Oh, what nonsense you talk!

TZARA: It may be nonsense, but at least it's not clever nonsense. Cleverness has been exploded, along with so much else, by the war. (Stoppard 1975, 20)

The use of language in such a way can create ironic, comic and parodic effect upgrading it to a double-voiced discourse:

Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized. Examples of this would be comic, ironic or parodic discourse, the refracting discourse of a narrator, refracting discourse in the language of a character and finally the discourse of a whole incorporated genre—all these discourses are double-voiced and internally dialogized. (Bakhtin, 1981, 324)

Thus, the parodic nature of the play, the festive wordplay, innuendos and implicit obscenities, substantially contributes to the “carnival atmosphere of [this] stylish and joyous comedy” (Brassell 1985, 161).

The Interrelationship Between Past and Present in *Travesties*

The final element of Menippean satire which is palpably present in *Travesties* pertains to its engagement with contemporary topics by “echoing the ideological issues of the day” by means of an encyclopedic presentation of “overt and hidden polemics with various philosophical, religious, ideological and scientific schools, and with the tendencies and currents of his time . . . seeking to unravel and evaluate the general spirit and direction of evolving contemporary life” (Bakhtin 1991, 118). This Menippean aspect of *Travesties* can be explicated from a postmodernist or even new historicist standpoint. The decade in which this play was written and staged coincided with rise of postmodernism. One of the fundamental aspects of postmodernist writing is its metafictionality which when combined with historiography creates historiographic metafiction, a mode of writing theorized by Linda Hutcheon (1988). For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is “a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (1988, 4). This kind of fiction emphasizes the porousness of boundaries between fiction and history by asserting that historiography is as much in debt to the conventions of storytelling as fiction is to history as a source of narrative. History and fiction in this sense are treated as texts and cultural constructs. This assertion contains two implications: texts are intertextual and texts are not created in a vacuum. Similar inferences can be drawn from

Bakhtin's argument about the evolution of the novel from serio-comic genres. The novel is similarly an intertext and unlike its predecessors, epic and tragedy which are set in a distant past, is concerned with contemporary issues, directly influenced by the prevailing ideology. In other words, the novel is a representation of contemporary people, their lives and ideological concerns.

Despite its focus on historical figures, *Travesties* is in fact concerned with the present because in it

we find the social presence of the world as perceived by Tom Stoppard, a representation of the postmodern condition with all its absurdities, together with nostalgia for the past and its paradoxes. Through his narrator, Old Carr, Stoppard raises questions about the past and present and gives subjective answers for today's audience. (Er 2005, 238)

I would like to modify the previous quote by arguing that instead of 'nostalgia', the past is being re-presented through an ironic perspective. The irony is twofold: neither the young Carr nor his older self can offer us a definitive answer about reality which is the crux of debates in the postmodern era.

Conclusion

Stoppard is known for his distinctive plays which draw on various disciplines and scientific fields. By interweaving different discursive strands into his plays, he creates multifaceted and multivalent works in which thoughts and ideas intersect. Whether such a medley of utterances produces polyphony and dialogism is a legitimate question to consider. My intention here was twofold: firstly, to argue that *Travesties* is imbued with a carnivalistic sense of joyful relativity that permeates all genres created through the process of carnivalization, and, secondly, to identify the elements that contributed to the formation of serio-comic genres in *Travesties*. Overall, I aimed to demonstrate how the dialogical and polyphonic aspects of this play render it comparable to serio-comic genres.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that no conflict of interests exists pertaining this paper.

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