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English Renaissance Drama

Peter Womack

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Introduction

Imagine putting the clock back by exactly four hundred years, so that I finish writing this book in the summer of 1605. In the spring I could have seen the first performance of *King Lear*, followed a few weeks later by *Eastward Ho!*, a topical satire two of whose authors, Ben Jonson and George Chapman, are still in jail as a result of it. In the meantime, Thomas Middleton is producing a string of comedies of contemporary London life, a genre he invented about a year ago. *Macbeth*, *Volpone* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* are currently being written; all three will have had their first performances by the time this book comes out in the middle of 1606. This is a schedule whose energy and ambition are unmatched in the history of English drama. The year 1605–6 is an *annus mirabilis* in the middle of an extraordinary half-century: to get the measure of it, we could wonder which five new plays of 2005–6 will be holding the stage in the early twenty-fifth century. Besides marvelling at it, there are two things to say about it by way of introduction to this guide.

First, the site of this extraordinary productivity was the theatre. As far as we can tell, all these plays were staged as soon as they were written, and printed only after they had been staged: they were shows first and books second. Their making was a theatrical rather than a literary process in the sense that, typically, the writers were not independent authors, but theatre managers, collaborators, dramatizers, adaptors. The pace of production, the visual and formal conventions, the size of the cast, the distinction of genres, the language spoken on the stage – all these things were determined in the playhouse rather than the study. In a sense, the scripts were produced partly by individual poets, but partly by the fast-

moving theatrical culture to which – more or less closely, more or less discontentedly – they all belonged.

To reflect that mode of work, this guide to drama will concentrate not so much on dramatists as on the institution they worked in, not on the personal emphases that distinguish Massinger from Middleton, or Beaumont from Fletcher, but rather on what they all shared. Accordingly, the first two substantive sections are ‘The Set-Up’ – an analytic description of the early modern theatre and its social and material environment – and ‘Background Voices’ – an account of some of the discourses and tones out of which plays were made, the raw materials, as it were, to which all dramatists had access. Only then is there a section on the principal ‘Writers’ of English Renaissance plays, giving a brief biographical account of each, and focusing on each one’s particular relationship with the theatre.

In other words, I have deliberately downplayed the category of authorship. This decision has an effect of paradox, because one of the people who wrote for the early modern stage happens to have become the most famous author on the planet. One view of this phenomenon is that it is a posthumous distortion – that if the mechanisms of eighteenth-century publishing and nineteenth-century imperialism had worked slightly differently, we would now be patronizing the Royal Jonson Company, or securing our credit cards with holographic images of Marlowe. I should perhaps say that I don’t share this view: it seems to me that Shakespeare’s personal mastery of the medium was of a different order to everyone else’s, and that what made 1605–6 not just a good year but an astonishing one was the arrival in the repertoire of *Lear* and *Macbeth*. But that is a point on which readers of this book can freely make up their own minds; the trickier question concerns Shakespeare’s proper place in a guide to English Renaissance drama. If he is placed according to his position in our knowledge and understanding of Elizabethan theatre, he will simply take over the book. If he is excluded – a fairly common strategy, which makes ‘Renaissance drama’ mean everyone *else’s* plays – that leaves a bizarre hole in the centre of the dramatic landscape. Shakespeare was, after all, not an obscure figure in his own time. He was much quoted, much alluded to, much imitated; his collected plays were grandiosely published within a few years of his death; for most of his career he was the principal dramatist in the most successful of the theatre companies; he was the only dramatist who retired rich. In short, he was one of the leading playwrights

of his age, not only in bardolatrous retrospect but also at the time. To represent the drama of 1590–1610 without him would be to misrepresent it. In this dilemma, what I have done is to refer to Shakespeare's plays readily and often, considering them, however, not as products of an individual imagination but as uses (sometimes supremely exact and forceful uses) of a common language. To the limited extent that this is a book about Shakespeare, then, it is about the collective character of what we call his genius. He didn't become Shakespeare all by himself.

The second point to make about the 1605–6 season concerns the tempo of production. I mentioned only the better-known plays; in the season as a whole there were probably thirty or forty new productions, mounted by four or five London companies between them. That was on top of the existing repertoire, which was already large: hobbled by official prohibitions, companies needed to act every day they could, and to keep drawing audiences by changing the programme every day. These are the imperatives of an entertainment industry: underlying the immense expressive range of the great plays was a technical fluency that came from high turnover, precarious success, and the relentless demand for material. Today, the scripts that survive from this business do so primarily in academic contexts, so we tend to think of them as academic texts, and to ask what values they embody, what ideological problems they address, what doctrines they are designed to enforce or question. And of course it is bound to be true that playwrights also aspired to be moralists, political activists, representatives of this or that social or confessional grouping. But before they could be any of those things in practice, they had to be entertaining. Academics tend to underestimate the seriousness and complexity of this requirement, perhaps because their own audience is a captive one.

To correct that underestimation, this guide adopts an attitude of conscious superficiality. In discussing the selection of 'Key Plays', it often neglects the question of what the play means in favour of the question of what pleasure it affords, and how (and whether) it works. Similarly, for the final substantive section, I have chosen not to identify the 'themes' or 'topics' which appear at the same point in other books in this series, but instead to consider a range of 'Actions That A Man Might Play' – the things that are literally done on the stage – and to ask what makes them interesting to watch. I hope the effect of these decisions is to make the book itself more entertaining than it would otherwise have been. There

are too many critical essays about these reckless and inventive scripts which, unforgivably, make them sound dull.

Note on Dates and Readings

Throughout this book, the date attached to a play is the year of its first performance, not necessarily the year it was written, or the year it was published. Very often, these dates are uncertain: the early modern theatre kept no systematic record of performances, and its chronology has been established by scholarly detective work that includes a good deal of guessing. Since the exact date is often not important, I have simply adopted the dates given in the standard reference work, Alfred Harbage's *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700*, revised by S. Schoenbaum (London: Routledge, 1989), and not added the many question-marks and caveats which the state of the evidence strictly requires. Whenever a play receives more than a passing mention I have given its date, except in the case of 'key plays', which are asterisked.

Getting access to the texts of these plays is also a matter of making reasonable compromises. Most of the playwrights are available in university libraries in multi-volume editions of their collected works – but in some cases these editions are well over a century old, and very dated in their presentation of the text, their sense of what sort of notes and explanations a reader needs, even in their assumptions about who wrote what. Wherever a relatively modern and student-friendly edition is available, it offers a much better way of getting at the play. Most of the plays that are studied or performed today can be found in single-play series such as the New Mermaids from A. & C. Black and W. W. Norton, or the Revels Plays from Manchester University Press, or else in the selected editions produced by Penguin and by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses. It can also happen that a play is republished to coincide with a new production in the theatre: these editions should be treated with a little care, because sometimes they give the acting text of the new production, which may well be heavily adapted from the original. There is nothing wrong with adaptation, but it's as well to know what you're reading.

In this rather muddled situation, I have elected to be user-friendly rather than consistent. Each entry in the 'Writers' section notes the fullest edition of a dramatist's complete plays, however old and dusty it is. But

when I am discussing an individual play, in the 'Key Plays' section or elsewhere, I have used a helpful and readily available modern edition. All the editions used are listed in the bibliography at the end of the book.

Some editors choose to preserve the archaic (and various) spelling of the earliest texts, others use modern spelling. I have modernized the spelling in all my quotations, so as not to give the impression that some Renaissance writers are more ancient than others.

It is worth adding that all these scripts are also available in electronic form. Two databases produced by Chadwyck-Healey both include virtually all the extant drama texts from 1576–1642 and beyond: Literature Online (www.lion.chadwyck.co.uk) and Early English Books Online (www.eebo.chadwyck.com). Neither of these resources is in the public domain, but many university libraries are subscribers, so they make an enormous library of drama available to students. And there is also a selection of full texts on the open web, less comprehensive, but large and growing.

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I'm grateful to Andrew McNeillie for suggesting this project, to the University of East Anglia for giving me the time to complete it, to Tony Gash for literally inexhaustible advice and encouragement, and above all to Laura Scott, the reader without whom there would be no text.

Timeline

With a few exceptions, this table logs only those plays and events which I have touched on elsewhere in the book. The idea is to avoid burdening the reader with items whose significance she has no way of seeing. It does mean, though, that the table is not a safe guide to the history of the period, as it omits many things which a different point of view might register as centrally important.

Plays are assigned to the year of first performance, other writings to the year of first publication unless otherwise stated. Performance dates are of course subject to the health warning I issued in the Introduction. As for the writers, I have tried to show when they entered and left the theatre rather than the world; so there are no births in the timeline, and deaths only in the cases where a dramatist died more or less in harness. If anyone is referred to by surname alone, he has an entry in the 'Writers' section. As throughout the book, titles discussed in the 'Key Plays' section are asterisked.

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1576	The Theatre, Shoreditch, opens Children's company begins playing commercially at Blackfriars	
1577	The Curtain playhouse opens John Northbrooke, <i>A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes</i>	Francis Drake's world voyage (–1580) Raphael Holinshed, <i>Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland</i>

TIMELINE

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1580	Last (unsuccessful) attempt to stage biblical cycle plays in York	Population of London about 100,000 Proclamation prohibits building in City of London because of overcrowding
1581	The Master of the Revels is commissioned to regulate all playing companies	Philip Sidney writes <i>Arcadia</i> Thomas Newton and others, <i>Seneca His Ten Tragedies</i>
1582		Philip Sidney writes <i>Astrophil and Stella</i> and <i>The Defence of Poesy</i>
1583	Formation of the Queen's Men Edward Alleyn begins acting career Philip Stubbes, <i>An Anatomy of Abuses</i> , attacks theatre, fashion and popular festivities	
1584		End of Elizabeth's last marriage negotiations opens the way to the cult of the Virgin Queen
1585		Declaration of war with Spain (-1604)
1586	<i>The Famous Victories of Henry V</i> Richard Tarlton at the height of his fame	Death of Philip Sidney
1587	Kyd, <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i> * Marlowe, <i>Tamburlaine the Great</i> * Rose playhouse built	Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots Launch of papal crusade against England
1588	Thomas Lodge, <i>The Wounds of Civil War</i>	Failure of Spanish invasion force, the 'Armada'
1589	Greene, <i>Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay</i> Peele's first play	Richard Hakluyt, <i>The Principal Navigations of the English Nation</i>

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| 1590 | Greene, <i>The Scottish History of James IV</i>
Peele, <i>The Old Wives Tale</i>
Shakespeare, <i>1 Henry VI</i>
Children's companies close down | Thomas Lodge, <i>Rosalind</i>
Philip Sidney, <i>Arcadia</i>
Edmund Spenser, <i>The Faerie Queene</i> , Books I–III |
| 1591 | <i>Arden of Faversham</i> | |
| 1592 | <i>Thomas of Woodstock</i>
Marlowe, <i>Edward II</i> , <i>Doctor Faustus</i> *
Shakespeare, <i>The Comedy of Errors</i> ,
<i>Richard III</i> | Thomas Nashe, <i>Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil</i>
Death of Greene
Plague (–1594) |
| 1593 | Arrest and interrogation of Kyd
Death of Marlowe | Marlowe, <i>Hero and Leander</i>
Shakespeare, <i>Venus and Adonis</i> |
| 1594 | Heywood, <i>The Four Prentices of London</i>
Establishment of Lord Admiral's Men and Lord Chamberlain's Men; emergence of Richard Burbage as Lord Chamberlain's Men's leading actor | First of five consecutive bad harvests
Start of Irish insurgency
Thomas Nashe, <i>The Unfortunate Traveller</i> |
| 1595 | Anthony Munday and others, <i>Sir Thomas More</i>
Shakespeare, <i>Richard II</i> *
Swan playhouse built | Edmund Spenser, <i>Amoretti</i> |
| 1596 | Shakespeare, <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
Death of Peele | Edmund Spenser, <i>The Faerie Queene</i> , Books I–VI
Drake's last (unsuccessful) voyage |
| 1597 | Shakespeare, <i>Henry IV</i>
Edward Alleyn withdraws from full-time acting
Chapman, Dekker and Heywood begin writing for the stage | Francis Bacon, <i>Essays</i>
John Dowland, <i>First Book of Songs</i>
The 'Islands Voyage' (unsuccessful naval expedition to the Azores) |

TIMELINE

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1598	Jonson, <i>Every Man In His Humour</i> * First of the series of 'Parnassus' plays at Cambridge (-1601)	James VI of Scotland, <i>The True Law of Free Monarchies</i> John Marston, <i>The Scourge of Villainy</i> Anti-vagrancy law
1599	Chapman, <i>All Fools</i> Dekker, <i>The Shoemakers' Holiday</i> * Jonson, <i>Every Man Out Of His Humour</i> Marston, <i>Antonio and Mellida</i> Shakespeare, <i>As You Like It</i> , <i>Henry V</i> Globe playhouse built New children's companies launched	Proclamation prohibiting verse satire Death of Spenser
1600	Michael Drayton and others, <i>Sir John Oldcastle</i> Fortune playhouse built	Population of London about 200,000
1601	Jonson, <i>Poetaster</i> and Dekker, <i>Satiromastix</i> mark the height of the 'War of the Theatres' Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> *, <i>Twelfth Night</i>	Fall and execution of the Earl of Essex Foundation of East India Company
1602	Middleton and Webster begin writing for the stage	Foundation of Bodleian Library, Oxford
1603	Heywood, <i>A Woman Killed With Kindness</i> Jonson, <i>Sejanus</i> Lord Chamberlain's Men become King's Men, Lord Admiral's Men become Prince Henry's Men	Death of Elizabeth I and accession of James I Plague Montaigne, <i>Essays</i> , translated into English by John Florio
1604	Dekker and Middleton, <i>The Honest Whore</i> Marston, <i>The Malcontent</i> Shakespeare, <i>Othello</i>	King's triumphal entry into the City of London End of war with Spain Beginning of negotiations to unite England and Scotland

1605	Chapman, Jonson, Marston, <i>Eastward Ho!</i> Marston, <i>The Dutch Courtesan</i> * Middleton, <i>A Trick to Catch the Old One</i> Shakespeare, <i>King Lear</i> * Jonson, with Inigo Jones, <i>The Masque of Blackness</i> (their first masque) Red Bull playhouse built	The Gunpowder Plot Francis Bacon, <i>The Advancement of Learning</i> Miguel de Cervantes, <i>Don Quixote</i> , Part I
1606	<i>The Revenger's Tragedy</i> * John Day, <i>The Isle of Gulls</i> Jonson, <i>Volpone</i> * Shakespeare, <i>Macbeth</i> Law restraining profane oaths in plays	Virginia Company founded
1607	Beaumont and Fletcher, <i>The Knight of the Burning Pestle</i> *	
1608	Fletcher, <i>The Faithful Shepherdess</i> Shakespeare, <i>Coriolanus</i> Children at Blackfriars suspended due to scandals Marston retires from theatre	
1609	Beaumont and Fletcher, <i>Philaster</i> Jonson, <i>Epicoene</i> King's Men begin playing at Blackfriars	New Exchange opens in the Strand Dekker, <i>The Gull's Hornbook</i>
1610	Beaumont and Fletcher, <i>The Maid's Tragedy</i> * Jonson, <i>The Alchemist</i> Shakespeare, <i>The Winter's Tale</i>	Unresolved tensions over taxation between King and Parliament
1611	Dekker and Middleton, <i>The Roaring Girl</i> * Fletcher, <i>The Woman's Prize</i> Shakespeare, <i>The Tempest</i> * Tourneur, <i>The Atheist's Tragedy</i>	The Authorised Version of the Bible Chapman's translation of the <i>Iliad</i> John Donne, <i>The Anatomy of the World</i>

TIMELINE

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1612	Webster, <i>The White Devil</i> Publication of Heywood's <i>Apology for Actors</i> Shakespeare leaves London	Death of Henry, Prince of Wales <i>Don Quixote</i> appears in English
1613	Middleton, <i>A Chaste Maid in Cheapside</i> * Globe playhouse burnt down Beaumont's career ends Massinger begins writing for the stage	Marriage of James's daughter Elizabeth Murder of Sir Thomas Overbury Elizabeth Cary, <i>The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry</i>
1614	Jonson, <i>Bartholomew Fair</i> * Webster, <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> * Globe playhouse rebuilt, Hope playhouse built – the last amphitheatres Chapman leaves London	Sir Walter Raleigh, <i>The History of the World</i>
1616	Jonson, <i>The Devil Is An Ass</i> Cockpit playhouse, Drury Lane, built	Jonson's <i>Works</i> published in folio William Harvey lectures on the circulation of the blood
1617	Fletcher, <i>The Chances</i>	
1618		Beginning of Thirty Years' War in Europe James I publishes <i>The Book of Sports</i> , endorsing traditional pastimes
1619	Death of Richard Burbage	
1621	Dekker, Ford, Rowley, <i>The Witch of Edmonton</i> Fletcher, <i>The Wild-Goose Chase</i> Middleton, <i>Women Beware Women</i>	Political fall of Francis Bacon Confrontation between King and Parliament over the latter's rights John Donne becomes Dean of St Paul's

1622	Middleton and Rowley, <i>The Changeling</i> *	Building of the Banqueting House at Whitehall, designed by Inigo Jones
1623		James I seeks marriage between Prince Charles and the Infanta of Spain Shakespeare First Folio published
1624	Middleton, <i>A Game At Chess</i> , attacking the Spanish marriage Middleton and Webster retire from playwriting	
1625	Massinger, <i>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</i> Shirley's first play Death of Fletcher	Death of James I, accession of Charles I Plague
1626	Massinger, <i>The Roman Actor</i> * Death of Rowley	
1629	Brome, <i>The Northern Lass</i> Jonson, <i>The New Inn</i> Salisbury Court playhouse built	Breakdown in relations between King and Parliament leads to 11-year period of personal rule by Charles (-1640) Duke of Bedford obtains licence to develop Covent Garden area
1630	Ford, <i>The Broken Heart</i>	Milton's early poetry written
1631	Heywood, <i>The Fair Maid of the West</i> *	Death of John Donne
1632	Ford, <i>'Tis Pity She's A Whore</i> * Death of Dekker	
1633	William Prynne, <i>Histriomastix; or the Player's Scourge</i> – the most ambitious of the tracts attacking theatre	Building of the Covent Garden Piazza Charles I reissues the 1618 <i>Book of Sports</i> George Herbert, <i>The Temple</i>

TIMELINE

	In the theatre	Events and publications
1637	Death of Jonson	Charles's personal rule threatened by taxation crisis
1640	Death of Massinger	War with Scotland, recall of Parliament Population of London exceeds 350,000
1641	Brome, <i>A Jovial Crew</i> * Death of Heywood	Parliament embarks on revolutionary overhaul of royal institutions
1642	Parliamentary order closes playhouses	Outbreak of English Civil War

The Set-Up

The Moment

From around 1570, playhouses appeared in various parts of London: Shoreditch, Southwark, Blackfriars, Clerkenwell. Some were open-air amphitheatres, others (less famous today) were existing buildings converted for use as indoor playhouses. Altogether some twenty theatres opened between the 1570s and their eventual closure in 1642, though there were never more than six or seven operating at any one time. These were the first buildings since Roman times to be designed specifically for the performance of plays, and they were both cause and sign of a new age in English drama.

Not that there was anything magical about the buildings themselves. Their layout is quite interesting, and lends itself to some distinctive performing conventions. But throughout the period, actors regularly took plays out to non-theatrical spaces at Court or in the provinces: the purpose-built stage was never essential. Rather, the significance of the new departure was economic. Building and equipping a playhouse from scratch cost something like £1,000, at a time when a labourer might earn £10 a year. Whoever invested this large sum was expecting to recoup it from the proceeds of playing. What was new, then, was the assumption that putting on plays could be a sustainably profitable thing to do.

Moreover, if building a playhouse made profit necessary, it also made it more likely. Professional actors were nothing new, but until now, they had been, in effect, servants, performing in someone else's space. They might literally be household servants, mounting occasional shows for their master's feasts; or they might be touring players bought in for a special occasion, rather like a band hired for a party today; or else, further down the social scale, some played in public space, that is, they were busking. None of these models offered a predictable income, or any opportunity to establish much in the way of status, audience or repertoire. Actors established in their own house were in a different position. They were there by no one's favour, they could take money from everyone who wanted to come in, they could play day after day so long as they could keep the customers coming through the door, and as for that, they were free to try any species of entertainment they thought would attract an audience. In other words, the new set-up established the actors as independent producers, offering their wares for public sale on a permanent

basis. The purpose-built theatre is implicitly the commercial theatre, where the show is a commodity.

When we talk about English Renaissance drama, we centrally mean the plays performed in these commercial playhouses. Here, over a period of about sixty years, a distinctive theatre culture rose, flourished and declined. On the whole, its scripts were for immediate, not to say hurried, production. The turnover was high; about 500 plays survive, and hundreds more were never printed and are now lost. In the rather frantic process, the writers achieved far more than was necessary: they not only kept the players supplied with fresh material, but also somehow produced most of the classics of English drama.

This theatre was not the only context of dramatic writing in the period. Poets wrote so-called 'closet' drama – plays written not for public performance, but for reading, or perhaps for private recitation in noble households. Academic plays, in English or Latin, were presented by amateurs at Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Institutions such as the Court, the City of London or the Inns of Court staged seasonal revels and shows, many of which took theatre-like forms – masques, triumphs, dialogues, mock-ceremonies. This para-dramatic activity is historically interesting – the closet dramas, for example, include Elizabeth Cary's *Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, the first English play known to have been written by a woman – but it did not generate scripts that still live on our stages, bridging or complicating or articulating the great gap of time between then and now. For that remarkable effect – for English Renaissance drama as it plays for us, today – we have to concentrate on the professional theatre.

It lasted a lifetime, which is long enough for a good deal of variation: there were differing theatrical organizations, assorted playing spaces, changing styles of play, passing fashions. All the same, the theatre which staged *A Jovial Crew* in 1641 was fundamentally the same one, socially, spatially and organizationally, that had done *Tamburlaine the Great* in 1587. The purpose of this section, then, is to provide a historical understanding of that theatre.

In the terms of conventional national history, it took shape at a moment of relative stability. In 1485, the first Tudor king, Henry VII, had taken the crown from Richard III in the final battle of the Wars of the Roses; and in 1642, the royal and parliamentary armies would meet in the first engagement of the Civil War (it was because of this emergency that the theatres were closed permanently by parliamentary order). In the

intervening century and a half, there were no battles on English soil, and four more Tudor and two Stuart monarchs succeeded fairly peacefully to the throne. This long civil peace, though, was marked by a cultural upheaval more radical than violence. Early in the sixteenth century, the authority of the universal Catholic church was being challenged across Europe by what would later be called Protestantism. In the 1530s, Henry VIII took advantage of this ideological fissure to break with the pope, expropriate the rich network of monastic establishments, and declare himself Supreme Head of the Church in England, thus precipitating a political and doctrinal revolution – the English Reformation – that far outran his immediate purposes. The outcome was uncertain for decades. When Henry VIII died in 1547, he was succeeded first by his nine-year-old son Edward, whose regents were militantly Protestant, and then by his daughter Mary, a Catholic who tried to reverse the whole process. Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by her younger sister Elizabeth, who imposed a Protestant religious order and, by reigning for forty-five years, effectively ended the disturbing oscillations of the preceding thirty. By the time of the first great Elizabethan plays, in the 1580s, this settlement was starting to seem irreversible, even natural. Internationally, it was more contentious, setting England against Catholic Spain: war between the two states was formally declared in 1585 and not concluded until after Elizabeth's death in 1603. But although this was gruelling and expensive, it was not politically disruptive; on the contrary, the external threat had the effect of reinforcing internal stability.

This mattered to the theatre because it was a new business which needed reasonably secure conditions for investment. But there is more to this than the mere absence of disorder. If we wanted – simplifying of course – to identify a common theme in these broad epochal developments, we could adopt one of Elizabeth's mottoes: *semper una* (forever one). The consolidation of Tudor rule after the baronial wars of the fifteenth century involved concentrating power at the centre, curtailing the rights of the aristocracy, and seeking to define local jurisdictions as royal agencies rather than autonomous lordships. Exactly the same principle informed the establishment of a national church. The medieval realm had been a dual sovereignty, in which the king was the temporal head and the pope the spiritual head: Henry VIII's coup converted this into a single structure, a single principle of legitimacy. This formal unification was then confirmed in practice by the war, which conflated Protestantism,

patriotism and loyalty to the throne in a single ideological formation. So the Elizabethan state was working to secure a monopoly on law *and* belief *and* physical force. It was appropriate, to say the least, that Elizabeth's successor was already the king of Scotland before reigning as James I of England (1603–25), thus irreversibly combining the two crowns and creating the 'United Kingdom'.

In short, English Renaissance drama emerged in the context of a forceful drive towards national unity. This was reflected directly in stage images of England, notably in the chronicle plays of the 1590s. But more indirectly and radically, unification formed the theatre itself. For one thing, it was the centralization of political and economic life that made London into a metropolis capable of sustaining a permanent professional theatre. And for another, closing the gap between church and state had the inadvertent effect of creating space for a *secular* culture. I will take this second point first.

Irreligious Drama

Today, when Christian churches are fairly marginal to the national life, an effort of historical imagination is needed to grasp how *total* the English Reformation was. The medieval church was the principal agency, not only for the worship of God, but for education, scholarship, welfare, health care and a large part of the legal system. It was also the medium of most neighbourhood and professional organizations, and by far the most significant patron of music, art and architecture. Restructuring this vast organization, then, by stripping it of much of its wealth, revising its central doctrines and subordinating it to the nation-state, affected literally everything. No significant activity was untouched, certainly not doing plays. Moreover, the effects of reformation were far too complex to be controlled by the intentions of the reformers. Nobody could know how it would turn out.

Most surviving medieval plays are religious in one way or another: they narrate the life of Christ, or enact miracles, or stage allegories of sin and repentance. The records probably exaggerate this emphasis – there was a lively secular drama whose scripts are mostly lost – nevertheless, it is fair to say that serious theatre was primarily a religious tradition. And as Protestant orthodoxy established itself in the second half of the sixteenth century, this tradition was increasingly identified as Catholic, and so abandoned or suppressed. It was not only that many individual plays articulated distinctively Catholic doctrines, such as the cult of the Blessed Virgin; it was also that the reforming movement was hostile to theatrical representation as such. One of the central accusations against the medieval church was that in its weakness for effigies, relics and spectacle, it had forgotten the commandment prohibiting graven images, and substituted external shows for the inward reality of faith. It is easy to see how religious theatre falls within the scope of this attack. By about 1580, virtually the whole of the medieval dramatic tradition was dead.

At just this point, in an order of 1581, the Elizabethan state established a fairly effective method for regulating the content of the drama that was beginning to emerge in the new playhouses. A Court official called the Master of the Revels was charged with licensing scripts for public performance; to perform an unlicensed play was an offence. This system of pre-censorship, which continued essentially unchanged through to 1642,

depended on the Master of the Revels' discretion, but he did have guidelines, one of the firmest of which was that the stage was not to meddle in matters of religion. In part, this insistence just reflected the antitheatrical values of the Protestant church: for players to dress up as prophets, or angels, or the persons of God, which in the old order had been a type of devotion, now appeared as a type of blasphemy which could not be allowed. Jesus Christ did not appear on the English stage again until 1668. But there was also another reason for this enforced separation between theatre and religion. To an unprecedented degree, the Reformation itself had made belief a matter of controversy. Ancient authorities had been found to be corrupt; scripture was interpreted in drastically differing ways; monarchs denounced one another as heretics. In this ideologically unstable situation, what the state wanted from unauthorized people like actors was not that their performances should be doctrinally correct (a demand liable to produce endless debate and thus further instability) but that they should keep away from the entire topic. So in this sense, too, the theatre was enjoined to be secular.

This is not only a question of subject matter. Medieval theatre had been religious in another sense too: that the business of putting on a play – the script, the finance, the organization of the company, the costumes and props, the time and place of the performance – everywhere involved religious considerations and institutions. This is most obviously true of the best-known form of English medieval drama, the biblical cycles presented by the guilds of towns such as York and Chester. These were annual holiday performances, celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi, their dramatic values inseparable from their ritual functions. But it applies across the range of pre-Reformation theatrical practices. A show might be a parochial initiative to raise funds for the church; or it might be conceived as a sort of dramatized sermon, with didactic or polemical purposes; or it could form part of the consciously Christian hospitality of a nobleman or corporation. In any of these cases, doing the play was not a free-standing activity, but one element in a more extensive event. Theatre was as it were lodged in a network of social and religious relationships.

The revolutions of the sixteenth century had the effect of dislodging it. The reformed church – at once purified of its corruptions and relieved of much of its wealth and scope – was no longer worldly enough to embrace all these social and cultural functions. Mingling divinity with

entertainment now seemed, in the phrase of one antitheatrical preacher, like eating meat with unwashed hands.¹ The church was to become unambiguously sacred, the theatre unambiguously profane, and the two institutions were to find their separate places within the overarching framework of the nation-state. Looked at in this way, the building of the London playhouses appears as a kind of loss, as well as a kind of renaissance. The players built their own house because they had been evicted from the house of God. Autonomy, you could say, was thrust upon them.

Ironically, then, the effect of Protestantism upon the theatre was to *make* it irreligious. The actors were forbidden to engage seriously with sacred matters; they were released from every obligation to the church and required instead to meet their obligations to their customers and creditors. This is a situation conducive to moral and ideological neutrality, such that the good is whatever is applauded, and the bad is whatever is booed. Its spokesman is the clown, singing to the audience at the end of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601):

A great while ago the world begun,
 With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
 But that's all one, our play is done,
 And we'll strive to please you every day. (5.1.405–9)

The lyric glances at the story of the whole world from its creation (the subject of the medieval Corpus Christi play) and then casually gives up on it. The theatre is more modest nowadays, more like a restaurant, where these great questions are 'all one' so long as the customers are pleased. Unsurprisingly, preachers thought this attitude frivolous and profane. Shakespeare's clown, with his childish rhyme, rather suggests that it is conscientious and innocent. Whatever judgement one makes, it is the accent of a changed identity for the theatre, a new role.

¹ John Northbrooke, *Spiritus est vicarius Christi in terra. A treatise wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds . . . are reprovued*, London, 1577, p. 65.

Courtiers and Capitalists

I have said that this theatre was based in London, but London was really two places. London proper, the walled city on the north bank of the Thames between Blackfriars and the Tower, was England's biggest seaport and financial and mercantile centre. A few miles up river was Westminster, the political capital of the nation. The space between the two was still fairly rural in 1580, but by 1640 it was built up: during the period that interests us, then, the two cities were in the process of coming together. The merger was a function of growth. London was already many times bigger than any of the provincial towns, and was expanding faster as well. This increase was not inherent: the conditions of urban living were not conducive either to fertility or to longevity, and in particular, the population was decimated every few years by bubonic plague. Rather, it reflected a steady flow of immigration from the rest of the country. This affected every social class, from the top, where provincial aristocrats reacted to political centralization by investing in town houses, to the bottom, where London's economic expansion (together with a disastrous long-term fall in real wages) pulled in the landless poor in search of work. Writers and intellectuals were drawn to the increasingly dominant centre of publishing and patronage, obeying the same logic as less celebrated craftsmen. The influx also included a significant temporary element: members of provincial families might spend time in London in pursuit of litigation, education or political influence, thus transferring yet more resources from country to city.

For drama, the arithmetic of all this was decisive: London was, uniquely, a local constituency big enough to sustain a permanent company. In the provinces, actors still had to travel to find audiences; in London the audiences came to the theatre. It was not only a question of population: the wealth and social diversity of the double capital generated leisure, conspicuous consumption, a market in amusements – a society, in other words, in which significant numbers of people were able to spend a weekday afternoon watching a show. This aspect of the matter appears vividly in pamphlets and sermons denouncing the idleness of the times; from this perspective, plays were one item in a catalogue of extravagance that also included fashion, feasting, gambling, dancing and smoking tobacco. We can take the economic point without having to

endorse the moral judgement: drama, like cinnamon or starched ruffs, formed part of a boom in luxury goods.

The moralism, though, was itself part of the theatre's environment. The City of London was governed by the senior representatives of its traditional trades: the ruling group thus represented a medieval guild structure confronting new patterns of employment and expenditure, and, at the same time, a gerontocratic authority confronting a youthful population. We have already glimpsed the ideology that corresponded to this situation. It could be summed up in the reverberant word 'godly' – a Protestant ethos implying piety, work, restraint and a social ideal made up of orderliness and charity. The exponents of these values were not enthusiastic about their city's new entertainment industry. Typically, they argued that everyone ought to work for a living, and that playing is not working; that weak people are lured to plays when they should be attending to their duties; that playhouses waste resources that could be applied to better purposes; and that assembling large miscellaneous crowds leads to crime, disorder and infection. Accordingly, the local authorities imposed restrictions on times and venues, and made several attempts to prohibit playing entirely. Thus the theatre found itself in a trap: it was under pressure administratively from the city which was its life-blood economically.

In this situation it turned to the other London. One aspect of political centralization was that the royal Court became increasingly elaborate; and one aspect of the elaboration was the entertainment in the festive period of the calendar, between Christmas and Shrove Tuesday. Actors were called away from their theatres to present the most suitable parts of their repertoires before the monarch at Whitehall. This was a more or less residual form of their earlier status as household servants to the great: although, now, they made the main part of their living at the box office, they were still partly defined as royal or aristocratic retainers. The definition was the more vital precisely because public performance was a new and unrecognized profession: a person with no recognized profession and no master either was in danger of prosecution under the harsh laws against vagrancy; so actors had strong legal reasons, apart from anything else, for making sure they counted as somebody's servants. With this assortment of considerations in view, the companies operated under Court patronage – in Elizabeth's reign, actors were the servants of leading courtiers such as the Earl of Leicester, the Lord Admiral or the Lord

Chamberlain; and after James I's accession in 1603, they were reassigned to members of the royal family itself, so becoming servants of the king, the queen, Prince Henry, and so on. On the whole, it was a mutually satisfactory deal. For the Court, buying in an existing show was cheaper than devising one specially: it meant that the costs of royal display were being tacitly subsidized by the playgoing public. And for the actors, association with the Court offered the political protection they needed against the hostility of the London authorities: the Common Council of the city would always defer, in the end, to the Privy Council of the realm.

Some critics have read this dependence of the theatre on royal and courtly approval in quite extreme ways, arguing that it obliged the companies to stage what was essentially monarchical propaganda. Others have argued that the situation of the actors was not as sewn up as all that – that, after all, they depended not only on royal protection, but also, given that, on their capacity to attract paying audiences – that is, they had to consult the taste of the people as well as that of the queen. It's a difficult issue, and one that involves critical judgements about the plays: the historical record doesn't furnish a straight answer.

What can be said, though, about the theatre's ambiguous affiliations, is that they placed it in a *socially* anomalous position. Considered as a business, playing was scarcely respectable – only just legal, and frequently denounced as disorderly, parasitic and corrupting. Considered as a courtly institution, the theatre was an honourable servant of the crown, enjoying the protection of the nobility, and wheeled out on state occasions to impress foreign ambassadors. Acting was not a formally recognized vocation, yet successful actors owned property and had the clothes, the education and the connections of gentlemen. Edward Alleyn, England's first star tragedian, died rich enough to endow the charitable foundation that later became Dulwich College. Were these people leading members of society, or were they fairground buskers who had got too big for their boots? Was an actor high or low?

That last way of putting it is crude but not trivial. In many everyday ways, early modern society was thoroughly hierarchical – that is, it was bound together primarily by vertical links: king and subject, master and servant, patron and client, husband and wife, parent and child. Of course, horizontal connections were also recognized: for example, men of honour were all (notionally) bound by a code that required each to recognize the equivalent claims of the others. But even that kind of solidar-

ity depended on a shared position on the vertical scale: a man who had been insulted, say, was not free to seek satisfaction from a person much above or below him. Relationships were defined by inequality: knowing how to behave required a clear grasp of distinctions of rank, and in particular the ability to see who was, and who was not, a *gentleman*. The concept of gentility had no legal status, but was all the more deep-seated for being implicit: criteria of birth, wealth, education, occupation and lifestyle all came into it, but none of them was singly decisive. Its meaning was immersed in the minutiae of social existence. In the plays, for example, it is noticeable that when a gentleman and a commoner address one another, the normal practice is that the commoner uses the more formal 'you' and the gentleman the more familiar 'thou', just as French children are expected to say 'vous' to adults who say 'tu' to them. Scenes are written like this not to make a dramatic point, but merely because anything else would sound odd to the audience. It is an automatic notation of patronage on the one hand and respect on the other, one casual sign of a reflexively hierarchical society. In this context, not to be able to say whether an actor is high or low is tantamount to not knowing who he is. He seems to be neither fish nor flesh.

But this amphibiousness was not only a difficulty about picking the right rung on a ladder. The ladder itself was in question: the actors belonged not just to different positions in the social order, but to different social orders.

Insofar as they are the recipients of royal or aristocratic patronage, actors belong to the hierarchical system I have begun to sketch. The patrons themselves are not merely wealthy and powerful; their wealth and power take the form of the inherited land that gives them their titles, which means that what they own is inseparable from who they are, and both derive from an intricate kinship network, festooned with local privileges and obligations. It is an identity in which economic, ethical and political factors are not separated out, but indistinguishably combined. Patronage is a correspondingly many-levelled relationship. For example, it includes a financial transaction, but is not reducible to it. Certainly the client performs services for the patron and receives money from him, but this is not the same as a salaried job: rather, the patron gives the money because generosity is fitting in a lord, and the client does the work because dutiful service is fitting in a servant. The bond between a patron and his client is not a standardized, enforceable agreement between legally equal

parties, like a contract of employment. Rather, it is an informal and open-ended relationship between particular people, like that between cousins or school-friends; it treats relatives differently from strangers, the old differently from the young, men differently from women, and so on; and the benefits the patron bestows on the client are understood to be favours, not rights, the connection being unequal by definition.

There is no need to idealize this model of social relationships. It elevates nepotism and discrimination into humane principles, and if the lower participant in such an arrangement experiences neglect or exploitation, it offers him no recourse except humble protest. Moreover the pyramid as a whole maintained itself by violence: people who fell outside or below the system of masters and servants were liable to be whipped, mutilated or killed. Nevertheless, it is useful to try and grasp its rationality, and the conviction it carried as a model of how society ought to work. It is the system that made it possible to regard the fifth commandment – ‘Honour thy father and thy mother’ – as a general rule of obedience and respect, because the whole kingdom can be thought of as a kind of family, which the monarch governs by the same natural principle that gives the parent authority over the child; and conversely the family, like the parish or the workplace or the county, can be thought of as a little kingdom. Here, again, is a way of imagining society that intertwines strands we tend to keep distinct – this familial order is a matter at once of politics, etiquette and personal feeling. It is a highly integrated social model, making modern liberalism look thin and fragmentary by comparison.

It has another advantage, which may have given it misleading prestige among students of poetry: namely, that it is very good at generating metaphors. The logic whereby a craftsman is the monarch of his shop, or a monarch the mother of her people, can also extend off the social scale into metaphysical, alchemical and astronomical discourses, there to find further instances of sovereignty in the rule of reason over appetite, gold over base metal, or the moon over the ocean. Hierarchy, projected from the daily life of communities on to the screen of the universe, becomes a machine for making different things stand for one another. Shakespeare owes some of his literary reputation to the virtuosity with which he operates the machine.

At this point, however, we must turn away from the sun-like patrons shedding light and warmth upon the responsive actors, and adopt instead the point of view of the box office, or more exactly of the ‘gatherers’ who

collected money at the playhouse door. They see a strikingly different model. The difference is not simply that the patrons are high and the commercial theatre audience low. As far as that goes, the evidence suggests a socially diverse constituency. Certainly there was a *déclassé* element of ‘vagrant persons and masterless men that hang about the city’,² but the playhouse was also frequented by noblemen, gentry, students at the elite Inns of Court, citizens and their wives and apprentices. There are stories which portray the theatre as the haunt of riotous servingmen, and also stories that place it on the itinerary for showing foreign visitors the notable sights of London. It is certain that the small indoor venues, called ‘private’ theatres, were more exclusive and expensive than the open-air ‘public’ playhouses; and it is possible that there was a social polarization over time – that the heterogeneous audience of the Elizabethan amphitheatres divided, during the reign of James I, into a stratified system of upmarket and downmarket houses whose clienteles overlapped far less. But however far this stratification went, it remains the case that the total audience for drama extended across the whole gamut of ranks and occupations. A playhouse was by no means automatically a debasing place to be seen in.

What does make the difference is the nature of the encounter between the actors and this miscellaneous audience. It is a straight commercial contract. The crowd has no organic identity; it consists of the individuals who have chosen the same amusement on the same afternoon. The money they have paid to get in is not the earnest of an innate superiority which the actors gratefully acknowledge; it is simply the purchase price of a place to see the play. The exchange – a penny for the show – is a deal between equals, and when each has got what the other was offering, it is over. The spectators are not literally equal among themselves – it costs extra to get into the galleries, so the audience is tiered by price, as it is in the modern West End. But the superiority this accords the people in the good seats is very limited. Unlike the nuanced discriminations of rank, it is open to anyone who can pay for it. And anyway, it confers no authority: the spectators may not all be equal, but they are all equally spectators, equally entitled to see and to decide for themselves whether

² A formulaic phrase used to deplore the theatre’s clientele, used for example by the Lord Mayor of London in a letter of 1594 (E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923, p. 317).

they like what they see. In the playhouse, so long as the transaction lasts, the hierarchical order is suspended; on leave from our social authorizations, we are all vagrant persons and masterless men.

So the actors, considered now not as royal servants but as common players, drop out of the frame of hierarchy and into an alternative model of social connectedness: the market. And this, it is important to realize, produces an equally accurate and adequate picture of early modern society. The era that developed (and lived) the orderly pyramid of obligations was *also* an age of ruthless and sometimes lawless commercial enterprise. Monopolistic trading organizations – the Muscovy Company, the Levant Company, the East India Company – were formed by London merchants to exploit the newly global reach of English shipping. The long war with Spain (1585–1603), the occasion of neo-chivalric heroics on the part of Sir Philip Sidney and his admirers, was also conducted by a system of licensed piracy that enriched shipmasters and businessmen, including at least one future Lord Mayor of London. At its centre, London was still the medieval walled town that survived until the fire of 1666, governed by time-honoured corporate guilds. But around it there were largely unregulated suburbs which grew, in this period, many times faster than the city itself. Some of these areas were effectively shanty towns, with alarming levels of crime and disease. Others were what would now be called upscale developments; west of the city, in particular, first the Strand and later Covent Garden were the scene of adventurous and lucrative gentrification. With the new metropolis came new trades, new patterns of consumption, new methods of capitalization. The state attempted to control these activities, but its bureaucracy was not sufficiently developed to cope with the protean energies of the market; pervasive bribery meant that licences designed to regulate buying and selling were themselves bought and sold. The static, hierarchical version of society retained great scope and authority, and we cannot understand these plays without taking it seriously. But we cannot understand them, either, if we suppose that the orderly scheme of things, with the angels at the top and the beggars at the bottom, is a reliable account of how people actually made a living and lived. An angel, incidentally, was not only a celestial messenger but also a coin worth about ten shillings; several dramatists are rather addicted to the consequent pun; it is not very funny, but it reminds us that the metaphysics of hierarchy were always in danger of being disconcerted by the levelling power of money.

