

Representing the Instability of the Subject in Thomas Kilroy's *Talbot's Box*

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Introduction: Father, power and instability of subject

This paper looks at Irish playwright Thomas Kilroy's *Talbot's Box*, one of his "historical fictions".¹ The play deals with the life of Matt Talbot, an actual historical figure.² I examine how the play represents the instability of the individual subject when it comes up against powerful external forces. In taking historical facts concerning a real historical personage and evoking the fragmentation of his subjectivity, the play reveals his fictiveness both in history and on the stage. As Nicholas Grene says, "Their history is less important than the awareness of the constructedness of their selves", the foundation of this "constructedness of their selves" being deeply related to the relationship the central character in this play has with his father"(70). Thus in the play we see an important interplay between the individual and how that individual is appropriated by the greater society and represented in alienating ways by the prevailing powers in that society. This power is embodied in the figure of the father, and the loss of individuality due to the emergence of this father figure is represented in the engenderment of the individual, that is, the individual becoming incarnate losing his or her pre-Oedipal oneness with the world.

In the play the protagonist is threatened by his father. 'Father' is used

in the literal sense of his actual father as well as Father as a representation of the power and order in society, which in Lacanian terms equates with the Phallic or symbolic order. I analyse below the representation of the father-figure and the concept of paternal power as represented in the play and how this focuses the core elements of the drama onto the issues of power and individual identity.

Talbot's Box

In dealing with the story of Matt Talbot, *Talbot's Box* employs his persona as a strongly effective code which instantly signifies certain behavioural roles, such as mystic, alcoholic, working class, a saint and so on. Using Talbot as a code, the play shows the problematic conflict between Talbot as an individual with his own asocial religious experiences and Talbot as a signifier being decoded by society. Kilroy himself mentions in an author's note to *Talbot's Box* that the story is about "the mystic and essentially irreducible division between such extreme individualism and claim of relationship, of community, society" and that he tried to write about "the way individuals of exceptional personality invite manipulation and the projection of the needs of others"(5-6). The play's topic involves deep metaphysical questions concerning self and identity in relation to the power of religion and society, and the role of mysticism in the search for existential freedom for the individual through disembodiment and the avoidance of duties to gender expectations that stem from the fact of one's existing in a body. The root of this issue is sourced and manifest in Talbot's fear of his father.

Power of Father and fragmented Self

When his father appears in the play, Talbot shrinks and says "No... no...me mother...mammy..." and "No...lave me be ...no..." (Kilroy 43). Avoiding looking at his father, Talbot calls for his mother. As he ap-

pears in front of his father he is powerless, as the stage direction says, “he collapses to his knees”(Kilroy 43). The paternal world is a place he cannot cope with, drawing him to cocoon himself in the maternal world. The play also reflects Talbot’s unstable sense of paternal power on stage through the Priest being acted by a female actor whom he actually calls “Mother Church”.

Staying in the maternal world involves rejecting the real society, the Phallic Order.³ Continuing in this Lacanian vein, we can say that in becoming like a pre-Oedipal child mirroring itself on the mother as the ‘other’ undisturbed by the father as ‘Other’, Talbot avoids the order of the real society and stays in the Imaginary world. In this world, in identifying himself with his mother, there is no gender identity distinction. This androgyny is referred to in one section of dialogue concerning Talbot:

FIST MAN. Human?

SECOND MAN. Marginally.

FIST MAN. Young?

SECOND MAN. Difficult to say.

FIST MAN. Male or female?

SECOND MAN. In the modern sense, both (Kilroy 43).

This gender ambiguity, described as androgyny, becomes the ambiguity of individual identity.

