



## How Brith Gof's *Gododdin* (1988) and Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) engage with the 'performative / pedagogical' and 'hybridity', two of Homi K. Bhabha's concepts for analysing how nations are culturally produced

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The concepts of the 'performative' versus the 'pedagogical', and 'hybridity' are some of the focal ideas on how nations are culturally produced. Postcolonial theorist and scholar Homi K. Bhabha discusses how these apply when theatre helps create a national narrative. He states that there is a "split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative."<sup>1</sup> Here, he is talking about the role of the people in nation narration, and how they are both objects of the respective histories that precede them, but are also subjects of a continual process of trying to proclaim contemporaneity. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha stated that the importance of hybridity, the mixing of cultures and histories to create a nation, is "not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge."<sup>2</sup> I will be discussing how Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) and Brith Gof's *Gododdin* (1988) engage with these concepts, bringing a balance of pedagogical and performative elements in how they involve themselves with their source material. Furthermore, I will explore how they are then performed to modern audiences; being iterations and translations of past events and blending them with late-twentieth-century socio-political issues, I will also delve into how the hybridity shown in these plays further their respective conversations of post-colonial discourse.

On the surface, *The Romans in Britain* is remarkably pedagogical, as it endeavours to give a two-pronged history lesson on colonial invasion and occupation in Britain. The invasions chosen were the Roman invasion of Celtic England and the Saxon invasion of the Roman-Celts, with these happening alongside enactments of the British forces stationed in Ireland in the late twentieth-century. Brenton takes a symbolic, artistic approach by blending the storylines through character interactions throughout the narrative of the play. He does so in order to bring forth a performative comparison of historic invasions and British imperial aggression. This idea is prominent in the most controversial moments in the play, when the Roman 'Third Soldier' rapes the Briton named 'Marban' after the soldiers kill his friends, 'Vridio' and 'Brac'. The murdering of these characters is extremely symbolic of how colonial powers look down on the colonised 'other', as the audience witnesses Vridio give a highly descriptive and emotive battle-cry after Brac is wounded, concerning his plans for revenge. He exclaims, "Foreigners, I will hold your heads in my hands. With my fingers in the sockets

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<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.145.

<sup>2</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha" in Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) p.211.

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of your eyes, I will hold up your skulls, wet with the flesh of your eyes and your blood!"<sup>3</sup> This is quickly followed by the 'First Soldier' claiming it to be "jabber jabber"<sup>4</sup> and swiftly murders him, highlighting not only the barrier of language between the coloniser and the colonised, but the sheer power disparity. This abominable display symbolizes the history of colonial extortion and seeks to change the national view glorifying the Roman Empire. Additionally, it was a pedagogical reminder to the British public by the National Theatre of the barbaric colonial practices in Britain and Ireland that are often brushed over when studying the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup>

With that said, as much as the play is a medium for looking back through history, the non-linear nature of the play's chronology should be viewed in the same light as the way the audience perceives how the different eras influence each other's narratives. Bhabha's concept of the three 'spaces' relating to cultural hybridity can be applied quite literally to the three settings within the play. The 'third space' of the British forces in Ireland allows for parallels to be drawn by both the writer and the audience; the play having blended histories means that the mirror being cast onto the audience is not an a priori picture of colonialism in Britain and Ireland. Instead, as Sean Carney suggests, "we bear witness to a history of oppression and bloodshed, a series of repetitions that appears to criticize human beings for their inability to learn from the past."<sup>6</sup> Certainly, this is true for the way that the colonisers are depicted in *The Romans in Britain*; in scene 7 at the end of Act 1, aptly titled 'Caesar's Tooth', the presentation of the Roman army is blended with the British army, "*From the back the Roman Army advances in British Army uniforms and with the equipment of the late 1970's.*"<sup>7</sup> Again, an encounter between the Celts and Romans ends with fatal results for 'Slave' for throwing a rock at the Roman soldiers, who shoot her. The imagery of desecration and disrespect continues as the soldiers kick and search the corpse to find "Just stones."<sup>8</sup> The merging of the two colonial armies is done in a way that is not verbally, but visually, explained, and so there is no staging of the "two original moments" of British and Irish invasions. Brenton puts forth an immediate third space from which a more engaging, performative story can be told.