For the sake of clarity, I have told this story as if the hierarchical principle resided at Whitehall and the commercial principle in Cheapside. There is some colour for this – the contrast between the Court as the fountain of honour and the City as the source of cash is a very well-worn trope, on the stage and elsewhere – but it is misleading. The fault line between rank and wealth ran, not between ‘aristocracy’ and ‘bourgeoisie’, but right through the middle of each. The general monetarization of social relations affected everybody, perhaps even especially the nobility because of the escalating cost of the kinds of display their eminence demanded. Successful courtiers were no less involved in business than successful merchants; and the crown itself was in financial difficulties throughout this period, essentially because its tax base was not broad enough to support its political pretensions. Elizabeth put money into commercial and military enterprises, and negotiated like any other investor for her share of the profits. James I pushed the idea of the fountain of honour to the very limits of credibility by systematically selling knighthoods. The courtiers of both monarchs competed for lucrative appointments and trading monopolies. Commercial relations penetrated deep into supposedly hierarchical institutions. The Court was at the top of the social and cultural ladder, but it was no less truly a market than Bartholomew Fair.

Unsurprisingly, comparable divisions informed the workings of the theatre itself. As we have already seen, a company’s external definition was ambiguous: the actors identified themselves as, say, the Lord Admiral’s servants, but also as the lessees of a commercial playhouse, having a contractual relationship with its owner in which the Lord Admiral took no part. As for the company’s internal structure, arrangements varied, but normally it was held together by the mechanism of ‘sharing’ – that is, the company was owned by ten or a dozen leading actors who had each contributed an equal sum to the start-up capital, and were each entitled to an equal share of the profits. These ‘sharers’ were collectively responsible, both commercially and politically, for the actions of the company. In the Lord Chamberlain’s company, which after 1603 became, as the King’s Men, easily the most successful troupe of the age, the same arrangement was repeated for the building, so that each sharer owned one-twelfth of the Globe itself; but this was unusual. More commonly, the playhouse was leased, and its owner claimed an agreed proportion of the takings. Of course, a company at full strength contained

far more than a dozen people: counting walk-ons, musicians and stage-hands, it was probably nearer forty. The numbers were made up in two ways. The company collectively hired performers for daily wages; and individual sharers took on boys as apprentices – this was the source not only of the next theatrical generation, but also of trained actors with unbroken voices to play the roles of women.

In a way, ‘sharing’ is a rather precociously capitalist device: it created a sort of joint-stock company and, at least in the case of the King’s Men, provided a financial structure, based on investment, that was both flexible enough for expansion and resilient enough to get through bad times. But as with patronage, the relationship was not reducible to its economics. A sharer established himself as a sharer not only by paying in the money, but equally by discharging his part as an actor and organizer in the common enterprise: if he failed in that he would forfeit his position, and could not fall back on his merely financial entitlements. Moreover, although a share was a kind of private property, it was not alienable: a sharer who retired, or the widow of one who died, could only sell it back to the company, for an amount determined by custom and discretion. It had no market price, and so neither did the company as a whole: it was a business, certainly (it had to make profits or die), but it was also, to use one of the sharers’ own terms, a ‘fellowship’, whose members recognized the obligations not only of business partners, but in the same breath of friends and allies, limbs of the same body, quite often neighbours and relatives too. Trivially but indicatively, it became customary under James that the sharers of royally patronized companies were made Grooms of the Chamber in Ordinary – a minor Court title which had some real privileges attached to it, besides whatever glamour it may have bestowed. So to be a sharer meant something in terms of honour as well.

Altogether, then, ‘a fellowship in a cry of players’ (*Hamlet*, 3.2.277) was a mixed instrument, partly owned, partly earned, partly conferred. As you might expect, the institutional structure that produced this hybrid was not very stable. It happened more than once that an individual – sometimes the owner of the playhouse, sometimes an unusually efficient or acquisitive sharer – concentrated enough resources in his own hands to drain power from the collective and establish himself as something like a manager in his own right, approaching the pattern which would become normal in English theatre after 1660. In these cases, the structure becomes more recognizably capitalistic, with the manager raising any necessary

funds in the ordinary markets, and the actors coming close to the status of paid employees. But although this was always a possibility, it was not an inevitable evolution: the collegial model, with its stratified commonwealth of sharers, hired men and boys, was equally viable, arguably more so. Within the theatre, as across London generally, hierarchical and commercial modes of living were opposed, not in orderly progression, but in uneasy coexistence.

It is a tension which finds its way on to the stage. Every actor, after all, needs a working answer to the question 'who am I meant to be?' In what I have been calling a hierarchical model, the answer to this question is primarily relational: I am meant to be *x*'s son, *y*'s master, *z*'s subject. The market, on the other hand, constitutes persons as individuals, emerging autonomously out of consciousness and choice, 'as if a man were author of himself, / And knew no other kin', in the reverberant words of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (5.3.36–7). The theatre's most intensely told stories set the two versions against one another. Take, at random, *Bartholomew Fair**, where the citizens have orderly families, held together by naivety and legality, until they are exposed to the individualistic business relationships that make up the Fair, and every hierarchical connection is dissolved within a few hours. Or Massinger's *A New Way To Pay Old Debts* (1625), in which the monstrous *nouveau riche* Sir Giles Overreach approaches the landed gentry with a high comic mixture of the self-made man's contempt for it and the snob's anxiety to join it, eventually to be defeated and driven mad by the workings of an elite code he is unable to crack. Or, perhaps above all, *King Lear**, which begins in a society densely signified by all the main markers of hierarchy – land, kingship, aristocracy, paternity, gender, service – and then smashes it to pieces, precipitating its members into lonely extremes of selfhood. These Jacobean masterpieces are by very different authors, in very distinct genres, but they are linked by the energy with which all three give narrative form to the very threshold on which the theatre stood.

Actors and Writers

One consequence of the theatre's divided social identity had particular implications for the making of plays: the tension between actors and playwrights.

In business terms there was no ambiguity. As we have seen, a company was owned and controlled by actors. They needed plays just as they needed costumes and props, and they acquired them in the same way – by commissioning the article from a suitably skilled person and paying him for it when it was finished. Since the concept of copyright was not invented until the eighteenth century, what they were buying was literally the manuscript, which became the property of the company. If the play was performed repeatedly, the extra revenue did not find its way back to the writer; and if the actors had no further use for it, they could sell it on without his knowledge. The playwright, then, was a kind of craftsman supplying a specialist product to the trade, valued – and quite well paid – because of his skills, but obliged to defer to the wishes of his customers. This relation can be seen particularly clearly in the prevalence of collaborative writing. It was common for scripts to be produced by three or four writers working together, each taking responsibility for particular scenes within an agreed overall plot; in a set-up like that, clearly, the writers are not so much authors of the eventual show as contributors of material. In other cases, the playwright's subordination to the company was formalized in a contract that required him to produce a regular number of plays in return for a salary. This arrangement offered the writer security, but also made the power relations explicit: the dramatist was an employee, the sharers were his collective boss.

But if, once again, we think hierarchically rather than contractually, the relationship looks different. The terms 'playwright' and 'dramatist' do not appear in early modern English. The author of the play was most often referred to as the 'poet', partly in a classical sense (the word goes back to a Greek original that translates as 'maker'), and partly because the normal medium of stage writing was indeed verse. And while 'poet' is no more a recognized social position than 'player', it does have more elevated associations. The most immediately significant of these is education. The prevailing conventions of poetry demanded a knowledge of metre, genre and allusion which was hard to acquire without some classical background –

and a glance at the biographical section of this book will confirm that, in fact, most Renaissance dramatists had spent several years in (Latin) grammar schools, and many had extended their education, either at Oxford or Cambridge or else at one of the Inns of Court, which were primarily training establishments for lawyers, but in practice also served the landed and professional elite as an unofficial university of London. Secondary education possibly, and higher education certainly, entitled the graduate to consider himself a gentleman – more than a cut above a common player. Moreover, although poets were drawn to the theatre because the money was quite good, they were not confined to it. Especially in the early years, the leading stage writers, such as Chapman, Jonson, Marlowe, Marston and Shakespeare, were well-known non-dramatic poets too, and as a result they had literary networks of friendship and patronage that were closed to purely theatre professionals. If they felt (as most did at times) that the theatre was a demeaning place to work, they could always point out that they were visitors rather than natives.

So the players were hiring their betters. The tension can be seen vividly in a group of scripts known as the ‘Parnassus plays’, which are satirical Christmas revues staged at a Cambridge college between 1598 and 1602. The idea is that having dwelt on Mount Parnassus (the hill of the Muses, i.e. the university), a group of friends are now filled with poetic inspiration, and are looking for a way to make a living in an unpoetical world. They try to get positions as secretaries, tutors, chaplains and so on, and are foiled by various kinds of unfairness. In one scene in *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus*, increasingly desperate, they apply to Burbage and Kemp, then the two best-known sharers in the Lord Chamberlain’s company, and are shocked to learn that what the theatre needs is more writers like ‘our fellow Shakespeare’ and less about obscure poets called things like ‘Ovid’ and ‘Metamorphoses’ (1766–70). The snubbed intellectuals complain bitterly at having to grovel to ‘mimick apes’ and ‘glorious vagabonds’ (1918–22). It is the lament, mocking but also self-mocking, of an educational elite coming to terms with the vulgarity of real cultural production, like aspiring American novelists toiling in the script-factories of Hollywood.

This is not only a problem of graduate unemployment. It is also a historical form of the question: who owns the play? Commercial logic states that you cannot sell something and continue to own it too; and consequently that the play belongs to the theatre. On the other hand, a

literary tradition regards the play as the legitimate offspring of the author's brain, which is therefore his own forever, whatever sordid deals poverty may compel him to accept.

The practical form of the latter idea was publication. Since the company were the owners not of the copyright but of the manuscript, it was entirely legal for an author to publish his play under his own name as a dramatic poem to be read. The practice was certainly open to objection. Thomas Heywood, probably the most prolific playwright of all, questioned the honesty of those who 'have used a double sale of their labours, first to the stage and after to the press',³ besides, if the acting company was opposed to publication, a writer might well lose more by antagonizing his employers than he could gain from the bookseller. But there were often other reasons for wanting to see a play in print. In his explicit readiness to honour the sale of his labours to the stage, Heywood makes an extreme contrast with his contemporary Ben Jonson, who used publication precisely to reclaim his literary identity from the theatre. More than once, the printed version of a Jonson play differs explicitly from the script used in performance: he takes the opportunity to reinstate text which the actors have cut or altered. On other occasions, he adds epistles explaining things that apparently failed to work in the theatre, or attacking the incompetence of actors and the stupidity of audiences, or supplying footnotes to show that his inventions are based on serious scholarship. Not only that, but he also often dedicates the printed play to a patron, thus appealing over the heads of the theatre crowd to a learned or aristocratic reader whose judgement is understood to have more authority. In all these ways, publication becomes a weapon with which the author fights to get his play back from the theatre, retaking control of its detail, its meaning and its social destiny.

Arguably, scripted drama is always shaped by this same opposition. In our own time, for example, there is a familiar argument between 'writer's theatre', where the performers work to embody the dramatist's conceptions on stage, and 'director's theatre', where the written script is only one component, among many others, of the total theatrical experience. And a comparable antithesis appears in the academic study of Renaissance drama itself. For most of the twentieth century, editors of the plays were consciously trying to present texts that would represent the author's

³ Address to the reader, prefixed to Thomas Heywood, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1608).

intentions. Over the last two decades or so, however, this aim has been challenged in the name of an alternative principle: that a play truly exists in the traffic of the stage rather than the authorial imagination, and therefore that the text should be regarded not as the expression of an original conception, but rather as the trace of a lost performance. The critics, having long identified with the poet, now show signs of going over to the other side.

In the early modern theatre itself, though, what is most striking about the age-old quarrel is the socially specific way it was conducted. Not universally, but then and there, the authorial position was aligned with social and cultural hierarchy, and the theatrical position with popular entertainment. For example, in 1611, Jonson dedicated his austere and learned tragedy *Catiline* to the Earl of Pembroke, with thanks to his lordship for daring, 'in these jig-given times, to countenance a legitimate poem'. Jigs were semi-improvised song-and-dance routines that actors sometimes did as afterpieces to the main play: the opposition is very firmly between the 'legitimate poem' and the disorderly performance, and, at the same time, between the exalted patron and the low theatre. The following year, a playwright at the popular end of the market, Thomas Dekker, published a wild burlesque play called *If This Be Not A Good Play The Devil Is In It*, and dedicated it, in a deliberate travesty of gestures such as Jonson's, to the theatre company that had staged it:

I have cast mine eye upon many, but find none more fit, none more worthy, to *patronize this*, than *you*, who have *protected it*. Your *cost, counsel, and labour*, had been ill spent, if a *second* should by my hand snatch from you *this glory*.

Dekker ostentatiously refuses to offer some outside patron a piece that the actors have made their own by their commitment to it: this is the same rather attractive theatre solidarity that we saw in Heywood. In the same breath, though, the statement is aggressively populist, dismissing the vanity of the usual kind of patron, and insisting on the actors' unpretentious 'labour'. The dedication ends by looking forward to the company's next new play, wishing them a good audience and an 'honest door-keeper'. Since door-keepers took the entrance money, their dishonesty was a recurring headache for theatre companies: the little bit of shop-talk is there to reassure the actors that Dekker shares their humdrum concerns.

In short, this was a theatre where the structural opposition between writing and performing was sharply overdetermined by social class. The sharpness was uncomfortable: Jonson's repeated self-vindications and Dekker's complicated humility equally articulate unease and self-division. But probably it was also productive. The dissatisfied poets strove to make the theatre more dignified, more ambitious and philosophical, than it was sensible to expect; and the actors subjected the poets' inventions to a regime of instant practical tests. Out of these mutually unreasonable demands came Renaissance drama's extraordinary inclusiveness, its capacity to stage widely unconformable languages and points of view within a single play. The theatre's voices (the priest's and the sinner's, the emperor's and the fool's, the virgin's and the virago's) all sound with passionate and dissonant certainty; there is no metalanguage to reduce them to order, because it is literally true that nobody is in uncontested control – not the dramatist, and not anyone else either.

There is one intriguing exception to the general opposition. The best-known dramatist, William Shakespeare, was in the exceptional position of being a sharer in the company for which he wrote. He thus resolved the contradiction by combining the significant roles in his own person: he was writer *and* actor *and* co-owner of the playhouse. It is almost impossible to detect him gravitating towards theatre populism on the one hand or authorial elitism on the other, because he simply avoided the predicament that generated these positions in the first place. Of course, it was this fortunately placed individual who was also, in the virtually unanimous view of posterity, the greatest of all the writers for the Renaissance stage: this may or may not be a coincidence.

The Stage

As we saw, what most simply defined the moment of English Renaissance drama was the existence of the playhouses, the physical spaces to act in. It is fairly easy to find out what they were like: there are documentary and archaeological sources, and a wealth of modelled, filmed and built reconstructions. The details vary, both because playhouses did differ from one another, and because some of the evidence is inconclusive and is interpreted differently by different historians. But the common ground is firm enough for our purposes. The typical Renaissance stage is an approximately square platform, with the audience on three sides of it, and on the fourth a structure called the 'tiring house' which accommodates props, offstage actors, materials for sound effects, and so on. Actors enter and exit through doors in the tiring-house facade. Many of the spectators stand on the ground immediately in front of the platform; others, more privileged, sit in the wooden galleries which surround the space, two or three storeys high, enclosing the stage and the standing spectators together. In the public amphitheatres, this ring of galleries is roofed, but the central area is open to the sky, so the place feels rather like a house built round a large courtyard. In private playhouses the basic configuration is the same, but the whole thing is indoors and therefore a good deal smaller; it is more like being in a old-fashioned school or college hall.

Dramatic conventions are never simply determined by the architecture, but this set-up has several suggestive features. Above all, it is not a scenic theatre. The tiring-house facade is decorative, but it is always the same; it has no representational function. One sees the actor against a background that consists either of a part of the building, or else of the faces of a section of the audience; either way, he is situated for the spectator not in a consistent fictional world but in the theatre. The lighting arrangements prompt the same awareness. Whereas modern theatre lighting defines the auditorium and the stage as visually separate worlds (the real world and the world of the play), everyone in a Renaissance playhouse appears in the same invariable light, whether that is daylight or candle-light. The performers and the spectators see very well that they are all together in the one room.

In modern terms this makes the theatre sound like a concert hall; and some critics have indeed concluded that a play was primarily an auditory

experience, like a poetry reading. This view derives some support from the replica Globe Theatre in London, which opened in 1997 and turned out to have surprisingly good acoustics and surprisingly bad sightlines. And certainly we should reflect that the spoken word was much more prominent in early modern culture than it is in our own. At every social level, it was important to be able to take in what was said – in private business because reprographic technology was fairly primitive, and in the public arena because by no means everybody was literate. In law, in Parliament, above all in the church, orators often spoke for an hour or more, and the same habit of organizing thought and feeling into extended formal speeches is obvious in any play-script. Whether for instruction or for pleasure, listening was a culturally central activity; and the etymological sense of ‘audience’ – a group of people assembled to *hear* something – was not as far from ordinary theatrical experience as it is for us.

All the same, to conclude that the theatre was not really a visual medium at all would be to overread these indications. Not only do play-texts call for a great many non-verbal effects; it is also clear that companies spent a lot of money on costumes and props, and were denounced in antitheatrical pamphlets for their visual ostentation. There is no doubt that a play was something to see, too. And in fact there is no contradiction. Certainly the physical set-up is not scenic. But it does not follow that it is not visual, only that its visual language is different.

Take one kind of suggestion, inevitably fragmentary. In 1592, a pamphleteer praised the theatre’s patriotism, because there the deeds of our valiant forefathers are revived, ‘and they themselves raised from the grave of oblivion, and brought to plead their aged honours in open presence’. In 1610, a member of an Oxford college, who had seen a visiting production of *Othello*, described in a private letter how moved he had been by the sight of ‘Desdemona illa apud nos a marito occisa’ – the celebrated Desdemona, slain in our presence by her husband. In 1615, a sketch of ‘an excellent actor’, probably written by the playwright Webster, suggested that ‘what we see him personate, we think truly done before us: a man of a deep thought might apprehend the ghost of our ancient heroes walked again’.⁴ These very different spectators all watch in the same way.

⁴ The pamphlet is Thomas Nashe’s *Pierce Penneless His Supplication to the Devil*, in *The Works of Thomas Nashe* ed. R. B. McKerrow, 5 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) i.212; the eyewitness of *Othello* was Henry Jackson, whose letter is quoted in the Riverside Shakespeare,

All three submit to the theatrical illusion; for all of them, it is as if the person the actor plays, long dead in reality, has been magically brought back to life by the performance. But equally, they are conscious that the place where these *revenants* walk is 'apud nos': our presence, our house. The magic does not transport the spectators to Agincourt or Cyprus; it brings the characters out of those remote times and places and presents them to the spectators, rather as Marlowe's Dr Faustus presents Alexander the Great at the German emperor's court. We remain in the theatre, and the famous men and women of the world appear to us like spirits.

This way of seeing is understandable in a theatre that has elaborate costumes and no sets. The characters are defined by what they walk about in: they are embedded not in a historical world of their own, but rather in the present rhetoric that summons them up and grasps them, across the gap of time, as universal instances of virtue or love or power. Something like the same logic shapes the rest of the visual repertoire as well. The characteristic object on the Renaissance stage is a prop so sharply and publicly meaningful that it is almost an emblem, that is, an object that functions explicitly as the sign of a universal idea: book, goblet, money, mirror, skull. Costumes are part of the same emblematic vocabulary – fetters, garlands, rags – and the same thing can even be said about scenery, for it is not quite true that the Renaissance stage is bare. There are quite large pieces of furniture or even landscape that can be pushed on for occasional scenes, but their function is not to provide a vivid sense of place; rather, again, they are generic and significant – the arbour, the banquet, the gallows. Whatever the scale, the objects, like the people, are not seen in their natural environment, but explicitly abstracted from it and displayed to the audience in the theatre. So the presentation is forcefully visual, but the visual order is discontinuous: things form not a joined-up scene, like objects arranged in a picture, but an articulated sequence, like words arranged in a message.

If that seems counter-intuitive, the reason may be that when we think of dramatic images today, we automatically tend to make them into pictures in our minds. The proscenium arch, and the black border of the cinema screen, teach a habit of framing that imposes a two-dimensional

p. 1852; and 'An Excellent Actor', which first appeared in a collection of characters by Thomas Overbury, is much reprinted, for example in Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4, pp. 257–8.

unity on whatever it encloses. The sightlines of an Elizabethan amphitheatre are not like that. The stage is deep, extending as far as halfway across the courtyard. Consequently, an actor downstage centre is standing in the middle of the building: in a full house he is being watched from all sides, and also from above (by the people in the top gallery) and from below (by the standing spectators at his feet). There is no dominant viewpoint that could form him into a picture: he is unframed, in among the crowd. His presence is drastically uneven: he has intense face-to-face contact with some spectators, while others have a distant view of his back. By moving upstage, on the other hand, he progressively diminishes the angles, and smooths out the unevenness, until eventually he is facing almost the whole house at once. Now, framed by the tiring-house facade, he has unified his image; now he makes a picture after all, single, two-dimensional and remote. Altogether, then, the visual relationship between the actors and the audience is extremely various, differing fundamentally from one spectator to another, and for the same spectator from one moment to another. There is no single focus: the stage is polycentric. This can be seen in the writing for it: dramatists are always ready to divide it into two or three contending zones – masquers and spectators, con-men and victims, lovers and eavesdroppers, besiegers and besieged. The effect is potentially spectacular, certainly, but the spectacle is not so much a unified visual image as a succession of heterogeneous visual events.

It is a mixed stage, in other words: capable both successively and simultaneously of intimacy and distance, composition and disturbance, concentration and diffusion. And its codes of representation are mixed too, as we can see in the simplest coordinates of dramatic representation: fictional time and space.

Take a very well-known sequence as an example – the scenes around the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* (Globe, 1606). Duncan is killed in his bedchamber offstage, and the exit that is supposed to lead to it has to be unambiguously defined: four different characters go in there and return, some with bloody hands that brutally intimate what the unseen room contains. A different exit – the one that leads to the outside world – is no less clearly marked: this is the door on which Macduff knocks repeatedly, prompting first Macbeth's terror and then the Porter's drunken response. Thus, although the stage is bare, it firmly denotes a location: we are in Macbeth's castle, between the guest rooms and the main gate. The next scene, on the other hand, is not located at all. Ross talks with an unnamed

old man, and then meets with Macduff, and this could be happening anywhere. It seems that the stage *may* represent a particular place, but doesn't have to.

Something similar can be said about time. While the murder is being carried out, it is insistently noted: beforehand, we see Macbeth waiting tensely for Banquo and the servants to go to bed, and then, afterwards, the knocking at the gate announces the morning, Duncan having told Macduff to call on him early. The finding of the body clearly ensues straight away: it is still early morning and the alarm wakes the castle from sleep. But then the next scene, the unlocated conversation between Ross and the old man, is equally vague about time. Some verbal details suggest that this is still the same morning, others that several days have passed. It has stopped mattering.

So the representational code is fluid: sometimes the stage stands for a time and place in the fictional world, and sometimes it reverts, as to a default position, to just being a neutral platform. Moreover, even when time and place are crucial they are represented in a highly conventionalized manner. In this case, a continuous flow of action takes us from the moment when Macbeth says good night to Banquo to the moment when he says good morning to Macduff: the whole night is acted in about twenty minutes. Time can be compressed or elongated; characters may be placed at once in adjacent rooms and in separate worlds. It is the same as the visual design; time and location are not fixed; the actors bring them on with them like props.

What makes such fluidity possible is simply that behind or within its passing specifications, the stage is always frankly the place where the actors gather to meet the audience and tell them a story. It is not a pseudo-nature but a narrative instrument, with no more reason than any ordinary novelist to provide a location for every conversation, or to confuse the temporality of the story with that of the telling. It's a simple enough point, but it does have a complicating consequence, namely, that the stage is never wholly committed even to the specifications it does offer. When it becomes a bedroom or a forest at night, it does so only provisionally, only as a move in a game; it is still itself as well. And as a result of this doubleness, the space is often ambiguous or overdetermined: it is whatever it is said to be, but it can be said to be more than one thing. For example, when the Porter embarks on his pantomime of answering the door to damned souls, the audience, who are already looking at the door

of the tiring house and seeing it as the entrance to a castle in Scotland, are additionally asked to see it as the Gate of Hell. Or again, a few moments later, when Macduff raises the alarm, he hyperbolically speaks of the murder as if it were the end of the world; so that as the stage fills with agitated half-dressed figures, the audience see Duncan's courtiers roused from their beds by the castle bell, and at the same time, in a dream-like superimposition, the dead raised from their graves at Doomsday.

It has been argued that in these moments Shakespeare's theatre is literally recalling the medieval mystery plays, which had indeed staged, with spectacular confidence, both the gate of Hell and the Day of Judgement. As a specific allusion, that is perhaps asking too much of the audience's memory: no one under forty in 1606 could have seen a mystery play. But there is the slightly uncanny sense of a structural memory, as if the theatre itself had not entirely forgotten its proscribed former language. The fundamental latency of the stage, underlying its temporary identifications, is a sort of implicit universality: *sometimes* it is this place or that, but *always* it is the world, with hell underneath and heaven overhead, and the agents of salvation and perdition walking about disguised as ordinary people. The theatre's physical insouciance opens it up to metaphysical possibilities which a consistent realism would exclude; its images of time and place flicker in the light of eternity. This realization forms an ironic pendant to the account of secularization with which my brief history began. The sacred, prohibited as thematic content, survives in the irrereligious theatre at the level of dramatic form.

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Background Voices

If a creative writer is someone who evolves a unique work of literary art from within himself, most Renaissance drama was not produced by creative writers. The playwrights were more like craftsmen, constructing scripts out of existing materials. They adapted stories from histories and romances, equipped their characters with sentiments borrowed from essays and poems, and commanded their audience's attention with theatrical devices drawn from old plays and performing traditions. So in working on the plays, it helps to know something about the assorted materials they were made out of, the non-dramatic genres and discourses that came together in the hybrid language of the stage. This section describes ten of them, sketching what each element was like, and how it lent itself to dramatization.

Allegory

In some of her many portraits, Queen Elizabeth holds a flat circular sieve. For modern viewers the effect is incongruous: it is hard to imagine Gloriana helping out in the kitchen. And that does indeed turn out to be an interpretive wrong turning. According to legend, a virgin at the temple of Vesta in Rome, accused of sexual misconduct, miraculously demonstrated her intactness by filling a sieve with water from the River Tiber and carrying it to the temple without spilling a drop. Elizabeth's sieve, then, is a sign of her virginity: the painting does not show her as she appeared on any actual occasion, but presents a metaphor for one of her invisible attributes. It addresses an audience for whom pictures are not simply representations of the world, but coded messages asking to be deciphered – an audience, in other words, open to the constant possibility that the things we encounter in art are allegorical.

Allegory pervaded the culture. The cult of pseudo-medieval knight-hood at Elizabeth's court included a craze for the *impresa*: on his shield the knight displayed the picture of some object – a plough, a pelican, a shower of rain – with a motto hinting at its meaning. The same form appeared in the books of 'emblems' that were popular across Europe for about a century from 1530. An engraving showed an image such as a fly drawn to a flame, or a snake concealed in a flower, and an accompanying poem meditated on the (usually devotional or moralistic) meaning. Emblems circulated widely, turning up for example as allusions in plays: when Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy** refers to 'that bald madam, Opportunity' (1.1.54), he expects his audience to know that Opportunity has only a single lock of hair on her forehead, meaning that you can grab her when she is coming towards you, but once you have let her go by there is nothing to get hold of. The riddling quality of that is typical: an effective emblem requires you to think about it for a moment before you 'get' it – and that slight effort is the mental hook that makes it memorable.

Such puzzles could be very long as well as very short. The greatest literary monument of Elizabeth's reign, Edmund Spenser's narrative poem *The Faerie Queene*, looks like an anthology of chivalric tales, but is really, as Spenser declared in an explanatory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, 'a continued Allegory, or dark conceit', its knights, ladies, monsters and castles denoting a psychic universe of virtues and vices, as well as a political

landscape corresponding to late sixteenth-century England.¹ Both the manifest story and its 'dark' implied argument are so complex as to make interpretation a matter of endless critical debate: this riddle is still not conclusively solved.

Allegory generated not only forms of writing but also modes of reading. Francis Bacon, a dominant political and intellectual figure of James I's reign, published a book called *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), in which he sought to recover the truth value of classical myths by reading them as allegories. This practice can be traced in dramatic texts too. A character in Ford's *The Broken Heart* (1630) warns his nephew against aiming too high by referring to the story of Ixion, who tried to seduce Juno, queen of the gods, and found himself making love to a cloud, which gave birth to the original centaur:

'Tis an useful moral:
Ambition, hatched in clouds of mere opinion,
Proves but in birth a prodigy. (4.1.71–3)

Ixion is the over-ambitious courtier, Juno is whatever he is aiming at, the cloud is opinion, and the centaur, considered as a monster, is ambition itself. The speed and fluency of the application suggest how far this kind of interpretation is, literally, part of the language.

Besides, allegory was part of the theatre's immediate environment. In masques and pageants, the quasi-theatrical entertainments staged to honour the monarch or other dignitaries, allegory was the usual medium of expression. Actors appeared as Plenty or the Five Senses or the River Thames; scenic devices represented the fountain of honour or the ship of state. And the obvious source of expertise for these shows was the professional theatre. When the 'Genius of the City' welcomed the new King James to London in 1604, it did so in the person of Edward Alleyn, the most famous actor of the day. Jonson and Shirley wrote entertainments for the Court, Dekker and Middleton for the City. Everyone in the theatre was familiar with allegorical conventions.

Moreover, until quite recently it had been the dominant language of the public stage itself: much of the printed drama of the first three-

¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, 2nd edn (London: Pearson Education, 2001), p. 714.

quarters of the sixteenth century consists of ‘moral interludes’ – plays whose characters personify moral qualities, or doctrinal categories, or estates of the realm. For example, in a 1550s play by Lewis Wager called *The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene*, Mary’s conversion from sin to penitence is dramatized through her companions: first she has friends called Infidelity, Pride of Life and Carnal Concupiscence; next she is introduced to a hideous creature called Knowledge of Sin; and then she meets Christ, who drives away her devils and sends Faith and Repentance to live with her instead. Her changing spiritual state is externalized as *who she appears with*: this dramatic code is still readable in, for example, Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* (1595–6), where the Prince’s companion, ‘that reverend Vice’ Falstaff, functions as the visible form of his delinquency, ultimately driven out to signify his reformation.

The public stage, then, while it was not consistently allegorical, did have access to allegorical models – in contemporary art and literature, in related entertainments, and in its own recent past. Allegory thus formed one element in the hybrid dramaturgy of the age – an element not always obvious to later audiences. Take, for example, Heywood’s domestic tragedy *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603), which had a mild vogue in the twentieth century because of what was admired as its exceptional naturalism. A country gentleman’s wife is unfaithful; he responds by sending her to live, in comfort but alone, in one of his outlying manor houses. It seems a drama of individual relationships and inner feelings, remote from the public schematizations of allegory. In a late scene, however, the husband’s servant overtakes the penitent wife on the road to her new home. He has brought her lute: she left it behind, and the husband wants nothing of hers in his house. She would like to send her husband a message, but dare not presume to address him:

Speak not for me,
Yet you may tell your master what you see. (16.93–4)

With the servant watching, she plays sad music on the lute, then hands it back to him and says:

Go break this lute upon my coach’s wheel,
As the last music that I e’er shall make. (71–2)

Unable to speak to her husband, she makes the lute her means of communication by turning it into an emblem. Like the Sieve Portrait, the scene shows the gesture not as spontaneous behaviour, but as a coded message.

In reading such moments in Renaissance drama, we should resist the simplistic notion that allegory is simplistic – that its meanings can be retrieved from its signs by a mechanical process like cracking a code. In the letter expounding his poem, Spenser says that the Faerie Queene herself signifies both ‘glory’ in general and Queen Elizabeth I in particular; immediately adding that Queen Elizabeth is also signified by another character in the poem, Belphoebe. Allegory, then, is not obliged to be monolinear. On the contrary: one allegorical sign can indicate several different meanings, and one allegorical meaning can be indicated by several different signs. Precisely because the signs are artificially devised, with no claims to inevitability, the readings they invite are playful and multiple.

Thus, looking back over my theatrical examples, we see that none of them is quite straightforward. In the sexualized atmosphere of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, baldness suggests not only slipperiness but also syphilis: Opportunity is being personified as a goddess and simultaneously as an old whore, doubling and ironizing the emblem. In *The Broken Heart*, the speaker is trying to restrain his nephew’s love for the king’s daughter Calantha. But if ‘loving Juno’ means ‘Ambition’, what does ‘loving Calantha’ mean? Perhaps the events we are watching are themselves allegorical? In *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, the metaphor of the crushed lute is not directly part of the play’s discourse; it is a deliberate message from the wife to her husband, whose mixture of humility and protest, self-pity and violence, defies exposition: it is not after all so easy to say in a word what the lute means. Wherever you look, when Renaissance drama adopts the allegorical language that was all around it, the effect is not that it is dropping back into an older and simpler idiom. Rather, allegory appears as an alienation effect, interrupting the self-consistent world of the fiction, and opening up jarringly different ways of reading the play.

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Ceremony

Every year, on 30 October, the new Lord Mayor of London took his oath of office in the Guildhall and proceeded to a river wharf, roughly opposite the Globe on Bankside, from where a flotilla of decorated barges escorted him to Westminster. There he took a second oath in the presence of the monarch before sailing back to the City, where he was met by a costumed procession and a specially scripted pageant celebrating his entrance as Mayor. The procession returned to the Guildhall for a banquet, and then on to St Paul's for an evening service. By the end of the day, then, the Mayor's authority had been symbolically established over land and water, in court and city, before patricians and populace, and by tokens spiritual, legal and material. This comprehensive coverage was expensive; a Lord Mayor's Show could cost £1,000 for the day – the cost of building and equipping a permanent theatre. Clearly, Elizabethan and Jacobean businessmen did not regard it as an optional flourish. Ceremony was essential.

The Lord Mayor's inauguration is only one message in a code that was used everywhere. At one extreme, there were the great rituals of state – coronations, weddings, funerals – involving thousands of people and a general suspension of everyday life. At the other extreme, there were small ceremonies that were themselves a part of everyday life – the offering of hospitality, family prayers, taking one's hat off to social superiors. In both religious and secular ways, it was a ceremonial society – one that tended to make its values visible in set actions and observances. This tendency is theatrically useful: social relationships are as it were already dramatizing themselves.

This is most obviously true if we think about the media of expression. Like a play, a public ceremony is a meaningful organization of groupings, costumes, objects, music, gestures. If drama shares its verbal codes with other kinds of literature, it shares its visual codes with this other kind of performance. Take an unspectacular example, again from the Lord Mayor's investiture. The day begins with the outgoing Lord Mayor stepping on to the platform at the Guildhall. Then the Mayor-elect joins him, and they sit side by side while the insignia of office are formally handed over. When this is done, the new Mayor leads the way out, and his predecessor follows him. Thus the transfer of authority is stated in the basic stage language of exits and entrances: the entrance showed the old Mayor

in charge, and the exit shows the new one in charge. The change-over has the shape of a play.

Ceremonies of this kind resemble theatre in the further sense that they posit the presence of an audience. The action is carried out in order to be witnessed. At royal and aristocratic funerals, for example, the coffin was presented to general view in a raised hearse with decorative pillars and a roof; in surviving drawings these structures look very like miniature stages. Not only that, but the display included elements of illusion. A lifelike effigy of the dead monarch was carried on top of the coffin, dressed in real robes; when Elizabeth I died, the spectators wept at the sight of her effigy, reacting to the representation as if it were the queen herself. Or again: a hierarchical code prescribed a fixed number of principal mourners – fifteen for a king, eleven for a duke, nine for an earl and so on. If somebody died without enough high-ranking relatives to fill their allowance, it was permissible to make up the numbers with humbler people dressed up to the appropriate social level. The important thing is how it looks; in more than a loose sense, this is a dramatic performance.

Ceremony also involves another, more inward kind of theatricality: its deployment of the idea of a *role*. The participants in a coronation or a state funeral are invited on principles that have nothing to do with their individual feelings, and everything to do with their institutional or dynastic or diplomatic identity. It is a society that is marking the event, and it is as a member of the society that I am to rejoice or mourn. Personally, I may be delighted by the death of the dignitary who is being mourned; but for my delight to appear in my actions at the funeral would be a mistake, a piece of bad behaviour. The ceremony calls upon me, not to express my private feelings, but to discharge my public role.

Moreover, the biggest of these ceremonies are what anthropologists call rites of passage, marking those moments when a person moves from one state of life to the next: child to adult, prince to ruler, daughter to wife, and so on. (Aristocratic funerals are rites of passage too, not only in the sense that they mark the transition from life to death, but also that normally the chief mourner is in the same instant inheriting the position of the deceased.) At such moments a person is making the transition from one role to another, or equally, to look at it the other way round, a role is passing from one person to another. These are the risk points for social or political or psychological identity – the places where, necessarily, the

fit between person and role loses its habitual air of inevitability and threatens to come apart. Hence the ritual: by ceremonially performing change, the community contains its power to disrupt. Ceremony is thus theatrical in the radical sense that its essential business is the preservation and circulation of roles.

Surveying all these overlaps, it is tempting to conclude that ceremony simply was a kind of theatre, and theatre a kind of ceremony. This is a tenable idea. Conventionally, the playhouse was hung with black drapes for tragedies, just as houses and churches were hung with black for funerals: the tragic theatre was as it were a house in mourning, the performance a solemn enactment of the idea of death. In such a visual context, it is striking that the action of a tragedy, often, is precisely a rite of passage, bringing an old state of things to a conclusion and ending with the new ruler, full of sorrow and hope, following the protagonist's body as it is carried off the stage. Repeated public rehearsal of this scenario not only draws on ceremonial images, but also arguably serves ceremonial functions, negotiating risk points, exorcising the spectres of violence, loss and change.

Within this analogy, though, the differences are at least as important. The most legible sign of these is the theatre's love of travestied ceremony: a wedding masque concealing the fact that the bride is the king's mistress; the funeral of lovers who then rise up from their coffins and get married; a mourning widow embarking on a love affair. Revenge tragedies are almost obliged to include a scene in which a masque, supposedly celebrating a coronation or a wedding, turns into a bloodbath. Shakespeare disrupts ceremonies with endless inventiveness, from Juliet's wedding morning to Ophelia's funeral, and from Richard II's decoronation to Macbeth's haunted feast. Here, all over the repertoire, is a sense in which drama is not a variant of ritual but its opposite. Ceremonies are meant to pass off without a hitch: dissonances and interruptions are what they are designed to exclude. In the theatre, on the contrary, dissonances and interruptions are the very sources of meaning. Drama and ceremony are in this sense so far from identical that each thrives on the other's failure.

Putting these perspectives together, we can see that the theatre's appropriation of ritual was dialogical: it adopted it and negated it at the same time. Arguably, this doubleness was possible because of the impact of the Reformation. Although it was a necessary part of their authority that they were traditional, many ceremonies were in fact altered during the six-

teenth century, to remove elements that had come to seem idolatrous or superstitious. As a result, it was evident that their forms were not immutable. Cultural conservatives lamented observances that had been abandoned; radical reformers pressed for the suppression of many that had survived. The authorities tried to enforce the status quo, convinced that too much ceremonial diversity would undermine the unity of the commonwealth. But attempts at regulation made it still more obvious that people had choices, and so invited further revisions. The conservatives were exaggerating: it was not true that the rites and ceremonies of England were dying out. But they were changing, and the changes made it possible to play with them in new ways.

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Drama

In the 1580s Philip Sidney complained that English playwrights were ignoring the principles of drama; he meant the classical principles exemplified by the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Thirty years later, Ben Jonson published his own plays in a grandiose format, and with a title (*The Works of Benjamin Jonson*), that invited comparison with the editions of these same dramatists. The prologue to the first play in this collection, *Every Man In His Humour*^{*}, announces that its author 'hath not so loved the stage, / As he dare serve the ill customs of the age' (Prologue, lines 3–4), and goes on to mock a selection of contemporary theatrical conventions. The provocative use of 'dare' sets the context: Jonson dares defy the expectations of his own time, but does not dare break the rules of good playwriting, which he thinks of as transhistorical. His main source of these rules is the *Ars Poetica* of Horace.

Throughout its life, then, the theatre of Renaissance London was haunted by that of classical Rome – not simply as a source of plots and devices, but as a standard to which writers aspired, or by which they were condemned. Today, the Renaissance plays are themselves classics, canonized and edited for academic study. But of course they had no such status then: even the word 'drama' was not applied to English stage writing until after 1660. The early modern canon of drama was Latin.

The relations between the two bodies of writing were shaped by this distinction. Classical plays were encountered as printed texts demanding close attention to their language; the modern repertoire, on the other hand, existed primarily in performance, and was published piecemeal and belatedly. So the opposition between Latin and English was also an opposition between drama (a branch of literature) and theatre (a kind of amusement). Moreover, classical texts belonged to their authors, whereas new English plays, as we have seen, belonged to the companies. Drama is located in the mind of the dramatist; theatre in the bodies of the players. This is also a question of class. Seneca and Plautus mostly remained on the page, but when they were performed, it was not in the playhouse, but in the schoolroom, as part of a gentleman's education. And most English imitations of Seneca were by scholarly amateurs whose plays were for private recitation: the performance was not a public spec-

tacle, but part of the cultural life of the aristocracy. In all these ways, the classical paradigm defined the actually existing theatre as educationally, psychologically and socially *low*. In another of his uninviting prologues – to *The Staple of News* (1625) – Jonson told his audience, ‘Would you were come to hear, not see, a play’. A many-layered division is involved in this wish; his play is a *show* aspiring to be a *text*.

It can be argued – it often is, in various terms – that in expressing this desire Jonson did not know what was good for him. Surely he was better off in the playhouse? As everyone knows, classicism imposed arbitrary restrictions on the resources of theatre: that the time and place of the action should not exceed one day and one city; that comedy and tragedy should not be mixed in the same play; that characters should conform to commonly held ideas of consistency and appropriateness; that violent deaths and the like should not be shown but reported by messengers. These regulations can fairly be extrapolated from Sidney and Jonson, and from their Latin sources; but in this country Jonson was virtually alone in taking them seriously. After all (this line of argument continues), the Elizabethans were heirs to a medieval tradition which had successfully ignored all such rules. If we look at the scope and inventiveness of (say) the biblical pageant cycle from York, we can see that the English stage had nothing to learn from humanist pedantry about what theatre can and can’t do. Classical ‘drama’ was largely – and fortunately – irrelevant to Shakespearean ‘theatre’.