This ambiguity of identity takes on an important role in the dramaturgy of this play. The most obvious and effective aspect is the actors incessant role changing. It creates the effect of down-playing the importance of peripheral individual characters and of blurring the differences between individuals. Anthony Roche says that the play “indulge[s] in an orgy of role changing, so that an existential morgue attendant becomes a captain of industry as a mere change of clothes suggests the relative ease with which social roles can be acquired or changed”(Contemporary:204). In effect

such interchangeability of the persona on stage shows the arbitrariness of individuality. Thus, in this play, gender difference seems to be displayed as an indistinct, arbitrary choice, as in Judith Butler's notion of performative role taking.⁴ The actor playing Talbot is the only one who does not change character in the play. However, the fragmentation of his identity is represented through the fragmentary representations of him in the dialogue of the other characters as well as the visual imagery on the stage.

Dramatic Representation of Self in a Box

His staying in the Imaginary world is consolidated finally as the box is closed on stage with Talbot in "a mood of child-like reverie" inside with the Mother Church (Kilroy 62). Supported by the effect of light and sound, the huge eponymous box "occupying virtually the whole stage" works as an important sign which signifies Talbot's enclosed world and identity (Kilroy 11). The box which is "a primitive, enclosed space, part prison, part sanctuary, part acting space" is practically and metaphorically the dominant presence within the whole performance (Kilroy 11). At the beginning of the play, the story of Talbot starts on the stage with the gaze of the audience being invited into the box by opening it up in front of them.⁵ The box functions as the parameters of Talbot's life both in space and in time.

The box at many stages functions as the staging of Talbot's "room", the private space into which Talbot withdraws from society to engage in his religious quest. After Talbot found "the emptiness of all friendship in this world", he retreated from the social world (Kilroy 48). He utters, "'N' they turned away from me. N' I turned away from them and went to me room'"(Kilroy 36). This notion of his "room" can be read as both his own private physical and mental space as is shown in the following dialogue.

WOMAN Well, why don't you do something, so? Instead of always

stuck in that bit of a room. How do you stick it in there?
TALBOT. I've measured it. The length and the breadth of it. I fit into it (Kilroy 51-52).

They are talking about a room but whether it is an actual room or a metaphor for his inner life is ambiguous. Talbot is constantly saying, "Hafta get back to me room", as he evades wider society (Kilroy 41). The box then acts to signify this metaphor of the private mental asocial space that Talbot has retreated into. The box is both his hermitage and his inner soul.

As well as being his private space, the box also serves to delineate the sacred space Talbot seeks away from the profane social world. The box at times becomes the walls of a church and in a wider sense acts to reinforce the idea, most famously posed by Emile Durkheim, that the religious mind divides the world into that which belongs to the sacred and that which belongs to the profane and that this division is often physical and spatial.⁶

Whilst the box functions as a sacred place sheltering him from the profane society outside, it is also the barrier which encloses him within the confines of his own individual subjectivity. Inside this barrier of his persona he faces the darkness of his nature. As Thierry Dubost says, "for Matt Talbot, hiding his real nature becomes a way of getting closer to God". Talbot dares to face the darkness as it is the only way to overcome his alienation from and failure to embrace completely the sacred realm (15). His firm determination can be seen when he says, "I knows darkness! [...] 'Tis because I wanta meet the darkness as meself. I'm niver meself in the drink. [...] I think meself the darkness is Gawd"(Kilroy 47).

Talbot faces the paradox that the more he must struggle for the mystical light, the more he is facing into a very solitary and lonely darkness. He exclaims, "There's something in me that makes it hard for others to abide

me. Even me own. (*Prayer.*) Oh, Lord....Let thy light shine upon my darkness!”(Kilroy 24) In the final scenes we see how his quest for God was an utterly internal struggle that eventually encloses him in a realm that even the audience cannot peer into:

...It’s afraid o’ the last darkness I am. When I should see it as the start of Eternal Light. There is a little distance left to me to go. (*Gesturing back to the other figures.*) Leave me! Leave me to go it alone! Leave me! (*The two men and the woman slink through openings of the box, leaving it altogether.*) (Kilroy 62)

As Grene points out, “The box is turned into a coffin at last and the innerness of the self is sealed from sight”(74).