Much like Brenton's play, Brith Gof's *Gododdin* interacts very heavily with the concepts of the pedagogical and the performative. The play is based on the original elegiac epic poem, *Y Gododdin*, written by Aneirin in Old Welsh in the sixth century, and tells the story of 300 Celtic warriors who rode out to fight, and die at the hands of, 100,000 invading Saxons. The audience can see pedagogical elements of the performance through the poem's fractured recital, either on-stage or over loudspeakers, as it coincides with the poem's form of not being a narrative poem, but an elegy with no connected story being told.<sup>9</sup> The highly performative experience of the play could also be attributed to oral poetry and singing, 'y peth', historically being a part of Welsh culture. The play begins with a woman standing alone on stage, who recites in Old Welsh, the tenth stanza of the poem, "Men went

<sup>3</sup> Howard Brenton, "The Romans in Britain", In *Plays: 2*, (London: Methuen Drama, 1989) [Retrieved 07/01/2022 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781408162309.00000007>] p.32.

<sup>4</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.33.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Travis, *Bound & Gagged: A Secret History of Obscenity in Britain*, (Profile: London, 2000), p.267.

<sup>6</sup> Sean Carney, "The Art of Living: History as Use-Value in *The Romans in Britain*", *Modern Drama*, 47.3 (2004), p.427.

<sup>7</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.56.

<sup>8</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.57.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Jackson, "The 'Gododdin' Of Aneirin", *Antiquity*, 13.49 (1939), p.25.

to Catraeth with the dawn [...] the most valiant register in battle, before the retinue of Mynyddog Mwynfawr.”<sup>10</sup> Although translated for the purpose of the documentary, the stanza was delivered in Old Welsh, which possibly even modern, native Welsh speakers would struggle to follow. Having someone stand alone and recite the poem in front of the audience is pedagogically striking as the poem, along with most poetry in Britain at the time, would have been orally performed and written down later.<sup>11</sup> Mike Pearson suggests states that in the late twentieth-century, Wales did not have a national theatrical identity, however, Brith Gof were successful in utilizing early medieval poetry and adapted it to appeal to Wales’s rich culture of national performativity.<sup>12</sup> This, coinciding with the deconstruction of the mining industry, was testament to the rebirth and celebration of Welsh culture in what can only be described as a Celtic renaissance.

This rejuvenation of Celtic, specifically Welsh, culture and history’s momentum, was aided by the way in which Brith Gof’s *Gododdin* hybridized Wales’s Celtic past and its contemporary position in the wider socio-economic British narrative. Another reason that Bhabha claimed the importance of cultural hybridity is that it “bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation [...] cultural hybridity gives rise to something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.”<sup>13</sup> This can explicitly be seen in Brith Gof’s creative decisions behind their staging. Their form of site-specific theatre had their first performance in 1988, set in an abandoned Rover car factory. For the actors playing the warriors, shields and weapons were replaced by car bonnets and empty oil drums and preparing for battle involved riotous imagery of smashing old cars. British music group, Test Dept, are known for their use of ‘Industrial Percussion’ and the sensory overload the audience would experience from the use of space, place and dramaturgical elements within the car factory creates a stark contradiction to the silence of the former industrial hub. The audience, seeing a rundown, abandoned factory as a training ground for Celtic warriors preparing to fight their invading Saxon counterparts, would likely have images of the Cwm Colliery and other ‘uneconomic’ mines across the country that saw cuts and closures under Thatcher’s Conservative government, causing 20,000 miners to lose their jobs.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Brith Gof demonstrated Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity by the show bearing both formal traces of the historic elements which inform the play, but also physical traces relating to how the spatial components of the performance contribute to contemporary ideas of Welsh nationness. This, in turn, promotes “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation”,<sup>15</sup> as Brith Gof compares the defeat of the outnumbered *Gododdin*, to Thatcher’s privatisation of industries such as coal, of which Wales suffered greatly.

The national pride that is exhibited and celebrated in *Gododdin* is something that is ironised in *The Romans in Britain*. An example of the pedagogical performative (the two

<sup>10</sup> Test Dept, "Gododdin 01 | Test Dept", *Testdept.Org.Uk*, (1990) <<https://testdept.org.uk/media/video/gododdin-01>> [Accessed 9 January 2022].

<sup>11</sup> Brynley F. Roberts, 'Oral Tradition and Welsh Literature: A Description and Survey', in John Miles Foley (ed.), *Oral Tradition*, 3.1-2 (1988), p.65.

<sup>12</sup> Mike Pearson, "Theatre in a minority", in Brith Gof (ed.), *Brith Gof - A Welsh Theatre Company 1981-1985*, (Aberystwyth: Brith Gof, 1985), p.3.

<sup>13</sup> Bhabha, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", p.211.

<sup>14</sup> "The Thatcher years in statistics", *BBC News*, (09/04/2013) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22070491>> [Accessed 10 January 2022].

<sup>15</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 108.