This narrative is a nationalist myth: England appears as a bundle of robustly traditional practices, and Rome as a schedule of unnecessary regulations. What it ignores is that classical drama consisted of plays as well as precepts, and that the plays are stranger and more chaotic than the precepts make them sound. Take an influential example: the *Thyestes*. Like all Seneca’s tragedies, it is set in the world of Greek myth. Thyestes has wronged his brother Atreus, who plans revenge. He fakes a reconciliation and invites Thyestes to a feast; when Thyestes accepts, Atreus kidnaps his children, butchers them, and serves them to him in a stew. When Thyestes has finished, Atreus tells him what he has eaten, and the brothers end the play face to face across the horror that joins them forever. This story surfaces in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and several other early modern tragedies. And although *Thyestes* more or less observes the neoclassical rules, its savagery, which is typical, puts paid to the idea that Latin drama was simply a restraining influence on the excesses of the native

imagination. On the contrary, one of the things London seems to have learned from Rome is the theatrical potential of ultra-violence. But the most far-reaching questions concern form rather than content.

At the opening of the fifth act (five-act structure is itself a Senecan legacy), Atreus looks forward to his crowning act of vengeance:

Aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super
altum superbo vertice attingens polum.
nunc decora regni teneo, nunc solium patris.
dimitto superos; summa votorum attigi. (885–9)²

The Elizabethan translation, by Jasper Heywood, is pedestrian but accurate:

Now equal with the stars I go, beyond each other wight,
With haughty head the heavens above and highest Pole I smite.
The kingdom now and seat I hold, where once my father reigned:
I now let go the gods: for all my will I have obtained.³

This soliloquy is often echoed in Renaissance drama. At the opening of Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* (1599), for example, the victorious Duke Piero is warned against pride and replies, 'Pish! *Dimitto superos, summa votorum attigi*' (1.1.59). Less directly, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*^{*}, Vindice announces that the murderer of his lover is now in his power:

Oh sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing . . .
Oh, 'tis able
To make a man spring up and knock his forehead
Against yon silver ceiling. (3.5.1–4)

The *dramatic* value of the line lies in the extreme disjunction between the subjectivity of the speaker and the perspective of the audience. The reason, after all, for the joy Atreus expresses with such persuasive inten-

² Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Tragedies*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³ Thomas Newton, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, first published 1581, edited in 2 vols (London: Constable, 1927), i, 86.

sity, is that Thyestes is about to eat pieces of his own children: this is a delight which no spectator will share – not consciously, at least – and so the speaker comes into focus as *somebody other than us*. It is this driving, unconditional selfhood that engages the Renaissance imitators. My two examples are very different: *Antonio and Mellida* is a tragicomedy, and Piero its rather camp villain; Vindice, on the other hand, is a revenge hero, his enemies so monstrous as almost to legitimate his cruelty. But what survives any amount of recontextualizing is the gesture – *dimitto superos* ('I dismiss the gods') – with which the speaker decrees his own individual heaven. The public command forces the audience to accept his view of the world at the same time as the rebarbative privacy of his delight forces them to reject it. That doubleness is the condition of the character's autonomy – in our inability to *settle* him, he comes to life.

The importance of this can be confirmed by glancing at *The Comedy of Errors* (1592), Shakespeare's adaptation of Plautus' comedy *Menaechmi*. Its plot, a sequence of misunderstandings involving identical twins, is a theatrical machine for producing disjunctions between points of view. When twin 1 is addressed as if he were twin 2, and responds inappropriately, the audience sees exactly how the situation looks to him, and also, at the same time, exactly how he has got it wrong. Just as with the obscene exultation of Atreus, the validity and the invalidity of the character's world are dramatized in the same breath: again, though in a different tone, we grasp somebody else's being.

In this sense classical drama, rather than regulating the theatre, helps turn it loose. Fictional subjects, circumscribed by obsession or misapprehension, have the effect of balkanizing the stage, replacing a universal standard of good and bad with multiple local ones. Ironically, the habits of academic study contributed to this reckless diversification. Most people, after all – including most playwrights – didn't read classical plays from start to finish. They skipped and selected, retaining only the bits they had memorized at school or found in anthologies of quotations, and which circulated, regardless of dramatic context, as autonomous moral reflections. Thus sentiments taken from the speeches of liars and murderers were all considered as rational and potentially true. This habit of reading multiplied incompatible points of view across the Renaissance stage, generating the disorder that a more codified classicism tried in vain to control.

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Festivity

In 1591, when professional theatre had been established for some time, one critic could still wish ‘that players would use themselves nowadays, as in ancient former times they have done, which was only to exercise their interludes in the time of Christmas, beginning to play in the holidays and continuing until twelfth tide, or at the furthest until Ash Wednesday’.⁴ This writer thinks of plays, not necessarily as a bad thing, but as a seasonal thing: a permanent playhouse is like having fairy lights all the year round. In other words, theatre for him is linked with *festivity*.

Early modern England observed a complicated calendar of festive days. Some were religious, like Easter, some seasonal, like May Day, and some political, like the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth’s accession. These festivals were unsummarizably various – not only because each occasion had its own distinctive customs, but also because they were celebrated by different communities. Accession Day at Court featured elaborate pseudo-chivalric displays of personal loyalty to the Queen, whereas in the villages it was more a matter of bellringing and bonfires. Christmas revels were often governed by a sort of mock-king, but this personage was one thing in a farm kitchen and another in an Oxford college. Despite this diversity, it is possible to generalize about the structural character of festivity, and its relationship to theatre.

It was, and is in general, a certain kind of time. Holidays were not individually chosen; they were observed by everyone, and they started and finished at preordained times. So long as the festival lasted, ordinary routines were suspended, above all the routine of work. Many customs dramatized the opposition between festive time and working time: people wore special clothes, ate special food, or played special games, and so broke their links with yesterday and tomorrow, connecting instead with the same time last year, or with the cycle of the seasons. As anthropologists have pointed out, the festive is a moment in and out of time, when the ticking of the social clock gives way to a different temporality, natural or ludic or sacred.

At its most material, this ‘time out’ had the importance of a respite from a hard life. The labouring poor briefly figured the opposite of their

⁴ E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923), vol. 4, p. 237.

condition: leisure and abundance. In particular, Shrove Tuesday (Carnival, Mardi Gras, the last day before the privations of Lent) was an eating and drinking festival across the Christian world; and in England the November feast of Martinmas was the time to slaughter cattle that could not be fed through the winter, so that by a truly festive logic, famine gave rise to abundance. The mythologies associated with such occasions projected fantasies of plenty: in the land of Cockaigne, where it is always Carnival and never Lent, the streams run with wine, and pigs run about ready roasted, looking for someone who wants to eat them.

The cruel absurdity of that image, however, is a warning that festivity was by no means a matter of simple wish-fulfilment; it had sharper edges than that. One was the idea of inversion, of what appears in ballads and woodcuts as 'the world turned upside-down'. If, after all, festive time is *constituted* by its opposition to normal time, a festive world comes into view where everything, by definition, is the wrong way round: food searches for people, and, in the words of a late sixteenth-century print, 'horses ride on their masters' backs; . . . wives go to war and husbands sit by the fire; the child rocketeth his father in the cradle; the servant calleth his master to reckoning; the country man sits on a horse and the king follows him'.⁵ As that list suggests, this game of inversion is enjoyably ambiguous. It can be an extension of the fantasy of plenty ('wouldn't it be nice?'), but it can also be a conservative reinforcement of the status quo ('look how ridiculous it would be!'), or it can be satirical ('everything's topsy-turvy these days') or, at its most audacious, revolutionary ('why not?').

This questionable trope informed many festive practices. Sometimes it was literally acted out – on Shrove Tuesday, for instance, schoolboys would lock their master out of the classroom until he promised them a day off; or on Hock Monday, a folk festival after Easter, women would form gangs to harass and intimidate the men. Sometimes it took the form of parody, like a travesty coronation for the Christmas King. Or it was more broadly transgressive: among groups such as servants and apprentices, who were normally required to be sober and submissive, festivity licensed drunkenness and riot. Some of these traditions were certainly

⁵ Described in Malcolm Jones, 'The English Print, c. 1550–c. 1650', in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 356.

crude, but they were not simple. The schoolboys were not just being rebellious: they were doing what was expected, and to that extent being obedient. And the licensed rowdiness of London apprentices could take the form of attacking brothels and punishing the prostitutes: it is uncertain whether this was transgressing the law of their everyday existence or enforcing it. On the other hand, it did occasionally happen that a festive riot turned into a serious uprising: holiday disorder was not always securely contained within the boundaries of customary inversion.

Thus festivity was not so much a single activity as a repertoire of tropes and performances, something like a language. It seems to have been understood right across early modern culture, taking verbal, iconographic and social forms, and entering into the learned fooling of lawyers as much as the folk customs of the illiterate. This common discourse could hardly fail to enter the theatre. As we saw at the start, drama was itself a seasonal diversion: Christmas festivities might well include plays. And beyond that, drama responded to what was play-like in festive practices, the way they inserted people into fictive scenarios and imaginary roles.

Several of the comedies discussed in this book are set around holidays: *The Shoemakers' Holiday* is a Shrove Tuesday play, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is a Lent-into-Easter play. Others don't represent festivals directly, but borrow their motifs. The logic of 'Shakespeare's festive comedy' is well known: in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* especially, the whole cast is transported by removal and masquerade into a state that precisely reproduces the demarcated 'moment in and out of time' of festivity. Jonson does something comparable with the figure of misrule: Bartholomew Fair, the travesty court of Volpone, and the chambermaid's Court of Love in *The New Inn*, are all temporary realms governed by mock-monarchs. Fletcher, in *The Woman's Prize* and *The Sea Voyage*, fantastically reverses women's roles, echoing licensed games of cross-dressing and gender indecorum. In all these cases, it is not just that carnival or Christmas imagery can be shown to 'influence' the text, but also that the festive character of the devices affects the way we watch the plays.

For what festivity most radically does to theatre is to undermine the idea of mimesis. The proposition that drama imitates life entails a binary opposition: on the one hand there is real life; on the other, the imitation of it. Festive games, dances, masquerades and disorders confuse this

opposition by failing to be either one or the other. They are not just 'imitation'; they really happen; the fighting leaves real bruises, the feast is real food. But they are not simply 'real life' either. The combatants will be friends again when they take off their masks; the carnival king's reign only lasts so long as his superiors play the game of deferring to him. Rather, they constitute a space which is neither ordinary reality nor dramatic representation, but what might be called social theatricality – a play which, because we are all *in it*, is directly a part of our life.

This symbolic dimension of social existence was an extraordinary theatrical resource: not only a storehouse of quasi-theatrical forms, but also a middle term between the stage and the world. In festive space, neither reality nor illusion, Renaissance drama made itself at home: that is evident in the confident artifice of its plot-devices, the freedom of its clowns, and the orchestrated playfulness of its set-pieces. Meanwhile, though, the customs themselves were in decline – under attack from Protestant reformers, disconcerted by new rhythms of urban and mercantile living, fractured by a stratification that insulated the literature of the elite from the pastimes of the people. Modern scholars reconstruct the festive calendar from records that are often already nostalgic; even as the language of festivity was being written down it was disappearing into a more or less legendary past. Moreover, the forces hastening its disappearance included drama itself. The professional theatre abstracted playing from its seasonal matrix and turned it into work; it subordinated its performers to an individually composed script; it undermined community by withdrawing from shared space into the private interior of the playhouse, and dividing paid participants from paying spectators. In all these ways, it did as much as the church to destroy the festive tradition. It just did more amusing things with the ruins.

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History

Most drama was dramatization, and much of what was dramatized was history. The Elizabethan theatre's favourite book was probably the encyclopedic *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, compiled by Raphael Holinshed and first published in 1577. Shakespeare dominated the Holinshed market with what eventually became an eight-play cycle staging the entire fifteenth century, but he did not monopolize it. Richard II, Richard III and Henry V had all appeared on the stage before he took them up, and there were also, for example, diverse plays about all four medieval King Edwards, as well as about London worthies such as the fifteenth-century Lord Mayor Simon Eyre and the founder of the Royal Exchange, Thomas Gresham. Besides, such history plays were not the only way of using chronicles. For one thing, playwrights exploited European and classical sources as well as English ones. And for another, historical material also informed tragedies. For the theatre, history was not so much a special topic as a general storehouse.

However, that is a slightly misleading way of putting it. It makes history look like raw material; and the material the playwright actually had in front of him was not raw at all, but consisted of narratives which already had their own shapes and meanings. 'History' (and this is particularly true of Renaissance uses of the word) is not a sequence of events but a mode of writing. Dramatizing it is not giving form to matter, but changing one form into another. Moreover, history is itself historical: the discourse known as history in the sixteenth century is different from the one professed in history departments today. What kind of discourse was it?

The answer is not unitary: then as now, historians were doing different things. Perhaps the central difference was that between the two dominant traditions of the Renaissance: classical and Christian. For the first, history is ultimately a branch of rhetoric and is dominated by the idea of virtue; for the second, it is ultimately a branch of theology and is dominated by the idea of sin. As you would expect, the frontier between these two versions of history was riddled with gaps and compromises: few writers felt the need to sign up for one side or the other. Nevertheless, it may make for clarity if I sketch the implications of each in turn.

One version of history as theology can be found in the much reprinted poem called *A Mirror for Magistrates*. In this lengthy miscellaneous work, published in incremental stages between 1559 and 1587, kings, lords and statesmen appear one by one to relate how they met their downfall. The narratives, called ‘tragedies’, turn on the transition from delusive prosperity to misfortune and death. They are arranged in chronological order, from the reign of Richard II through to that of Henry VIII, but there is no effective idea of progression. The world is unchangingly untrustworthy. The ghosts ask why they have suffered, and fluctuate between two kinds of answer: one invokes Fortune (permanence is confined to Heaven – on earth the wheel is always turning), and the other invokes Providence (the speaker’s prosperity covered some act of injustice, which God punished in the end). In theory, these explanations conflict, but in the text they work closely together to take agency away from the human actor and subject him to a divine order. The poem’s final object is not mortal but eternal – that is why the stories are so repetitive, and also why they continue to be relevant.

This way of doing history is strikingly disrespectful of civil authority. It concentrates on rulers who come to grief: there are no instances of political success, and the providential argument depicts every worldly eminence as a fool’s paradise. The scepticism is startling because for much of the twentieth century, ‘providential’ history was read (through Shakespeare’s chronicle plays) as a way of legitimizing the status quo. This account is traceable to one of Holinshed’s sources, *The union of the two noble and illustre families of Lancaster and York* (1548) by Edward Hall, in which the Wars of the Roses are shown leading to the redemptive establishment of the Tudor dynasty. In that case, certainly, the existing order turns out, with unpleasant neatness, to be what God had in mind all along. But providential history is not always like that. It can also hold up a ‘mirror’ in which the great men of the realm appear small, guilty and temporary.

The contrasting, classical version of history is neatly summarized by William Camden, a distinguished historian and the mentor of Ben Jonson:

I have learned of Tacitus that the principal business of Annals is to preserve virtuous actions from being buried in oblivion, and to deter men from either speaking or doing what is amiss, for fear of after-infamy with posterity. (Quoted in Worden 1994: 72)

This rationale is pagan rather than Christian. We transcend mortality through fame, and history matters because it is fame's instrument. This is why history is a branch of rhetoric: if the historian's 'principal business' is the fame of virtuous actions and the infamy of vicious ones, then he is like an orator, organizing his objects into topics of praise and denunciation. Moreover, the rhetorical orientation implies, as it always does, a lively and practical sense of audience: what effect is history supposed to have? The answer is that it is morally and technically educative. Morally, famous actions are to inspire emulation, infamous ones aversion. And technically, history is a textbook for rulers – just as a lawyer stocks his memory with precedents, so the governor studies examples of political skill and incompetence.

The effect of these expectations is that historical writing is insistently comparative. One classical historian, Plutarch, made this his principle of composition: in his *Lives*, translated into English in 1579 and heavily used by Shakespeare, he matches each notable Roman life with a Greek one that is in some way analogous. Analogy makes history eloquent; every personality and situation speaks implicitly about others that resemble it. History is therefore both polysemous and risky. Take Sir John Hayward's notorious *Life and Reign of King Henry IV*, published in 1599 and dedicated to the Earl of Essex. It was an account of the deposition of Richard II, presented with great rhetorical richness, much of it borrowed from Tacitus – that is, Hayward assumed that parallels could be illuminatingly drawn between the royal Court of about 1400 and the imperial one of the first century AD. Unfortunately the authorities perceived other analogies too – between Richard II and Queen Elizabeth – and after the fall of Essex Hayward spent the rest of Elizabeth's reign in jail.

In short, historical figures and events become readable. John of Gaunt, or Julius Caesar, appears not as a unique historical individual but as an example. This makes sense, for instance, of the otherwise puzzling convention of the invented oration. When, say, the Scottish leader Calgacus (in Tacitus) or the Archbishop of Canterbury (in Hayward) is shown in some vital encounter, and there is no record of what he said, the historian composes a speech for the occasion and puts it into his mouth. The person may not actually have said any of things that are thus attributed to him; the truth of the account is of another kind; it is an ideal statement of what he stands for, bringing out, as forcefully and clearly as the historian's rhetorical skill allows, the meaning of the character and his

situation. Clearly this brings the practice of history very close to the practice of writing plays.

In the theatre the two modes of history interact, sometimes jarringly. In *Richard III* (1592), for example, when Richard is manipulating the Court and the City, the play inhabits the world of classical historiography – these scenes are based on the life of Richard by the English humanist Thomas More. But the climactic scene in which Richard is haunted by the ghosts of his victims is as close as anyone gets to putting the *Mirror for Magistrates* on the stage. In the theatre, as in non-dramatic historical writings, incompatible types of interpretation overlap. One thing the different traditions have in common, though, is their claim to transcend the political present. A transhistorical point of view – that of God, or the dead, or a judicious posterity – subordinates today's ruler to a judgement he cannot corrupt. In Jonson's densely researched tragedy *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), an offending historian is hounded to death by a tyrannical emperor and his sycophantic Senate. The character who speaks for Jonson is indignant but also contemptuous of

the Senate's brainless diligence,
Who think they can, with present power, extinguish
The memory of all succeeding times! (3.471–4)

It's a cunning little triumph: the Senate's folly is proved by its being enacted on the modern stage and therefore, exactly, not forgotten. Actors embraced history, not only because there are a lot of good stories out there, but still more because they wanted to borrow its formidable air of independence – to become, as Hamlet announces with sly arrogance, the abstract and brief chronicles of the time.

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Love

It can seem that in the late sixteenth century love was everywhere. The queen's courtiers were all officially in love with her; poets wrote love stories; lutenists played love songs; everybody wrote sonnets. It was an essential philosophical concept, and also an essential fashion accessory. Not that men and women were mysteriously more liable to fall in love than those of other ages, but that they possessed an unusually rich language for expressing it. And the language is what we can study – love, not as an urge or a sentiment, but as a discourse.

As a specimen of it, I have chosen a sonnet by Spenser, published in his collection *Amoretti* in 1595, because it is both conventional and brilliant:

Fresh spring the herald of love's mighty king,
in whose coat armour richly are displayed
all sorts of flowers the which on earth do spring
in goodly colours gloriously arrayed:
Go to my love, where she is careless laid,
yet in her winter's bower not well awake:
tell her the joyous time will not be stayed
unless she do him by the forelock take.
Bid her therefore her self soon ready make,
to wait on love amongst his lovely crew:
where every one that misseth then her make
shall by him be amerced with penance due.
Make haste therefore sweet love, whilst it is prime,
for none can call again the passèd time.

The poem has a familiar argument: the lover is urging the girl to make love while they are young. For most of its length, however, it defers that immediacy through a fiction with two additional characters: the King of Love and his messenger the Spring, who summons lovers to attend on him. What is the point of dressing up the simple injunction in this picturesque allegory?

Firstly, it situates love in a monarchical court: the king, the herald, the attendants, the summons, the fine. This is not an arbitrary metaphor: there were strong connections between the two spheres, preserved in the

various senses of the word 'court'. Courtiers and lovers are alike, both living for their queen, and expiring if she ceases to smile upon them. Some critics have read Elizabethan love poetry as literally a court code, arguing that the favour the lover-poet seeks is not primarily sexual but political and financial, so that the true relation is not that the king is an allegory of love, but that love is an allegory of royal power. That is perhaps making the metaphorical links go too rigidly all one way; but certainly the courts of princes were widely regarded as natural theatres of love. The idea is even confirmed by its dark converse: in Italianate revenge tragedy, the court appears as a scene of unrestrained lechery.

Fanciful as they sound, these associations reflect some of the functions of a real court. It was for example a marriage market: dynastic alliances were vital to the cohesion of the ruling class, so royal government sought to manage them. In that sense, love and politics were connected not just metaphorically but literally. Less specifically, a court was meant to be a place where conflicts between factions were resolved without violence. Courtiership, with its attention to the details of civility – dress codes, modes of speech, 'courtesy' – is a politics of love as opposed to war, an opposition set out in the famous opening soliloquy of Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1592). 'Love' here means the principle of mutuality and harmony that holds the kingdom together.

That move outwards, from two lovers to a whole nation, is a good example of a second vital characteristic of the discourse of love: it generalizes. For example, if you think about time in the Spenser sonnet, you see it says 'early' on three levels. It is morning, and the girl must get up; it is spring, and flowers are adorning the earth; and it is the moment of the girl's youth, as she 'wakes' to sexuality. Day, year and lifespan are superimposed so fluently that the complexity goes almost unnoticed. As a result, love is not only what the poet feels for the girl (though it is vital to the structure that it is that *too*), but growth in general, consummation in general, perhaps, as we saw, peaceful coexistence in general. Renaissance love poetry tends to be written in praise not only of Stella or Corinna, but also of Love, and this greatly extends its scope – this sonnet, for instance, is also a reflection, melancholy and somewhat moralistic, on the passing of time.

In one way, the readiness to generalize assimilates love to biology. Spring wakes the girl from her winter sleep as if she were a hedgehog; love is the drive to carry on the species; in it, we resemble the animals.

But even within this one poem there is also a half-submerged religious language ('mighty king', 'goodly', 'gloriously', 'penance') that suggests the opposite: love draws us away from creaturely life into the service of a higher power. This elevating conception of love is no less universal than the biological one. Its generalizing mechanism is not brute instinct, but the idea that the lover sees the beloved as perfect – perfectly beautiful, perfectly wise, perfectly virtuous. His adoration of the apparent embodiment of these qualities is tantamount to adoration of the qualities themselves: *in Stella* or *Corinna*, he loves beauty, and wisdom, and virtue. Love is our aspiration towards the absolutely good: in it, we resemble the angels. This passionate and ingenious idealisation came from the Italian Renaissance – from its early philosophical love poets Petrarch and Dante, and from its rediscovery of Plato's doctrines of love. Its impact on English love poetry was indirect but immense.

Around here, though, we start to detect irony. Is the courtier-lover really aspiring to absolute beauty, or is that flattery? At the end of Spenser's poem, he forgets the herald and talks directly to his 'sweet love': could that be an admission that herald, court and all were just decor for the real point, which is that he wants his girlfriend to sleep with him? Or again, what about the fact that the idealization of the beloved is taking place in a patriarchal society? The lover is his lady's humble servant, in a slightly whimsical sense, until such time as they marry, whereupon she becomes his humble servant in a sense which is not whimsical at all, but legal and economic. So 'courtship' – the finite period during which the discourse of love is operative – becomes a time of masquerade, when the orders of gender and power are inverted in the knowledge that they will right themselves when it is over. The Petrarchan architects of ideal love extend this transitional moment indefinitely by fetishizing the lady's chastity; but that means the poet is relying on the lady to refuse him, so there is something game-like about his attitude of despair when she does. There seems to be no final way of detaching the discourse of love from a margin of make-believe.

That is how it strikes Francis Bacon in his essay 'Of Love':

It is a strange thing to note the excess of this passion and how it braves the nature and value of things, by this: that the speaking in a perpetual hyperbole is comely in nothing but in love.⁶

⁶ Francis Bacon, *Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 88.

To 'brave the nature of things' means to deny that things are as they are. Love is the heartland of make-believe: the lover, addicted to hyperbole, transforms commonplace girls into goddesses, and tries, like Romeo and Juliet (and John Donne), to talk his way out of the fact that the sun rises in the morning. One reaction to all this is to call love a mental illness; and that is indeed a pervasive trope – the comparison of lovers to lunatics is not an attack on the discourse of love, but a recognized move within it. On the other hand, the refusal of the factual is not necessarily madness: it can be poetry. The poet's excellence, according to Sir Philip Sidney's famous defence of him, is not that he describes the world as it is but that he can invent a better one:

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely.⁷

In the same way, we could add, nature never set forth men and women as lovely as the one in the lover's description: the power of love creates what it could never find. So the lover is a poet in that what he says is neither a truth nor a lie, but a beautiful invention. This creative irresponsibility is what the discourse of love gave the theatre. Lovers on the Renaissance stage enter an astonishing range of states that merge truth and falsehood: disguises, pretences, sophistries, alienations, sports, flights, metamorphoses – beginning, of course, with the pretence that there are any women on the stage at all.

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Medicine

Surprisingly often, the plays represent their characters in medical terms; the most obvious reason for this is that the terms were widely understood. There were very few qualified physicians, so people commonly treated themselves, with the result that medical discourse was not so much a professional code as a common language. Medicine was part of the general knowledge, shared by writers and audiences, of what human beings are like.

On the whole, it was medieval knowledge. Medical education was based on the doctrines of Galen, a Greek physician who practised in Rome in the second century AD. His physiological model remained authoritative throughout this period; it was ultimately undermined by the implications of William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood, which was not published until 1628. From our point of view, then, Renaissance drama is medically premodern; its implicit conception of the body is alien to us.

Like any long-lived system of knowledge, the Galenic tradition was not a unified theory but an untidy bundle of practices, always flexible and sometimes contradictory. But at the risk of oversimplifying, we could say that its guiding concept is transformation. Whereas the finest human sculptor can only shape his materials, not change them, nature has a wonderful capacity to transform the materials themselves. The essential principle of life is heat, centrally generated in the heart. Thanks to this heat, the food we eat is converted by the stomach into a sort of liquid essence called 'chylus'; this then travels to the liver, where it is transformed into blood. As blood, the nutrients are conveyed to every part of the body, where they become flesh, bones, nerves and so on; and in particular, blood refined in the heart itself produces spirits. These are the active agents of the system: vapour-like, lighter and livelier than the fluids that give rise to them, they are conceptually linked to breath – that is, to life itself (what goes out of the body when it dies). Spirits are vitality, movement, perception, even consciousness; as the highest stage of refinement the body is capable of, they are the mediators between it and the immortal soul. Thus a series of chemical purifications leads all the way from the grossest part of us to the finest.

However, the work of transformation can go wrong at any point. Heat is literally vital, but if there is too much of it, it dries up equally vital

fluids; so the physician strives at once to maintain it and to moderate it. If impurities enter the body, it tries to purify itself by heating, thus causing fever by its very self-defence. Blood is particularly complex and precarious. It consists of four mingled liquids ('humours') with different characteristics: blood proper, which is hot and moist; choler, which is hot and dry; phlegm, which is cold and moist; and melancholy, which is cold and dry. Each of these is necessary to overall health, and each causes illness if it is present in excess. Doctors devote great efforts, then, to maintaining or correcting the balance, whether through diet, or drugs, or deliberately induced sweating, or, drastically but very commonly, bleeding – that is, drawing off some of the patient's blood in the hope that the liver will replace it with fresh blood that has a better humoral mix.

This conception straddles our divide between body and mind. The heart is the distributor of blood, but also the seat of the passions, and its physical and emotional functions are inseparable. Thus, the composition of the blood has emotional effects – the dry heat of choler appears as anger, the chill of melancholy as sadness, and so on. But equally, the emotions affect the composition – for example, joy dilates the heart, causing it to send out blood more abundantly and so spread sensations of well-being throughout the body, whereas grief contracts it, inhibiting the purification of the blood and producing dark, sluggish humours. It is a radically psychosomatic language. Here at random is Shakespeare's Brutus, mocking the anger of his friend Cassius:

Fret till your proud heart break;
 Go show your slaves how choleric you are,
 And make your bondmen tremble . . .
 Must I stand and crouch
 Under your testy humour? By the gods,
 You shall digest the venom of your spleen,
 Though it do split you. (*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.42–8)

When someone is angry, the relevant humours, choler and melancholy, are drawn from their seats in the spleen and the gall bladder to the site of the passion, the heart; this excess of humour is toxic, and to relieve the discomfort the angry person 'vents' it, letting it out in violent words and gestures. Brutus, an exponent of self-control, is refusing to tolerate the offensive behaviour this produces, and saying he will force Cassius to

dispose of his humour internally, however painful that is. Almost all the terms in his rapid diagnostic sketch – ‘heart’, ‘choleric’, ‘humour’, ‘digest’, ‘spleen’ – carry both physical and emotional senses. The theatrical value of this system hardly needs underlining: a theory that grounds strong feeling in states of the body is effectively a theory of acting.

To put it another way, Renaissance medicine is radically metaphorical. For instance, why in theory are there only four humours? In practice, both doctors and laymen speak as if there are dozens. The answer lies in the requirements of analogy. The four primary humours exhaust the possible combinations of hot, cold, moist and dry; and in this they correspond to the four elements that make up the material world: choler is hot and dry like fire, blood is like air, phlegm is like water, and melancholy is like earth. The same logic then projects these quartets on to others, such as the quadrants of the zodiac or the ages of man’s life. So if a doctor diagnoses, let us say, an excess of melancholy, there is a cluster of associations – coldness, dryness, earth, old age, winter, Saturn – to suggest appropriate dietary and astrological interventions. The procedures of medical treatment are not as remote from those of poetry as we have since come to expect.

We can see the resulting fluidity of thought in discussions of the gravest medical problem of the time: the epidemics of bubonic plague which literally decimated London in 1592–4, 1603, 1609 and 1625. No one knew that the disease was carried by fleas, but everyone saw that it was infectious. Physicians tried to understand its natural causes and cures, and the authorities struggled to counter it with a mixture of prophylactics and quarantine; on the other hand, there were preachers who dismissed this approach, maintaining that plague was God’s punishment of the city’s sin, and that the only remedy lay in prayer and repentance. At first sight the two accounts, medical and theological, seem absolutely opposed, but things are not that neat. For instance, some argued that the disease, however it was transmitted, seized the more readily on blood that was contaminated already: ‘those bodies wherein there is *Cacochymia*, corrupt and superfluous humours abounding, are apt and lightly infected’ (Hoeniger 1992: 213). As we just saw, ‘corrupt humours’ imply bad impulses as well as bad health: this formula comes very close to saying not only that unhealthy people are more likely to contract the plague, but also, in the same breath, that it infects the *morally* corrupted. Divine and naturalistic frameworks join together. Moreover, another branch of

medical thinking speculatively attributed the plague to environmental squalor: perhaps we are infected through our food and air by unburied corpses, 'stinking dunghills, filthy and standing pools of water'. This line of thought situates the corrupt and superfluous humours not in the patient's blood, and not in his moral conduct either, but in the common life of London. It thus extends still further the metaphoric connections between the languages of medicine and divinity: the proposition that the city is filthy and needs to be cleansed has both a hygienic register and a prophetic one.

It is this polysemy that informs the most forceful stage appearances of medical language. When the Duchess of Malfi's brother Ferdinand thinks she has given birth to illegitimate children, he cries:

Apply desperate physic:
 We must not now use balsamum, but fire,
 The smarting cupping-glass, for that's the mean
 To purge infected blood, such blood as hers . . . (2.5.23–6)

Balsamum is a mild analgesic, cupping a particularly painful technique for extracting blood. The simple medical idea is that the Duchess is ill and must be bled to restore her health. But Ferdinand is also thinking of blood in three other ways: as the medium of the sexual passion that has corrupted her chastity; as the lineage she shares with him and passes on to her bastard children; and as what he will shed in revenge. The fierce pile-up of meanings, typical of Jacobean tragedy, is made possible by the fact that the inner workings of the body are already subject to multiple interpretation in the practice of medicine.

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Rhetoric

For actors, from the Player in *Hamlet* to the drama school applicant of today, these plays demand the ability to go on and ‘do a speech’. As everyone finds out in practice, early modern drama is not only made out of action and dialogue, but also depends on this other, special unit of construction – the speech, the extended verbal solo. This has its own distinctive shape and energy, and requires the actor to *perform* it, rather in the way that an opera singer performs an aria. It is a trace of the most important historical fact about the language of Renaissance theatre: that it is rhetorical.

Simply, rhetoric was what boys learned in the newly established network of grammar schools. The curriculum mostly consisted of Latin, and this was taught under two main headings: grammar, which concerned the rules of the language, and rhetoric, which concerned its effective use. Ideally, then, a student acquired both correctness and eloquence. The forms in which he practised these were varied: schoolboys wrote letters and formal essays; university students engaged in disputations and analyses of texts. But the underlying paradigm of eloquence, and the ultimate outcome of the programme, was oratory. The universally acknowledged classical master of rhetoric, Cicero, wrote a textbook called *De Oratore* – ‘About the Orator’ – and the title points to the heart of the discipline. We could say, without too much simplification, that rhetoric is fundamentally the art of composing and delivering a speech.

Today, when making speeches is a marginal activity for most people, this seems an odd skill to put at the core of secondary education. So it is worth considering how it can have looked like a good idea. First, we have to imagine a social order in which oratory really did have more practical applications than it does today. English higher education was concentrated at Oxford and Cambridge, which were dominated by the church, and at the London Inns of Court, which were dominated by the legal profession. Both institutions privileged speaking: a clergyman was being prepared to preach, and a lawyer to argue a case in court. And both these activities were culturally central: the audience for sermons was far more numerous, regular and committed than the audience for plays; and in the absence of a developed political economy, law was the main discourse for the management of society. Eloquence was almost equally an asset in other political spheres, such as Parliament and the Court.

Here is one immediate way of grasping the rhetorical character of the stage. The conventionally stated aim of rhetoric was 'the moving of men's minds': it was meant to be effective in the direct sense of having an effect on the thoughts and perceptions of those who heard it. It was thus an instrument of influence: when religious and political codes were enforced, or altered, or contested, it was through the medium of rhetoric. Hence its vitality as a theatrical medium: the actors were, so to speak, playing with the levers of power in their society.

However, the prestige of oratory was most strongly secured not by the purposes it served but by the qualities it demanded. Rhetoricians subdivided the art of speaking into five faculties: invention, arrangement, memory, style, action. That is, sensibly enough: finding material for the speech, putting it in order, memorizing it, putting it into words, and delivering it. To do all these things excellently, the orator needs to make himself knowledgeable, methodical, focused, articulate and graceful: it is a comprehensive training of the mind and the body. Not only that, but since the purpose of the speech is to persuade, the orator must also be able to represent his cause as excellent and himself as trustworthy; and he cannot do that without understanding the political and moral values of his society. Putting it all together, then, rhetoricians tend to argue that an education in rhetoric amounts to education in general.

This communicative and ethical ideal influenced playwriting in the general way that it influenced every considered use of language. But beyond that, it was specifically conducive to drama. If theatre was rhetorical, that was partly because rhetoric was already theatrical. Three particular correspondences connect the school and the stage.

First, rhetoric was ambiguously placed between speaking and writing. Officially the discipline was all about speech: the oration was taken to be a live performance, and there was much discussion of how to command the attention and stir the emotions of a crowd. And as we saw, it did have real uses of this kind. On the other hand, rhetoric was studied in classical Latin, a language which had no living native speakers, and was learned in written form. Moreover, most of its practical applications were to writing: the textbooks in both English and Latin are manuals for the composition of narratives, treatises, letters, reports; and the grammar schools themselves were set up in part because the centralizing Tudor state needed well-read advisers and skilled bureaucrats. Even genuine instances

of oratory (sermons, for example, or speeches to Parliament) were often distributed in print as well as spoken. In short, Renaissance rhetoric was theoretically centred on speech, but it was not really an oral practice. Rather, it was a kind of writing that *imagined* itself as a kind of speaking. And that is exactly what the script of a play is.

Second, rhetorical speech was public. Not that the authorities ignore private communication (Cicero himself was an exponent of the familiar letter), but it remains a special case: the oration, the defining instance of eloquence, is addressed not to an individual but to an assembly. This public orientation is something that rhetoric shares with theatre, but not equally with all theatre. Modern naturalistic drama, for example, works above all through private conversation: it is because we observe the characters talking informally with their friends and families that we feel we know them and take an interest in them. It is a public form in the sense that it has an audience, but that fact does not in itself give rise to public speech. The characters talk as if they were alone together; the audience are eavesdropping. In Renaissance plays, by contrast, the speakers are effectively aware that they are on a stage. They rarely engage in simple private conversations: much more usually, a scene is in public space (at court, in the street, on the battlefield), or if it is in private the real theatre audience is acknowledged through the conventions of soliloquy and aside, or else, more deviously, the apparent spontaneity of the exchange is undermined by theatrical devices (there is an eavesdropper within the play, or one of the participants is disguised or lying). However it is done, the actual situation – the players, the stage, the assembled audience – enters into the language of the characters; they speak to us as well as to one another, each one actively and deliberately representing his desires, arguing his case as if at a public hearing, in the most forceful sense *making himself clear*.

Third, rhetoric is pragmatic. It understands speech, not as a set of true or false propositions, and not as an expression of the speaker's personality, but as an action. Speaking is always *doing* something: rhetorical utterances admonish, blame, congratulate, demand, exonerate, flatter, urge, warn. The theatrical value of this principle hardly needs underlining. It is the occasion of great set-pieces (Antony turning the crowd in *Julius Caesar*; Vindice's attempt to debauch his sister in *The Revenger's Tragedy**; Paris' defence of the theatre in *The Roman Actor**), but it equally informs less ostentatiously persuasive speeches. At random: *Volpone** opens with

an oration in praise of gold, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside** with a mother's attack on her daughter's lack of interest in fashionable accomplishments, *'Tis Pity She's A Whore** with a disputation about the lawfulness of incest. Praising, reproving, disputing: all three plays begin not with a state of affairs, but with an aggressive speech act. Rhetoric is a motor of the dramatic action, not just a manner of speaking.

To insist on the central value of rhetoric, for plays in particular and for the social order in general, sounds paradoxical in modern ears because for us rhetoric means, precisely, something neither central nor valuable, but mere verbal trickery, presentation as opposed to substance. Evidently this used not to be the word's dominant connotation. As we have seen, it was conventional to equate rhetorical competence with civic virtue. All the same, the modern account of rhetoric was by no means unimaginable: it was almost equally conventional to characterize rhetoric as a box of tricks by which people may be induced to believe outrageous falsehoods. (Shakespeare's great rhetoricians, on this view, include Richard III and Iago.) Thus the dramatists embrace rhetorical expression, but also hold it at an ironic arm's length: the examples in the previous paragraph are representative in that they all have something deceptive about them, or self-deceptive, or heretical. It was part of the vitality of the theatre that it both prized and mistrusted its own means of communication.

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Romance

As everyone knows, the ‘rise of the novel’ occurred in the eighteenth century; as a result, the early modern period can appear on syllabuses as if it had no prose fiction to speak of, only poetry and plays. That is a false impression – but it is true that if we survey the assortment of ‘romances’, ‘discourses’, ‘histories’ and ‘tales’ that make up the narrative literature of the time, we don’t see anything we can recognize as a novel. How do we orient ourselves in this unfamiliar landscape?

Renaissance readers did speak of novels, or more exactly of ‘*novelles*’, with the accent on the second syllable, since the word continued throughout the seventeenth century to denote a genre imported from Italy. It referred, more or less directly, to the *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio, a fourteenth-century prose work in which a group of young ladies and gentlemen, sheltering from the plague in a rural retreat, amuse one another by telling stories. The stories they tell – a hundred of them altogether – are *novelle*: new things, novelties, news. The ‘novel’ derives several characteristics from this context. It is explicitly recreational, designed only to pass the time pleasantly. It is also sociable: although in fact it is a written form, its framework and manner suggest a conversational art of storytelling. As a result it makes no claim to originality: like someone telling a story at a dinner party, the narrator is supposed not to be performing her own creation, but retailing something she has heard. Boccaccio’s stories, and those of his Italian successors in the genre, were indeed much retailed and retold, many of them appearing in English collections in the 1560s and 1570s.

They were not the only imports. The classical heritage of Renaissance Europe included ‘Greek romances’ – long, extravagant stories from the first and second centuries, featuring unfortunate lovers, battles, shipwrecks, mistaken identities and miraculous restorations. These also began to appear in English in the 1570s. And there was a European tradition of chivalric romances, too – again extended and episodic narratives, but centred upon the exploits of idealized knights. These existed in medieval English, but were also developed by the sixteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese prose writers who would eventually become notorious for causing the madness of Don Quixote; he himself appeared in print in 1605, and in English in 1612.

These translated romances had a socially varied fate. Both Iberian chivalric paragons like *Amadis de Gaule* and native ones like Guy of Warwick entered on a long, vigorous life as heroes of popular pamphlets. The taste for them was already being mocked as naive and plebeian at the end of the sixteenth century, and that tone can still be heard in novels of the early nineteenth century. Yet the same narrative repertoire informs the most ambitious prose fiction of the age, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, which was written in the early 1580s and published in 1590. Sidney took the formulas of romance – knight-errantry, heroic love, impenetrable disguise and so on – and made them the occasion of a virtuoso display of courtly style; so much so that more than one Elizabethan textbook of rhetoric took its examples from *Arcadia*, thus making it into a pattern-book for aspiring speakers and writers. It could hardly have distanced itself further from the tone of popular romance, and yet its social status was not entirely secure: an admirer in the 1630s complains about sarcastic spirits who call it the reading of chambermaids. It seems that whatever the author's intentions, prose fiction has something socially unreliable about it.

This is perhaps connected with its deliberate lightness. We saw how the 'novel' defines itself as an amusement; and this is confirmed in the title of the first major English collection, William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure, beautified, adorned and well furnished, with pleasant histories* (1566). And Sidney, in a stylish dedication, calls *Arcadia* 'a trifle, and that triflingly handled', designed for the reader's 'idle times' (p. 506). Both these gambits were much imitated: prose fiction consistently presented itself as a mere diversion. The storyteller is socially and artistically unpretentious: as Sidney puts it in his *Defence of Poesy*, 'with a tale forsooth he cometh to you, with a tale that holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue.'⁸ It is not that he is trivial-minded: he intends a serious moral effect. However, his claim to attention is based not on his intention but solely, and precariously, on his power to delight.

An inner logic connects this offer of narrative pleasure with the idea of love, which is the central business of almost all the stories. One of the many collections inspired by Painter's example was *Rich's Farewell to the Military Profession* (1581); the reason for the odd title is that the compiler,

⁸ Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, p. 101.