Torment of the Body and the Power in the Society

Perhaps what torments Talbot is the fact that what prevents him from embracing the Eternal light of God in the sacred space he is vigorously carving out for himself is that even when inside the sacred confines of his box he is still trapped within the profane borders of his own body. Talbot is marked by his body, it has an alterity that alienates him from complete mystical communion with the sacred. What we find then is that Talbot despises his corporal, engendered self and struggles with the fact of his physical embodiment which he feels separates him from the realm of the eternally sacred. He says “Isn’t it a quare thing the way the body does stand in the way of Eternity? The time will come, says the Lord, when the body, that garment of shame shall be cast off ‘n there will be no more male ‘n female”(Kilroy 25). As long as he has his body and the gender specifications that come with it there is no peace for him. He articulates this when his sister asks him, “Shouldn’t we rest in peace?” and he answers, “Not in the flesh, Susan”(Kilroy 23). Talbot punishes his body, with chains and so on, to be free of its mystical limitations. He utters “I bind meself with the bonds of this earth that I may know the weight of flesh. And

learn to free meself from its burden”(Kilroy 19).⁷

A further paradox of the mystic’s quest is that although Talbot ‘leaves’ his family, girl friend and society in general and encloses himself in his own sacred mystical space, this act of withdrawing from society, his disembodiment, actually in effect enhances his status in that same society. The box into which Talbot has withdrawn becomes a signifier to be interpreted by the surrounding society in whose gaze the exteriority of the box resides. The play deals in a large part with how Talbot’s asocial behaviour acts to make him a potent symbol and tool for various conflicting groups within society. As Murray points out, in the play “[Talbot] is depicted both in his own time and in ours, resurrected from the dead, so that his individual self is seen to be boxed in and appropriated by self-interested parties”(178). Society labels him in turn “a scab” and “a holy man” among other things as we see in the following dialogue:

WOMAN. He was a tool of the Church against the workers!

SECOND MAN. He was a scab! He was a scab!

FIRST MAN. He was irrelevant!

PRIEST FIGURE. He was a saint! (Kilroy 36)

While the surrounding characters clamour to tell what he is, Talbot remains silent. Throughout the play we see various interest groups, such as trade unions, the Church, the nationalist Catholic bourgeoisie, condemn and idolise Talbot in turn as he becomes a symbol for or against their various power struggles. The core message then seems to be that even the extreme individualism such as that of a religious mystic and its rejection of social ‘markedness’ still cannot avoid being represented and marked within socially constructed frames of reference. Even those individuals who endeavour to escape society enter the gaze of that society and become re-embodied and engendered by that gaze.

Conclusion

Talbot's Box deals with the conflict between self and society. The body in turn symbolises the liminality between the two in which the protagonist lingers. The play works out, dramaturgically, the relationship between the subject residing in the body, engendered by it, and the disempowerment that arises from the alienating representation he must face from the symbolic (Phallic) order.

Notes

1 These words were used by Thomas Kilroy in an interview with Anthony Roche about another of his plays, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*, “this isn’t history, it’s historical fiction”. See Roche (An Interview: 157).

2 Dubliner Matt Talbot (1856-1925) was a former alcoholic who became famous for leading a life of strict piety. He became revered by Catholics and is a candidate for saint-hood. Kilroy’s play also refers to the allegation that Talbot, a labourer, opposed the 1913 Dublin Lockout, a widescale labour dispute. There is, however, no evidence that he actually did so.

3 See Lacan.

4 See Butler.

5 See Durkheim.

6 Here I refer to the performance at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Ireland.

7 Later, Talbot repeats almost the same words, “Dear Gawd! I bind meself wid the bonds of this earth that I may know the weight o’ the flesh; and learn to free meself from its heavy burden”. See Kilroy 49.

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