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concepts working symbiotically) when hearing about the past in Britain, specifically England, is hearing terms used such as 'the golden age' to evoke a sense of nostalgia and comradeship. The creation and implementation of myths and fantasies such as King Arthur and the chivalric knights of the round table being used as symbols of English glory are often used to push a wider agenda. Such was the case for the Thatcher administrations, who, "invoked a nostalgic nationalism to justify the creation of a militarized nation and articulate a myth of renewed national strength".<sup>16</sup> This idea is mocked in the final scene of the play, where Morgana and Corda meet the two cooks, recently out of work with one wanting to become a poet. The cook improvises a subject for their poem: "a King who never was. His Government was the people of Britain. His peace was as common as rain or sun. [...] And thought of as a golden age, lost and yet to come."<sup>17</sup> To which the other cook improvises the king's name to be, "any old name. Arthur? Arthur?"<sup>18</sup> Having the myth of King Arthur, and the idyllic lands he ruled, be created from nothing in a conversation between working class individuals deconstructs and unsettles any sort of imagined community that attempts to paint over the fractures of the historical narratives that constitute the ideas of a nation. Moreover, the cooks' poetry is a microcosm for the role of the people in the creation and narration of nationhood for, in this instance, not only does the performative unsettle the pedagogical—the audience's prior understanding or view of the myth of King Arthur—but the pedagogical is kept alive by continuous performances, as the Myth of King Arthur is kept alive even by this mockery of it.

In the way that it unsettles fixed ideas on nationhood, *The Romans in Britain* can be regarded as a counter-narrative of Britain and its colonial exploits. Rather than glorifying any aspects of imperialism, the play's merged narratives mean that there is already a sense of hybridity in how the audience experience the play. It means viewers and readers will look for the potential thematic and symbolic connections that can be made between the narratives within specific scenes, but also in reference to other timeframes, and real-world events. Unlike *Gododdin*, Brenton's play can utilize dialogues and monologues to convey the play's respective anti-imperialist message. In scene 4 of the second Act, 'Arthur's Grave', Cai, a veteran Roman-Celt soldier, refuses to acknowledge the danger of the "Saxons from the South, the Irish from the West, only stories and lies [...] Bandits calling themselves 'Emperors', 'New Romans'",<sup>19</sup> and is subsequently killed by his daughters, Corda and Morgana. Here, Brenton presents a slightly different perspective through what is an allusion to the British occupation of Ireland. Previously, Britain's power and imperial brutality was being compared to that of the Roman Empire, due to their similar methods of invading and therefor inheriting "the same moral status."<sup>20</sup> Here, the Saxons (a metaphor for the British Empire) are being contrasted to the Romans, being demoted to merely 'bandits,' to eliminate any chance of colonial glorification. Brenton's symbolism goes back to Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, stating that "just like a translation... hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses."<sup>21</sup> The invasions by both the Romans and the Saxons

<sup>16</sup> Carey Mickalites, "'Enemies Within': Pat Barker's Great War and Margaret Thatcher's New Right", *College Literature*, 48.1 (2021), p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.94.

<sup>18</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.95.

<sup>19</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.75.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Saunders, "Demythologizing Nationalist Narrative: Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*", *Modern Drama*, 62.1 (2019), p.84.

<sup>21</sup> Bhabha, "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", p.211.

are being translated into a telling of the Irish experience under Britain's interventions during the troubles. This is summarized by the 'Irish Woman' scolding the British soldier, Chichester, and his reform two scenes later, "What did the Roman Empire give to the people it enslaved? Concrete. What did the British Empire give to its colonies? Tribal wars."<sup>22</sup>

The meaningful contrasting of the two eras is also shown in *Gododdin* in how they use their space and location to create an incongruity between their source material and the setting of each performance. For example, a medieval epic poem being set in a car factory, castles being erected out of oil drums stacked on top of one another, car wrecks being used as chariots, and as previously mentioned, using oil drums and car bonnets as weapons. In one performance, the actors were battling to escape a rising water level, and thus all these items were disappearing. In the contrast between the high-energy performance of the actors and the pedagogical storylines of the *Gododdin* and their defeat, "an affective identification with both the (historical) narrative and the (still-present but disappearing) objects and sites of the industrial age was sought that referred to both as signs for a Welsh national identity."<sup>23</sup> Site-specific theatre was able to bring this to life, and was the most suitable theatrical staging style as it allowed for an obvious, and intentionally imperfect fit for the pedagogical origin and the performative essence of the production. This incongruity was necessary to defocus the noticeable anachronisms on stage, as it would only be possible for the reminiscent pieces of scrap and waste to become symbols of Welsh nationhood if they were defamiliarized. Mike Pearson, one of the co-creators of *Brith Gof*, stated that, "simple possessions of rural peoples manipulated in unexpected ways to create strong and eloquent metaphors; our physical rhythms are the rhythms of work, play and worship, mutated, given new emphasis."<sup>24</sup> This evidently works into Bhabha's concepts of the pedagogical and the performative, as it brings contemporary theatricality to an historic tale. Similarly, it relates to the concept of hybridity as this 'third space' created by *Brith Gof*'s performance brings new meanings to, through the merging of, the daring cultures of the *Gododdin* and the late-twentieth-century Welsh.