Barnaby Rich, is an ex-soldier who is now seeking recognition as a writer. In his preface, he says he is exchanging the service of Mars for that of Venus: it seems that the goddess governs fiction as the god governs soldiering, an unclassical notion that suggests an automatic association between stories and love. Or take for example Thomas Lodge's *Rosalind* (1590), a successful short romance which is the source of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599). Like the play, it tells of a young man who is unjustly treated by his elder brother after their father's death, defeats a wrestler who has been bribed to kill him, goes into exile in the forest in the company of a faithful servant, and eventually regains his patrimony. Lodge's final paragraph draws a series of morals suggested by these events, which form the backbone of the story. But the bulk of the story consists of reflections, debates and soliloquies about the young man's love for the princess of the title, and the varied course of his wooing; this does not come from Lodge's source, and is not mentioned in his conclusion. Love dominates the story without quite being integrated into its structure; foreign to the didactic purposes of the text, it directly expresses its desire to please.

The same desire can be traced in another general characteristic of this fiction: its appetite for the wonderful. For example, one of the most popular love stories in the *Arcadia*, much retold and dramatized, is that of Argalus and Parthenia. Parthenia is violently disfigured by a rejected suitor, and becomes as ugly as she was once beautiful. Her true lover, Argalus, insists that his feeling for her is unaltered, but she refuses to accept him because she will not disgrace him with an unworthy bride. The narrator comments on the stalemate: 'a strange encounter of love's affects and effects, that he by an affection sprung from excessive beauty, should delight in horrible foulness, and she, of a vehement desire to have him, should kindly build a resolution never to have him' (p. 31). This is a very characteristic narrative move. It is the 'strangeness' of the tale that makes it worth telling: the point is not that the characters and events are probable or realistic, but precisely that they are astonishing. The story forms the image of an idea (love, honour, spite), and the more extreme the image, the more eloquently it conveys the idea. It is not a slice of life, but an operation on the mind of the listener.

The theatre's relationship with this literature was complicated. On the one hand, there was a sense that drama defined itself precisely in opposition to the looseness and implausibility of romance. Romance wanders

across times and countries, a play focuses on a single point; tales are childish fantasies, drama a mirror of life; the narrative hero is a plaything of fortune, the stage hero the creature of his own act; and so on. This is a position repeatedly articulated by Ben Jonson, and also explored, ironically but not open-mindedly, in Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle**. It makes narrative fiction the negation of drama: each is what the other is not.

On the other hand, fiction obviously served drama as a reservoir of plots. Like the twentieth-century film industry, the theatre ransacked published books for usable narrative ideas; Elizabethan and Jacobean drama would be unrecognizable without the Italian *novellieri* such as Boccaccio, Bandello and Cinthio. Moreover, some of the characteristics of fiction-writing that I have highlighted – the centrality of pleasure and astonishment, the organization of imagery to denote ideas – feed straight into the hyperbolic theatricality of the Renaissance stage. As Romeo and Juliet (derived from Bandello) are carried off at the end of the play, the Prince concludes:

For never was there story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo. (5.3.309–10)

Still visible on the stage, they become the most unfortunate of lovers, the eloquent paradigm of woe. They are already a story.

Shakespeare is perhaps unusually given to this kind of narrative gesture: his early *Comedy of Errors* flirts with the conventions of Greek romance, and his late *Winter's Tale* flaunts its narrative character in its title and manner. But he is not alone. From George Peele's strange folktale anthology *The Old Wives Tale* (1590) to Thomas Heywood's pageant-like rehearsals of Greek mythology in *The Golden Age* and its sequels (1610–12), the theatre can be seen periodically returning to a storytelling principle at odds with its own conventions. It is as if romance is the source of the theatre's power to tell stories, and although the source is normally covered up, no one can resist taking an occasional look.

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Satire

Playwriting was not the only literary fashion; another was verse satire – bitter attacks on folly and vice, more or less closely modelled on the satirists of classical Rome, particularly Juvenal. Known throughout the century, the genre experienced a sudden boom in the late 1590s, when dozens of new satires were published, not including the most brilliant of them, the ones by John Donne, which were not printed until later but circulated in manuscript. It was a brief, flamboyant craze. Most of the writers were privileged young men at the Inns of Court, the unofficial ‘third university of England’; their style was violent and quasi-improvisatory, and their content tended to obscenity, political risk-taking, and thinly veiled attacks on real people (often other satirists). For one or another of these offences, the genre was prohibited by episcopal decree in 1599; the ban was incompletely effective, but probably did nudge the whole phenomenon towards the theatre, which was not covered by its terms. Certainly the next few years saw a flurry of satirical playwriting, much of it for children’s companies, and some of it concentrated in the ‘war of the theatres’, an exchange of insults between Ben Jonson and John Marston that produced, in a little over two years between 1599 and 1601, three plays from Jonson, two from Marston and one (on Marston’s side) from Thomas Dekker. Significantly, both the main combatants were extra-theatrical satirists too: Marston’s verse collection *The Scourge of Villainy* (1598) had been one of the targets of the bishops’ disapproval; and Jonson would later present his partly satirical *Epigrams* as his best work. Satire was a place where dramatic and non-dramatic writing joined up.

At its centre is a persona, a consciously adopted voice:

Preach not the Stoics’ patience to me,
I hate no man, but men’s impiety.
My soul is vext, what power willeth desist?
Or dares to stop a sharp-fang’d Satirist?
Who’ll cool my rage? who’ll stay my itching fist?
But I will plague and torture whom I list?

(John Marston, *The Scourge of Villainy*, Sat. 2, 5–10)

or

Who is so patient of this impious world
That he can check his spirit, or rein his tongue? . . .
Not I: my language
Was never ground into such oily colours,
To flatter vice and daub iniquity:
But, with an armed and resolved hand,
I'll strip the ragged follies of the time
Naked as at their birth . . .
 and with a whip of steel,
Print wounding lashes in their iron ribs.
(Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out Of His Humour*, 'Grex', ll. 4–20)

The first passage is from *The Scourge of Villainy*, the second from a play. In theory, then, one speaker is an actual poet and the other a theatrical character; but in practice the convention is so powerful that the voice is almost the same.

It is first of all *impatient* speech, an explosive response to provocation. Both passages develop a famous tag from Juvenal: *difficile est satyram non scribere* – it is difficult not to write satire. The poem exists, we gather, because of the failure of a painful effort of self-restraint: it has not been composed so much as it has broken out. This story is two-edged. In a way, it is a guarantee of honesty: we believe this man because his words come from the heart; he can't help telling the truth. But there is another tone:

My pate was great with child, and here 'tis eas'd,
Vex all the world, so that thy self be pleas'd.
(*The Scourge of Villainy*, 6.111–12)

Here, the speaker afflicts everyone else in order to make himself comfortable; the principle that overcomes his self-restraint is not a regard for truth but a defiant selfishness. So the satirist is ambiguously prophetic and yobbish. This contradictory identity is dramatized by the false etymology that derived 'satire' from 'satyr' – a mythical goat-like creature associated with Bacchus. Satires resembles satyrs in two ways. Both have rough surfaces: the creature is hairy and ragged, and the verse is deliberately abrasive, often metrically irregular and lexically uncouth. And both are characterized by uncivilized vigour. Satire, the wild man of the literary woods, doesn't care who is offended by its intemperate speech – perhaps

because it is incorruptibly natural, perhaps because it is irredeemably unsociable.

The same uncertainty informs the genre's aggression. In tropes that recur endlessly, satire 'bites' and 'lashes', and as is clear both from Marston's title and from Jonson's punningly sadistic reference to printing, the poem is imagined as a literal assault: its intention is not to describe vices, or to counsel against them, but actually to *be* their punishment. But, again, what is the status of this violence? Whipping was a penalty under the criminal law; in administering it, the satirist lays claim to authority, as if he is the agent of some poetical court of justice. But at the same time, explicitly, he is freelance, attacking people when he feels like it and proudly refusing to hold himself accountable to any authority whatever. The violence is both judicial and individualistic; the speaker is a cross between a minister of heaven and a mad dog.

The contradiction is a political one. It is not coincidental that satire peaked in the same years as the cult of Elizabeth, when the artifice of the Court's iconography was at its most extreme. The courtly poetic of love and eulogy found its schematic opposite in a convention of rage and detraction. It was not simply that satire expressed the feelings of the unsuccessful, though satirists themselves were satirically conscious of that interpretation. It was also that if the Court, with its hierarchies of lordship and service, could be seen as a universe of dependences, it produced a reactive ethos of *independence*, an overmotivated contempt for everything servile, or ceremonious, or even polite. Hence the rhetoric of truculent selfhood. But of course there is no such thing as a language of unconditional individuality. The satiric discourse, and the reader's assent to it, are necessarily constructed out of shared materials: the exposure of ignorance, affectation and sensuality invokes (respectively) classical authority, hereditary gentility and religious orthodoxy. Even the individualism has an aristocratic character: the indiscriminate aggression suggests an author who wears a sword and is not disposed to swallow insults. The anti-social pose is a form of social membership.

That inconsistent figure, producing the contradictions of his making in the form of histrionic excess, naturally found his way on to the stage. Most obviously, the voice itself is heard from the commentators of Jonson's drama, the misanthropes of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (1607), or the semi-licensed 'railing' characters such as Marston's own

Malevole in *The Malcontent* (1604). But these adapted satirists tend to be afflicted by dramatic stasis. Natives of a monologic genre, they stand on the stage and talk, and nothing happens. More dynamically, satire infiltrated Renaissance tragedy in the form of revenge.

The mechanism appears most clearly in a joke. In the university comedy *The Return from Parnassus* (1601), a character called Furor Poeticus, probably a caricature of Marston himself, imagines what he will do to a rich man who refuses his application for patronage:

I'll shake his heart upon my verse's point,
Rip out his guts with rhyming poniard,
Quarter his credit with a bloody quill. (1352–4)

Here, parodically, literary and literal attacks merge. An epigram has a point like a dagger, a wounded reputation bleeds. What makes the overlap easy is not only the lexical violence of satiric convention; it is also that the literal atrocities of revenge tragedy are already semiotic. The avenger, after all, is not simply a killer. He wants the killing to be *understood*, by the victim, by a public, by the spirit of whoever is being avenged; and therefore he wants it to be meaningful – to have the formal coherence and representational force of a message. So he behaves more like a poet than a professional assassin, often devising metatheatrical refinements for purely artistic reasons.

The avenger, then, translates satiric speech into tragic action. What is more, he reproduces, in the course of his role, precisely the contradictions of the satiric persona. Like the satirist, he cannot bear the vices of his world: this inability is powerfully motivated by his personal wrongs, but at the same time, just that particularity is calculated to exacerbate the tension between public chastisement and private malice – it is the whole dramatic point of the avenger's situation that, again like the satirist, he is both a judge and a criminal. His social alienation makes him appear from one angle as a collective hero, championing on the audience's behalf all those shared values his enemies have trampled on; and from the opposite angle as a locked individual, skulking with his skulls, engaging in social interactions only in order to plot mayhem. It was in revenge tragedy, and above all in *Hamlet*, that the Elizabethan satire boom found its really adequate form.

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The Writers

Francis Beaumont (1584/5–1616)

More than most playwrights, Beaumont was upper class: he was from a prominent Leicestershire family; his father was a judge. He was educated at Oxford and the Inner Temple, and in 1607 made a startlingly confident dramatic debut with *The Knight of the Burning Pestle**. It was staged by the Children at the Blackfriars, who were partly owned by Beaumont's older contemporary at the Middle Temple, John Marston; they were the appropriate company for both writers, being fashionable, impudent and expensive.

The *Knight*, which apparently flopped, was Beaumont's only solo venture. For the rest of his career, which was ended by a stroke in 1613, he collaborated with John Fletcher, producing five plays for the children in the private theatres, notably *The Scornful Lady* (c. 1610) and four for the King's Men: *The Captain*, *Philaster*, *The Maid's Tragedy** and *A King And No King*. The last three of these, staged between 1608 and 1611, are the defining works of that composite Jacobean playwright, 'Beaumont-and-Fletcher'. Stylishly combining courtly artifice, sexual perversity and political ambiguity, they were successful in the theatre throughout the seventeenth century. Together with some work in masque and poetry, they established a major reputation: Beaumont died respected and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Even so, the posthumous fame of 'Beaumont-and-Fletcher' is slightly misleading. In 1647, *Comedies and tragedies written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, gentlemen*, was published in folio – a durable monument to set beside the folios of Jonson and Shakespeare. One consequence was that their plays became easier to find than other, uncollected scripts; this supported their status after 1660. And a second result was that the two men came vaguely to be regarded as the joint authors of everything in the folio, whereas in fact it included dozens of plays that Fletcher wrote either alone or in collaboration with someone else. The collection publicized the image of an inseparable playwriting couple: anecdotes have them sharing not only authorship, but also lodgings, clothes, girls. It is impossible, now, to know how far that is biographically true, and how far it is a mythical projection of the folio itself.

This myth distorts Beaumont's writing career chronologically. Because Fletcher continued to write prolifically until his death in 1625, and

because the folio appeared only after the closure of the theatres, Beaumont-and-Fletcher look like a relatively late phenomenon. An influential critical tradition highlights their sceptical wit, frigidly complex plots, thin, intelligent verse and deliberate appeal to a genteel audience: here we seem to see drama turning away from the medieval and popular stage that underpinned Shakespeare, and towards the secular, socially exclusive theatre of the Restoration. What complicates this reading is the fact that Beaumont was Shakespeare's professional *contemporary*: like him, he wrote his last play in about 1612 and died in 1616. The dramaturgic gulf between them is not a historical one: they wrote for the same adult company in the same years. Rather, it illustrates the hybrid character of the theatre that employed them both.

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Richard Brome (c. 1590–1652)

The earliest record of Richard Brome's existence seems to be the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), when the Stage-keeper launches into an attack on the play, but first checks that he is not overheard by the author 'or his man, Master Brome, behind the arras'. Brome did indeed start out as Ben Jonson's 'man', perhaps a domestic servant, or a literary assistant, or a mixture of the two. By 1623 he was writing plays on his own account, and in 1629 he had two successful comedies with the King's Men at the Blackfriars: *The Lovesick Maid* and *The Northern Lass*. Jonson's own comedy *The New Inn* famously flopped in the same Blackfriars season; at the time the ageing master was bitter in print about the contrast, but when *The Northern Lass* was published in 1632 he contributed condescendingly benign verses.

After a few freelance years, which produced among other plays an interesting contemporary social satire, *The Weeding of Covent Garden* (1633), Brome signed, in 1635, a contract with Queen Henrietta's company at the Salisbury Court theatre, by which he engaged to give them three plays a year in return for a weekly salary of 15 shillings plus one day's profit from

each play. This was good money – at least double what a dramatist could have earned a generation earlier. In theory, the arrangement gave the playwright the status of a company employee: despite his affluence, Brome was a servant again. In practice things were not so neat: the flow of work was disrupted by a lengthy closure due to plague in 1636, and Brome kept in touch with a rival company, Beeston's Boys at the Cockpit. He did write several plays for Salisbury Court, including *The Sparagus Garden* (1635) and the ingeniously metatheatrical comedy *The Antipodes* (1638), but in 1639 he moved decisively to Beeston, for whom he wrote his last and best-known play, *A Jovial Crew**. The company at Salisbury Court both sued and lampooned him for his desertion: the status of the professional dramatist was still unresolved, and it is hard to say how it would have worked out if the theatre had survived beyond 1642.

Brome was more of a popular playwright than his contemporary Shirley: he was comfortable at the Globe and the Red Bull as well as the indoor houses, and recently he has been read as a consciously dissident writer too. He was briefly arrested in 1640 because his comedy *The Court Beggar* had been performed without a licence – probably because its not very heavily disguised versions of well-known courtiers would have prevented its getting one. Even so, he can be politically overinterpreted. His comedy also has a virtuosic complexity which suggests not so much any great referential force as a rather self-contained theatrical efficiency – writing at the service of a developed theatrical establishment.

Further Reading

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George Chapman (1559–1634)

Chapman was a versatile and ambitious writer for whom the theatre was only one option. His career as a dramatist took up less than two decades of a long life, from about 1596 to 1612; and throughout those years he was also engaged in translating the whole of Homer into English verse. He was not well off, and it may be that the theatre was subsidizing the scholarship.

He was the younger son of a Hertfordshire yeoman, from whom he inherited little. In his late twenties he served for several years as a soldier in the Netherlands. It is not known how he acquired an education, but he must have done so, for his earliest publications, in 1594–5, are erudite, even philosophical poems. In 1598 he brought out not only the first fruits of his work on the *Iliad*, but also a skilful completion of *Hero and Leander*, the narrative love poem Marlowe had left unfinished. Like anyone in his position, he was using these publications partly as bids for patronage, with dedications to the Earl of Essex and to various members of Sir Walter Raleigh's circle. By the end of the century he was fairly well known, but still only precariously solvent.

He began writing for the Lord Admiral's Men, notably the intrigue comedies *An Humorous Day's Mirth* (1597) and *All Fools* (1599). Then he took advantage of the renewed vogue for children's companies: most of his stage writing after 1600 was either for Paul's Boys or for the Children of the Chapel (later called the Children of the Queen's Revels). Besides more comedies, it included two pairs of tragedies based on recent French history – *Bussy d'Ambois* and *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois* (1604 and 1610), and *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron* (1608). These plays are occasionally revived, and effectively constitute his modern reputation: exceptional for their stylistic density and their explicit interest in political and philosophical ideas, they have struck most readers as interesting rather than exciting.

Like most of the Children's associates at this time, Chapman ran into occasional trouble with the authorities, being imprisoned along with Ben Jonson for his part in the clever (and unlicensed) comedy *Eastward Ho!* in 1605, and offending the French Ambassador with *The Conspiracy of Byron* in 1608. Chapman negotiated these crises with the help of his aristocratic patrons.

His retirement from the stage was probably a question of patronage too. Like other survivors of the Essex circle of the 1590s, he attached himself to the latently charismatic figure of James I's eldest son, Henry, Prince of Wales. The Prince's death at the end of 1612 put paid to a range of cultural hopes. Chapman had a success in 1613 with the *Memorable Masque of the Middle Temple*, part of the wedding celebrations for the Princess Elizabeth, but he wrote no more plays, and in 1614 left London for his native Hertfordshire, where he spent the rest of his life.

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Thomas Dekker (c. 1572–1632)

Dekker was a professional writer whose genres included satirical pamphlets and accounts of the criminal underworld as well as plays and civic pageants. He wrote vividly about London, and seems to have spent all his life there. He had no recorded family connections with any of the City companies, and there is no trace of his formal education. Of all the major dramatists, he is probably the one who was closest to the lives of ordinary unprivileged Londoners; and the populist and puritan cultural attitudes implied in his writings suggest the same social world.

He started writing plays in the later 1590s, and until about 1606 he was producing material at a rate dictated by his financial needs: he spent brief periods in prison for debt in 1598 and 1599. Like most people in his position, he combined work on his own plays with multiple collaborations, and between 1598 and 1602 was involved in about forty different shows. Seven of these were solo productions, including *The Shoemakers' Holiday**, the fairytale-like comedy *Old Fortunatus* (1600), and *Satiro-mastix* (1601), his contribution to the theatrical mini-war between Jonson and Marston. The technical diversity of this output is typical: in the next few years, he did bawdy City comedy (*Westward Ho!* and *Northward Ho!*, with Webster, 1604–5), as well as the two-part tragicomedy *The Honest Whore* (partly with Middleton, also 1604–5) and, on his own, *The Whore of Babylon* (1607), a strange anti-Catholic allegory about the Spanish Armada.

After *The Whore of Babylon* his theatrical work slackened. He wrote *If This Be Not A Good Play The Devil Is In It*, a piece of popular *diablerie* which was staged at the Red Bull in 1610, and – equally populist in a different way – *The Roaring Girl**, with Middleton again, at the Fortune in 1611. Apart from that he seems mostly to have been doing non-theatrical pamphlets, among them *The Gull's Hornbook* (1609), an ironic instruction manual for aspiring fashionable idiots.

Dekker wrote the Lord Mayor's pageant for October 1612, an important mark of success for a London writer. However, in the same year he was again arrested for debt – apparently at the suit of John Webster, the playwright's father. This time he was unable to raise the money to get out, and he was not released until 1619. He continued to write and publish from prison, but of course he was cut off from the theatre. On his release he threw himself into fresh collaborations, such as *The Virgin Martyr* (with Massinger in 1620) and *The Witch of Edmonton* (with Ford and Rowley in 1621). This last play, which has had several modern revivals, is about Elizabeth Sawyer, who had been hanged as a witch that spring. The opportunism is typical: throughout his career, in extremely various dramatic forms, Dekker was taking up and exploiting contemporary actuality in a way we would now call journalistic. This topical flair is one of the things that make him distinctive and interesting: it is hard to imagine a less 'Shakespearean' way of using the stage.

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John Fletcher (1579–1625)

John Fletcher's family was distinguished, literary and unlucky. His father was a Protestant clergyman who rose to be Bishop of London; his uncle, Giles Fletcher, was a diplomat and writer; his cousins Giles and Phineas Fletcher were poets. But his father died in debt in 1596, leaving his children and his debts to his brother Giles, who was attached to the Essex circle, and whose career was irreparably damaged by the Earl's fall in 1601. At this point John Fletcher was 21; he had recently taken an MA at Cambridge, he had numerous relatives and acquaintances in public and cultural life, but he had neither the resources nor the patrons needed for a political or ecclesiastical career. After some years about which nothing is known, he settled on the theatre, writing his first play, with Francis Beaumont, for the Children of the Queen's Revels in 1606. He was a full-time playwright for the rest of his life.

This career marks a new professionalization of playmaking. Despite Fletcher's miscellaneous literary connections, he seems to have written virtually nothing but plays: whereas the principal Elizabethan dramatists were all non-dramatic poets as well, he was a specialist. The pattern of his co-writing has the same businesslike quality. He had three significant collaborators: between 1606 and 1612 he wrote nine plays with Beaumont, the best-known being *Philaster* and *The Maid's Tragedy**; in 1612–13 he worked with Shakespeare on three plays, including *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; and from 1619 he wrote about ten plays with Massinger, including *Sir John van Olden Barnavelte* and *The Sea Voyage*. All three of these partnerships made organizational as well as artistic sense. Beaumont was related to the Hastings family, who became Fletcher's patrons. Shakespeare was a sharer in the King's Men, and when he retired in 1613–14, Fletcher succeeded him as the company's leading dramatist, apparently giving them everything he wrote from then on. Massinger, in turn, took over as the King's Men's principal playwright when Fletcher himself died of the plague in 1625. During all these collaborations, Fletcher continued to write plays of his own as well; the best known, for various reasons, are *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c. 1608), *The Woman's Prize* (1611), *The Chances* (1617), *The Island Princess* and *The Wild Goose Chase* (both 1621).

The efficiency of these working arrangements, the specialization, the high overall output, the emergence of what was effectively the post of writer in residence at London's principal theatre – all these developments suggest the formation, for the first time, of an established commercial theatre, in which the successful playwright has the status of a senior member of staff. In the writing itself, this professionalism takes the form of technical virtuosity. Fletcher's plays are characterized by formal innovation, complicated plotting, verbal economy and a curious absence of seriousness: in tragedy and comedy alike, this is a drama that knows it is entertainment. All these trademarks are also connected with the perception, important in post-1660 appreciations of Fletcher, that his comedies are written in the language of gentlemen. The institutional stabilization of the theatre was at the same time a stratification into popular and fashionable, lower and higher; and Fletcher's professional status was among other things an unambiguous identification with the values of the latter.

Further Reading

The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon, 10 vols, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966–96).

John Ford (1586–?1650)

Ford was from the upper provincial gentry, the second son of a Devon Justice of the Peace, and the great-nephew of the Lord Chief Justice Sir John Popham. He studied briefly at Oxford, and in 1602 joined the Middle Temple, where he seems to have remained until his eventual retirement from London life in the late 1630s. Formally, the Middle Temple, like the other Inns of Court, was an institution for trainee and practising lawyers, but if Ford worked in any branch of the law, there is no record of it. For him, as for many of its members (including Marston, for example), it served as a general education, a congenial society, and the base for a career as a writer.

This background places Ford in the same generation, and the same social stratum, as Francis Beaumont, who was a year or two older and entered the Inner Temple in 1600. As a dramatist, though, Ford belongs to a later age: his earliest traceable work for the stage is his collaboration with Dekker and Rowley on *The Witch of Edmonton* in 1621, and the solo tragedies for which he is best known now come from a five-year period around 1630. In the years before he began writing plays, Ford's publications included courtly and devotional poetry, and essays in ethics. The pattern of his dedications suggests an attachment to the residual Essex circle, as well as a dissident cast of mind. He could not be simply described as a courtier; but the literary baggage he eventually brought to the theatre was certainly that of an elite convention.

This is borne out by the tragedies he wrote alone – *The Lover's Melancholy* (1628), *The Broken Heart* (1630), *Love's Sacrifice* (1632) – all for private theatre performance, either by the King's Men at the Blackfriars or by Queen Henrietta's at the Cockpit in Drury Lane. Full of echoes of earlier plays (Ford read Shakespeare and Fletcher carefully), they nevertheless work differently from their models. In part this is because of their relative lack of narrative drive: typically they are more interested in situations, emblematic tableaux, spaces for the performance of inward states –

reflecting for example on both melancholy and heartbreak in some psychological detail. *'Tis Pity She's A Whore** (1632) and *Perkin Warbeck* (1633) are more 'Shakespearean' in manner, but push their respective forms (Jacobean tragedy and Elizabethan chronicle) to startling extremes of ideological indeterminacy.

Ford continued to see his writing in literary terms, taking care over the printing and dedications of his plays, and making frequent appearances in the complimentary pages of other writers' books. His last play, *The Lady's Trial* (1638), was published in 1639, and after that there is no trace of him. Probably he returned to Devon, but it is not known when he died. His practical and cultural connection with the theatre had never been strong; he has the interest of a distinctive practitioner who was always subtly at odds with the medium.

Further Reading

The Works of John Ford, 3 vols, ed. William Gifford, revd Alexander Dyce, 1895 (reprinted New York: Russell and Russell, 1965).

Robert Greene (1558–1592)

Greene died in a London garret at the age of 34, and this has tended to be what he is famous for – famous at the time because it formed the satisfying end of a tuppence-coloured career of transgression and repentance, marked by several farewell pamphlets; and famous later because one of the pamphlets contains the earliest reference (an abusive one) to Shakespeare as a playwright.

If Greene appears, then, as an Elizabethan *poète maudit*, this is mostly because he was, to a remarkably complete extent at such an early stage, a writer in the marketplace. He was probably the son of a Norwich tradesman; he was educated at Cambridge, and started writing for publication well before he left the university in 1583. Some of his publications have dedications soliciting patronage, but there are no signs that he secured any; he was wholly dependent on selling manuscripts to printers, which he did opportunistically and successfully, becoming a famous name by the late 1580s. He published prose fiction in large quantities and various genres: romance, pastoral, underworld pamphlet. His best-known prose

work is *Pandosto; or the Triumph of Time* (1588), which was a popular success, and is still read, partly because it is the narrative source of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

The theatre was an obvious resource for someone in Greene's position, at least once Marlowe had effected his decisive entrance. Like Peele's, Greene's first play, *Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1587), is roughly Marlovian, but subsequent work shows more independence: *A Looking-Glass for London and England* (with Thomas Lodge, 1588) picks up a moral-drama vocabulary; *James IV* (1590) is a blend of morality play and Italian romance, rather oddly located in Scotland; and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589) is a domestic love story made strange and metatheatrically comic by the interventions of the eponymous magicians. It is not too fanciful to say that Greene was in the process of finding ways to put his non-dramatic romance material onto the stage; we can only guess where he would have got to if he had not run out of time.

The deathbed pamphlet *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance* (1592) is directed not just against Shakespeare but against actors in general. Greene confesses that he has been brought to an early grave by his own follies, which include not only drinking, whoring and gambling, but also writing for the players. He warns his friends to have nothing to do with these low-born puppets who get rich by mouthing words they steal from better men than themselves. Whatever allowances are made, both for Greene's desperate circumstances and for the hyperbolic conventions of the genre, the bitterness of this is still startling. Arguably, Renaissance poetry and commercial theatre formed one of the great creative conjunctions of English literary history. But to the writers involved, the relationship could look more like a devil's bargain.

Further Reading

The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene, 2 vols, ed. J. Churton Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).

Thomas Heywood (c. 1573–1641)

In 1633 Heywood looked back over a writing career of nearly forty years and estimated that he had written or contributed to 220 plays, many of

which were never printed. If this is true, then it suggests two important propositions about early modern drama in general. The first is that in our terms its writers were scriptwriters rather than authors. Heywood's total, almost unbelievable if you are comparing him with a writer of stage plays today, is less surprising if you think of the CV of a writer of early westerns or television comedy. And the second is that the plays we read are a partly random selection of the plays that were performed. A large slice of the repertoire is lost.

Heywood was probably the son of a clergyman in Lincolnshire who died in 1593, leaving him, after two years at Cambridge University, to support himself. He went to London, and published his first poem in 1594. Like several others he was drawn into the scriptwriting circle around the Lord Admiral's Men in the second half of the 1590s, and although he always worked in non-dramatic forms as well, he found the theatre a congenial place. By 1598 he was a full-time actor, and in 1601 became a sharer in the Earl of Worcester's company. Reassigned to Queen Anne in 1604, this troupe moved into the new Red Bull playhouse in Clerkenwell, where it built up a reputation for vigorous popular spectacle. Heywood wrote for it until about 1614. The plays included *The Fair Maid of the West, Part 1**, another tale of love and privateering called *Fortune by Land and Sea* (co-written with Rowley), and a revival of *The Four Prentices of London*, the action fantasy (probably first written in the 1590s) which is among Beaumont's targets in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle**. In 1603, Worcester's also did the play for which Heywood is best known, *A Woman Killed With Kindness*. In many ways this domestic tragedy is the exact reverse of spectacular – the point of it is that the decisive events take place in the characters' inner lives. It is popular in the different sense that it insists on the seriousness of the sufferings of undistinguished people: hence its reputation among twentieth-century liberal critics.

There are signs that Heywood was consciously concerned about the status of his medium. Around 1608, he wrote *An Apology for Actors*, the theatre's only extended rejoinder to the attacks of preachers and pamphleteers. When that was published in 1612, he was halfway through an ambitious series of five plays (*The Golden Age, The Silver Age, The Brazen Age* and the two parts of *The Iron Age*), adding up to a pageant cycle of Greek mythology from the War of the Titans to the fall of Troy. Staged at the Red Bull, it seems almost a project in popular education, and it is

at the opposite end of the spectrum from *A Woman Killed With Kindness* – spectacular, episodic, and now read only by scholars.

Heywood apparently wrote nothing for almost a decade from about 1615, and when he resumed his career it was not with the same purely theatrical focus. He added a sequel to *The Fair Maid of the West**, he wrote Lord Mayor's pageants, he saw a good deal of earlier work through the press: several of his Jacobean plays only survive in 1630s editions. This perhaps signals a cultural shift. As I noted earlier, the Heywood of 1608 was dubious about publishing plays in book form because it was selling the same work twice. By the 1630s, after some ostentatious dramatic publications, including Jonson's and Shakespeare's, he was still not sure, but that Elizabethan insouciance about the text was harder to sustain. He had kept going long enough to see his own early scripts starting to turn into literature.

Further Reading

The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood, 6 vols, London, 1874 (reprinted New York: Russell and Russell, 1964).

Ben Jonson (1572–1637)

Jonson was a professional author in an unusually complete sense. With no family wealth or connections – he was originally destined for his stepfather's trade of bricklaying – he sustained a lifestyle of metropolitan gentility for forty years by exploiting the three main sources of literary income: the playhouse, publication and patronage. In the first category, he wrote some two dozen plays, mostly satirical comedies, of which the most successful, both then and now, are *Volpone** (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610). Seventeenth-century taste also canonized *Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman* (1609); modern critical and theatrical opinion has preferred *Bartholomew Fair** (1614). That these masterpieces are all grouped in the same decade is not accidental. Theatre writing was only one aspect of Jonson's complicated literary life. He was a famous non-dramatic poet; he cultivated several noble patrons; for most of the reign of James I

(1603–25) he was the principal deviser of court masques. Because of these commitments, he did no theatrical work at all, for example, between *The Devil Is An Ass* in 1616 and *The Staple of News* in 1626. He was extraordinarily successful – a pension from James effectively recognized him as ‘the king’s poet’, and he is buried in Westminster Abbey – but he was never secure, financially or culturally, and he died poor.

At the heart of his carefully constructed literary identity was the idea of classical scholarship. Thanks probably to a family friend, Jonson studied at Westminster School under the historian William Camden, and although he did not go to university, he made himself the best-educated poet of his generation, widely read in Latin and Greek, and a virtuoso English imitator of classical genres, including not only comedy and tragedy, but also epigrams, odes, verse epistles and satires. This conspicuous learning also supported articulate opinions about the form and value of poetry – Jonson’s plays have prologues, inductions and self-reflexive devices that amount to a continuing dramatic manifesto. Thus, unlike most writers of early modern drama, he was explicitly a critic of it too.

In the rather anarchic world of English Renaissance theatre, then, Jonson can be seen as a sort of cultural lawgiver, mediating the authority both of his royal master James and of his literary masters Horace and Cicero. Certainly that is an attitude he liked to adopt; but it is specifically only half the truth about him. The respected man of letters was also a famous drinker and brawler, imprisoned at different times for manslaughter, debt and subversive writings. And his plays and masques are full of, precisely, the culturally illicit: street slang, vulgar ballads, trivial fashions, mindless violence, the subcultures of thieves, gipsies, prostitutes and gamblers – grotesque, scatological and often close to incomprehensible. His vision of poetry as classically regular, restrained and lucid also produced its intensely realised opposite. How we grasp that contradiction determines how he is understood (and staged) today.

Further Reading

The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson, ed. G. A. Wilkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981–2).

Thomas Kyd (1558–1594)

Kyd was the son of a scrivener – a slightly equivocal place in the hierarchy because the documents scriveners dealt in meant that they were sometimes unofficial lawyers and moneylenders, and needed to be better educated than most craftsmen of equivalent status. Kyd went to one of the best grammar schools in London, but was not quite a gentleman: his background was artisanal, and he had not been to university.

He was probably a professional writer for most of the 1580s, but as nothing was published with his name on the title page until after his death, it is hard to establish what exactly he was writing. Allusions suggest that he was respected by fellow writers, but achieved neither personal fame nor celebrity patronage. At some point in this irrecoverable decade, though (probably 1586–7), he wrote *The Spanish Tragedy**, arguably the best loved and most influential play of the age. After that, he almost certainly wrote two more plays: *Soliman and Perseda*, which tells the same story as the play within a play that concludes *The Spanish Tragedy*; and *Cornelia*, a translation of a French neo-Senecan tragedy which was not intended for the public stage. The force and originality of *The Spanish Tragedy* apparently proved unrepeatable.

This may have to do with a disaster that befell Kyd in the summer of 1593. It was a season of economic and social tension, and the Privy Council were anxious to discover who was responsible for some inflammatory writings against foreigners that had been posted up around London. Kyd was among those arrested, and investigating him led to an unconnected but graver charge of religious unorthodoxy. He was imprisoned for some time and questioned under torture. At some point during this crisis, he wrote to the chair of the Privy Council ‘to entreat some speeches from you in my favour to my lord, who (though I think he rest not doubtful of mine innocence) hath yet in his discreeter judgment feared to offend in his retaining me’.¹

This is a vivid fragment of the conditions of a writer’s life. We don’t know who Kyd’s ‘lord’ was, but he says that he has served him for six years and will be ‘utterly undone’ unless he can regain his favour. It is

¹ Text from Arthur Freeman, *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 181.

clear what has happened: the accusations against Kyd have scared away his patron at exactly the moment when he needs him. Instead of calling on the patron to get him out of jail, he is reduced to petitioning the official who jailed him to reassure the patron that he is a safe person to retain.

We can be shocked, today, by the flattery that great Renaissance writers sometimes bestowed on mediocre aristocrats. This case gives some idea of why they did it. When it came to the push, Kyd's patronage arrangements failed him, and although we cannot be sure, it looks as if the failure cost him his life.

Further Reading

The Works of Thomas Kyd, ed. Frederick S. Boas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593)

Marlowe was the academically gifted son of a barely literate shoemaker; he won scholarships first to King's School, Canterbury, and then to Cambridge. He was at university from 1580 until 1587, when he not only took his MA, but also saw his play *Tamburlaine the Great** staged by the Lord Admiral's Men in London to sensational acclaim. From then until his death, he was the best-known playwright of the new public theatre, repeating the success of *Tamburlaine* with *Dr Faustus** and *The Jew of Malta*, and also writing the great, unfinished narrative poem *Hero and Leander*.

His life has attracted immense scholarly interest largely because of his death. According to the coroner, he died of a knife-wound in a quarrel over money; the killer successfully pleaded self-defence. This may be the truth: it would not have been the first fight Marlowe had started. But it has been doubted, for two main reasons – firstly, that one of the men present was a government spy; and secondly, that at the time this happened Marlowe was being investigated by the Privy Council over reports that he was disseminating atheistic opinions. If the killing was unconnected with these circumstances, it is an odd coincidence. But if it was connected with them, nobody knows how; the links that have been suggested are speculative.

The speculations usually attach three different forms of illicitness to Marlowe's image: that he was a spy himself; that he was a homosexual; and that he was indeed an atheist. The first of these is possible, but there is no hard evidence for it. The second is undecidable: 'homosexual' is a modern term with no exact equivalent in Elizabethan culture. But Marlowe's recorded conversation and his writings both trail the idea; and his last play, *Edward II*, is unusual among the drama of the age in showing, without ambiguity, a man in love with another man.

The atheism is an accusation much repeated by fellow writers as well as professional informers. Their memoranda are convincing because they read like humourless records of amusing conversations: 'that Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest'; 'that all the new testament is filthily written'; 'that all the apostles were fishermen and base fellows'.² This harshly witty speaker does sound like the playwright. Not that the scripts contain these jokes: this was a censored stage. But the three great heroes – Tamburlaine, Faustus and the Jew of Malta – are all in different ways placed *outside* a community of believers, so that the audience is invited to see religion from an alienated and derisive point of view. Clearly Marlowe was a conscious religious dissident, though how far he was in earnest is hard to judge.

It is likely, then, that during his brief life Marlowe managed to violate three of his society's defining boundaries: class, sexuality and religion. That he also virtually invented Elizabethan tragedy is appropriate: that feat, too, required a flair for transgression.

Further Reading

The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe, 5 vols, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987–8).

John Marston (1576–1634)

For John Marston, theatre was a phase. He worked in it from 1598 to 1608 – the decade roughly corresponding to his twenties. In 1609 he became a

² From the so-called 'Baines note', reprinted in Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 220–2.

clergyman, and he spent the rest of his life in comfortable parishes in the south of England.

He was a lawyer's son; in 1592 he enrolled at the Middle Temple, where his father was a senior member. Like the other Inns of Court, this was a place not just for career lawyers but for all kinds of young gentlemen, including a confident literary set. When his father died in 1599, Marston had already published his first book of poetry, and a cancelled passage in the old man's will asks God to bless his 'wilful disobedient son', 'and give him true knowledge of himself, and to forgo his delight in plays, vain studies and fooleries'.³

The disobedient son had a flair for notoriety. He started as a non-dramatic satirist, and when this genre was banned in 1599, his books were among those that were burned by the hangman. Turning to the theatre instead, he soon got involved in an exchange of insults with Ben Jonson, the so-called 'War of the Theatres'. Jonson pilloried him in *Every Man Out Of His Humour* (1599), *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) and *Poetaster* (1601), and Marston retaliated in *Jack Drum's Entertainment* (1600) and *What You Will* (1601). They were swapping compliments soon afterwards; the 'war' had something of the character of a publicity stunt.

As far as we know, Marston never produced a script for adult actors. He wrote for the Children of St Paul's until some time in 1601–2, and then for the Children of the Queen's Revels, who were at the Blackfriars theatre from 1600. He owned a £100 share in the latter company, and for them he wrote what now seem his strongest and most revivable plays: *The Malcontent* (1603), *The Dutch Courtesan** (1604/5), and (with Jonson and Chapman) *Eastward Ho!* (1605). The 'Children at Blackfriars' were no better than their dramatist at staying out of trouble. Relunched under the new queen's patronage in 1604, they had shows banned in 1605 and again in 1606; then, in 1608, they managed to offend the king and the French ambassador at the same time with two different plays. This double indiscretion almost broke them, and certainly ended Marston's involvement: after a brief stay in prison, he sold out and withdrew to his father-in-law's parish, leaving his last play, *The Insatiate Countess*, to be completed by somebody else.

³ David G. O'Neill, 'The Commencement of Marston's Career as a Dramatist', *Review of English Studies* 22 (1971), 442–5.

Today, when the appeal of young performers is primarily a sentimental one, it is easy to misread Marston's association with the children's companies. As we have seen, they were specialists in satire, perhaps because the actors' minority reduced its legal dangers. They were also singers, because of their historical links with choir schools; at times Marston's scripts for them read like musicals – especially his remarkable Paul's play, the tragicomedy *Antonio and Mellida* (1599/1600). And because they played in small indoor spaces, their ticket prices were high, and their clientele privileged. All this suggests a milieu which is smart, risqué and precious – a good match for Marston's own brief but brilliant career.

Further Reading

The Plays of John Marston, 3 vols, ed. H. Harvey Wood (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939).

Philip Massinger (1583–1640)

Arthur Massinger was an MP, fellow of an Oxford college, and agent for the earls of Pembroke: it is not clear why his son Philip, after studying at Oxford between 1601 and 1605, should have gravitated towards the theatre. He had certainly done so by 1613, when he wrote a letter to Henslowe from debtors' prison – so it seems that part of the reason was financial need. Throughout his life he continued to regard the Pembroke dynasty as his patrons, though he cultivated several others as well.

Until about 1620, all his scripts seem to have been collaborative: writing with John Fletcher, Nathan Field and Thomas Dekker was his effective apprenticeship. Then he moved to a two-track way of working, continuing to write for the King's Men, mostly with Fletcher, while at the same time producing half a dozen solo plays for performance at the rival indoor theatre, the Cockpit. Following Fletcher's death in 1625, however, Massinger came to replace him as the King's Men's principal playwright, and he wrote for them exclusively, largely without collaborators, for the remaining fifteen years of his life.

Perhaps surprisingly, given this uneventful curve of professional success, Massinger had several encounters with the censorship. In 1619 he and Fletcher made an instant play called *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelte*,

about the fall of a Dutch statesman; Barnavelt was executed in May, and the play was ready by August, but then held up while the company found a way round the disapproval of the Bishop of London. In 1631 a solo play about recent Spanish history was refused a licence because it commented too directly on current affairs of state – Massinger relocated the plot in the ancient world, and the play was allowed; it survives as *Believe As You List*. And in 1638 *The King and the Subject*, now lost, was distinguished by the personal attention of Charles I, who marked one speech in it ‘too insolent, and to be changed’.

In each case the play was permitted and performed, albeit with alterations; this is not drama as a subversive activity. Rather, these incidents are the trace of a compromise between topicality and propriety. Arguably, Massinger courts the difficulty because his writing is often immediately referential as earlier drama was not. His best-known plays today, for example, are *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1625), whose monstrous *nouveau riche* villain-hero Sir Giles Overreach is supposedly based on the historical monopolist Sir Giles Mompesson; and *The Roman Actor** (1626), whose self-referential preoccupation with the politics of theatre is an open invitation to pursue analogies. In the twentieth century, this representational directness seemed to deny Massinger’s plays the resonance of more baroque contemporaries such as Middleton, Webster or Ford; it remains to be seen whether he will now be recovered as a political dramatist.

Further Reading

The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger, 5 vols, ed. Philip Edwards (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

Thomas Middleton (1580–1627)

Middleton wrote plays for over twenty years, from 1602 to 1624. He virtually invented city comedy, he wrote two tragedies which are powerful in revival, and his political satire *A Game At Chess* (1624) achieved instant notoriety, running for nine days before being closed by the censorship. His reputation might have matched that of Jonson or Fletcher if, like theirs, his plays had appeared in a collected edition. In fact they were printed in miscellaneous single volumes: some are lost, and the complete

Middleton 'canon' is only now being established, with some details still disputed – for example, whether he wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and whether he had a hand in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*.

His professional life was enclosed by the spaces and institutions of London. His father, who died when he was a child, was a bricklayer, but upwardly mobile enough to have a coat of arms. Middleton began writing and publishing verse in his teens, and was at Oxford University in 1598–1600. He was back in London working as a playwright by 1602. Sometimes for children's companies and sometimes for adults, he produced a string of sharp comedies of contemporary London life, including *Michaelmas Term*, *A Trick to Catch the Old One* and *A Mad World, My Masters* (all 1603–6), and, later, *The Roaring Girl** (with his regular collaborator Thomas Dekker, 1611) and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside** (1613).

Also in 1613, he wrote *The Triumphs of Truth*, his first Lord Mayor's pageant. Rather as Jonson moved between the theatres and the Court, Middleton doubled as commercial playwright and writer to the City: he wrote material for James I's entry to London in 1603, and in 1620 he was appointed City Chronologer, with an official role in devising entertainments. He was thus celebrating the City in one place, while in another place he was subjecting it to bawdy and debasing satire. This is a reminder of the power of genre. There is little point in asking what was Middleton's true opinion of London – no doubt he was in two minds about it, like most people. What counted was the artistic task in hand, praising or abusing.

All the same, it is true that his 1620s theatre work kept away from London. He wrote his two great tragedies – *Women Beware Women* in 1621, and in 1622 *The Changeling** with his other regular collaborator, William Rowley. These were followed by a successful romantic comedy, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1623), written with Dekker and Rowley, and also the relative newcomer John Ford. What then precipitated the *succes de scandale* of *A Game At Chess* was James I's attempt to negotiate a marriage between the Prince of Wales and the Infanta of Spain: Middleton represents this as a Spanish plot to subvert the autonomy and Protestantism of the English throne. Since that was the predominant view in an increasingly Puritan-leaning London, Middleton was arguably still representing his city, though in a new and dangerous way.

Further Reading

The Works of Thomas Middleton, 8 vols, ed. A. H. Bullen, London, 1885 (reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1964).

An ambitious new collected edition is in preparation with Oxford University Press under the editorship of Gary Taylor; until it appears, the best option is the very full edited selection of Middleton's plays online at www.tech.org/~cleary/middhome.html.

Anthony Munday (1560–1633)

Munday was a miscellaneous writer who turned out plays alongside pamphlets, song lyrics, romances, translations and civic pageants. After fifty years of incessant work he was still making no more than a reasonable living. This is the lower end of the literary spectrum: writing was his craft, and he produced serviceable copy in whatever genres were in demand.

He did in fact have a craft background as the son of a London stationer, orphaned early on and apprenticed to a printer. But although he seems to have had no grammar school or university education, he did have a tutor who taught him French, Italian and Latin. At eighteen, he gave up the apprenticeship, travelled in Europe, and spent some months in Rome at the seminary for English Catholics. It is not clear whether he did this as a potential convert, an impartial observer, or a Protestant spy; but soon after his return home in 1579 he was working as an informer against Catholics in England, a function he continued to perform, on and off, up to and including the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Consistent with that, he also wrote several anti-Catholic pamphlets in the early 1580s; on the other hand, he was soon spying on Puritan dissidents as well. Once again, it seems that he took such work as was available.

A hostile sketch of him in a Catholic pamphlet says he worked as an actor, and also that he wrote an attack on the theatre; on the strength of the latter allegation, he is often credited with *A Second and Third Blast of Retreat from Plays and Theatres*, published anonymously in 1580. This is intriguing if true, but the attribution is not strong.

His playwriting career is mostly confined to the 1590s: he wrote scripts for Jacobean Lord Mayor's pageants, but there is no trace of him working for the professional theatre after 1602. He wrote some plays alone – one

example is *John a Kent and John a Cumber* (1590), a magical extravaganza copying Greene's successful *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589). But most of his work was collaborative; a note in a miscellany of 1598 calls him 'our best plotter', which may imply a talent for organizing multiply authored scripts. The plays that attract the most interest today are *The Book of Sir Thomas More* (1593), a complicated manuscript which also features Shakespeare, Dekker, Heywood and Henry Chettle; and *Sir John Oldcastle* (1600), written with Michael Drayton, Robert Wilson and Richard Hathway. Several other products of this network of jobbing writers were never printed and are lost.

Despite the ideological flexibility Munday's occupation required, the *More* and *Oldcastle* plays are both politically distinctive. *More* appears as a popular London hero, rising from humble beginnings to the highest honours in the realm, and eventually going to his death because of his integrity; remarkably, the play manages to tell this story without mentioning the fact that he was a Catholic martyr. And *Oldcastle* was an associate of Henry V who was eventually executed for his part in a Lollard uprising; this is the historical character who appears in Shakespeare, traduced out of all recognition, as Falstaff. Munday and his co-writers explicitly contest that disrespectful caricature, presenting *Oldcastle* as a vigorous proto-Protestant hero. In curious ways, then, Munday's questionable background in both Catholic and anti-Catholic circles was turned to account in his work for the stage.

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Anthony Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*, ed. Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori, Revels Plays (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

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George Peele (1556–1596)

Peele's career illustrates the relations between three spheres of literary production: the universities, the Court and the commercial theatre. He

began in the first: son to the clerk of Christ's Hospital (then a charitable foundation), he was educated at Christ Church, Oxford, where he took his MA in 1579, and where he wrote poetry translated or adapted from classical sources. In about 1581 he moved to London, and a long series of occasional poems, congratulatory, celebratory, and commemorative, testifies to his recognized function in the ceremonial life of the Court and the City. Some of this official writing was dramatic in form: *The Arraignment of Paris*, written for court performance by the Children of the Chapel, is a mythological play culminating in an elaborate masque-like compliment to Elizabeth; and Peele also devised at least two pageants for the inaugurations of Lord Mayors of London.

Like several university-educated Elizabethan writers, he seems to have been drawn to the public theatre by the success of Marlowe; his first commercial play was staged by the same company, the Lord Admiral's Men, probably in 1589. Over the next five years, he produced four original plays – not enough for him to be regarded as a professional dramatist, but interesting because of their extreme generic diversity. The first, *The Battle of Alcazar*, is a piece of violent orientalism that reflects the ascendancy of *Tamburlaine*. The others are *Edward I*, an English chronicle play of the kind that Shakespeare was writing at just this point; *The Old Wives Tale*, a collection of folktales narrated and dramatized with fantastical formal wit; and *David and Bethsabe*, a tragedy whose material, fairly unusually, is taken from the Bible. Writing in the early years of a literary drama in London, and perhaps not very firmly rooted in the theatre, Peele works up a new genre every time he writes a new play. The product 'lines' which established themselves later did not present themselves to him as fixed: whether from choice or necessity, he was an experimental dramatist.

By 1596 he was ill and in financial difficulties, and at the end of that year he died. According to some posthumous accounts, this was because he had wasted his health and money in taverns and brothels, but there is a strong mythic element to that story. Peele was one of the young men, sometimes called the 'University wits', who moved in the 1580s from the predominantly ecclesiastical environment of Oxford or Cambridge to a free, or at any rate freelance, literary life in London; the group also included Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe and Marlowe himself. All were represented, and some represented themselves, as prodigal sons, and that is the legend that took possession of Peele's reputation a decade or so after his death. But it is possible that his downfall reflects a harsher and

less gaudy truth: that most Elizabethan playwrights were sustained by an unstable mixture of patronage and performance that afforded success but no security, and that a few months' illness was enough to sink anyone.

Further Reading

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William Rowley (d. 1626)

Rowley could fairly be called a 'minor' dramatist: he wrote very few solo plays, and his collaborations were mostly with figures more formidable than himself – Middleton, Heywood, Fletcher. There were many similarly placed writers; if Rowley is now better known than they are, it is largely because one of his collaborations was *The Changeling**.

The explanation of his ancillary position as a writer is that he was primarily an actor, appearing with Queen Anne's, the Duke of York's/Prince Charles's (in which he seems to have been a sharer) and, in the last few years of his life, the King's Men. He was fat and funny, and some of the scenes he wrote were clearly routines for himself – for example the role of Cuddy, the rustic fool in *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), the rest of which was written by Dekker and Ford. Comedians were expected to invent business, if not actual lines; and in a case like this writing and performing are very closely related activities.

Rather predictably, then, Rowley is personally obscure: nothing is known about his age, his family or his upbringing, and his death is known only by the record of his burial, which does not mention his profession. He was not a gentleman but a clown, whose life does not register on the documentary monitors by which most of these writers' biographies can be reconstructed.

His solo plays included the almost self-explanatory title *A New Wonder*, *A Woman Never Vexed* (1611), and a lone tragedy, *All's Lost By Lust* (1619). His most productive partnership was with Middleton, their work including the comedies *A Fair Quarrel* (1617) and *The Old Law* (1618). As for *The Changeling* itself, Rowley's contribution consists largely, though not exclusively, of the comic sub-plot, in which a madhouse-keeper's pretty wife is

pursued by two young gallants who feign madness in order to get near her, thus generating fairly predictable ironies about the effects of love. Its relation to the main plot is like the fool's relation to ordinary life – the situations and preoccupations are much the same, but the attitude to them is debased, parodic, obstinately silly. All the same, there is some evidence that it was the madhouse plot that gave the play its title and ensured its contemporary popularity: this suggests an interesting gap between seventeenth and twentieth-century perceptions of the structure. The explanation may lie in the way that all old playtexts are haunted by the irretrievability of performance. Unlike his literary collaborators, Rowley could not commit his real material to paper; what we read is a trace of something whose centre was elsewhere.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

Shakespeare is unusual among these writers, and not only because of his posthumous reputation. Whereas most playwrights circulated in the market for scripts, Shakespeare was exclusively committed to a single company for almost the whole of his career. Whereas most playwrights lived from hand to mouth, Shakespeare acquired substantial wealth. And whereas most playwrights were or became Londoners, Shakespeare, who of course lodged and worked in London, effectively remained a citizen of Stratford-upon-Avon, the provincial town where he grew up, married, had children and died. These peculiarities are connected to each other, but are worth looking at separately.

He probably began working as an actor and playwright around 1590. In 1592 a serious outbreak of plague led to the closure of the playhouses, and he wrote two immediately famous narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. When the theatres reopened in 1594 a new company was formed, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare was one of the original sharers: he helped to manage the company, acted for it, and wrote about two plays a year for it. Through a mixture of luck and judgement, it did extremely well: by the time he retired around 1612, it was the most successful of the London companies, the corporate owner of two playhouses and, as the King's Men, the favourite of James I. As a leading member of this organization, Shakespeare had no occasion to offer his work to the King's Men's competitors: they were his competitors too.

This identification is one reason for his financial success. Usually, a playwright lived by selling his script to a company, and the company secured a place to perform it by paying rent to a landlord. Thanks to the Lord Chamberlain's Men's sharing system, Shakespeare was playwright *and* company *and* landlord; the whole theatrical process was in his hands, which may explain how he could buy landed property for cash in 1597, 1602, 1605 and 1613, as well as suggesting a grounding for his serene acceptance, as a writer, of theatricality itself.

Most of the property was in Stratford. Shakespeare's father was a prominent tradesman, alderman and Justice of the Peace who was in commercial decline from the late 1570s on; his son restored the family fortunes and lived in the grandest house in town. His involvement in the Lord Chamberlain's company, then, was complemented by a degree of detachment from London affairs in general. He had status, even preeminence, elsewhere; he was, quite unambiguously, a Warwickshire gentleman.

The firm edges of his social and professional position are arguably reproduced in his output. He did very little collaborative writing, at least after 1594; on the whole, the 37 plays of the standard 'Shakespeare canon' are probably his own. But some of them, including highly distinctive ones – *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry IV*, *Hamlet*, *Lear* – are drastic adaptations of existing scripts, while others – *As You Like It*, *The Winter's Tale*, the Roman lives out of Plutarch – are dramatizations of stories that were already well known. And several early references emphasize his fluency: people remembered how readily and quickly he wrote. All this suggests a theatre professional, prepared to make something out of whatever materials looked promising. The anomaly, then, which has exercised generations of critics in one way or another, is the passionate density of the resulting verbal and dramatic textures. Shakespeare's career can look almost chillingly efficient, but his writing was the reverse, magnificently giving the actors more than they could ever need.

Further Reading

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James Shirley (1596–1666)

Shirley was the leading dramatist in the final phase of the pre-revolutionary theatre. His first known play, *Love's Tricks*, was performed in 1625, the year of James I's death, and his last, *The Court Secret*, was still in preparation when the theatres were closed in 1642, and not staged until after 1660. His playwriting career thus corresponds exactly to the reign of Charles I: he is the representative 'Caroline' dramatist.

He was a Londoner, from a bourgeois family. He went to Merchant Taylor's School and at least one Oxbridge college, and then, on graduating in 1617, did the same things as many other young men whose education was better than their social connections: he published an undistinguished poem, he secured a post as a schoolmaster, he was ordained as an Anglican clergyman. It was only after pursuing these occupations for a few years that he made his move into playwriting; that the theatre could be a career choice at this level reflects its new respectability.

And indeed Shirley seems to have been a respectable playwright. For a decade, he wrote for the company at the Phoenix, a fashionable indoor theatre in Drury Lane. His plays were admired by the Master of the Revels Sir Henry Herbert, and in one case – the comedy *The Gamester* (1633) – by Charles himself. In 1634, he wrote *The Triumph of Peace*, a fabulously expensive masque presented to the king and queen by the Inns of Court. He spent four years in the entourage of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford and Lord Deputy of Ireland, writing for Strafford's court and for the private theatre in Dublin; then he returned to London in 1640, and succeeded Massinger as the King's Men's principal playwright. It was only at this point, then, that he saw any of his work in an Elizabethan open-air amphitheatre (the King's Men still had the Globe). His prologue on the occasion is nervous and disdainful; he had no background in the popular theatre of Shakespeare and Jonson's generation.

This shows in the distinctive character of the work. The staple of his success was alert, patterned comedy, such as *Hyde Park* (1632) and *The Lady of Pleasure* (1635). These revivable plays represent the new social geography of 'Town' – that elite London that was neither City nor Court – and defend its hierarchies by satirizing the upwardly mobile and the financially imprudent. There are also tragicomedies, such as *The Young*

Admiral (1633), and tragedies of love and honour – notably *The Traitor* (1635) and *The Cardinal* (1641) – which are as highly patterned as the comedies, and as preoccupied with class distinctions. Besides his social conservatism, Shirley looks back artistically to a formed dramaturgic tradition, writing, explicitly, as the humble legatee of Shakespeare, Jonson and, above all, Beaumont and Fletcher. He often suggests that this tradition has now declined; it is not quite clear whether that is cultural diagnosis or literary politeness, but either way, the attitude of belatedness is consistent with Shirley's subsequent reputation.

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The Dramatic Works and Poems of James Shirley, 6 vols, ed. William Gifford and Alexander Dyce, London, 1833 (reprinted New York: Russell & Russell, 1966).

Cyril Tourneur (d. 1626)

Tourneur was not primarily a writer but a soldier and civil servant. He served the Vere and Cecil families in state affairs, and wrote elegies for their great men when they died. His own background is obscure, as is his age, though he must have been grown up by 1600, when he published a long and serious allegorical poem. He took part in a disastrous expedition to Cadiz in 1625; the crews were decimated by fever, and he died on the way back.

His involvement with the theatre seems to have been a brief phase in his life. In 1611 *The Atheist's Tragedy* was staged, probably by the King's Men; and in 1612 a tragicomedy called *The Nobleman* was more than once played at Court. There are one or two further traces of stage writing in collaboration with others, but by late 1613 he had apparently returned to diplomatic business. Only *The Atheist's Tragedy* survives. It is an anti-revenge tragedy about patience and divine providence, much influenced by Chapman, and striking for its conscious didacticism; writers more organically connected to the stage tend not to treat it as a vehicle for doctrine in quite this way.

Tourneur's name is anomalously famous because a list of 1656 records him as the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy**, and the attribution was generally accepted until about thirty years ago. Internal evidence makes it

extremely unlikely. *The Atheist's Tragedy* is subtitled 'The Honest Man's Revenge', so it now looks as if Tourneur's reputation was the outcome of a transcription error. Our knowledge of this repertoire and its makers is really quite precarious.

Further Reading

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John Webster (c. 1579–c. 1630)

John Webster's social profile is that of a London citizen. He was the son of a successful coachmaker in West Smithfield, just outside the city walls, and he seems to have lived his whole life within walking distance of his birthplace. His father belonged to the Merchant Taylors' Company; when he died in 1615, the dramatist inherited his membership, and his other son, Edward, inherited the coachyard. Webster was probably educated at Merchant Taylors School, and his last known script was *Monuments of Honour*, the Lord Mayor's pageant for 1624, when a distinguished Merchant Taylor became Mayor. He married the daughter of a saddler who was a close family friend, and they had several children. Everything we know about Webster suggests a comfortable position within the neighbourly and institutional networks of the city's bourgeois elite.

His writing career seems puzzlingly sporadic. There are clusters of activity in 1602–5, 1612–17 and 1623–5, with silence in between and thereafter. Presumably he had an unrecorded alternative occupation which took up his time, or provided his income, during these gaps. He could therefore be described as a semi-professional playwright. He is unlikely ever to have depended on writing alone to support himself and his family, and he had no sustained connection with any one playing company – his early city comedies, *Westward Ho!* and *Northward Ho!*, both co-written with Dekker in 1605, were for the children at St Paul's; and of the Italianate tragedies that have made him famous, *The White Devil* (1612) was staged at the Red Bull, and *The Duchess of Malfi** (1613) at the Blackfriars.

On the other hand, there are clear signs that playwriting for him was not just either an expedient or a diversion, but a serious identity. In a

preface to *The White Devil*, he refers respectfully to Chapman, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare, Dekker and Heywood, ‘wishing that what I write may be read by their light’. To say that is to construct, and claim membership of, a dramatic canon not very different from the one that informs modern syllabuses. Or again, in the dedication of a later play, *The Devil’s Law-case* (1623), he notes that the dedicatee already knows ‘some of my other works, as *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Guise* and others’: this is plainly, even assertively, the voice of an author, someone who can point to ten-year-old playhouse scripts as *his works*. That turn of phrase had of course been paraded in the deluxe 1616 edition of ‘the Works of Benjamin Jonson’; and like Jonson, Webster was mocked for writing laboriously, as well as for his connections with London trade (Jonson is the bricklayer, Webster the ‘playwright-cartwright’). The citizen-playmaker, it seems, is not allowed to affect gentlemanly ease, and must insist instead on his seriousness. The proud declarations of literary autonomy contain an element of class defensiveness. The ambiguity recalls the upwardly mobile commoners of Webster’s great plays – Antonio, Bosola, Flamineo – ironists who serve, observe and emulate the great people coaches are made for.

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Key Plays

Every old play in revival is a negotiation between the present and the past. On the one hand, it is a trace of the theatre where it was first made. The configuration of the stage, the education of the writer, the practices of the actors, the prejudices of the audience, are all memorialized on the surface of the text, showing that it was designed to entertain people profoundly unlike ourselves. On the other hand, once it has been taken up by today's theatre it becomes today's play. The performance is modern, however ancient the script; to work at all, it must entertain the audience it has now, addressing its jokes, its eroticism, its deaths, to contemporary laughter and sexuality and tears. Even an 'authentic' staging, such as is sometimes mounted for example at the replica Globe in London, cannot neutralize the tension between 'then' and 'now': the look, the acting style and the sound of the words may be as close to those of the early modern theatre as research can make them, but the spectators remain obstinately rooted in the twenty-first century, intrigued or bored or amused by the show precisely because of the antiquity it intimates. The duality is ineradicable: by an everyday miracle, the play inhabits two different historical moments at once.

The texts discussed in this section are 'key plays' because of the force with which each of them embodies this doubleness. Each one has been chosen to illustrate some aspect of the political, cultural and theatrical world to which they all belonged, and between them, I hope, they add up to a historical account of it. But at the same time, all of them are part of the dramatic repertoire of today, turning up more or less regularly on school and university reading lists, and on amateur and professional stages. Each essay tries in its own way to kill both these birds with the

one stone. It asks what the play can tell us about its own moment of origin: hence the heading giving the probable company, playhouse and date of the first performance. But it also suggests some of the reasons why we should still care about it.

Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (?1587)

The plot of *The Spanish Tragedy* is more original than it now seems, because it was endlessly imitated over the following decades. In a battle between Spain and Portugal, the Portuguese prince Balthazar has been taken prisoner. Now ransom is to be paid to his captor, a gentleman named Horatio, and the peace treaty is to be secured by Balthazar's marriage to the Spanish king's niece Bel-imperia. But Bel-imperia falls in love with Horatio; enraged by this misalliance, her brother Lorenzo has Horatio murdered and Bel-imperia temporarily imprisoned. Eventually Horatio's father, Hieronimo, discovers who killed his son, and realizes that the criminal is too highly placed to be reached by the law. He is awaiting an opportunity to exact his own revenge when he is fortunately asked to arrange a court entertainment. He induces Lorenzo and Balthazar to perform a tragedy with Bel-imperia and himself, during which he kills Lorenzo, and she kills Balthazar and herself. Hieronimo exhibits the body of Horatio on the stage, explains what has happened, and triumphantly kills himself.

The play was first staged in the 1580s; numerous allusions and editions suggest that it was still popular in the 1630s, a dependable old warhorse that would always find an audience. This is a two-edged kind of fame. For example, in *Every Man In His Humour**, first staged in 1598, the fool Mathew calls on the braggart captain Bobadill, having just bought the book of 'Hieronimo':

Bobadill: I would fain see all the poets of these times pen such another play as that was. They'll prate and swagger, and keep a stir of art and devices . . .

Mathew: Indeed, here are a number of fine speeches in this book. 'O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears!' There's a conceit! 'Fountains fraught with tears!' 'O life, no life, but lively form of death!' Another! 'O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs!' A third! 'Confus'd and fill'd with murder and misdeeds!' A fourth! Oh, the Muses! Is't not excellent? Is't not simply the best that ever you heard, captain? (1.5.43–54)

A dozen years into the play's stage life, this sketch registers its continuing popularity, but attributes it to has-beens and fools. Who would want to be caught sharing this banal enthusiasm?

The lines Mathew quotes were already famous:

O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;
O life, no life, but lively form of death;
O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,
Confus'd and fill'd with murder and misdeeds;
O sacred heavens! if this unhallow'd deed,
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,
If this incomparable murder thus
Of mine, but now no more my son,
Shall unreveal'd and unrevenged pass,
How should we term your dealings to be just,
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (3.2.1–11)

It is easy to understand the mockery. The speech invites parody because its devices are so visible: the opening paradox in triplicate; the repeated periphrases for the murder almost bringing the sentence to a halt; the clinching rhyming couplet with its excessively symmetrical last line. The speech is also somewhat addicted to *polyptoton*, the rhetorical figure in which a word recurs, not exactly, but in cognate form – life/lively, mine/my, just/unjustly/justice; and to the weaker acoustic connectedness of unhallow'd/inhuman, unreveal'd/unrevenged. These patternings show a technical virtuosity which was one dimension of the play's initial success: few 1580s scripts are so highly worked, and the new verbal authority must have made the theatre seem a more exciting place. In a way, though, the virtuosity is the problem: it is difficult for the actor to commit himself to Hieronimo's grief when he also seems rather taken with his own verbal felicity. The speech *says* that it is the expression of ungovernable passion, and this is presumably how it was delivered by the actor Edward Alleyn, probably the first Hieronimo and a specialist in vehemence. But the conscientious filling in of rhetorical schemes gives the writing an inappropriate air of tranquillity.

On the other hand, as even Jonson's jokes acknowledge, the play did inspire attachment. In a story told in the 1630s, a woman on her deathbed, instead of concentrating on her spiritual state, cries out 'Hieronimo, Hieronimo, O let me see Hieronimo acted!'; even if the story isn't true, it's indicative that it's about this particular play.¹ Over and over again,

¹ Details of the sources and variants of this story are given by Shapiro (1991).

writers and characters in plays quote phrases – like ‘Hieronimo, go by’, or ‘What outcries pluck me from my naked bed?’ – which are not striking lines in themselves (though they may be associated with striking moments in Alleyn’s performance) but which seem to be treasured simply because they recall the play. The interesting way to read *The Spanish Tragedy*, then, is as this object of popular affection. What did the unfashionable audience love in it?

One clue is that although it is ‘The Spanish Tragedy’ on title pages, almost everyone calls the play ‘Hieronimo’. The hero by no means monopolizes the play, but he is clearly at the heart of its appeal. And the character is a distinctive one, not reducible to his plot function as the grieving father. He is the Knight Marshal, the officer charged with upholding the law in and around the Court. In one scene (3.13), he is shown receiving poor petitioners who see him as their advocate to the king. This role assigns him to the same type as Duke Humphrey in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI* (1590) or Duke Thomas in *Thomas of Woodstock* (1592) – the populist figure who speaks for the commons in high places and is in that sense the audience’s representative on the stage. Hieronimo is carefully established as a high-ranking servant: at a royal feast in the first act, he arranges the entertainment, and Horatio waits on the king.

Thus when Horatio is murdered, Hieronimo has a double claim on the audience’s sympathy. First, he is, in effect, a common man in pursuit of his rights. The rulers deceive him and fob him off, but in his final scene he exacts recognition and fear from them all; in other words, this is a fantasy of vindication with an anti-courtly political edge. And second, his office makes him not only a wronged individual but also the play’s exponent of justice in general:

This toils my body, this consumeth age,
That only I to all men just must be,
And neither gods nor men be just to me. (3.6.8–10)

This almost Christ-like figure – the just man wronged – has the effect of redeeming the class hostility implicit in the fantasy of vindication: in the end Hieronimo exacts revenge not merely and divisively in the name of the small people against the great ones, but universally in the name of justice. Displaced by intolerable contradictions from his position as Knight Marshal to the Spanish court, he becomes Knight Marshal to the

world. He is thus a *common representative* in every sense: as a father who loves his son in the common way of nature, as a plain man among the courtly schemers, and as a representative of the common good, which is damaged by the private murder and restored by its public chastisement. The crowd love him because he is the voice of what holds them together.

But Hieronimo also has a further role: that of an artist. He confesses to being a poet in his youth, and after his death is consigned to the realm of the legendary musician Orpheus. It is as if the Spanish court has combined the office of Knight Marshal with that of Master of the Revels: the provider of justice is also the provider of entertainment – and in his culminating tragedy, with real (deserved) deaths on stage, the two functions merge into one. Thus the audience have another reason for loving Hieronimo: he not only represents them on stage, but also offers them an idea of the theatre itself as a place where the injustices of life are put right.

This idea informs not only the play within a play, but also the structure of *The Spanish Tragedy* as a whole. At the beginning, the ghost of Don Andrea, the former lover of Bel-imperia, killed by Balthazar in the Spanish–Portuguese war, has just arrived from the world of the dead, its queen having commanded Revenge to lead him

through the gates of horn
Where dreams have passage in the silent night.
No sooner had she spoke but we were here,
I wot not how, in twinkling of an eye. (1.1.82–5)

This conceit mythologizes the performance we are about to see: the theatre is a portal of the underworld, where the actions of the living appear to the dead in the form of dreams. The dead are like us: they ‘sit . . . down to see the mystery’ (90); they may rejoice or rage at it, but they are powerless to affect it because they are not truly present. Thus the audience is invited to watch the play through the eyes of a vengeful ghost.

What they see first of all, from this seductively unearthly viewpoint, is false appearance. The ghost’s friends seem to be making peace with his enemies, the wrong people seem to be getting killed – Revenge has to reassure Andrea that the vengeance he has come to see really is imminent, although the characters are unaware of it. The onstage audience is

in this sense a device for underlining tragic irony: the characters think they will live happily ever after, but the watching dead know different. So the events become theatrical in the sense that what one sees is delusion – the hypocrite’s smile, the lovers in a fools’ paradise.

Once Horatio is dead, however, a different type of action begins. Hieronimo is now seeking to disrupt the delusional surface of the court and expose the crime beneath, and this leads to a series of bizarre outbursts. Some ambassadors ask him where Lorenzo is and he gives them directions to Hell; missing his son, he digs in the earth with his dagger as if to bring him back by violence; confronted by another bereaved father, he addresses the old man as Horatio and exclaims that death has aged him. Hieronimo is treating metaphors as if they were literal propositions, which makes him appear mad (famously, the play’s subtitle is ‘Hieronimo is mad againe’). But of course, madness is not the only discourse that produces metaphors as concrete objects: the same is true of theatre. So Hieronimo’s playmaking in the final scene is continuous with his lunacies: both practices are *dramatizations* of an unseen truth. The character, in short, is an idealized image of the playwright: before our very eyes, he makes theatre out of his own pain and loss. The result may not be the best play ever, but it is the essential play, the one you have to see on your deathbed.

There are two different theatrical codes, then: a bad code of false appearance, and a good code of exteriorizing truth. The secret murder activates the bad theatricality, precipitating the whole society into pretence and unreality. This is what Hieronimo’s notorious tirade is really about: so long as Horatio’s murder is ‘unreveal’d and unrevenged’, heaven is not heaven, eyes are not eyes, the world is not the world, nothing is what it is. He himself has to conform to this bad theatrical code, developing extremes of duplicity and indirection, until at length, making use of all his acquired deviousness, he devises a show which seems to conform to the world of false appearance but actually subverts it. It is therefore *doubly* false, and turns into an instance of good theatricality, where the pretences are ripped open and the inner truths publicly displayed. This violent second-order performance restores the integrity of people and objects and allows the play to end. The clumsiness of *The Spanish Tragedy* counted for less in the long run than its supremely confident establishment of this pattern, which rendered revenge and drama inseparable for the next fifty years.

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Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*

Lord Admiral's, Rose (1587)

Tamburlaine was the first play to be performed on the biggest stage at the British National Theatre when it opened in 1976. The choice reflected a perception that this play marks the start of Elizabethan drama proper – and therefore, since there are no pre-Elizabethan plays that hold a place in the modern repertoire, the start of English drama itself. This is not literally true: the play is early, but many earlier Elizabethan scripts survive, and even among canonical ones *The Spanish Tragedy** might claim priority. But it is not just a question of chronology. In both its intentions and its effects, *Tamburlaine* is characterized by an aggressive consciousness that what is happening is new. In more senses than one, Marlowe is *trying to start something*.

The Prologue to Part 1 is a document of this provocation. It reads, in its entirety:

From jiggling veins of rhyming mother-wits
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay
We'll lead you to the stately tent of War,
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.
View but his picture in this tragic glass,
And then applaud his fortunes as you please.

The prospectus is accurate enough. 'The Scythian Tamburlaine' is the fourteenth-century Mongol warlord Timur, who established a formidable if short-lived empire centred on what is now Uzbekistan; and he does indeed spend most of the two plays at war, threatening the world and scourging kingdoms. He conducts his campaigns on a vast scale and with unrestrained violence; he defeats the kings of Persia and Arabia, the Sultan of Egypt, and the Grand Turk with all his client kings; he bloodily besieges several cities, including Damascus and Babylon; and he eventually dies undefeated, raging at the lands he has not had time to conquer. But the Prologue does more than trail this rather monotonously victorious storyline. It also sets out what kind of show this is to be.

First of all, it signals the arrival of the poet on the stage. The play is presented in one of the open-air playhouses, and Marlowe sketches their usual repertoire with terse contempt: it has been dominated by ‘jigging’ and ‘clownage’ (i.e. entertainments centred not on language but on physical performance), and insofar as writing has come into it, it has been that of ‘rhyming mother-wits’ – not poetry, but improvisatory doggerel. These are not casual insults: it does seem to be true that the star of the 1580s stage was the clown Richard Tarleton, a master of jigs and sight-gags. And more broadly, we know that this was a performers’ theatre, in which it was the actors who kept the writers ‘in pay’, and not the other way round. With startling arrogance, the 23-year-old poet, just arrived from Cambridge, announces that all this is now going to change.

The play sets about this programme at once. Its opening lines are spoken by the Persian king, Mycetes:

Brother Cosroe, I find myself aggrieved,
Yet insufficient to express the same,
For it requires a great and thund’ring speech. (Part 1, 1.1.1–3)

Mycetes is dressed as a king, but he is nothing without a writer to provide him with high astounding terms. His role is not long, but while it lasts it is a gleeful anthology of poetic inadequacies – lame rhythms, inept allusions, trivial wordplay, inappropriate similes, and, as we would expect, tinkly rhyming couplets. This linguistic comedy (itself skilful enough to amount to a display of authorial mastery) sets up Tamburlaine, who speaks with all the greatness and thunder that Mycetes lacks, and who replaces him on his throne by the end of the second act. Thus the reign of Mycetes effectively is the clownish state of theatrical affairs which the Prologue denounced; Tamburlaine’s *coup d’état* enacts the poet’s conquest of the stage.

Persia, after all, had already been seen on the Elizabethan stage. *Cambises*, written before 1569 but probably still played, and certainly remembered, through to the 1590s, is about a tyrannical Persian king, and could almost be the very play that Marlowe is declaring obsolete. Not only does *Cambises* share the stage with a clown called Ambidexter, but also he speaks in the rhyming ‘fourteeners’ that seemed for a decade or two to be a good English equivalent for the hexameters of classical heroic verse. This, for example, is how *Cambises* refuses to listen to a plea for mercy:

You villains twain, with raging force ye set my heart on fire!
If I consent that she shall die, how dare ye crave her life?
You two to ask this at my hand doth much enlarge my strife.
Were it not for shame, you two should die, that for her life do sue!
And favour mine from you is gone, my lords, I tell you true. (1093–7)

And this is how Tamburlaine does it:

I will not spare these proud Egyptians
Nor change my martial observations
For all the wealth of Gihon's golden waves,
Or for the love of Venus, would she leave
The angry god of arms and lie with me. (Part I, 5.1.121–5)

Most obviously this is a difference in technical mastery: Cambises struggles with his metre, resorting to unhappy inversions and space-fillers to keep it going, whereas Tamburlaine inhabits his with resourceful fluency. Blank verse is going to defeat fourteeners, just as Tamburlaine defeats the Persians, because it is immeasurably more efficient.

But Tamburlaine's linguistic victory is not only about metre. It is also seen in the question of his religion. The dominant faith in the world of the play is Islam, and the historic Timur was part of a Muslim culture himself, but Marlowe's hero is aggressively hostile to 'Mahomet'. There are some Christian rulers in the play, but Tamburlaine is not one of them. Yet he invokes divinity in every major speech, and in later scenes identifies himself as 'the scourge of God', that is, someone divinely appointed to chastise mankind. So what does he believe in? The answer is that he is a devotee of the gods of classical antiquity. He refers familiarly to the Olympians and to the heroes of Graeco-Roman history, and when he invokes a supreme deity, it is the Prime Mover of Aristotelian metaphysics. This is improbable in a fourteenth-century Tartar warlord, but it doesn't come over as anomalous because it emerges naturally from the associative networks of the writing. That pantheon – Jove, Venus, Achilles, Julius Caesar – is the *normal* outcome of a classical education such as Marlowe's own; it is embedded in the play's poetic codes; Tamburlaine's religion, like his invincibility, is an effect of language. Similarly, when he falls in love, he abducts the lady in the manner of a Scythian bandit, but woos her in the dialect of Elizabethan love poetry:

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills,
Thy person is more worth to Tamburlaine
Than the possession of the Persian crown,
Which gracious stars have promis'd at my birth. (1.2.87–92)

The universal scope of the literary convention corresponds to the unlimited ambition of the speaker: taking in the whole world comes naturally to both of them.

Tamburlaine, then, is a sort of personification of Renaissance poetic discourse. But then by projecting that purely literary code into a religiously divided fictional world, the play asks you to imagine it as a practical creed, and so highlights the very aspect of the classical heritage that Renaissance humanism strove to attenuate: its paganism. Eloquent, courageous, self-consistent and high-minded, Tamburlaine represents a constellation of heroic virtues while proving, in Christian terms, an equally complete representative of merciless pride. He therefore has the effect of getting the biblical and classical elements of the culture to disrupt each other: in him, a perfectly conventional ethical terminology suddenly sounds scandalous.

The formal condition of this reversal is the fact that if humanism has colonized the language of the hero, it has stopped short of the dramatic structure. With its loose chronicle rhythm, its emblematic spectacles and its frequent battle scenes, *Tamburlaine* is more like a folk play than a classical tragedy. And references over the following decades make it clear that Tamburlaine was a London legend, universally recognized and often revived. Not even Falstaff is more clearly a creature of the popular stage. He does articulate the theatre's need for the poet, but in the same breath he embodies the poet's investment in the theatre. What does this jiggling and undignified place have to offer?

Tamburlaine first appears as a shepherd who 'means to be a terror to the world'. His first significant action is a costume change: he throws aside his shepherd's clothes and appears in full armour. Seeing the transformation, one of his followers, Techelles, exclaims:

As princely lions when they rouse themselves,
Stretching their paws and threat'ning herds of beasts,
So in his armour looketh Tamburlaine.

Methinks I see kings kneeling at his feet,
And he with frowning brows and fiery looks
Spurning their crowns from off their captive heads. (Part 1, 1.2.52–7)

It is a complex superimposition of images. There is Tamburlaine dressed to suit his birth, Tamburlaine dressed to suit his mind, Tamburlaine as Techelles sees him, and Tamburlaine as Techelles imagines him ('Methinks I see . . .'). The sequence – shepherd, warrior, king, emperor – will indeed be the course of the narrative, but first it is rehearsed at the level of appearance. Tamburlaine 'means' to be the terror of the earth, then he *looks* like the terror of the earth, and then – perhaps therefore – he *becomes* the terror of the earth. His irresistible rise is among other things an apotheosis of the actor (it was probably the making in reality of the most distinguished actor of the time, Edward Alleyn). With a sort of willed naivety, the poet grasps the theatre as the place where fantasies are actualized.

And in fact Techelles only has to wait two or three acts. When Tamburlaine has defeated Bajazeth the Grand Turk, he makes him kneel and mounts his throne by stepping on him. Later, in perhaps the most famous visual image of the show, he harnesses the conquered kings of Asia to his chariot and drives them across the stage. These tableaux are not simple emblems of power, they are also festive, even riotous; they represent not kingly authority but its overthrow – barbaric, anarchic, comic, somewhere between political ritual and horseplay. The atrocities which have often worried *bien-pensant* critics have something of the same character. Bajazeth is kept in a cage until, in despair, he dashes his brains out against the bars. Tamburlaine besieges Damascus; the defenders send out a troop of virgins to plead for mercy; they are slaughtered on his horsemen's spears. Two of his sons aspire to be soldiers, but one is a coward – Tamburlaine stabs him after a battle, and orders the enemy's concubines to dispose of the body. These excesses do not invite judgement exactly: there is usually a stage commentator to deplore them, but this figure has no authority, and the actions themselves are so completely indefensible that judgement is hardly an issue. Rather, they are types of externalization – with every victory, Tamburlaine extends the logic of his original costume change and draws closer to effacing the distinction between what is in his mind and what is in the world. In the country of the play, the imagination is lawlessly sovereign.

That is why the show is celebratory despite its brutality. The theatre turns the poet loose; the carnage measures by its very extremity the extent of his irresponsibility. To see why, we can return to the beginning:

View but his picture in this tragic glass,
And then applaud his fortunes as you please.

The prologue was after all not only a manifesto but also an advertisement, talking up its own product and sneering at its rivals. Without reservation it embraces the commercial relationship with its audience that the playhouse implies. The spectators can applaud as they please because they are the customers who have paid to see the picture: the playwright acknowledges no obligations to them, and they have none to him. The spectacle is aware of itself as a commodity, and for a brief inaugural moment, that feels like boundless freedom.

Further Reading

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Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

(?1592)

As everybody knows, Dr Faustus is the man who sells his soul to the Devil in return for a lifetime of magical power. The legend took shape in sixteenth-century Germany, appeared in book form in 1587, and had been translated into English by 1592. The form of the play is dictated by the shape of the story: the first five scenes show Faustus devoting himself to the black arts, conjuring up a devil named Mephistophilis, and signing the fatal contract, and in the final scene a magnificent and terrible soliloquy takes us through the last hour of his life until, at midnight, the devils come to claim their property. The middle section of the play exhibits in episodic fashion his twenty-four years of dearly bought success, culminating in his liaison with Helen of Troy.

Faustus is canonical; critics agree that it is, if not a great play, then a play with great moments in it. But it is also an extremely strange one. For a sense of its strangeness we can look at one of the less than great moments, the 'horse-courser scene' (B-text, 4.4). A horse-courser is a dealer in horses; Faustus sells one a horse for forty dollars, and warns him not to take it into water. We understand that the horse is magical (witches' spells are negated by running water), but the horse-courser fails to grasp the point, and after a brief absence returns, wet, to complain that the horse vanished from under him when he rode it into the river. Finding Faustus asleep, he pulls him by the leg to wake him, and the leg comes away in his hand. He is so horrified that he not only gives up on his forty dollars but promises to pay Faustus another forty to hush the matter up. He leaves, and Faustus gets up laughing to reveal that his legs are intact.