The critical reception of these new meanings of national identity that have been created is not limited to Wales, as the nature of the performance means the apparent cultural hybridity can be interpreted by, and for, whomever experiences it. *Brith Gof*'s success with *Gododdin* meant that it was later performed all over Europe, with the nature of its 'site-specificity' leading to it being staged in various ways:

"In Polverigi in Italy, it was played out in a sand quarry. In Leeuwarden, in Friesland, the show I (Mark Sinker) saw, they were using an indoor ice-rink. The floor was water-logged sand, with piles of oil-drums in the centre. Rows of pine tress surrounded little sandbag-islands, on which the audience would clump together nervously."<sup>25</sup>

Although the play likely will arouse the most positive feeling of nationhood amongst countries with similar proto-Britannic, Celtic ancestries such as Scotland—where the historic *Gododdin* resided—and Ireland, some key themes of the production proved to have more negative connotations elsewhere. For example, when staged in Hamburg, the play was criticized for celebrating war, with pagan imagery being reminiscent of Nazi summer festivals for some

<sup>22</sup> Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, p.90.

<sup>23</sup> Heike Roms, "Performing *Polis*: Theatre, Nationness and Civic Identity in Post-Devolution Wales", *Studies In Theatre And Performance*, 24.3 (2004), p.182.

<sup>24</sup> Mike Pearson, "Theatre in a minority", p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Sinker, "Operatic Skinheads", in *New Statesman & Society*, 2.66 (1989) p.40.

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German audience members.<sup>26</sup> Although this likely would not have Brith Gof's intention, there can be no doubt that it was a success in invoking such an emotional reaction. This shows that *Gododdin*, as a play which "centres on the politics cultural marginalisation and minority pride"<sup>27</sup>, engages with the concept of cultural hybridity on a continental scale, as so much of Europe, and the wider world has been directly or indirectly affected by colonialism. This is highlighted when one thinks about the role of the audience who were often placed in very uncomfortable positions (both physically and emotionally), either being splashed with water, near blinded by cars' headlights, or having to face "unresolved antagonisms (mainly between colonizer and colonized)"<sup>28</sup> when confronted by the performers.

To conclude, both plays engage with Bhabha's concepts for analysing how countries are culturally produced from their pedagogical source and translate them to the stage in a modern, performative format. They both utilize their respective Celtic heritages and hybridize them with socio-political challenges, jeopardising their national identity and enabling them to aid in painting a picture of national identity and pride. Susan and Henry Giroux further articulate Bhabha's theories by stating that, "Culture also provides the constitutive framework for making the pedagogical more political—for investigating how educators can make learning meaningful in order to make it critical and transformative."<sup>29</sup> *The Romans in Britain* is critical of British occupation of Ireland by comparing it to the Roman Empire, which is often regarded as a Western symbol of ancient high society. In this setting, The Roman soldiers are shown to be no more enlightened than any other occupying colonisers in how they brutalize the Celts. The Saxons are similarly vilified, the term Anglo-Saxon conjuring reminiscent thoughts of pride in English heritage. Therefore, by criticizing and mocking the pedagogical narratives of colonialism in Britain through performance, it criticizes and mocks the actions of the British Empire within the context of the troubles in contemporary Ireland. Brith Gof presents a highly performative piece in *Gododdin* which politicizes their pedagogical context of the epic poem. By juxtaposing the site-specific locations and props of the performances with the medieval story of the 300 Celtic warriors, as well as the only spoken words being fragmented incomprehensible poetry recitals, the actors eliminate any chance the audience has of meaning making. 'Brith Gof' itself translates to 'scattered memories' or 'faint recollections', which summarises the audiences' experiences as they piece together fragments of both a shared national pedagogy and a fractured contemporary performance. This hybridized cultural fragmentation, in turn, creates an example of Bhabha's 'third space' in which new positions of Welsh Celtic nationness can emerge.

<sup>26</sup> Sinker, p.40.

<sup>27</sup> Sinker, p.40.

<sup>28</sup> Heike Roms, "Performing Polis...", p.185.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Searls Giroux and Henry A. Giroux, "Making the Political More Pedagogical: Reading Homi Bhabha", in *JAC*, 19.1 (1999) p.141.

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