What we have here, obviously, is a clown routine. The dripping re-entrance and the false leg are formulaic sight-gags; both can be closely paralleled from the *commedia dell'arte*, the semi-improvisatory comic theatre which was at its peak in Italy at this time. But that is not all. When the horse-courser leaves in the middle of the scene, Faustus needs a few lines to cover his falling asleep and to create a little time for the offstage misadventure to happen. This is what Marlowe provides:

What are thou, Faustus, but a man condemned to die?
Thy fatal time doth draw to final end.
Despair doth drive distrust into thy thoughts.
Confound these passions with a quiet sleep.
Tush! Christ did call the thief upon the cross;
Then rest thee, Faustus, quiet in conceit. (4.4.21–6)

This speech, like the famous monologue at the end of the play, dramatizes a state of mind. Each of the six lines is a formula for a separate emotional attitude: Faustus questions himself; sums up his situation; analyses his feelings about it; tries to suppress the feelings; dismisses them with a rationalization; and ends in a tranquillity that both knows and refuses to know its own falsity. He is not simply describing himself but struggling with himself before our eyes; blank verse is demonstrating its capacity to serve as the medium of the speaker's inner life. Historically, this was a momentous development – effectively a new language for staging subjectivity – but its appearance in this particular scene makes extraordinary demands on the actor. He is to use the speech expressively, to convey the experience of a man confronting his own damnation. But he is to use the *same* speech to distract the audience's attention from the fact that he is fitting the false leg in preparation for the next gag. He is a tragedian and a clown literally in the same breath.

This coexistence of two incompatible stage conventions runs right through the play. For instance, what is happening when devils are presented on the stage? On the one hand, it is serious and frightening. It was in this period, after all, that prosecutions for dealings with Satan were at their height. Conjuring up the devil was not a trivial frisson but a capital crime. A well-known anecdote tells of an early performance of the play during which the actors noticed an unexplained extra figure on the stage; they stopped the show and spent the rest of the day praying. But then, on the other hand, hell is the site of theatrical fun. Medieval stage devils and vices talk nonsense, do acrobatic tricks, let off fire-crackers, and pursue their ends through double-dealing and disguise. It is the representatives of goodness and mercy who are serious; the devils are comedians. In *Faustus* itself, typically, a pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins, presented to Faustus by Lucifer, turns out to be a series of comic monologues explicitly designed to distract him. Going to see the devil in a play, then, is an ambiguous thing to do. It is like coming face to face with the enemy of mankind; but it is also like going to the circus.

The protagonist has the same doubleness. The original Faustus was apparently an astrologer, physician and showman who enjoyed something of a reputation among the German Catholic middle class in the early sixteenth century and died, perhaps violently, in about 1540. Recalled after his death in a predominantly Lutheran and anti-magical culture, he became a magnet for assorted bits of popular demonology. Many of these had started out as stories about other people and were attached to Faustus later: he became a folktale composite like Don Juan or Til Eulenspiegel. In other words 'Doctor Faustus' has no unity of consciousness because he is not an individual at all, but a bundle of collective fears and fantasies.

So his story is at once immense and trivial. On the one hand, he is a tragic hero who expresses the aspirations of all humankind. We hear him dismiss every branch of human learning because his ambition has exhausted them all; impatient with the banality of everything that is permitted, he transgresses in search of infinite understanding, infinite power, infinite pleasure. This is the Faustus whom Goethe could later adopt as the promethean representative of a whole civilization. But this cultural giant is also, on the other hand, the hero of an assortment of village tales – a conman, a fairground magician, and (if he is lucky) an entertainer at the courts of the aristocracy. So far from commanding the riches of the world, this character performs a doubly elaborate scam for the sake of forty dollars. With his big talk and his suspect abilities, he is 'Doctor Fustian', viewed with a peasant mixture of superstition and scepticism. It was mostly this picaresque figure that held the stage *between* Marlowe and Goethe: in both England and Germany, Faustus appeared in farces, puppet-shows and pantomimes, sharing plots with Harlequin and Scaramouche. It is the distinction, and the difficulty, of Marlowe's version that it accommodates the tragic hero and the vulgar showman in the same role.

It is a question not only of relative seriousness, but also of narrative register. Take for example the fatal contract which is at the heart of the story. If this is a folktale, it is binding. Faustus signs it with his blood, which congeals unnaturally as though his body is trying to prevent its own destruction; when he does get it to flow, it spontaneously writes a warning message on his arm. This portentous moment must be decisive for the story to make sense: Faustus has promised, the devil will collect. But if we imagine the situation as a real case in theology, then this fantastical document has no validity at all. A man cannot choose to damn himself

irrevocably; Faustus could repent at any time, as angelic advisers repeatedly remind him. He is damned, not because he has signed away his soul, but because his heart is closed to divine mercy by despair. If that is the story, the document matters only because of its effect on his state of mind – that is to say, the essential action takes place not on the stage but inside the hero's soul. As in the little horse-courser scene, the dramatic mode is incompatibly both material and spiritual, objective and subjective.

This is also an opposition between learned and popular culture, sharpened by the fact that it is, precisely, a story about a learned man. In the opening scene, Faustus sits in his study, turning over massive volumes, reading out Latin quotations, and sliding into deadly sin. In a later, farcical scene (B-text 3.3), a servant gets hold of one of the books and summons a very irritated Mephistophilis from Constantinople by reading bits of it out. These contrasting scenes share the assumption that books, especially books in unknown languages, contain both forbidden knowledge and unnatural power. Today, when access to the written language is more or less universal, it takes an imaginative jump to appreciate its mystique in a largely illiterate society. The writings in *Faustus* intensely suggest the old, equivocal connection between spelling and casting spells. But of course Marlowe, with his classical education, his famous rhetorical facility and his sophisticated religious opinions, is not presenting that naive image naively. Rather, this is a conspicuously well-educated poet playing games with a partly literate popular audience.

The hybridity, in other words, is also that of the theatre itself. In one sense, an Elizabethan play is a spectacle which is not part of the written world. It unites its public as spectators and listeners; the unmediated presentness of gesture and speech means that reading doesn't come into it. But in another sense, the play is precisely a written artefact, the work of a poet whose command of language advertises his learning and addresses those members of the audience who have read the same things as him. This tension can be seen in a further disturbance in the play's reception: the problematic state of the text. There are two versions – one first published in 1604, and the other, significantly different and about 700 lines longer, in 1616. Both went through several reprints, and both have their supporters among twentieth-century editors. The textual debates are complex, but what they come down to is this: *Faustus* was a theatrical hit for decades after Marlowe's death, and since it was owned by several different casts, the script fluctuated and multiplied in response to their dif-

fering requirements. Here, then, is another instance of this play's lack (or refusal) of unity: it does not even have a single text. Rather, the printed record gives us the traces of several related performances, in which the work of the poet is in unresolved tension with that of the acting companies. The play has never quite become literature because of the way it continued to belong to the theatre.

After all, what powers do we actually see Faustus exercise? He sprouts false limbs and attacks his enemies by magicking horns onto their heads. He mocks the papal court by visiting it invisibly. He conjures up the images of Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy so that his patrons can see them exactly as they were in life. In short, what he acquires is not power in general, but the power to create illusions. Theologically, this is sound enough: it shows what a bad bargain he has made, trading the reality of Heaven for a world of mere appearances. But dramatically what it does is to align the diabolically empowered hero with the theatre itself. Unable of course to do *real* magic tricks, the play uses stage tricks to stand for them: the black art is signified by the art of the actor. But then this is a two-way street: if the wicked magician is a kind of actor, is the actor not a kind of wicked magician? *Faustus* continues to be revived, despite its awkwardness, because in its hero actors recognize their own mystery.

Further Reading

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William Shakespeare, *Richard II* Lord Chamberlain's, The Theatre (1595)

Richard II, the grandson of Edward III, became king in 1377 at the age of ten because of the early death of his father the Black Prince; when he grew up he tried to assert his royal sovereignty against the dynastic powers of his numerous uncles and cousins. A series of destructive confrontations culminated in his forced abdication in 1399, when Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster, staged a *coup d'état*. Bolingbroke became Henry IV, and Richard was murdered the following year, leaving an ambiguity in the royal succession which led ultimately to the Wars of the Roses (c. 1455–85).

This story was told quite a lot in the 1590s. Besides Shakespeare's play (1595), it featured in the anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock* (1592) and the lost *Pierce of Exton* (1598), in Samuel Daniel's epic poem *The Civil Wars* (1595), and in John Hayward's history *The Life and Reign of Henry IV* (1599), whose first edition sold out in weeks, prompting a second edition which was burnt by the authorities. Shakespeare's subject was already interesting.

Part of the interest was that Richard's deposition was read as a sort of original transgression: by overthrowing its lawful sovereign, England had divided itself against itself, incurred the wrath of God, and provoked the civil wars that ended only with the accession of Queen Elizabeth's grandfather Henry VII. This story is a historical myth, explaining how things came about. But another equally orthodox account of the same events made it a paradigm of misgovernment. Richard had promoted upstarts over the heads of the hereditary nobility, set his own will above the law, and paid for an extravagant court by unjust and irregular taxation. When an Elizabethan gentleman said 'I was never one of Richard II's men' (Hayward 1992: 21), he meant that he was a man of honour as opposed to a court sycophant. This story is a historical fable, which can be applied to present-day politics.

The latter understanding of Richard's reign is staged in *Thomas of Woodstock*. Woodstock, the play's hero, is shown (unhistorically) as Protector of the realm during Richard's minority. On reaching the age of twenty-one, the king announces that he will now govern personally, with

the help of his friends. He demands Woodstock's staff of office, and Woodstock replies:

My staff King Richard? See, coz, here it is;
Full ten years' space within a prince's hand,
A soldier and a faithful councillor,
This staff hath always been discreetly kept;
Nor shall the world report an upstart groom
Did glory in the honours Woodstock lost;
And therefore, Richard, thus I sever it.
There let him take it – shivered, cracked and broke,
As will the state of England be ere long
By this rejecting true nobility. (2.2.155–64)

The speech and the gesture express an ideological break. By calling for the staff, Richard asserts that the offices of state are his to bestow on whoever he chooses. By handing it over broken, Woodstock retorts that his office is not freely transferable – that it attaches not only to the king's will, but also to his own virtues and rank. As a prince of the royal blood who has watched over England, he has *independent* status in government. His mode of address is equally pointed: calling the king 'coz' (cousin) reminds him that he is not only the king but also Woodstock's nephew. In other words, when Richard demands his obedience as a subject, Woodstock insists in reply on his honour as a nobleman. An *aristocratic* ideology resists a *monarchical* one.

Here is one way the events of the 1390s came alive in the 1590s. Whatever the truth about Richard II's reign, it is clear that Elizabeth's was approaching (not reaching) absolutist monarchy. The unification of church and state; the royal monopoly on military force; the centralization of political and legal institutions; the increase in the size and permanence of the royal household; the cult of Elizabeth's personality – all these developments meant that Richard's story (a story about the crown falling to the aristocracy) was being rehearsed in a state which firmly subordinated the aristocracy to the crown. This had come about, on the whole, with aristocratic support: the enhanced monarchy was not so much the enemy of the hereditary ruling class as the political instrument of its rule. But the subordination was no less real for that; and you can see the tensions in the way the stories are told. Look again at Woodstock's speech. Despite

its aggression, he is *obeying* the king: rebellion is unthinkable for him (as it certainly was not for the historical Thomas of Woodstock). But the manner in which he complies asserts his independence as forcefully as possible. He is trying to have it both ways.

The reason *Thomas of Woodstock* can put this dilemma so clearly is that it is authorially committed to the aristocratic ideology, arranging the story so that the contrast between hereditary peer and royal favourite is also a contrast between wise and foolish, generous and mercenary, English and foreign, masculine and effeminate. The play magnifies the idea of the nobleman's honour so that it embraces every political virtue. *Richard II* works things out differently, but the same ideological tension between monarchy and aristocracy is essential to its structure.

The play tells the story not only of Richard, but also that of Bolingbroke. The opening scene shows him seeking to vindicate his honour in a dispute with another duke. The combat is aborted (for dishonourable reasons) by the king, who sends him into exile. While he is abroad, his father's death means that he becomes Duke of Lancaster, but the king takes advantage of his absence to appropriate the dukedom's assets. It is this invasion of his dynastic right which licenses Bolingbroke, in his own eyes, to return to England without permission and to back up his demand for restitution with the threat of force. He is not casual about royal authority, but his allegiance to the crown is overridden by the threat to essential aristocratic values – personal honour, military courage, hereditary entitlement. In all these ways, Bolingbroke is the play's representative nobleman.

This ideology, however, runs into two interacting contradictions. One concerns Bolingbroke himself. Once he has landed in England, and the king's power collapses, his objective changes, with disturbing ease, from the dukedom to the throne. This makes him newly unclear: is he being carried along by events, or was he aiming at the throne all along? In another incident, before Richard has even abdicated, Bolingbroke is shown managing a quarrel among his courtiers that closely resembles the one he was involved in at the beginning. The combatants are clear and forceful, as he was then; now he tries to divert and mute the very passions he once expressed. Then, in the last act, a dangerous conspiracy illustrates the imprudence of leaving the deposed Richard alive. Bolingbroke half-instructs somebody to murder him, and at the end of the play he stands before the corpse, protesting that this was not what he

wanted. Again, he may be telling the truth; we can't be sure. The story of his meteoric rise, then, is also the story of how his code of honour loses its vigorous simplicity and slides into ambiguity. In becoming kingly he ceases to be noble.

The second ideological contradiction affects Richard's role. When he seizes Bolingbroke's inheritance, he is admonished by the Duke of York, who is uncle to both of them:

Take Herford's rights away, and take from Time
His charters, and his customary rights;
Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day:
Be not thyself; for how art thou a king
But by fair sequence and succession? (2.1.195–9)

In this account, kingship is essentially like any other heritable estate. The king cannot logically violate the rights of his peers because his own rights are continuous with them; the king is a kind of nobleman. In other words, this is the monarch as he appears within aristocratic ideology. But York will also tell Bolingbroke, on his unauthorized return from exile, that he is 'in gross rebellion and detested treason' (2.3.109). Here the king's decree has the character of an absolute law; regardless of its justice, it is mandatory because the king is, precisely, not a kind of nobleman, but a being set above society as a whole, even above humanity. As Richard says:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord. (3.2.54–7)

Strikingly, what makes the king here is not inheritance but anointing, not a civil procedure the king has in common with his subjects but a religious one that sets him apart from them. In other words, this is the monarch as he appears within monarchical ideology, not finally reconcilable with the aristocratic version.

So the play tells the story of two kings, and both stories, in different ways, show the aristocratic code of honour failing to encompass the requirements of the throne. In absolutist fashion, the sovereign transcends the arrangements and values of society. We could say, then, that

if *Thomas of Woodstock* deploys an aristocratic honour code against the absolutist pretensions of the crown, *Richard II* sets the paradoxes of monarchy against the ideology of the aristocracy. Implicitly, that would be to read Shakespeare's play as a royalist answer to Woodstock's anti-royalist challenge.

This formulation would not be entirely misleading, but it is too schematic; it risks taking the *play* out of the plays. 'Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king' sounds final enough when it is quoted as a self-contained sentiment – as it soon was, in a poetry anthology of 1600. But in the play it is immediately followed by the news that an army which was ready to fight for Richard against Bolingbroke has just dispersed:

One day too late, I fear me, noble lord,
Hath clouded all thy happy days on earth.
O, call back yesterday, bid time return,
And thou shalt have twelve thousand fighting men! (3.2.67–70)

The messenger's entrance demystifies the declaration of divine kingship: what secures the crown, it suggests, is not balm but troops. And the language lyrically generalizes that juxtaposition: the sovereignty Richard has articulated is absolutely unimpeachable because it is an idea; the stage moment enacts, vertiginously, the fall of the idea into time. It may be true in some ultimate sense that the breath of worldly men cannot depose the deputy elected by the Lord – that something as permanent as God's law cannot be altered by something as transitory as 'breath'. But here and now, in among the chances and changes of 'days on earth', that is exactly what is happening.

So we could say, contradicting what we said a moment ago, that *Richard II* undermines the absolutist pretensions of the crown *more* radically than *Thomas of Woodstock*. *Woodstock* merely showed how the king's sense of himself leads him into conflict with his peers, with the realm, with customary ideas of what is just and reasonable. Shakespeare, on the other hand, shows him (as York said) in conflict with time itself, his position demolished not by the wilful protests of his adversaries, but by the inadvertent mockery of his followers, who tell him that he can still be the king if he can call back yesterday. The conflict is not only thematic but rhythmic. Richard's great speeches form static lyrical moments which

arrest the play's narrative flow, setting his role at odds with the most basic elements of drama: moments passing, transformations, things happening.

But if this undermines absolutism by exposing it to the play of drama, it does so in a way which depoliticizes the gesture because it undermines so much else too. The scene that begins with the desertion of the twelve thousand men drives on through successive disconfirmations to Richard's famous confrontation with mortality:

for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable . . . (3.2.160–8)

In a way, certainly, this is negating absolutist pretensions, exposing royal invulnerability as a pitiful fantasy. But the speech fails to stop there; it goes on until there is no monarch at all, only somebody who 'monarchizes' (which means 'being a king' for a bit, like an actor). The only real ruler is death. So Richard's negation of kingship is no less absolute than his assertion of it; neither version affords any space for the aristocratic values which informed the politics of *Woodstock*. This king is everything or else he is nothing; he is distinct from everybody or else he is no different from anybody. Either way, he has only contempt for those who want him to be something in between. Consequently his kingship becomes, exactly as time takes away all its historical reality, a timeless image of the individual self. He defends monarchy so fanatically against aristocracy that to modern audiences, who care nothing for either, his voice sounds universally human.

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Ben Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour*

Lord Chamberlain's, Theatre (1598)

Every Man In His Humour is a comedy with multiple interlocking plots. It begins when a young gentleman called Edward Kno'well, who lives at his father's house outside London, is invited to spend the day in town with his smart friend Wellbred. The two of them collect a temporary retinue of fools to laugh at – Master Stephen the rustic snob, Master Mathew the poetic poseur, and Captain Bobadill the fake military hero. This party calls on Wellbred's sister, who is married to a jealous merchant called Kiteley. Bobadill quarrels with Wellbred's half-brother Downright; young Kno'well falls in love with Kiteley's sister Bridget and marries her. Meanwhile, Kno'well's father, concerned at the company his son is keeping, follows him to London, but his efforts to find him are frustrated by the virtuoso plotting of the family servant Brainworm. In the end the whole miscellaneous cast assembles before Justice Clement, an 'old merry magistrate' who resolves the accumulated misunderstandings of the day, imposes comic punishments on the fools, and invites everyone else to supper.

This is the first play the reader encounters in the imposing 1616 edition of *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*, where it is put forward, in a newly written prologue, as an exemplary corrective to the bad theatre conventions of the age. In contrast with the pragmatism of much early modern stage writing, then, this play is shaped by distinctly formulated principles. One of these is the neoclassical model of drama. The prologue declares that a play must not show a child growing up, or a long war, or a journey across the sea – in other words, it insists on the unities of time and place. And indeed, the action of *Every Man In* runs, conspicuously, from the morning to the evening of a single day, and is largely restricted to a few streets in the City of London. More generally, the prologue proscribes stage effects that are designed to elicit wonder or fear; and certainly, again, *Every Man In* avoids monsters, miracles and meteorology. It aspires to be humanist drama – a theatre inhabited only by ordinary mortals.

This implies the idea of *mimesis*, the imitation of life: what the prologue calls 'an image of the times'. A second conscious principle, then, is the project of representing contemporary actuality. This became explicit

by degrees. When *Every Man In* was staged in 1598, and printed in 1601, it was set in Florence, but with minor details that made it sound English – as often happened in Elizabethan drama, the Italian city was really a theatrical costume for London. Revising the play at some point before the 1616 edition, Jonson dropped the costume, anglicizing the names and thickening the language with local allusions, so that it became self-consciously a London comedy. The rewriting is superficial in the sense that the underlying plot remains the same; but the difference it makes is surprisingly far-reaching. The Kno'wells, for instance, live in Hoxton, still a village separated from London by fields; and the opening places old Kno'well, with his walled garden and his orderly household, as a rural figure in contrast with the busy rhythms of the urban gallants and merchants. So when Wellbred draws young Kno'well out of that seclusion into his own promiscuous sociability, and old Kno'well tries to keep him back, the contest sets country against city. The play is not only set in London, it is deliberately *about* London.

Thirdly, and most explicitly, there is the idea of 'humours'. At root this is a physiological concept. As the word implies (it is cognate with 'humid'), humours are fluids: they ebb and flow inside us, imperfectly contained by our organs, and their composition determines our mental and physical predispositions. For example, the humour called 'choler' is hot and drying, so choleric people tend to be lean, red-faced, energetic and angry. In the play, the idea is deployed semi-metaphorically to suggest any controlling impulse. Kiteley, for instance, experiences his jealousy as a 'black cloud' of suspicion overspreading his faculties. He knows that his wife is innocent, but knowledge is inundated by the current within. Jealousy is his humour, as quarrelsomeness is Downright's and merriment is Clement's.

However, the word had another life too. Finding young Kno'well in lethargic mood, Wellbred protests, 'what a drowsy humour is this now' (3.1.25). Bobadill says he refused a request to give fencing lessons because 'it was opposite to my humour' (4.7.25). These phrases, which appear in the 1598 version, are typical of their moment: ancient as it was, the word 'humour' had a brief career as a cult expression. For a while everyone was saying it and unsurprisingly its semantic content dipped towards zero. Jonson's title is thus ambiguously voiced. Is 'humour' a word that defines these people from the outside, naming the unseen sources of their behaviour with quasi-medical authority? Or is it a term borrowed, more or less

ironically, from their own affected way of speaking? Is the play modish, or is it a satire on modishness?

Despite its etymology, then, 'humour' does not simply name a natural substance; speaking the word has a social dimension to it. 'Humours' comedy and *London* comedy intersect, for example, in the little sketch of Stephen, the country fool:

My name is Master Stephen, sir, I am this gentleman's own cousin, sir, his father is mine uncle, sir, I am somewhat melancholy, but you shall command me, sir, in whatsoever is incident to a gentleman. (3.1.65–8)

Melancholy, associated not only with depression but with profundity, love and poetry, is the humour with the finest social tone: Stephen, a small-time squire unsure of his status in town, displays his melancholy as a badge of gentility. Or again, Kiteley's jealousy is a specifically *bourgeois* emotion:

Marry, I hope they ha' not got that start:
For opportunity hath balked 'em yet,
And shall do still, while I have eyes and ears
To attend the impositions of my heart.
My presence shall be as an iron bar
'Twixt the conspiring motions of desire:
Yea, every look, or glance, mine eye ejects,
Shall check occasion . . . (2.3.25–32)

The merchant balks, bars and checks tirelessly to try and prevent his rivals from 'getting the start' on him: his sexual insecurity is an extension of his worries about the security of his wealth, and even his own feelings appear as the 'impositions' of his heart – duties imposed upon him by himself. As with Stephen, humour turns out to proceed not so much from the composition of the body's fluids as from the class relations of Elizabethan London.

It is not only that a mercantile ethos informs Kiteley's humour in particular; there is also a general affinity between the play's psychology and its city. As a mechanism for producing dramatic characters, humour is oddly arbitrary: almost by definition there is no object which is causing Downright's anger; he is just an angry man. The conception thus individualizes action, making the actor accountable not to a coherent purpose

or a code of conduct, but only to his own subjectivity. The dramatic strength of that is that it provides for an unconditional diversity – no one is merely functional, every man is in his humour – and certainly part of the play’s appeal in performance is its warm impression of populousness; it makes a fairly modest cast feel like a crowd. The dramatic problem with it, though, is that it blocks interaction. People meet and reveal themselves to one another, but after that not much can happen between them because they are all fundamentally self-determining. It is for this reason that the plot, despite its intricacy, has something inconsequential about it. Old Kno’well pursues his son – but fails to catch up with him. Kiteley suspects his wife – and is eventually prevailed upon not to. Wellbred collects his cheats and fools, laughs at them for a while – and then loses interest in them. No one has a *decisive* effect on anyone else: there are situations, but not exactly stories. Characters do not so much relate as collide, and so the social atmosphere of the play is percussive, full of half-serious confrontations.

But as that style suggests, this miscellany of coinciding individuals does dramatize, in its very inconclusiveness, a historically definite kind of relationship: edgy, discontinuous, spontaneous. The atomization is mimetic as well as formal: this is an environment where unrelated individuals are juxtaposed at random, and where the immediate situation counts for more than the beginning or the end of anyone’s story. In other words, Jonson has found a way to stage an *urban* world. Even the false humours make sense in these terms: the vacuous Mathew can ‘be’ a poet, and the law-abiding Bobadill a fighter, because the next tavern will always afford some more people who don’t know what they are really like. On the street, individual identity is disposable (as it is on the stage, but not in Hoxton). The city is naturally populated by humourists; or rather, humour is an especially appropriate formula for dramatizing the city.

But then the play does not accept this openness in an indiscriminately playful spirit. Its exposition of the ‘humorous’ is *also* severely moralistic:

Learn to be wise, and practise how to thrive,
That would I have you do: and not to spend
Your coin on every bauble that you fancy,
Or every foolish brain that humours you . . .
Nor would I you should melt away yourself
In flashing bravery, lest, while you affect

To make a blaze of gentry to the world,
A little puff of scorn extinguish it . . .
I'd ha' you sober, and contain yourself;
Not that your sail be bigger than your boat . . .
Nor stand so much on your gentility,
Which is an airy and mere borrowed thing,
From dead men's dust and bones, and none of yours
Except you make or hold it. (1.1.60–83)

This is old Know'ell urging his nephew Stephen to be more sensible with money; but this commonplace purpose provokes a positive kaleidoscope of metaphors of insubstantiality. Melting, flashing, borrowing, bauble, blaze, fancy, air, dust – old Know'ell tries over and over again to name what he disapproves of, and it escapes him exactly because it is so contemptibly lacking in firmness and solidity. You cannot 'make or hold it', it sparkles and disperses. It partakes of whatever is unstable and incontinent – wind, money, fashion, crowds and, it comes as no surprise to see, humour. At this point, humour does not just serve as a neutral device for representing persons, but threatens, with its murky fluidity, every substantial value.

This moral panic is not simply authorial. Its principal exponents are old Kno'well and Kiteley, and the play takes care to put them both 'out of their humours' by the end. But its logic is accepted in surprising fashion by Jonson's eventual choice of a hero. 'Here is my mistress – Brainworm!' (5.5.77) exclaims Justice Clement at the end, hailing the shape-shifting servant as his man of the day. Brainworm is an anglicized version of the quick-witted slave of Roman comedy, the trickster who cheats the blocking characters and brings about the happy ending. What entitles him to this extravagant recognition? Partly it is that the conclusion is a generically festive moment, and Brainworm serves as the spirit of comedy. But he is also heroic because, picking and choosing among identities for purely tactical reasons, he represents the sovereignty of rational decision over impulse and habit. As he says when embarking on his career of illusions, his stratagems translate him 'from a poor creature to a creator' (2.4.2); he becomes the active maker and holder of himself, rather than a plaything of humour. So the play's austere morality is eventually embodied in the rogue – a paradox to remind us that simple characterization does not necessarily produce a simple play.

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Thomas Dekker, *The Shoemakers' Holiday*

Lord Admiral's, ?Rose (1599)

Dekker's comedy inhabits the common ground, described earlier (pp. 63–6), between theatre and festivity. The shoemakers' holiday is Shrove Tuesday, the three plots all end together in the festivities of the day, and the play itself was part of the Court's Christmas celebrations in 1599–1600. Dedicating the script to all shoemakers, Dekker enjoins them, 'Take all in good worth that is well intended, for nothing is purposed but mirth': that disclaimer, unpretentious, light-hearted and dimly rhyming, identifies the play with the holiday frolics it depicts. Altogether, then, *The Shoemakers' Holiday* gives us a chance to see the possibilities of the idea that a play can *be* a kind of holiday.

There is a minor but suggestive doubt about the title. In the earliest edition it is called *The Shoemakers Holiday*. Modern editors feel obliged to correct this by supplying an apostrophe, but then have to decide whether to make it *The Shoemaker's Holiday* or *The Shoemakers' Holiday* – that is, whether the holiday, and the play, belong to the particular shoemaker who is the central character, or to the whole profession. Both alternatives have their critical supporters; my view is that the show is festive precisely because it is collective. Like a modern village fete, and unlike most modern drama, it stages a community.

It is a free dramatization of Thomas Deloney's *The Gentle Craft*, probably published in 1597. This much-reprinted pamphlet contains three shoemaking legends. St Hugh worked as a shoemaker for a time; after his martyrdom his bones revealed miraculous properties and were made into shoemaking tools. The princes Crispine and Crispianus hid from a tyrant by apprenticing themselves to a shoemaker, and had various adventures of love and war before reclaiming their birthright. And Simon Eyre, a fifteenth-century London shoemaker, rose to be Lord Mayor, built Leaden Hall, and, in fulfilment of a youthful vow, feasted all the apprentices of London on Shrove Tuesday. All these tales end on the narrative formula 'and to this day . . .': we still say of a true shoemaker that he carries St Hugh's bones; leather is still bought and sold at the Leadenhall market; and shoemaking is still associated with royalty, for example in the

proverb 'A shoemaker's son is a prince born'. *The Gentle Craft* is neither a history nor a description of shoemaking: rather, it is the book of its traditions, the narrative form of its antiquity and pride.

The play discards two of the stories, but brilliantly preserves the book's celebratory function in the way it handles the third. It centres on Simon Eyre, who is a 'madcap' figure, loquacious, whimsical and high-spirited. First he is an ordinarily prosperous tradesman, then he becomes a rich man, then Sheriff of London, and then Lord Mayor. In the extended final sequence, on Shrove Tuesday, he is seen feasting not only the apprentices, but also the king, who has heard of the merry Mayor of London and comes to see for himself.

This narrative is flanked by two love stories. In one, a young aristocrat named Lacy is in love with Rose, the daughter of Sir Roger Oatley, who is Eyre's predecessor as Lord Mayor. Both the families are opposed to this cross-class alliance, so Lacy goes under cover in London as a Dutch shoemaker called Hans, and eventually the couple contrive a runaway marriage. In the other story, Ralph, a craftsman in Eyre's workshop, is conscripted to fight in France, and returns, maimed, to find he has lost contact with his wife Jane. She is working in a shop, and a wealthy suitor convinces her that Ralph has been killed; Ralph hears about her impending marriage and reclaims her in the nick of time. Both sub-plots are deftly integrated into the celebratory structure. For one thing, the two weddings are scheduled for Shrove Tuesday, so that Eyre's holiday hospitality also becomes a double love-feast. For another, both stories are tied to the gentle craft. 'Hans' gains access to Rose by bringing her shoes to try on; and Ralph, commissioned to make a pair of shoes for a bride, realizes in a poignant *coup de théâtre* that she is his own wife. Moreover, shoemakers' solidarity is the key to both happy endings. Lacy and Rose are married under Eyre's protection because he regards Lacy as one of his men. And Ralph interrupts Jane's wedding with the aid of half a dozen colleagues with cudgels; his honour as a husband is inseparable from the honour of the profession. These plots serve, within the framework of the Simon Eyre story, to celebrate the shoemakers' fraternal spirit and their easy association with aristocracy, as well as making them romantic champions of true love. The play as a whole is a pageant in honour of the trade.

However, we can hardly stop there. That kind of celebration would suit a craft feast day, but *The Shoemakers' Holiday* is a play for the public theatre and the Court: drama, as we have seen, addressed not an organic

community but a miscellaneous public. It is not practicable to have a play that only speaks to shoemakers. What does 'the gentle craft' mean to the rest of us?

We can start to answer that question by considering the phrase itself, which is also the play's subtitle. In its social sense it is an oxymoron – a craftsman is by definition not a gentleman. And this verbal contradiction points to an ideological one. Shoemakers use the phrase to praise their craft and recall that noblemen have not disdained to practise it. So it asserts artisanal pride: a shoemaker is as good a man as a lord. But the *language* of the assertion is that of the very hierarchy it denies: the claim to be as good as a lord is meaningful only if the lord is better. The social gesture is democratic and deferential in the same moment.

One might expect the play to try and reconcile this contradiction, but actually it exacerbates it. Eyre's catchphrase, alluding to the noble cobblers of legend, is 'Prince am I none, yet am I princely born' – that is, he simultaneously insists that he is royal and that he is not. The effect is a counter-factual regality: 'Simon Eyre, the mad shoemaker', as he also likes to call himself, performs a sovereignty which constantly debunks itself. He is a parody king, a lord of misrule. There is nothing sub-textual about this identity: it is vividly written in his dialogue. For example there are several scenes set in his shop, and although they show his men at work, they are also festive, full of eating, drinking, dressing up and abuse, most of the last directed at Eyre's fat wife Marjorie:

Peace, you bombast-cotton-candle quean, away, Queen of Clubs, quarrel not with me and my men . . . Avaunt, kitchen-stuff; rip, you brown-bread Tannikin, out of my sight! Move me not. Have not I ta'en you from selling tripes in Eastcheap, and set you in my shop, and made you hail-fellow with Simon Eyre the shoemaker? . . . Look, you powder-beef quean, on the face of Hodge. Here's a face for a lord . . . A dozen cans of beer for my journeymen! Here, you mad Mesopotamians, wash your livers with this liquor . . . (7.42–83)

This tone is lordly and debasing at once: Eyre speaks as a sovereign ruler – 'Peace . . . out of my sight! Move me not!' – but the exalted rhetoric is made out of low-life scraps – bombast, brown bread, tripes, livers. This is exactly the double voice that Bakhtin identifies, in his famous book about Rabelais, with the materializing gaiety of carnival. 'Carnavalesque'

is a word that has been overworked in recent criticism of Renaissance writing, but in this play, with Shrove Tuesday literally in the offing, we can allow ourselves to use it. Within the story, Eyre is merely an eccentric tradesman, but in performance he is a carnival king.

The action matches the language. The paradox of the gentle craft is reproduced in the doubleness of the hero, the Earl of Lincoln's nephew who is also the immigrant worker Hans. The multiple plot is eventually resolved when Eyre's youngest employee, an anarchic fool named Firk, outwits his elders. Above all, there is Eyre's own meteoric rise. It is fantastical, because in reality the City was strictly oligarchic; the Lord Mayor was chosen from among the members of the twelve dominant companies, and the company to which shoemakers belonged (the Cordwainers) was not one of them. The historical Simon Eyre did become Mayor, but only after he had long been a member of the powerful Drapers' company. In the play, no such strategies are needed: Eyre rises to the top as effortlessly as Dick Whittington. His mayoralty is thus utopian: the impossible royal handicraftsman inherits the earth, reconciles parent and child, court and city, patrician and plebeian, and serves free pancakes all round. Just for a day, the King of England and the humblest apprentice are both guests in mad Simon Eyre's hall; proper protocol is jovially muddled up; it is, to borrow another of Bakhtin's phrases for carnival, a feast for all the world.

So the shoemakers' holiday is not just a bland folkloric pageant, but something rougher: a temporary dissolution of working-day order. Shrove Tuesday itself, after all, for many Elizabethan Londoners, was not so much a vision of social harmony as a day when unruly crowds of apprentices took to the streets, getting drunk and damaging property. The play absorbs this riotous tradition in the scene where the shoemakers ambush the wedding party; at the first sign of resistance they shout 'Clubs for prentices!', the phrase used to initiate a serious ruck. This strikingly un-gentle version of craft identity is the more pointed because Dekker builds both love stories round the figure of Hammon, a wealthy young citizen. First he is Sir Roger Oatley's candidate for Rose's hand, and then, after she has refused him, he is the man who is trying to marry Jane. So in both cases the shoemakers bring about a happy ending by defeating the city oligarchy and its privileged son, just as the office of Mayor passes, for the festive culmination of the show, from the gentrified Sir Roger to the rough-tongued Master Eyre. For one day, at least, the mad

Mesopotamians overthrow the sober city authorities who normally govern them.

And that story, with its class animus, is completed by Eyre's eventual meeting with the king, who seems (unhistorically) to be the populist hero Henry V. The king is worried that his own presence will damp down Eyre's 'wonted merriment', so he twice urges him to behave as usual; this injunction makes Eyre a licensed jester, excused the forms of respect that are required of his betters. In the middle of his scene with the king, the Earl of Lincoln and Sir Roger Oatley come in to complain about Lacy's marriage to Rose; but Eyre has already secured the king's forgiveness, so it is the angry fathers who appear disorderly, upsetting the general mirth for the sake of their petty exclusions. Thus the royal visit is itself carnivalesque, prolonging the moment of Eyre's madcap sovereignty, and vindicating the disobedient lovers.

In the end, then, what universalizes shoemaking in the play is its social ambivalence: its stage image, as a group of characters and as a rhetoric, is both common and gentle, combative and eirenic, anarchic and monarchical. Because it is therefore low and high at the same time, it exceeds the social arrangements that depend on the distinction between the two. Thus the gentle craft comes to stand for the whole people, the 'everybody' that is the true subject of carnival. For the duration of the holiday, we are all shoemakers.

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William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Lord Chamberlain's, Globe (1601)

There is something absurd, now, about a brief account of *Hamlet*. As the Polish critic Jan Kott pointed out a generation ago, a bibliography of writings on the subject would contain more entries than the telephone directory of a major city. It has been interpreted thousands of times; it has been mythologized by European intellectuals from Turgenev to Derrida; it has provided the standard *rite de passage* for English actors for over three centuries; today it is adopted and adapted all over the world. Is it possible to put this world-historical genie back in its bottle – to pretend that *Hamlet* is (as it once was) just another English Renaissance play?

In some respects it is a remake of *The Spanish Tragedy**. The older play, first staged in about 1587, seems to have been updated for the Lord Admiral's Men in the late 1590s; *Hamlet* was presented by the Lord Chamberlain's in 1601, and was soon equally famous. It recycles Kyd's main ingredients: the ghost, the father-son relationship, the delayed revenge, the journey through madness, the revelatory play within the play. Ironically, a play that has elicited a more personal response from readers and actors than almost any other seems, on the face of it, to have been made not out of personal experience but out of theatrical counters which were already in circulation.

Less strikingly but perhaps more significantly, the plays share the same social setting. In *Hamlet*, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, and as in countless later plays in the genre they helped to establish, the action is immersed in the hierarchies and habits of a Renaissance court. This is insistent to the point of claustrophobia in *Hamlet*: virtually every scene takes place at court, and excursions into the outside world, like Hamlet's voyage or Ophelia's death, are brief, narrated and slightly phantasmagoric. The court is the world; nowhere else is altogether real. It is a surprisingly limited social and historical horizon for a play with – clearly – such universal resonance.

Two characteristics of court society are particularly interesting from the point of view of the theatre. One is that it is ambiguously public and domestic at once: it is the headquarters of the state, but also the home of the royal family. Space in *Hamlet* is intimate, but overdetermined as well. Hamlet's conversations are liable to overhearing, interruption,

concealed intention. Even the queen's 'closet' is not really closed, but penetrated by Polonius, by the ghost, and by the suspicion that she will report everything to Claudius. At court one is never alone. Consequently there are no purely private stories; they are all also stories about the society as a whole; the individual opens on to the political, and vice versa. And the other interesting characteristic of the court is its symbolic organization. One of its functions, I mean, is the ritual signification of war and peace, triumphs and humiliations, marriages and deaths. It is in this sense a ceremonial theatre, disposing its members in meaningful patterns, and deploying a theatrical means of expression – music, speeches, costumes, processions, dances, tournaments, masques. The court was an instrument for dramatizing the life of the state, as Shakespeare's company will have been aware (the official responsible for managing it was after all their patron the Lord Chamberlain).

One way to retrieve Hamlet from his Romantic myth, then, is to turn away from the prince and ask about his society instead. 'The Prince's consciousness', we are often told, 'is obviously the play's centre.'² He represents it as ineffable – 'I have that within which passes show' – and critics ancient and modern have tended to take him at his word. Few roles in drama imply so compellingly the presence of a *person*. But as Laertes reminds Ophelia, 'the Prince's consciousness' is not autonomous:

his will is not his own,
For he himself is subject to his birth.
He may not, as unvalued persons do,
Carve for himself, for on his choice depends
The sanctity and health of the whole state;
And therefore must his choice be circumscribed
Unto the voice and yielding of that body
Whereof he is the head. (1.3.17–24)

Let's see what happens, then, if we take it that the dramatic centre is not Hamlet after all, but 'the sanctity and health of the whole state'.³

² *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 37.

³ The phrase appears differently in different editions of this textually complicated play. The edition of Shakespeare which I am using throughout seems to me to have made the wrong choice here: I have given the line that appears in the 1623 Folio.

And in fact these are in question from the very start. When the court – including Hamlet – first appears, Claudius announces:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death
The memory be green, and that it us befitted
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom
To be contracted in one brow of woe,
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature
That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves.
Therefore, our sometime sister, now our queen,
The imperial jointress to this war-like state,
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious, and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife . . . (1.2.1–14)

What is the *ritual state* of this court? Is it in mourning for the loss of its old king, or is it celebrating its new king's wedding? In practical terms it appears to be in good order, but symbolically it is chaotic: as everyone remarks (even Claudius), the state is 'disjoint and out of frame'. His speech acknowledges this and simultaneously tries to resolve it, as an increasingly desperate series of oxymorons ('wisest sorrow', 'defeated joy', 'mirth in funeral') pulls the incompatible proprieties into a merely syntactic connectedness. Meanwhile, the whole court is clearly dressed for the marriage except Hamlet, who is in mourning. So the scene is a double image of dislocated ritual: the contradiction is present verbally in the king's tortuous rhetoric and visually in the prince's anomalous appearance. Denmark appears as a state which has lost the capacity to represent itself.

It goes on. When Polonius is killed his body is dragged indecorously round the building, and eventually buried 'hugger-mugger'; this second ritual failure precipitates Ophelia's madness, in which she performs an opaque funeral ceremony of her own. And then her burial is a deliberately incomplete occasion (a 'maim'd rite', like all the others), prefaced by a mocking epitaph for a dead fool, and profaned by the spectacle of two young men fighting in her grave. Like Ophelia herself, Gertrude improvises her own ceremony, again in terms that recall Claudius's

opening mix-up of death and marriage, scattering flowers on Ophelia's corpse and saying: 'I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid, / And not have strew'd thy grave' (5.1.245–6).

Denied ceremonial representation, death infiltrates the ceremonies that are supposed to compose the court's life. The play, an official occasion of delight, is twisted into an accusation of murder and broken off in confusion. And the drama ends in a fight to the death disguised as a sporting contest, while the royal family drink to one another's health with poisoned wine. Only when it is over does Fortinbras arrive, to survey the carnage, deplore its indecorum, and give orders for the proper ceremonial treatment of Hamlet's body, thus restoring the symbolic order of the court.

This ritual confusion is not a mere question of etiquette. The court's ceremonial breakdowns generate other, menacing modes of representation. The dead king, not having been laid fittingly to rest, walks the battlements at night. His son's mourning, with no communal observance in which it could be grounded, takes the aberrant forms of melancholy and madness. Polonius's children are similarly alienated in their mourning, Ophelia in madness and Laertes in insurrection. Even the players take on some of the undischarged ritual energy, presenting Claudius with a spooky reenactment of his fratricide, and offering the prince an identification with Pyrrhus, the vengeful son of a dead hero, butchering a king. These wild languages overlap despite their diversity. The ghost is a *likeness* of the king, assuming his shape as the player does in *The Murder of Gonzago*: spirit world and theatre are not quite separate. Theatre and madness similarly merge: Hamlet's antic disposition is, with famous ambiguity, both a psychological state and a piece of play-acting. Haunting, madness, theatre and rebellion bleed into one another because of their common function in the economy of the play: together they form the court's obverse, nocturnal, dangerous and illusory, disconcerting the dramatic unity with unconformable registers – the ghost's antique magniloquence, Hamlet's 'mad' clowning, Ophelia's songs. What the court fails to represent is represented in spite of it, spectrally, behind its back.

So the dramatic grammar splits repeatedly: official and illicit, day and night, face value and hidden value. These oppositions run through its micro-structures as well as its larger patterns. Take one example, almost at random:

Hamlet: My father – methinks I see my father.
Horatio: Where, my lord?
Hamlet: In my mind's eye, Horatio.
Horatio: I saw him once, 'a was a goodly king.
Hamlet: 'A was a man. Take him for all in all,
I shall not look upon his like again.
Horatio: My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.
Hamlet: Saw, who?
Horatio: My lord, the King your father. (1.2.184–90)

The expression 'to see him' sounds straightforward, but this exchange relentlessly defamiliarizes it. Seeing him in imagination, seeing him in public, never seeing the like of him again, having seen him last night – every touch on the phrase gives it a new turn, so that when Hamlet says 'Saw, who?' it is as if he has momentarily lost track of what the words mean. The sudden appearance of the ghost in the conversation (like his appearance on the stage) shakes its codes, opening up gaps in its coverage of the world. A similar disjunction reappears much later as a joke, when Claudius asks Hamlet where Polonius is, and Hamlet offers him a range of answers: at a worms' supper; in heaven; in the lobby. Here, again, the court's incapacity to represent itself in the face of death appears in the minutiae of its language as much as in the incoherence of its state occasions.

The splittance is not something the writing observes from an Olympian standpoint that keeps its own coherence intact. It is itself subverted by it. Take for example the representation of Claudius. For two acts he maintains a rhetoric of state so blandly official that it seems possible that he is just an ordinary king and his nephew strangely deluded. Then, without warning, he turns to the audience and says:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word. (3.1.50–2)

The lurid and pedantic simile is like something out of a book of emblems; the register is utterly distinct from the worldly cleverness which is Claudius's prevailing tone. His reign is thus two incompatible things, corresponding to the two different codes: it is a normal instance of monarchical government; *and* it is a grotesquely false cover for murder

and incest, a dystopian court like the ones in the Italianate tragedies of the next few years. No single sign can fix its unstable being; its time is out of joint.

At every level, then, *Hamlet* exploits the narrowness of its courtly setting to elaborate the image of a society failing to represent itself. But to say that is not to deny that the play stages the lives of individuals, including the one whose individuality has become so famous. Rather, the point is that the syntax of court society ties individual and communal languages intricately together, so that the symbolic breakdown of the community breaks down its members too, precipitating them into madness, violence and self-division. In that sense the ‘consciousness of the Prince’ – his addiction to soliloquy and the extraordinary illusion of his independent subjectivity – is a by-product of catastrophe. It is because he is not making sense in his own world that Hamlet speaks to ours.

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John Marston, *The Dutch Courtesan* Children of the Queen's Revels, Blackfriars (1605)

For modern readers and audiences, John Marston's London comedy *The Dutch Courtesan* is his most accessible play – urbane, argumentative and funny. It is also pitilessly sexist, achieving its resolution by scapegoating the courtesan of the title. Altogether, then, it is an instructive case in the politics and poetics of revival. Should we do plays like this, or would it be better to consign them to the dustbin of cultural history?

The main plot concerns two gentlemen of the town, Freevill and Malheureux. Freevill keeps a mistress called Franceschina; Malheureux is tensely disapproving. Freevill is about to marry a perfect bride called Beatrice, and needs to end his disreputable liaison. Perhaps cunningly, he introduces Franceschina to Malheureux, who falls in love with her. Furious at being dumped, Franceschina promises Malheureux that she will sleep with him if he kills Freevill. The two friends agree to fake a quarrel; Freevill will hide out for a few days, and Malheureux will claim to have killed him in order to enjoy Franceschina. However, Franceschina is lying too: as soon as she hears that Freevill is dead, she turns Malheureux in for his murder, hoping to destroy both of them. Freevill decides to stay dead until Malheureux is literally under the gallows, then reveals himself in a *coup de theatre* which saves his friend, revives his mourning bride, and dispatches Franceschina to jail.

Like most tragicomedies, the play offers various motives for the pretences required by its plot, not all of them convincing. If we stand back from these pretexts, though, we can see that the purpose really served by the whole structure of deceptions is Freevill's transition from libertinism to marriage. At the beginning he is in a false position: he is attached to both Franceschina and Beatrice, and neither of them knows about the other. How is he to consolidate his identity by bringing them into a single world? If the whore were a rapacious grotesque and the bride simply delightful, then the duality would be easy to convert into a stable hierarchy. And if the whore were charming, the hero penniless, and the bride an uninteresting heiress, that would be straightforward in a different way. But Marston is being more ambitious than that. Both Franceschina and

Beatrice are beautiful and intelligent; both of them love Freevill, and he loves both of them. Their coexistence in the same dramatic world is a contradiction, which it is the business of the comedy to resolve.

It does it by means of fiction. The four principals perform a scenario which brings their real situation to an imaginary crisis (Malheureux's murder of Freevill) and then resolves it by a miracle (Freevill's resurrection). The degree to which the participants are deceived varies: Beatrice almost entirely, Freevill hardly at all, the other two somewhere in between. This unevenness makes it hard to conclude that the action is really happening, or that it is not; it has the ambiguous character of a game, or an acting out. The point of this is clearly visible in the scene where Freevill and Beatrice are reunited. Beatrice is distraught at Freevill's death, and Freevill visits her in disguise. He sings to her, and she faints with emotion; terrified that he may have pushed her too far, he throws the disguise aside. She therefore returns to consciousness to find her lover in front of her. At first she thinks she has died and met him in heaven; and, indeed, the meeting is a resurrection for both of them – hers from the 'death' of the faint, and his in terms of the plot. There is, then, an ingeniously contrived sense in which Freevill dies to Franceschina and lives anew in the love of Beatrice. Freevill's initial contradictory position has been resolved with the aid of theology: the illicit love is death and hell, the respectable marriage is life and heaven, and Freevill's transition is a work of grace.

Malheureux's function in this sacred drama is to take over Freevill's place in hell. It is not simply that he replaces Freevill as Franceschina's lover. It is also that because of his rigid moralism, his infatuation with her takes the form of self-division: that he should be in love with a whore is for him at once impossible and undeniable, so he effectively goes mad. His rhetoric sets love against friendship, virtue against nature, beauty against salvation, knowing against doing – he is 'malheureux' not accidentally but essentially, irreconcilably at war with himself. In other words, he internalizes, as a dilemma, the duality which marked Freevill's external situation between his two women. Comically and cruelly, he *lives* the antinomy on Freevill's behalf; Freevill transfers the guilt and shame of his lechery to Malheureux and steps, 'free', into Beatrice's arms. In the next move, however, he can rescue Malheureux as well, by offloading Malheureux's guilt, in turn, on to Franceschina. She is the only one who is punished at the end.

Indeed, that is her function in this moral economy. It is spelt out by Freevill in the opening scene:

- Malheureux:* I fear the warmth of wine and youth will draw you to some common house of lascivious entertainment.
- Freevill:* Most necessary buildings, Malheureux. Ever since my intention of marriage, I do pray for their continuance.
- Malheureux:* Loved sir, your reason?
- Freevill:* Marry, lest my house should be made one. I would have married men love the stews as Englishmen love the Low Countries: wish war should be maintained there lest it should come home to their own doors. (1.1.76–87)

Brothels guarantee the order of the respectable home by being the place where disorder is *put*: it is chaste because they are lascivious, it is private because they are ‘common’, Beatrice is above us because Franceschina is under us. As the unpleasant half-metaphor of ‘necessary buildings’ suggests, the stews are a sewer, helping to keep the streets clean; at the end of the play, Freevill and Malheureux are both restored to wholeness when everything that has compromised or negated them is removed via the soiled channel of the whore. The play is sexist not only because it performs, without anxiety, the ‘necessary’ vilification of the courtesan, but also because the subjects of its ideological system are definingly male. The women do not have moral experiences; they merely constitute the moral experiences of the men.

So to return to my opening question: what are the issues for a theatre company which revives a play like this? We can take some hints from an explicitly feminist production by Vivienne Cottrell in London in 1990. Clearly deciding that a radical move was required, the director arranged for the actresses playing Beatrice and Franceschina to swap roles, irregularly but quite often, in the course of the show. After momentary confusion, the audience learned to accept either performer as either character: distinguishing between them was easy since, obviously, they dress differently, and one of them has a foreign accent.

This bold and clever device helps us because it was, in my view at least, a *half* success. The successful half was that it established a gap between the bodies of the women and the roles they were playing in the drama,

and so resisted precisely the inscription (of the ideological meanings *upon* the women's bodies) which Freevill's scam is designed to accomplish. The audience saw the goodness and happiness of Freevill with Beatrice, and the badness and misery of Malheureux with Franceschina, but it saw this opposition as readily reversible; heaven and hell appeared as social positions into which the women were put, rather than expressions of their essential being. Because neither actress could be regarded as embodying the woman she played, both appeared to the audience as variable representations rather than unconditional individuals. So the masculine viewpoint of the script was itself dramatized, and a script whose performance could easily *be* an oppressive ratification of male identities was tricked, as it were, into becoming a *study* of that process.

In this aggressive appropriation of the script there is an echo of its earliest performances. It was written for boys of between 10 and 15 – that is, the gap between the performers' bodies and their roles, which the modern production engineered with militant ingenuity, was also a feature of the original show. Probably Freevill and Malheureux were played by teenagers, and the women by smaller boys whose voices and faces suited female roles better. In 1605, then, no less than in 1990, the stage images of the bride and the prostitute were alienated and abstracted. Making the play into a feminist show turned out to be easier than you would expect, because of an ironic overlap between the two viewpoints. The production wanted to insist that these figures with female names are not women in their own right but women as defined and represented by men; the script precisely substantiated that proposition because it was so literally true of its original production. The masculinism of the play created the conditions for the feminism of the performance: the good thing about misogyny is that it fails to obscure the question of gender.

I said the device was half successful. To suggest the unsuccessful half, I must briefly point to the rest of the play, outside the main plot which has been the focus so far. Beatrice has a sister called Crispinella, who does little more than tease and then accept her suitor, but whose conversation, in two relaxed and almost plotless prose scenes, plays wittily and irreverently with many of the values which the main plot secures. And a neatly stitched-on subplot features the demolition of a London vintner at the hands of a trickster called Cocledemoy – full of disguises and sight-gags,

it is almost pure clowning, whimsically reversing the status difference between citizen and knave.

Both these sideshows are interesting in their own right, but also, with their different kinds of playfulness, they constitute a comic *environment* for the main plot. Take for example the 'gallows scene' at the end. Not only is Malheureux brought to the verge of execution by Freevill; at the same time, the vintner, Mulligrub, is brought to the same point by Cocledemoy. What is the point of this psychological torture? My own account of the main plot suggests two quite serious answers: the mock-execution is part of a ritual 'dying to sin'; and the victim's fear and shame are imposed upon him to 'cure' his infatuation. But neither of these interpretations covers the case of poor Mulligrub. Rather, he is tormented *for fun*; the genre here is not so much ritual as practical joke. In this context, Freevill's scam is less bizarre and machiavellian than a cold summary makes it sound: comic trickery is as it were the language of his theatrical homeland, and he speaks it naturally.

The problem with our 1990 production, then, is that, precisely because it was so sensitive and intelligent, it could not integrate the play's cruel and irresponsible gaiety. Marston himself introduces it as an 'easy play' (Prologue, line 1), and this ludic character is hard to combine with a reasoned critique of male hegemony. The point here is *not* that the play was written to amuse and therefore should not be taken seriously. Its lightness is not triviality; like most interesting comedies, it chooses serious issues to be funny about; it is playing, all the way through, but with fire as well as toys. Rather, the problem is that joking is the structural principle of the whole show: it sails under the flag of 'just for laughs'. So to engage in responsible discussion, to use the play to say something that matters, is to restrain the scope of the writing and tamper with the sources of its energy. Intelligent interpretation then comes at the expense of theatrical vitality – which is better than the other way round, but still an unhappy trade-off. At that point, the question of *The Dutch Courtesan* is this: can we have the play's harshly liberating laughter without its punitive ideology? Or does it all hang together?

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William Shakespeare, *King Lear* King's, Globe (1605)

Since about 1800, *King Lear* has been widely regarded as the greatest play of the English Renaissance, the theatrical equivalent of the *Divine Comedy* or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Such universal questions of value are beyond the scope of this guide, but we can take a hint of a more limited kind from the idea of 'greatness': the word says something not only about people's admiration for the play, but also about its size. The cast and running-time of *Lear* are nothing out of the ordinary, but the general impression is that it is somehow bigger than other plays. This is not just a trope of Romantic Shakespeare-worship: the play says it about itself. When the protagonist dies, the on-stage spectators register the event as the end of something unimaginably extensive:

- Is this the promised end?
- Or image of that horror?

He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

We that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (5.3.264–5, 314–16, 326–7)

What justifies these hyperbolic comments? In what way is *Lear* big?

The narrative shape gives the beginnings of an answer. The play has a brilliantly integrated double plot. The main story concerns the aged British King Lear, who, wishing to lay down the burdens of rule, divides his kingdom between his three daughters at a ceremony where each is to deserve her share by declaring how much she loves him. The elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, flatteringly comply and are rewarded, but the youngest, Cordelia, cannot produce the expected words and is angrily banished. Now powerless, Lear entrusts himself to Goneril and Regan, who treat him with such contempt that he loses his mind and wanders away into a great storm, attended by the handful of disguised or damaged followers who stay loyal to him. Cordelia, who has married the King of France, hears of her sisters' cruelty and returns to Britain with an army; Lear is reunited with her and restored to sanity, but her army is defeated.

By now the elder sisters are plotting viciously against each other, and the intrigues in the aftermath of their victory lead to the deaths of all three daughters. Lear, unable to bear losing Cordelia a second time, dies with her body in his arms. In the second plot, which is from an entirely different source, the Earl of Gloucester is tricked by his bastard son Edmund into an unjust rage against his legitimate son Edgar, who escapes by disguising himself as the mad beggar 'Tom o' Bedlam. At this point, the family's story becomes enmeshed with that of Lear's. Gloucester tries to help the vagrant king, and is arrested by Regan and her husband; blinded and turned out of doors, he is cared for by the still disguised Edgar. Edmund, meanwhile, is on the make: having betrayed his father, he becomes Earl of Gloucester and embarks on affairs with both sisters. After the culminating battle he is in effective command of the kingdom, but then is killed in single combat by an unknown challenger who turns out to be Edgar. The ruling family having been wiped out, Edgar is left to govern the broken kingdom.

These events are not inherently comprehensive in scope. All the characters are monarchs or courtiers or their servants: the play may appear to stage an entire society, but this is an illusion. We could say that its universality is inward rather than social, but then its psychic world is equally incomplete, with no mothers or children, only aged fathers and grown-up sons and daughters. The play's immensity is not a reflection of its representational content; we have to look differently.

Structurally, it is that the play's extreme and daring binary oppositions produce an effect of comprehensiveness. Each of the five siblings either takes all or loses all. Lear descends from king to wandering tramp. Edgar rises from naked beggar to armed champion of the realm. The three sisters come together only twice – at the beginning of the play to talk about love, and at the end to die. Or take the more elaborate binarism of the double plot. In both families, paternal authority is first established, in Lear's absolute monarchy and Gloucester's dictatorial patriarchy, and then inverted, as both fathers become their children's children, helplessly experiencing the tyranny of the bad and the loving care of the good. The families are dramatic machines for exhausting the possibilities of the parent-child opposition. That, in turn, places them in parallel, as if each family is a version of the other. But having set up this mirroring, the play multiplies differences within it: daughters versus sons; three versus two; madness versus blindness; the absence versus the presence of the issue of

legitimacy. The complicated interplay of similarity and contrast creates enormous amounts of dramatic space: it seems that there is room for every permutation – that by the end we have, so to speak, seen it all.

This plenitude is not only a matter of Shakespeare's technical virtuosity; it comes about because the story is already a myth. In legendary history, Lear is a direct descendant of Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas and founder of the realm of Britain. When Brutus died, he left the kingdom to his three sons, whose shares more or less correspond to England, Wales and Scotland. That act of sharing out the country is repeated several times in the chronicles, the Lear story itself being one example. The last in the sequence is King Gorboduc, who divided the land equally between his two sons, thus precipitating a civil war in which both were killed and Brutus's dynasty ended. A Senecan drama of *Gorboduc*, written for Inns of Court performance and seen by the young Queen Elizabeth in 1561, counts as the earliest English tragedy. The division of the kingdom is one of the culture's shaping stories.

It is not that partition was literally an urgent question, either in 1561 or in 1606, though images of an original tripartite division of the island certainly served to compliment James I, who united the three crowns for the first time in 1603, and whose iconography naturally featured the idea of 'Britain'. Rather, the story is something like the myth of a fall: once, in the beginning, everything was unified and natural; then a fatal act of separation precipitated us into the self-divided state in which we now live. This image of loss has several levels. Politically it is a royal myth: the embodiment of the original and ideal unity is the monarch, the unique person who is, as it were, the oneness of the realm in physical form. At this level, the story is above all an admonitory one: kings should not compromise the unity of their kingdoms, and subjects should not compromise the authority of their kings. That is how it works in the largely didactic dramaturgy of *Gorboduc*. But it is a psychic myth as well: even when *Lear* is performed in societies where kings have no political significance, everyone can recognize the movement out of unreflective union with an omnipotent parent into autonomy and guilt – that is, the play tells a story about how children become independent persons. And what makes the play big is that the image of patriarchal monarchy permits the two levels to interpenetrate freely. On the one hand, the play's families work as a metaphor for the national community, so fourteen named characters can enact the fate of Britain. And on the other, the political events

work as colossal, dreamlike metaphors for the family drama, so that the father is a mighty king, his growing old is an abdication, sibling enmity is a civil war, and so on. The play, in short, is a trace not only of a monarchical state but deeply of a monarchical culture – one in which the fall of a king comprehends every kind of falling.

The effect of this spacious structure is magnified yet further by the play's extreme theatrical heterogeneity. In the middle of the play, for example, when Lear is wandering on the open heath, his hyperbolic rhetoric of rage and despair is set among drastically alien tones – a plain, almost realistic prose for the machiavellian politicians, a fantastical mix of proverbs and childish rhymes for Lear's Fool, a strange baroque devotional verse that is associated with Cordelia, and two sharply distinguished kinds of fractured speech, for Lear's real and for Edgar's assumed madness. With all this going on, the Fool observes, 'This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen' (3.4.78–9), and that sense of communicative breakdown is dramaturgic as well as psychological – as if there are four or five incompatible conceptions of what kind of play this is, with no functioning authority to impose a definition.

The almost uncontrollable diversity is not only linguistic and generic but also what we could call, for want of a more exact term, metatheatrical. In a famous scene, for example, the blind and despairing Gloucester asks the beggar who is in fact Edgar to lead him to a cliff so that he can end his life. In the middle of the flat stage, Edgar persuades Gloucester that he is standing on the cliff-edge. Gloucester throws himself forward and faints, and Edgar rouses him in the character of a poor man who was walking on the beach and has seen him fall; it is a miracle, he tells him, that he is still alive. The scene works because it is mime. If the theatre simply wanted to show a man throwing himself off a cliff, it would be by some such enactment as we in fact see; the difference between an actual fall and a simulated one is not as decisive on the stage as it is in life. Consequently, there is a strange, spectral level at which Gloucester really has thrown himself off the cliff and been miraculously preserved. This is representative of the play's theatrical syntax. Gloucester travels through several kinds of death: the real and illusory things that happen to him are so drastic as almost to split the role into three or four successive figures. In the same way, Edgar leaves Tom o' Bedlam behind at the imaginary cliff-edge, just as he left Edgar behind to become Tom. Next, he will briefly be a rebellious peasant, and then the nameless knight who

challenges Edmund. The whole role is not so much a character as a series of discrete performances, matching and eventually overcoming those of his brother, who also shifts from role to role in the more banal sense that he deceives people. Comparable breaks of identity punctuate the parts of Lear himself and his most faithful servant, the Earl of Kent. The effect of these discontinuities is not only to multiply personalities and make the play feel more populous than the cast-list suggests, but also to exaggerate the scale of the action because the individual journeys within it are so long. Lear – or Gloucester, or Edgar – is not one thing but a succession of things, driven on from one to the next by the pressure of events; as a result, each role seems to comprehend a lifetime.

This theatrical fluidity also opens up one further dimension. The fifth-act battle, for instance, takes the form of offstage sound effects while, on the stage, the blind and almost indifferent Gloucester sits quietly under a tree, not even covering the passage of time with a soliloquy. The effect intimates a different sort of vastness: a metaphysical point of view from which the decisive struggle for the kingdom appears as a noise in the distance. For Lear in his madness, life is similarly lacking in gravity:

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (4.6.182–3)

It is a viewpoint with no more authority within the play than any other; indeed, its air of philosophical transcendence is savagely demystified by events. But it does show how *Lear's* 'greatness' includes its openness to the knowledge that it consists, itself, only of a little playacting, and to the teasing possibility that the great world is nothing more.

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The Revenger's Tragedy King's, Globe (1606)

Although *The Revenger's Tragedy* survives in a single seventeenth-century edition, and has no performance history before the twentieth century, it has become, since its theatrical rediscovery in the 1960s, *the* Jacobean tragedy. All the things we loosely expect of the genre are concentrated into this one play: intrigue, revenge, sexual perversity, rhetorical excess, a touch of parody, a pile of corpses. It is not clear who wrote it (it was formerly attributed to Cyril Tourneur, and now is widely regarded as Thomas Middleton's, but neither case is conclusive), and it is appropriate that it remains anonymous. It is *everybody's* revenge tragedy, the genre incarnate.

It begins with the hero dressed in black and holding a skull, while the Duke and his family, gorgeously dressed, pass across the stage by torchlight. The skull is that of his mistress Gloriana, whom the Duke poisoned because she refused to sleep with him. So the opening sets the gaudy, prosperous group against the wronged and funereal loner. To a modern reader, this looks like a cartoon version of *Hamlet**, and the link is plausible: *The Revenger's Tragedy* was staged by the King's Men when *Hamlet* was still in their repertoire, and Burbage probably played both leads. But the difference – or at any rate one difference – is that while *Hamlet* is built round the tension between the hero's interiority and the role he is required to perform, the characters of this play inhabit their roles without reservation. The hero is called Vindice ('revenger'), the leading members of the ducal family are equally described by their names – Lussurioso, Ambizioso, Supervacuo and Spurio (the lecherous one, the ambitious one, the fool and the bastard) – and the Duke and Duchess are not named at all. They *are* their plot functions. Externalization, a central difficulty in *Hamlet*, is here the whole effect: this is revenge as a show.

However, superficial does not mean simple: no early modern play does more to demolish the assumption that depth is the only kind of complexity drama can have. Take the show's most notorious 'turn': the murder of the Duke. Vindice has adopted the role of Pisto, a court pimp, and arranges to introduce the Duke to a prostitute in a house some distance from the palace. In fact the girl is Gloriana's skull, dressed up in robes and

a mask. The excited Duke kisses the skull, then it is unmasked and he looks in terror into its empty eyes. Its mouth has been smeared with poison which eats away his lips as he dies. What kind of theatre is this?

In a way it is allegory. As in the moral drama of the sixteenth century, the actors personify vices and enact commonplaces: lust is its own punishment; the charms of the flesh are a trap; remember you must die. Literal poison signifies moral poison. In this sense, the play is an animated emblem book, its images visual aids for a savagely judgemental sermon. But even when allegory is used in that dogmatic way, there is something unavoidably two-faced about it, a tension between the visible object and its metaphoric meaning. The message is therefore liable to unexpected reversals. Waiting for the Duke to arrive, Vindice broods over the dressed-up skull:

Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
For thee? for thee does she undo herself? . . .
Does every proud and self-affecting dame
Camphor her face for this, and grieve her Maker
In sinful baths of milk, when many an infant starves
For her superfluous outside – all for this? . . .
Here might a scornful and ambitious woman
Look through and through herself; see, ladies, with false forms
You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms. (3.5.71–97)

This is unmistakably the moralist speaking, the preacher's misogynistic denunciation of extravagance and sensuality. As the thought develops, though, it makes the dead bone into the sole measure of truth. Silk, cosmetics and flesh are only different kinds of cover-up; mask and face are equivalent in that both conceal the reality beneath. From this point of view, life itself appears as 'superfluous outside'. This is melancholic because it devalues Gloriana along with the rest. But it is also liberating, because it implies that nothing is serious: every appearance is a costume, every action a pretence. All the world's a stage, in fact; and Vindice's device exemplifies the appalling playfulness that follows from this conclusion. The sermon mutates into camp. Moreover, the murder, in its luxurious cruelty, is obviously a fantasy: the images of punitive morality are perversely erotic. Vindice's first line, as he prepares to set the Duke up with his last and most exciting whore, is 'Oh sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing!' (3.5.1): what the avenger gets out of his revenge, with

scandalous explicitness, is pleasure. Teasingly, the show is condemnatory and sexy in the same breath.

To see how that works formally, we have to look beyond the Duke's death to the surrounding plot. In order to substantiate his role as Pisto the pimp, Vindice has hired himself out to the Duke's son and heir Lussurioso, who wants him to corrupt the latest object of his lust. This unfortunate girl turns out to be Vindice's own sister, Castiza; so by the time Lussurioso succeeds to his father's title, Vindice is planning to murder him too. Lussurioso celebrates his accession at a banquet where two groups of masked entertainers are separately plotting to murder him. The first group, led by Vindice, are successful, so the second group dance before an audience which is already dead; when they discover this, their own purpose explodes into rivalry, and the assorted contenders to the ducal throne slaughter each other. In a final ironic twist, Vindice casually reveals himself to be the originator of the entire bloodbath, and is in turn carried off to execution.

This lurid denouement spells out something that has been implicit throughout the play: its generic connection with masque, which was establishing itself as the main form of royal entertainment at exactly this time. A masque combined allegory and pleasure, as the new king's courtiers danced amid fabulous scenery in the characters of gods and virtues. The occasion both idealized the court and amused it, offering it not only a vision of itself as the fountain of perfect honour, love and happiness, but also a night of revelry and feasting. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is in this sense an inverted masque: it too idealizes the court, though as the fountain of perfect vileness, lust and envy; and it too links the idealization to enjoyment. In his opening speech, Vindice tells the skull:

Be merry, merry,
Advance thee, oh thou terror to fat folks
To have their costly three-piled flesh worn off
As bare as this – for banquets, ease and laughter
Can make great men, as greatness goes by clay,
But wise men, little, are more great than they. (1.1.44–9)

The tone is festive: the triumphs of the bone over the flesh, and of the little men over the great gluttons, are celebrated with, exactly, 'ease and laughter'. The revels are not cancelled but hijacked.

After the opening, the whole court does not appear on the stage again until the end; even so, the action seems to happen in a consistently realized court society. This impression comes from repeated set-piece descriptions, mostly Vindice's: this is social location by tirade. Here for example is Vindice as Piato, urging Castiza to accept Lussurioso's offer:

Oh think upon the pleasures of the palace,
Securèd ease and state; the stirring meats
Ready to move out of the dishes
That e'en now quicken when they're eaten;
Banquets abroad by torchlight, musics, sports;
Bare-headed vassals that had ne'er the fortune
To keep on their own hats, but let horns wear 'em;
Nine coaches waiting – hurry, hurry, hurry! . . .
Who'd sit at home in a neglected room
Dealing her short-lived beauty to the pictures
That are as useless as old men, when those
Poorer in face and fortune than herself
Walk with a hundred acres on their backs –
Fair meadows cut into green foreparts . . . (2.1.194–213)

The material elements of this recur through the play: we have already met the ease, the banqueting, the torchlight. The sense of a distinctive society, though, comes more inwardly from the way the speeches handle time. The verse is flat-out, fractured lines and sloppy enjambements suggesting impatience with the measured returns of the iambic pentameter. And the direct markers of time – 'ready', 'now', 'waiting', 'hurry' – intimate a nervy contemporaneity, set off by the brilliantly sketched tedium of days spent at home. Still more pace is generated by the manic shorthand of the imagery. Take the women who 'Walk with a hundred acres on their backs – / Fair meadows cut into green foreparts'. In the context, that sketches the mistress of a country landowner who is so besotted that he sells his estate and spends the money on her clothes – a Balzac novel knowingly compressed into one line. Characteristically, too, the narrative is shot through with innuendo: 'on their backs' is an ordinary phrase for wearing something, and 'cut' and 'foreparts' are innocent dress-maker's terms, but juxtaposing them makes them seem vaguely sadistic; while '*green* foreparts' is primarily a mocking reference to the greenness of the lost fields, but also picks up a convention that prostitutes wear

green, and so notes subliminally that these enviably well-dressed women are whores.

What is typical here, besides the speed, is the interchange of sex and money. By this point, we have already heard Vindice recalling Gloriana as beautiful enough 'to ha' made a usurer's son / Melt all his patrimony in a kiss' (1.1.26–7), Lussurioso complaining that he has sent Castiza 'jewels that were able to ravish her / Without the help of man' (1.3.94–5), and Piato declaring that if he were Castiza's mother, 'I would raise my state upon her breast / And call her eyes my tenants' (2.1.94–5). Sexual transactions are constantly turning into economic ones and back again: the union of the two is prostitution, which is therefore at the heart of the imagery.

Here is what is at stake in the play's obsession with 'now'. Court time is the time of money. The 'fair meadows' imply the slow time of hereditary landed property; in contrast, the court appears as a market, where wealth loses its longevity and passes into instant circulation as money, jewels, deals. Acres can be transferred over dinner, and 'lordships sold to maintain ladyships / For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute' (3.5.73–4). As a result, everything can be exchanged and nothing is what it seems – ranks, identities and faces are nothing more than surfaces. The paradigm of this dislocation is the prostituted woman: like the land, the female body is a natural resource which ought to be the guarantor of true lineage, but once traded as a commodity, becomes the very agent of its dissolution.

At least, that is how things appear in the conservative ideology which is articulated with furious eloquence in the course of the play. Whether we should hear it as the ideology *of* the play is harder to say. In practice, the good old time, when riches were woods and fields and women were chaste matrons, is a faint trace, associated mainly with the dead. The show itself, in its taste for excess, its semantic promiscuity, is at least equally committed to the bad new time. Vindice embodies this complicity: he is the enraged spokesman of the past, but he is also Piato, the 'strange-composed fellow' who has no past at all because 'He is so near kin to this present minute' (1.3.26), a figure of pure, depthless contemporaneity. The theatre itself, after all, is specifically an institution of the latter principle – new, ephemeral, overdressed. The ambivalence cannot be resolved because the play's restless vitality depends on it. Each new reader, or director, has to decide what time it is in, and how to hear its broken rhythms.

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Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or, The Fox King's, Globe* (1606)

The fox pretends to be dead, the carrion birds flock round, and the fox gobbles them up. Jonson's comedy translates this fable of devouring and being devoured into a story about financial competition. Volpone, the fox, is a rich, childless Venetian who is free to leave his wealth to whoever he chooses. He puts about the news that he is terminally ill, and greedy fellow-citizens hurry to ingratiate themselves with him by giving him expensive presents. We see four of these applicants for the legacy: a lawyer named Voltore (the vulture); a very old man called Corbaccio (the raven); a merchant called Corvino (the crow); and the wife of a visiting English knight, Sir Politick Would-be – she is sometimes referred to as 'Lady Pol', and so joins the aviary as a parrot. Helping the fox to manipulate the ravenous birds is his secretary and parasite Mosca (the fly).

The exposition of this device occupies the first act, but so long as it is working smoothly, it is a state of affairs rather than a plot, so Jonson sets it in motion by introducing two complications. The first is Volpone's desire for Corvino's beautiful young wife Celia. Corvino is obsessively jealous, but Mosca convinces him that the doctors have prescribed the dying Volpone a healthy girl to lie in bed with him. Desperate to stay ahead in the competition for the legacy, Corvino offers Celia, and Volpone nearly rapes her, but she is rescued by Corbaccio's son Bonario, who is in the house in connection with another of Mosca's plots. Bonario goes to the authorities, and it seems that the whole scam will be blown. However, Mosca enlists the professional skills of Voltore, and the mendacity of everybody else, to persuade the court that Bonario and Celia are adulterers who have invented the incident for their own devious purposes; so justice is defeated and stability restored. On the back of this triumph, Volpone conceives of the second complication: just for the pleasure of watching the rage of the disappointed suitors, he pretends that he has died and left all his money to Mosca. This puts the initial device into crisis all over again, and this time the situation proves irretrievable, because once Mosca is in possession he turns against his master. After a frantic fifth act of claim and counter-claim, everything comes out, the juvenile leads are vindicated, and Volpone, Mosca and the carrion birds are all appropriately punished.

This brilliantly articulated comic structure is curiously ambivalent. In one sense, advertised in the printed edition by Jonson and his admirers, it is a *tour de force* of classical unity: the action is completed within one city and one day, and except for a rather perfunctory subplot involving Sir Politick, everything derives from the initial situation, whose possibilities have been exhausted by the end. But although the play has this formal and ethical unity on paper, it does not feel that way in performance. Twice in the course of the action, the tricksters arrive at a happy ending – at the end of Act 1, just before the first mention of Celia; and again at the end of Act 4, when the threat from Bonario has been seen off. In both cases, the equilibrium is no sooner established than it is overturned by a new and arbitrary narrative shock. The overall effect, then, is not purposeful unity, but violent alternation between rest and agitation. The same rhythm controls the role of Volpone himself, who switches constantly between sickness and health, at one moment coughing faintly in his bed, and at the next leaping up in vigorous pursuit of drink or diversion or sex. This grotesque double-faced mode of existence is summed up when he ventures into the streets to catch his first sight of Celia. Since he is supposed to be bed-ridden, he has to go out in disguise, so he turns himself into a mountebank, a street seller of quack cures, with a lurid line in patter:

To fortify the most indigest, and crude stomach, aye, were it of one, that (through extreme weakness) vomited blood, applying only a warm napkin to the place, after the unction, and fricace; for the *vertigine*, in the head, putting but a drop into your nostrils, likewise, behind the ears; a most sovereign and approved remedy: the *mal caduco*, cramps, convulsions, paraly-ses, epilepsies, *tremor-cordia*, retired-nerves, ill vapours of the spleen, stoppings of the liver, the stone, the stranguary, *hernia ventosa* . . . (2.2.93–100)

The list insists relentlessly on the body's obstructions and failures: mortality is heavily present as what the miracle drug is supposed to cure. But on the other hand there is the high-energy gab, the furious appetites and multiple pretence – the mountebank's show is both a panorama of disease and an exhibition of rapacious vitality. The acceleration of the intrigue pushes this doubleness harder and harder until by the end Volpone is dead, and alive, and dead again, every few minutes. Thus if the neoclassical

comedy makes him an intelligible case of avarice, progressing by satisfyingly logical stages towards his eventual just deserts, in performance he is by contrast a folk-play figure, laid low only to be raised up again, oscillating between decay and regeneration like some deranged fertility god.

Deranged, because the principle of increase at work in the play is not natural but financial. The substitution is made explicit right at the start, when Mosca draws a curtain to reveal a pile of gold, and Volpone speaks to it:

Hail the world's soul, and mine. More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,
Am I, to view thy splendour, darkening his . . . (1.1.3–6)

The natural light that prompts the earth's fertility is outshone by the unnatural radiance of money; the play's whole action will take place by the light of a false sun. In most stagings this is even literally true: the pile of treasure glitters upstage throughout, motionlessly inspiring the feverish action in front of it, the visible presence of what Volpone piously calls 'the dumb god, that giv'st all men tongues: / That canst do naught, and yet mak'st men do all things' (1.1.22–3). Its influence transforms everything: covetous men come bearing gifts, the jealous husband turns into a pimp, the geriatric Corbaccio, aspiring to be an heir, 'hopes he may / With charms, like Aeson, have his youth restored' (1.5.155–6). Volpone courts Celia in a dizzying rhetoric of transformation, telling her that he has changed into a mountebank and back; that she has exchanged a base husband for a worthy lover; that she can take his jewels and lose them and buy them over again; that she will come to him dressed as the heroines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or as Spanish, or Persian, or African:

And I will meet thee in as many shapes:
Where we may, so, transfuse our wand'ring souls,
Out at our lips, and score up sums of pleasures . . . (3.7.232–4)

His riches mean that nothing has to stay as it is: the soul can 'wander' from one embodiment to another, just as money takes the random forms of the successive objects it buys. He offers a world of unceasing, monstrous productivity, leaving behind the pedestrian output of the 'teeming earth'.

This opposition between natural and unnatural increase is a trace, paradoxically glamorized, of a contemporary debate about usury – that is, moneylending for profit. Under an Elizabethan law that lasted until 1624, usury was illegal in theory and permitted in practice, an unhappy compromise between its sinfulness and its indispensability. One of the reasons for condemning it was that in a society governed by the owners of land, the paradigm of legitimate growth is agriculture. Seeds germinate, crops ripen, animals breed – these are the authentic ways that wealth increases. When money reproduces itself in the same way, as if it were alive, there is no real augmentation of value, so it must ultimately be a trick, a sleight of hand. Hence the resonance of Jonson's grandiose comment.

Volpone's system, after all, is comprehensively abstracted from material production. It is set in Venice because the city can be imagined, uniquely, as a place where there is no land, only houses and water, so there is no natural increase, just the circulation of money. Moreover, it is striking that the whole scam depends on Volpone's having no children to whom his property could 'naturally' descend: financial reproduction thrives in the absence of natural reproduction. This is directly dramatized by a trio of household entertainers he maintains, consisting of a dwarf, a eunuch and a hermaphrodite. According to Mosca these are Volpone's illegitimate children; if so, they are the negation of a family, a dishonour to their parents, unable to inherit or breed. And above all, the transaction at the centre of the plot consists of nothing but money, as Volpone proudly points out:

I use no trade, no venture;
I wound no earth with ploughshares; fat no beasts
To feed the shambles; have no mills for iron,
Oil, corn, or men, to grind 'em into powder . . . (1.1.33–6)

To the suitors, the gifts they shower upon Volpone appear as investments; they part with their money only because they think they are going to get it back with interest. They are deluded, but for Volpone a quite similar structure really works: he makes profits, day by day, out of the wealth he already has. His treasure is on show not only as a symbol but also as a means to an end: it is because his visitors see how big the pile is that they add to it. In short, the stage is dominated by a big, crude picture of money that makes money: Volpone's dumb but effectual god is *capital*.

In this sense, *Volpone* is a conservative satire of breathtaking scope and prescience, a harshly funny caricature of a whole economic system which had barely taken shape. What needs to be added to that understanding of it, though, is that the scope, and the laughter, are made possible by a kind of complicity: the theatre, and the actors, and the writer himself are as it were on the wrong side.

Think for example of the theatrical structure of the basic deception. Each client, carrying his jewel or his silver plate, is ushered on stage by Mosca and presented to the desperately ill Volpone. The illness is of course a performance: the bed is a little stage, the visitor is the spectator. But much more radically, Volpone is the spectator, and Mosca is adroitly showing him the visitor in all his abject egotism. For example, he convinces Corvino that Volpone is too far gone to hear anything, and encourages him to shout insults into his ear, thus getting him to exhibit not only his hypocritical friendship but also the malice beneath it. Volpone's pleasure in these elegant humiliations is aesthetic: 'My divine Mosca! / Thou hast today outgone thyself' (1.5.84–5) In other words, the visitors are his entertainment; he extracts mirth from them as well as money, and the two kinds of exploitation are so closely allied that he hardly notices the moment when he leaves the financial motivation behind, and embarks on his last trick only to see how his trained birds will perform.

This means that an unsettling analogy makes the comen the accomplices of the comic dramatist: like him, they set up an artificial environment for fools and knaves to play their parts in, with faked illnesses and illusory gold. Like him too, they have mixed motives for this elaborate pretence: to make money, to reveal the truth about people, to have fun. Thus the severity of the satire is enliveningly compromised – not because Volpone is an ambivalent character: he is not – but because the theatre itself is in bed with him. The playhouse, after all, that rings with laughter at the antics of the greedy animals, was built as a speculation, with money borrowed at interest.

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Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* Children of the Queen's Revels, Blackfriars (1607)

In a 400-year-old repertoire, it is not surprising to find scripts that have lost their power to move or amuse. For instance, the successful tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher, such as *Philaster* (1609) and *A King and No King* (1611), have not (so far) found a way onto the modern stage. Their baroque artificiality, eloquent for Jacobean audiences, conveys little to us. But Beaumont's solo play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* has moved in the opposite direction. It was printed in 1613 with a prefatory epistle suggesting one ill-received performance in 1607, and there is no sign of a revival until 1635, by which time both Beaumont and Fletcher were dead and famous. Now, however, it is seen fairly often, and academically it is the most studied play in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon. It is an anomalous case: a text which released its significance only when its moment had passed.

It is a metadramatic entertainment, piling up layers of illusion. At the fashionable Blackfriars theatre, the Children of the Revels are doing a play called *The London Merchant*. The merchant, Venturewell, intends his daughter Luce to marry a wealthy idiot called Master Humphrey, but she is in love with Venturewell's apprentice Jasper, so they trick Humphrey and elope. Amid this crisis, Jasper's parents separate. His father, Old Merrythought, is a cheerful spendthrift who takes nothing seriously; and his mother, Mistress Merrythought, provoked by the fecklessness of her husband and her son alike, leaves home with her younger son Michael. Both expeditions fail: Luce is recaptured by Venturewell, and Mrs Merrythought loses her purse and has to return home, where her husband now refuses to let her in. At this point Jasper pretends to have died of grief and has himself delivered to Venturewell's house; this enables him first to smuggle Luce out in the coffin, and then to appear to the merchant as a ghost and frighten him into repenting of his cruelty. All find their way to Old Merrythought's for a general reconciliation.

However, among the audience for this rather formulaic city comedy are a London grocer and his wife who are not happy with it. Suspecting that *The London Merchant* is going to be yet another smart Blackfriars show

that sneers at honest citizens, they intervene to demand something different: they want to see a grocer doing great things. They persuade the company to accept their apprentice Rafe as a guest performer, and commission various adventures for him: he wanders romantically in Waltham Forest in the margins of the *London Merchant* plot; he visits an inn which he treats as a castle, and a barber whom he treats as an ogre; he is the guest of the Princess of Cracovia; then, in London, he appears successively as the May Lord and as the captain of the volunteer militia; and finally he has a death scene with an arrow through his head. These extremely miscellaneous exploits interrupt the proper play and occasionally threaten to alter its course; but thanks to a running discussion between the citizens and the actors, the two stories just about manage to share the stage for the duration of the show.

A moment's reflection makes it obvious that this device produces not two dramatic levels but three: the city comedy, which is understood to have a script; the episodic romance, which we take to be improvised; and the exchanges between the grocer and his wife and the actors, which are supposed to be literally happening in the playhouse. Moreover, these levels are not separate and alternating: the point is that they interact.

For example: by the end of Rafe's first day as a knight errant, he has accumulated four companions – Mrs Merrythought and her son Michael from *The London Merchant*, and from his own play Tim and George, two fellow-apprentices who are now his squire and his dwarf respectively. This existentially miscellaneous party arrives in Waltham, near London, needing a place to stay:

Tim: Why, we are at Waltham town's end, and that's the Bell Inn.
George: Take courage, valiant knight, damsel, and squire;
I have discovered, not a stone's cast off,
An ancient castle held by the old knight
Of the most holy order of the Bell,
Who gives to all knights errant entertain. (2.354–8)

Here, we could say, two incompatible codes come face to face on the stage: for Tim, the Bell is an inn, and for George, it is a castle. The symmetry is a nice little theatre joke in itself: arguably, since there is neither an inn nor a castle but only the back of the stage, the choice between the two is arbitrary. But actually the scene is not written in that even-handed

way. Tim's line is funny because it is a flat statement of fact; George's, because it wraps the fact up in fantasy. The actor playing George has options – he may be mad, or he may be playing a game of make-believe, or he may be making fun of Rafe – but whatever he does has got to accommodate the doubleness of the reference: castle equals pub, knight equals landlord, holy order equals inn-sign, and so on. He is talking about an inn: anyone who is unsure about that has misunderstood the speech. In other words, there are indeed two codes in play, but they are not finally incompatible because only one of them has authority. As in *Don Quixote*, which appeared in 1605 and must surely be the source of the idea, the 'inn' code defines the 'castle' code as delusory, thus making the character who entertains it into a kind of lunatic. The Knight of the Burning Pestle is not for one moment a free-standing dramatic subject: as his derisive title indicates, he is always the object of a knowing, parodic commentary.

The parody is at once complicated and sharpened by the presence of the grocer (who is also called George) and his wife Nell. Predisposed in Rafe's favour, they take his word for it that the Bell is a castle, and if anyone calls it an inn, they interpret this as a misunderstanding or a joke. That does not make the theatrical signs ambiguous; rather, it makes the citizen couple themselves the targets of the play's mockery. They watch *The London Merchant* in a similarly topsy-turvy fashion. The heroine Luce, for example, is in a familiar comedy predicament: in love with the gallant young apprentice but condemned to marry the rich fool her father has chosen. Obviously our sympathies are meant to be with young love against aged prudence. But George and Nell, being respectable citizens, are shocked by Jasper's rebellious energy and take the side of the feeble Humphrey, thus turning the whole play upside down. Their formal function, in other words, is to guide the interpretation of the play by getting it wrong.

The joke here is not about unperceptive audiences in general; it is *social* satire. The conception of a grocer's boy who is somehow also a knight in armour is borrowed from a popular sub-genre of plays that glorified the City of London in the terms of chivalric romance, most obviously from Thomas Heywood's *The Four Prentices of London* (c. 1594), in which four brothers, apprenticed to a mercer, a goldsmith, a haberdasher and a grocer, leave their trades to travel to the Holy Land and capture Jerusalem

from the infidels. So the whole knightly sequence is a gentleman's parody of middle-class city drama; and George and Nell, in their naivety and ignorance, are satirical types of the people who like that sort of nonsense. Thus George's opening protest – 'you have still girds at citizens' – is the object of a characteristically neat joke. He is right, but he is looking in the wrong place; *The London Merchant* is actually quite innocent; the show is a satire on citizens, but George can never see how because he is himself its vehicle.

The social satire is at its sharpest when it comes to the structure of the secondary play. Whereas *The London Merchant* belongs to a genre and has a plot, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is a request show:

Wife: George, let Rafe travel over great hills, and let him be very weary, and come to the King of Cracovia's house, covered with black velvet, and there let the king's daughter stand in her window all in beaten gold, combing her golden locks with a comb of ivory, and let her spy Rafe, and fall in love with him, and come down to him, and carry him into her father's house, and then let Rafe talk with her.

Citizen: Well said, Nell, it shall be so. – Boy, let's ha't done quickly.

Boy: Sir, if you will imagine all this to be done already, you shall hear them talk together. But we cannot present a house covered with black velvet, and a lady in beaten gold.

Citizen: Sir boy, let's ha't as you can, then. (4.33–44)

Shopkeepers themselves, the Citizens think of the theatre as a shop of sensations. You produce your money, you say what you want, and it is up to them to get it for you. Hence George's bullying tone to the boy; that is how he would speak to a shop assistant; he is asserting his rights as a paying customer. Hence too his tolerant rejoinder about the velvet and gold: he would expect a customer of his own to settle for currants if there were no sultanas, and he is being similarly reasonable. It is specifically and parodically a bourgeois view of art, inviting the mockery of the gentlemanly Blackfriars audience. The Citizens' deplorable taste in drama is presented not as a superficial failing, but as the natural expression of their rank and occupation.

But this rather sourly class-based closure does not have the last word. Not that the Citizens have a point after all – though it might be that their

consumerist theory of drama found more allies in the twentieth century than in the seventeenth. Rather, their confusion is too comprehensive to be contained by so reductive an explanation. Take, from dozens of examples, the moment when the barber at Waltham, to play a trick on the apparently deluded Rafe, presents himself as the giant Barbaroso. Nell is apprehensive:

Wife: George, dost think Rafe will confound the giant?

Citizen: I hold my cap to a farthing he does. Why, Nell, I saw him wrestle with the great Dutchman and hurl him. (3.267–9)

It is hard to know where to start with this. The great Dutchman is presumably a fairground showman whom Rafe, George's apprentice, took on in a wrestling match. The giant, on the other hand, is in a play; but the couple make no distinction between the two different kinds of show. Even if we swallow this, and agree to make the world of the stage completely continuous with that of the London streets, George is still muddled. That was a big wrestler, this is a giant – it is farcically parochial to think of them as equivalent. But then, again, if we raise that objection we are forgetting, as the Citizens clearly have, that the giant is not a giant at all, but a barber playing a practical joke. Their understanding of the play is not even consistent in its wrongness.

In other, quick words, they reduce the play to nonsense. But having been reduced to nonsense, it goes imperturbably on producing new situations and scenes, and this opens the gate into a world of what we might call pure performance, where the drama has no coherent purposes left, and so is free to play. This world is dreamlike, not in its atmosphere, but in the precise sense that it is not governed by a principle of non-contradiction. Rafe can be the same person and a different one, he can travel the world and be confined to the City of London, he can die at the end and attend his mistress home. By their very silliness, the Citizens turn the show into a celebration of its own medium. It is as if the anarchic possibilities of the theatre, which are normally restrained by consistent codes of representation, are turned loose by the arrival in the building of people who are too ignorant to understand the codes and too stubborn to observe them. The elitist satire becomes liberating precisely because it is so extreme; that is what gives the play its anomalous, belated life.

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Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy* King's, Blackfriars (1610)

Writing in the margins of this play, the Romantic poet and critic S. T. Coleridge called its political position 'servile jure divino royalist'.⁴ He was referring to the notorious theory that monarchs rule by 'divine right': that is, that God has placed them on their thrones, that they are answerable to God alone for their actions, and that it is the law of God that obliges us to obey them. A play affirming this doctrine could be judged 'servile' for two reasons. First, the doctrine was explicitly promulgated by James I, so parroting it on the Jacobean stage looks like flattery. And second, for a monarch's subjects its consequence is what was called 'passive obedience'. If the king rules unjustly, that too is God's will; one should try not to abet his wickedness, but any resistance is sacrilege; the only allowable positive response is prayer. To Coleridge, as to most of the British political class after 1688, this seemed immoral – a licence for kings not only to oppress their subjects materially, but also to corrupt their civic virtue and undermine their self-respect. His comment is in that sense far from marginal: it is an attack on the whole ethos of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays. The attack has been influential: in the couple of centuries since, most critics have assumed that in order to admire *The Maid's Tragedy* you have to demonstrate that Coleridge was wrong.

The play is centrally the story of Amintor, a young nobleman at the court of Rhodes. He has been engaged to a loving girl named Aspatia, but on the king's instructions marries another lady, Evadne, who reveals on the wedding night that she is the king's mistress, and that the marriage is a cynical device to protect her from scandal. Amintor is devastated but can do nothing because, as we know, the person who has wronged him is accountable only to God. Meekly and bitterly, he promises to keep the secret, but he is unable to hide his grief from his friend Melantius, a forceful military leader who also happens to be Evadne's brother. Untroubled by monarchist scruples, Melantius bullies her into repentance and commands her to murder the king while he himself takes control of the city's

⁴ S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, Vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 380.

fort. On the fateful night, therefore, the king's brother, Lysippus, is precipitated onto the throne and then, at once, into talks with the impregnable Melantius, who demands an amnesty. Lysippus agrees, but then Amintor, Aspatia and Evadne are found dead or dying, the love triangle having turned into a chain of suicides immediately after the killing of the king. Disarmed before he can join his friend and his sister in death, Melantius resolves to refuse food, and ends the play victorious but in despair.

The speech which provoked Coleridge's remark is Amintor's reaction to being told that it is the king who has debauched his bride:

Oh, thou hast nam'd a word that wipes away
All thoughts revengeful; in that sacred name,
'The king,' there lies a terror. What frail man
Dares lift his hand against it? Let the gods
Speak to him when they please; till when, let us
Suffer and wait. (2.1.304–9)

Certainly this is the ideology of passive obedience, but critics have pointed out, obviously enough, that Amintor is only one character. Contrast Melantius's response to the accusation that he has broken his faith to the king:

Whilst he was good, I call'd him king, and serv'd him
With that strong faith, that most unwearied valour,
Pull'd people from the farthest sun to seek him
And buy his friendship; I was then his soldier.
But since his hot pride drew him to disgrace me
And brand my noble actions with his lust . . .
Thus I have flung him off with my allegiance;
And stand here, mine own justice, to revenge
What I have suffer'd in him. (5.2.40–51)

Here, equally plausibly, is a contrary position: Melantius makes his obedience conditional on the king's deserving it. Why not credit Beaumont and Fletcher with this sentiment rather than with Amintor's – and so at a stroke transform the servile royalist tragedy into a robust parliamentary one? But the arbitrariness of that choice is enough to show that this is the wrong question. *The Maid's Tragedy* is a play, not a pamphlet for or against monarchy. Of course it is concerned with the divine right of kings: we

have already seen how directly. But it takes more than a highlighter pen to work out how.

Look for example at another speech of Amintor's, this time addressed directly to the king, who has drawn his sword in the course of an argument about Evadne:

I fear not swords, for, as you are mere man,
 I dare as easily kill you for this deed
 As you dare think to do it. But there is
 Divinity about you that strikes dead
 My rising passions; as you are my king,
 I fall before you and present my sword
 To cut mine own flesh, if it be your will.
 Alas! I am nothing but a multitude
 Of walking griefs! Yet, should I murder you,
 I might before the world take the excuse
 Of madness; . . .

but fall I first

Amongst my sorrows, ere my treacherous hand
 Touch holy things. But why? I know not what
 I have to say. (3.1.243–58)

The anguish here is cognitive: the idea of sacred kingship is not a settled ideology but an intolerable paradox. The king is human, the king is divine; he inspires reverence, he inspires contempt; the right thing to do is kill him, the right thing to do is die for him. Amintor staggers from one 'but' to the next, unable to formulate any position that he does not immediately negate. Divine right appears as divisive, not simply in the sense that one speaker believes in it and another doesn't, but in that it splits this single speaker into a 'multitude', driving him towards madness. How does a principle of order give rise to such confusion? The answer lies in the structure not only of the play but also of the doctrine.

In itself, the proposition that the king is answerable only to God is a rather bland piety; most Renaissance monarchs said as much, certainly including James I's predecessor Elizabeth. What gave the 'divine right of kings' its Jacobean distinctiveness was the political work it had to do. For example, everyone agreed that true kings govern according to law, and kings who ignore the law are tyrants. But surely that means that under certain circumstances a judge might have the power to allow or disallow

the actions of his sovereign? James accepted the principle but not the inference, which he resisted by invoking his divine right. Or again, even monarchical theorists accepted that subjects must not be taxed without their consent. But what if, in a particular case, the subjects' representatives give their consent conditionally? Will they not then have to judge whether the king has met their conditions? If so, then the king is answerable to them – so what about the rule that he is answerable only to God? In short, divine right was not a blanket orthodoxy that brought all debate to an end, but an instrument to be used in the complicated legal and political negotiations by which the crown, the judiciary and the landowning class managed their coexistence.

Here is the source of the paradox that makes Amintor unhappy. The rhetoric of divine right represents royalty as a principle sent from Heaven to resolve the conflicts that are generated by the interactions of sinful men. But royalty develops this rhetoric in detail out of its involvement in those very interactions and conflicts. The king deploys his divinity in order to put pressure on his political opponents; his setting himself above the struggle is a move within it. His authority is absolute, but since it can be enhanced (for example by preaching its absoluteness), it is also relative. This is not just the banal observation that kings have imperfections like the rest of us. It is a contradiction within the doctrine of divine right itself: that if it were all that it is said to be, it would not be needed. Conversely, it is just because the king's sacredness is so precarious that it is so sublimely theorized. People are reminded that kingship is divine because otherwise they might forget.

The play's code for this paradoxical immersion of the sacred in the profane is sex. We know that the king is a tyrant because he encroaches illegally on his subjects' rights, but sex is the only sphere in which we see this happening, so rape becomes a metaphor for every kind of violation, chastity for every kind of integrity. In a way, this is a means of dramatization, rendering political principles theatrical by situating them in the bodies of the performers. But that is not the only difference it makes: it is also a mechanism of debasement, ironically juxtaposing the king's physical urges with his metaphysical claims.

For example, Evadne is able to kill the king because his attendants have orders to admit her to his bedchamber without question. They let her in and then wait discreetly outside until she leaves. They are only surprised that it is such a short wait: 'How quickly he had done with her! I see kings

can do no more that way than other mortal people' (5.1.117–18). This joke has several layers. First it is a bawdy demystification of royal pretensions: there is no divine right in bed. And it also has an unconscious irony: the attendant's reminder that the king is mortal is addressed to spectators who know that he is dead. But then, thirdly, the attendant's assumption is not so far from the truth after all. When she enters, Evadne finds the king asleep and ties him to the bed, so when he wakes up, her assault on him seems like a sexual game. And it never quite loses this character: in the end she stabs him repeatedly and then, as he cries out 'Oh! I die', suddenly forgives him, as if her rage had discharged itself in a moment of climax.

The force of this scene is very clear if we contrast it with *Macbeth*, staged by the same company five or six years before. There too the king is murdered in his bed, but the act, which is kept out of sight, is fully imagined as the desecration of a holy place: the idea that to attack the monarch is to 'touch holy things' is made tangible in the imagery, the organization of space, the responses of the onstage characters. Although *The Maid's Tragedy* expresses the same idea, its staging of regicide has no sacred dimension: rather, the scene is moralistic, witty and pornographic. In other words, the reason divine kingship in this play has such a paradoxical effect is that it is set down in a radically secular world.

This is confirmed from a different angle by the figure of Melantius. In the speech I quoted earlier, he declares, 'I . . . stand here, my own justice', literally and explicitly a law unto himself. This extreme gesture is consistent with his mode of action in the play as a whole: we see him dominating Amintor, Evadne and several other characters by virtue of his brutally concentrated self-possession. He does not represent the legal and parliamentary opposition that the crown actually encountered in Jacobean England; rather, he is in the *same* lawless condition as the tyrant. Arguably, this shows that the play is a divine-right tragedy after all: unable to get outside monarchical ideology, it can present opposition only as a mirror-image of the monarch's own rejection of every constraint upon his will. But it cuts the other way too. It projects a world of discrete, unconditional selves, whose relationships consist only of controlling one another or resisting control, penetrating one another or resisting penetration. So far from transcending this condition, the divine-right king is the supreme example of it: in his refusal to be held accountable for anything at all, he is the unconditional self *par excellence*. The play represents

absolute monarchy as nothing more than a special instance of absolute individuality; that is why it feels modern despite its bizarre and antiquated problematic.

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Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Roaring Girl* Prince's, Fortune (1611)

Roaring boys were urban youths who spent their time drinking, smoking, swearing and fighting. Roaring girls were unheard of. The heroine of this play, then, is a contradiction in terms. She goes around in men's clothes; she smokes with the gallants and is a judge of tobacco; she wears a sword and is ready to use it; she associates with pickpockets and cutpurses and can retrieve stolen property by using her contacts. She is a woman operating as a man, a 'captain male and female', as her servant calls her; and the primary purpose of the show is to display this anomalous character. It dominates the play, not only because it is theatrically striking, but also because it explicitly represents a contemporary London character. Mary Frith, aka Moll Cutpurse, aka Mad Moll of the Bankside, thief, fence, musician and transvestite, was already a minor celebrity when the play was first staged in 1611. The court gossip John Chamberlain called her 'a notorious baggage';⁵ she was evidently not a shy person, and London was not a very big city; many of the spectators at early performances will have known her by sight, and have come to the theatre to see *her*.

Formally, this emphasis on a character is interestingly disruptive. The play is a comedy with two plots, and Moll is not at the centre of either of them. In the main plot, the juvenile leads, Sebastian and Mary, want to marry, but Mary's dowry is not big enough to satisfy Sebastian's father Sir Alexander. Sebastian pretends to be on the point of marrying Moll, so that his father, appalled by her reputation, will settle for Mary as the lesser of two evils; clearly this is the story of the lovers and the father, with Moll involved only as a negative means to their happy ending. In the subplot she is still more marginal. It concerns the intrigues between a group of unattached gallants and two shopkeepers' wives, leading ingeniously in both cases to the vindication of the wives' chastity and the shaming of the gallants; Moll appears to know the shopkeepers but plays no part in the intrigues.

⁵ *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, 2 vols, ed. N. E. McClure (American Philosophical Society, 1939), Vol. 1, p. 334, quoted in most editions of the play.

The character on display, in other words, fails to fit into the comedic frame. Rather, Moll is presented in a plotless, picaresque sequence of incidents: disarming a man with a long sword; testing a prospective servant by knocking him down; rescuing a man who is about to be arrested for debt; seeing through a fake war-veteran begging in the street; and so on. The structure is not like stage comedy: it is more like a jest-book, a collection of anecdotes. An earlier London virago, Long Meg of Westminster, survives in just this form: she is legendary in the sense that her biography consists of the assorted stories that people used to tell about her. The shape of the roaring girl's role reflects a similar legendary status, even borrowing one or two Long Meg tales and reassigning them to Moll. She is certainly the heroine, but not of the comedy that is going on around her: it is as if she lives outside the jurisdiction of genre as well as gender.

The two kinds of outsideness are evidently connected. Normally, and certainly here, comedy gravitates towards marriage, so Moll has no place in it: she is unthinkable as a wife (it is *as* unthinkable that she features in Sebastian's plot), and equally so as a husband, since she never pretends not to be a woman. She declares, 'I have no humour to marry, I love to lie o'both sides o'th'bed myself' (2.2.36–7) – but comedy assigns everybody to one side or the other in the end. Interestingly, several men in the play take it for granted that she is a whore: for them, a woman who is not in the legitimate sexual system must necessarily be in the illegitimate one. The historical Moll vehemently rejected this accusation, and the play gives authorial support to her denials. Her unmarriageability consequently appears as a militant chastity: if her mannishness makes her seem like a whore because she lacks a woman's modesty, it also makes her seem like a virgin because she lacks a woman's weakness. She is both too bad and too good to get married. A strange moment near the end articulates the latent unworldliness of her position. Asked if she will ever marry, she says:

I'll tell you when i'faith:
When you shall hear
Gallants void from sergeants' fear,
Honesty and truth unslandered,
Woman manned but never pandered . . . (5.2.216–20)

The doggerel form of this suggests popular prophecy, and so gives Moll's sexy asexuality a fleeting utopian sense. She will marry when the world

is just – that is, never – and it is as a messenger from that impossible future that she walks the streets, rescuing debtors and helping true lovers find happiness.

What qualifies Moll for this sketchy idealization is the representational disturbance caused by the fact that she is, if one can put it like this, *real*. In a way, of course, real persons constantly appeared on the stage, from Cleopatra to Thomas More. But this is different because Mary Frith was a contemporary, inhabiting the same London subculture as the theatre itself. Indeed, she was a kind of performer: she appeared in her male costume at alehouses and playhouses; she played the (notably unfeminine) viol da gamba; on one occasion, at the Fortune, she exchanged jokes with the crowd and got up on stage to do a song; she probably made an appearance at one of the performances of *The Roaring Girl* itself. In this context, making her into a dramatic character is a sort of self-reflexive tease: if the real Moll is in the house, the actor is invited to wink at her more than once. For instance, she meets a couple of rogues and says: ‘One of them is a nip: I took him once i’ the twopenny gallery at the Fortune’ (5.1.269–70). Or again, chastising a man who has treated her as a whore, she says:

If I could meet my enemies one by one thus,
I might make pretty shift with ‘em in time (3.1.131–2)

But she is not surrounded by enemies within the play: the reference is clearly to Mary Frith’s critics in actual society. In another scene (2.2), she talks with her tailor, and there are several rude jokes about what the breeches he is making will and will not contain; the secondary point of these is that the actor playing Moll is a boy, who is disguising his true sex when she is not, and vice versa. In all such moments, Moll pulls away from the rest of the cast for the simple reason that they are fictional characters and she is something more than that; their being is subordinated to the story, but her being is subordinated only to the living woman of whom she is a portrait, and this affords her as it were the freedom of the play.

On the other hand, the same freedom is a dramatic limitation because she cannot be allowed to do or suffer anything that would alter her and therefore compromise her truth to her original. As a result, all the action around her is curiously nugatory: she is thought to be sexually available,

but she is not; it is believed that she will marry Sebastian, but she does not; Sir Alexander sends an agent to entrap her, but he fails; Sir Alexander is hostile to Mary, but then changes his mind. And so on: any of these plot-lines could in principle develop a situational density of its own, but all are closed down too easily for that to happen. The play's dependence on an offstage reality appears on stage as a pervasive mistrust of fiction.

Not surprisingly, then, it is at its most inventive in the two extended scenes which come closest to staging the life of the city directly. In the first of these (2.1), three neighbouring shops are set out on the stage: an apothecary's, a feather-maker's and a sempster's. The tradesmen and their wives are in the shops, and three gallants are lounging along the row, to be joined after a moment by a fourth, with his servant, and then by Moll. So there are about ten characters on the stage, flirting, arguing, milling about between the three separate centres. Stage directions mark shifts of focus from one shop to another: '*At the feather-shop now*'; '*Fall from them to the other*'. The scene is carefully designed to give an impression of random movement; with great formal ingenuity it stages the discontinuous space that is characteristic of urban shopping.

This was historically a fairly new activity, and maybe Middleton and Dekker were moved by sociological curiosity. But the scene is dramatically functional too, providing the setting for Moll's first entrance. In the first act she has been extensively trailed but not seen – now she appears among the shoppers, wearing 'a frieze jerkin and a black sauvegarde', and saying she is planning to buy a shag ruff. These arcane references, and the fact that at this point she is in woman's clothes, place her notorious masculinity in the sphere of fashion. It is not that she pretends to be a man, like the heroines of *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*: it is simply that she sometimes chooses to dress like one. It is as a consumer, then, that she is introduced. We never learn anything about her origins: she is defined not by where she comes from, but by the clothes she buys.

This is a precociously modern identity, and her opening gesture confirms it. The group smoking at the apothecary's call her over; she says 'I cannot stay', but does stay for a few moments, and then moves on. That restless, provisional rhythm is typical of her encounters; in the words of one of the gallants, the unpleasant Laxton, 'she slips from one company to another like a fat eel between a Dutchman's fingers' (2.1.191–2). Her elusiveness is social as well as sexual. A few moments later, Laxton makes an assignation with her on the assumption that she is a prostitute. She

agrees to meet, but then turns up in men's clothes and a sword, mockingly supposing that the rendezvous is for a fight. The tables turned here are those of class as well as gender: Laxton, expecting to claim a service from an inferior, is confronted with a challenge from an equal.

This social indeterminacy is crucial to her part in the other scene of city life (5.1). Moll is out with a group of friends, all of whom clearly belong to the gentry. They meet a pair of rogues; Moll speaks with them in thieves' cant, the peculiar mixture of Romany and slang that was supposed to be the dialect of the underworld, and translates the conversation for the benefit of the baffled gentlemen. The scene, which has almost no connection with the plot, is adapted from the genre of warning pamphlets about London low life, several of which Dekker had written himself. The rogues are the characters in the pamphlets, the gentlemen are the readers, and Moll herself is the narrator, who speaks both languages and can interpret between them. Everyone else belongs either to the underworld or to respectable society, but Moll lies on both sides of the bed herself.

The underlying formal principle is marked, once again, by the stage directions. One of the company says, 'come, gentlemen, let's on', and, accordingly, '*They walk*' (5.1.56–60) Here, in defiance of the logic of stage representation, Middleton and Dekker want, as it were, a tracking shot. As in the shopping scene, Moll is not allowed to settle; she keeps moving through the London streets. She cannot be staged in fixed positions: the whole point of her role is the social and spatial mobility that makes her equal to the diversity of the city.

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William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* King's, Blackfriars (1611)

A recent book about this play is called *'The Tempest' and Its Travels*, and it has indeed travelled a long way from its starting position in the theatre of 1611. Now, it is not so much a script as a myth, endlessly reshaped in essays, stage adaptations, poems, novels, polemics, films. It is Shakespeare's farewell to the stage; it is a meditation on the nature of art; it is western culture's transition from myth to enlightenment; it is an allegory of the psyche; it is the paradigm of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The effect of the derivatives is to define the play as the original. It is hard to imagine it in the repertoire of the King's Men, or of any earthly company; it appears unconditional, a one-off.

Yet the plot has no such singularity: it is made out of the familiar components of romance. Prospero, Duke of Milan, devotes himself to study and leaves the business of the state to his brother Antonio. After a time, Antonio enters into a conspiracy with Milan's enemy Alonso, King of Naples, whereby Antonio becomes Duke, Milan becomes a possession of Naples, and Prospero, together with his young daughter Miranda, is pushed out to sea in an open boat. Twelve years later, Alonso marries his daughter Claribel to the King of Tunis, and travels to the ceremony with his son Ferdinand, his brother Sebastian, and various courtiers including Antonio. On the way back to Italy, this party is caught in a storm and shipwrecked on the very island where Prospero and Miranda are living in exile. Shocked by this uncanny return of the past, Alonso restores Milan to its rightful duke; meanwhile, Alonso's heir Ferdinand falls in love with Prospero's heir Miranda, so that in the end, the kingdom and the dukedom, which had been united by treachery, will be reunited by marriage.

It is a serviceable story, but hardly any of it appears on the stage. The play begins and ends on the island, relegating everything else to the background. Trying to recall her life in Milan, Miranda says, "'Tis far off; / And rather like a dream, than an assurance / That my remembrance warrants' (1.2.44–6), and the events in Italy have just that remoteness. They are necessary back-story, but somehow abstract. The play lives at one remove from its plot.

The ensuing disorientation can be traced from the opening shipwreck, the moment when the plot and the island literally collide. There are sound-effects, nautically realistic orders, wet sailors, cries of despair – the scene clearly shows the ship running aground in a tempest and sinking. Over the next few scenes, however, this impression unravels. Prospero and Miranda have watched the shipwreck, and both of them speak of it as an effect of Prospero’s ‘art’. This art, the outcome of his studies, is magic. He has a cloak, a staff and a book, and he controls a powerful spirit named Ariel. It was Ariel who ‘performed’ the tempest, confusing the perceptions of the ship’s passengers and crew. Later still, the passengers appear on land, unhurt and beautifully dressed; they seem not to have been in the sea at all. And at the end of the play, the sailors reappear to announce that the ship is intact as well. The first scene was an illusion, then, but on the other hand the travellers have experienced a shipwreck, and have ended up on the island. It is true both that it happened and that it did not.

Subsequent events are similarly equivocal. The ‘shipwrecked’ royal party is split into three groups: the King and his courtiers; Ferdinand on his own; and two comic servants, Stephano and Trinculo. Each group supposes that the others are drowned, and forms its own intentions. Antonio and Sebastian attempt to kill Alonso and take his throne. Ferdinand courts Miranda. Stephano and Trinculo meet Prospero’s ‘savage and deformed slave’ Caliban, and plot to kill Prospero and take over the island. All these projects are illusory. The conspiring courtiers are under Prospero’s control without knowing it; Ferdinand’s wooing, which he imagines is transgressive, is what Prospero intends; and Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban are clowns, unconsciously parodying the schemes of the high-born characters, and effortlessly contained by Ariel. All over the island extreme things appear to be happening – shipwreck, murder, revolution, secret love – but when you blink they disappear. This provisional quality is one source of the play’s openness to reinterpretation. That it suggests so much action without allowing anything to happen is a provocation: people keep trying to pin the story down.

The mirage-effect is not accidental. It is spelt out in the play’s best-known speech:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and

Are melted into air, into thin air,
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. (4.1.148–56)

This seizes on the strange weightlessness of the play's action, and makes it first into a general image of the pathos of theatre and then, via the metaphor of the world as a stage, into a sumptuous reflection on the impermanence of life itself. However, it also has a more specific reference, which depends on the context. Prospero presents a masque for Ferdinand and Miranda's betrothal, performed by his spirits. It celebrates the young couple's purity and love, first in a dialogue between three goddesses, and then in a dance of nymphs and reapers. Suddenly, Prospero remembers Caliban's plot, and the dancers vanish: his speech is a reaction to this abrupt loss of harmony and delight. The masque is a problem for modern productions: it is usually either slightly embarrassed or drastically altered. This is because Shakespeare was borrowing a theatrical form which was vivid at the time, but is now virtually unreadable.

Masques were performed in various institutions, but above all at Court. Basically they were occasional rituals: courtiers devised a striking and apt way of saying 'Happy birthday', or 'Welcome home', or whatever the occasion required. Over time, however, each aspect of this gesture (the words, the actions, the fancy dress) was elaborated and formalized, and around 1605 it was taken up by two seriously ambitious artists, the writer Ben Jonson and the designer Inigo Jones. In their hands, masques became monarchical grand operas, with narrative, music, ballet, mythological characters, learned allegories, comic interludes and spectacular sets and costumes. They were the most technically complicated entertainments of the age, and although courtiers continued to appear in them, they needed the help of professional performers, naturally including the King's Men themselves. It is not surprising, then, that masque elements should have turned up on the public stage.

Despite this convergence, the form remains radically distinct from drama. Three differences are especially significant. First, the core of a masque is not acting but dancing. It would be inappropriate for a courtier

to be a good actor, but he, or she, is expected to be able to dance; so it is the musical sequences that draw the Court into the design. Moreover, the poetics of dancing are organized round the idea of harmony, whereas those of drama are based on conflict; so from a political point of view dancing is the proper code for a monarchical entertainment.

Second, masque is tied to a particular occasion. It is performed only once, or at most twice; and it explicitly dramatizes the meeting between specified performers (the courtiers taking part) and specified spectators, especially the royal spectator in whose honour it has been devised. Consequently, the fiction has no autonomy: it is nothing but the actual situation in idealized form.

Third, Jones used a new vocabulary of illusion – perspective painting, coloured lighting, scenes moved by concealed machinery – which was foreign to the public stage. Much later in theatre history this technology would be used naturalistically, but the masque had no interest in simulating ordinary reality. Rather, it fabricated wonders: a goddess rides a chariot through the night sky; a mountain opens to reveal a palace. What masque offered the eye was not a representation of anything material, but what both Prospero and Jonson call a *vision*.

All three characteristics – the subordination of drama to dance, the basis in a specific encounter, and the idea that the show is a vision – are conspicuous in the masque for Ferdinand and Miranda. In itself, this merely proves that Shakespeare is quoting the form accurately. But he does more with it than that.

The dramatic situation, after all, is a typical occasion for a masque. The King of Naples and his court, still dressed for the princess's wedding, are the (involuntary) guests of the king of the island. He devises a show to welcome them to his realm, and also, eventually, to celebrate the engagement of his daughter and the restoration of his dukedom. The idiom of this entertainment is, precisely, illusionistic theatre. The shipwreck is one example; later, the king and his courtiers encounter strange spirits who offer them food, but when they try to eat, it vanishes and is replaced by a harpy, a mythological monster who reminds them of their guilt. The harpy is Ariel in disguise: the illusion, dramatizing and universalizing Prospero's relationship with his guests-cum-enemies, is a brilliant reverse use of masque language.

Moreover, the medium of control, leading Prospero's guests from one spectacle to the next, is music. Ariel's music draws Ferdinand to Miranda,

warns Alonso against Antonio and Sebastian, distracts the clowns from their plot, restores the visitors to sanity when the island has proved too much for them. Here too the logic of masque dictates the dramatic rhythms. All these characters imagine that they are asserting themselves – that is, that they are in conflict with their environment. But we can see that they are moving along prearranged paths, in compliance with the music of the island. What they think is a battle is a dance.

And what this performance eventually does for the royal group is to show it an ideal vision of itself. At the climax of the sequence of illusions, Prospero appears, for the first time, in the costume of the Duke of Milan. The visitors see him, and see one another, and understand what has been happening. As in a court masque, the recognition of the true monarch is the key to the spectacle. Then he reveals Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess; it is a theatrical image of their betrothal; again as in a masque, they are playing the role of their idealized selves. Finally, Miranda moves out of her own tableau to contemplate the visitors:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! (5.1.181–3)

They are a vision for her as she is for them: Prospero's artifice has transfigured the whole court.

At this point, though, the images are shadowed by enough irony to remind us that *The Tempest* is not a masque, but a play that speaks masque language. As we know, and Miranda does not, the goodly creatures were trying to murder each other. As we know too, Prospero is not simply the benign sovereign: the spectacle is a triumph not only over his enemies, but also over his own violent rage against them. What underlies these local complications is that by moving the masque out of the royal banqueting hall and into the professional theatre, Shakespeare has given it an extra level. Whereas the subjects and spectators of Jonson's masques were extra-textual individuals, the participants in Prospero's masque are themselves dramatic characters, so that the text is divided against itself – the vision *and* the resistance to it, the dance *and* the battle. That is why the interpretive debates around the play are so intractable; it is also why Prospero has two servants rather than one – not only Ariel, the metamorphic spirit, but also Caliban, the untransfigurable brute.

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Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* Lady Elizabeth's, Swan (1613)

This was Middleton's seventh or eighth comedy, and one reason for studying it is its technical virtuosity. It stages four neighbouring families, each one unhappy in its own way:

- 1 Yellowhammer is a City goldsmith; together with his wife Maudline, he is trying to marry both his children, Tim and Moll, into the landed gentry. Neither is promising: Tim, a student at Cambridge, is an overgrown schoolboy, and Moll is in love with a penniless young man about town.
- 2 Mrs Allwit is the kept mistress of an extravagant knight. Mr Allwit swallows his pride, pretends that the children are his own, welcomes the knight respectfully whenever he chooses to visit, and lives comfortably on the proceeds.
- 3 Sir Oliver Kix and his wife are wealthy and infertile, and spend their time quarrelling about it.
- 4 Touchwood and his wife are so fertile that they regretfully separate because they can no longer afford the consequences of their living together.

So the play lays out contrasting domestic situations – having unsatisfactory children; having someone else's children; having no children; having too many children – as if madly trying to exhaust the logical possibilities. What is more, the narrative joins them all up: strictly speaking this is a single plot. The landed gentleman whom the Yellowhammers want Moll to marry is Sir Walter Whorehound, who is also Mrs Allwit's keeper. He is secretly in debt – hence his need for a lucrative marriage – and is creditworthy only because he is the presumptive heir to Sir Oliver Kix: in fact, the Kixes want a child mainly in order to stop him getting their estate. In a separate cross-plot link, Moll's unacceptable lover is Touchwood Junior, the over-fertile Touchwood's younger brother. Thus the four stories are at once separate and connected; together they produce the illusion of watching an entire society.

The outcome dramatizes the connectedness. Touchwood Senior tells the Kixes he has a potion to cure barrenness; they buy it and, after a little mumbo-jumbo, he sends the husband on a journey and impregnates the wife himself. Sir Oliver supposes that Lady Kix's pregnancy is the result of the potion, she doesn't mind that it is not, and Touchwood is so handsomely rewarded by the grateful couple that he can be reunited with his own wife. The pregnancy leads to the bankruptcy of Sir Walter Whorehound, which leads to his expulsion from the Allwit household and the reconciliation of the husband and wife there, and also to the cancellation of his marriage to Moll Yellowhammer, who is thus able to marry Touchwood Junior. Except for Sir Walter, the entire society is brought into harmony: Touchwood Senior's phenomenal sperm-count turns out to be the key to a general happy ending.

At the heart of the play's image of London, then, is sex. It makes this very obvious: the cheekily alliterative title implies that a chaste maid in Cheapside would be headline news; and the multiple impropriety of the plot is matched by the relentless innuendo of the dialogue. Take an indicative example, a few lines into the first scene. Maudline tells her husband Yellowhammer that she is correcting Moll's errors; Yellowhammer, whose social aspirations are complicated by inverted snobbery, thinks the word 'error' is pretentious, and improvises several down-to-earth synonyms – fault, crack, fray, flaw – all of which signify both 'an imperfection' and 'a narrow hole'. Maudline caps the growing suggestiveness by saying 'But 'tis a husband solders up all cracks' and, on the word, it turns out that Sir Walter has arrived to claim his bride. A conversation about Moll's behaviour has rapidly mutated, through the instability of its words, into a conversation about her vagina. The shift is typical: these characters talk about their genitals whether they mean to or not, because they live in the ingeniously filthy linguistic world of sex comedy.

In principle this should not surprise us. Renaissance antitheatrical pamphlets and sermons return again and again to the theme of obscenity: a typical example, signed by 'I.G.' and published in 1615, alleges that plays 'are full of filthy words and gestures . . . and have sundry inventions which infect the spirit, and replenish it with unchaste, whorish, cozening, deceitful, wanton and mischievous passions'.⁶ This kind of attack is often

⁶ Tanya Pollard (ed.), *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 260–1.

read as uncomprehending prejudice: after all, anyone today with enough interest in drama to read ancient antitheatrical pamphlets is probably on the playwright's side already; and since we encounter the plays in an educational context, we tend to assume that the filth serves some instructive purpose, overlooked by the outraged pamphleteer. But if we suspend that assumption, and remember that we are reading a script from a down-market commercial playhouse, then I.G. no longer sounds as if he is grumbling at random. *A Chaste Maid* is indeed full of filthy words and wanton passions; and its denouement is provocatively immoralistic, conferring authority on the priapic Touchwood, and failing to punish the disgusting Allwit. Any Christian spectator – not necessarily a 'Puritan' – might well call these devices 'inventions which infect the spirit'.

But the play is not simply or indiscriminately dirty-minded. Its sexual references have a distinctive character, and observing this can give us a more exact idea of what is going on. Three angles are particularly worth exploring: babies, money and religion.

The first of these is striking because humour which is explicit about sex is often coy about childbirth. Restoration comedy, for instance, which dominated the London stage after 1660, is full of illicit couplings whose unexplained sterility gives them an air of erotic fantasy. In *A Chaste Maid*, on the contrary, sex is continually linked with having children. The second act is an elaborate example. It contrasts the predicaments of the childless Kixes and the penniless Touchwoods, and intercuts that story with the birth of Mrs Allwit's latest child, who appears on stage in the second scene, and whose christening party is under way by the end of the third. Yet another narrative strand follows an unnamed 'Wench' with an illegitimate child. She inconclusively confronts its probable father Touchwood Senior, and then, in a comic set-piece, tricks a pair of corrupt officials into taking it off her hands. The stage is crowded with envisaged and actual babies.

The subject is physically as well as numerically insistent. Allwit speaks of his wife 'wallowing' and 'grunting', and fusses around the wet-nurse; Touchwood apologizes to the Wench for 'this half-yard of flesh', leaving it momentarily uncertain whether he means his offspring or his penis; the Kixes argue in vicious detail about which of them is to blame for their infertility. Moreover, the babies themselves are never who they are supposed to be. Allwit plays the role of fond father, but the servants all know the child is Sir Walter's. The 'Wench' tells Touchwood that she was a virgin until he ruined her, but admits to the audience that this is her fifth

child. Sir Oliver celebrates his lady's eventual pregnancy with bells and bonfires, but he is alone in believing that he is the father. Childbirth consistently appears as both gross and illicit: if this is an 'entire society', it is one whose reproductive arrangements are out of order.

Within the network of the play, this appears as an economic problem rather than a moral one. Children are the media through which property is transmitted: that is the nexus between biology and society. 'The feast of marriage is not lust', Touchwood Senior says in a sententious moment, 'but love, / And care of the estate' (2.1.50–1). Lady Kix, lamenting her childlessness, says to her husband:

'Tis our dry barrenness puffs up Sir Walter –
None gets by your not-getting, but that knight;
He's made by th'means, and fats his fortune shortly
In a great dowry with a goldsmith's daughter. (2.1.159–62)

The immediate meaning here is that Sir Walter can negotiate a large dowry (Moll comes with £2,000) because he can present himself as Sir Oliver's probable heir. But the poetic texture crosses this financial logic with Lady Kix's physical longing: Sir Walter's estate is puffed up and fattened as she wants her own body to be; he gets profits because Sir Oliver fails to 'get' children. Through a systematic *double entendre*, flesh is instrumental like money, and money is sexy like flesh. The Allwit household, in particular, is evoked in densely material terms, with its coal, sugar, wine, tableware, cushions and embroidered chairs, all traces, as it were, of the sex that Mrs Allwit has with Sir Walter. When Allwit boasts that the stack of firewood in his yard is higher than the nearby windmill, the code slides once again into innuendo: the evidence of his prosperity is a suitably phallic acknowledgement of its source. This recurrent conjunction of sex and money somehow manages to taint both: the sexual context robs property of its respectability, and the financial context robs desire of its innocence.

From a religious point of view, moreover, the profanity of all this seems conscious. The christening, attended by the godly women of the neighbourhood, is a bacchanalian gathering round the fake marital bed. Tim Yellowhammer turns up in the middle and endures the wet kisses of the sisterhood, one of whom spares him by passing out. Allwit tensely reminds himself that he is not paying for the food and drink they consume, and afterwards wonders whether the puddles on the floor are spilt wine or worse: the baptismal water has been replaced by more

suspect fluids. All this happens in Lent, officially a time of abstinence when meat is forbidden, but in practice, as we see in an extended street scene, the occasion for officials to grow fat, either on the meat they confiscate, or on the bribes they take instead. These are the ones who are tricked into impounding the Wench's baby, along with a loin of mutton: the sequence is an ambiguous festival of flesh, literally carnivalesque. As the plot develops, Moll and Touchwood Junior attempt a runaway marriage, but Yellowhammer catches them and locks Moll away. Both 'die', Moll of a broken heart, and Touchwood of a wound sustained in a fight with Sir Walter; carried in together, they rise from their coffins and turn the funeral into a wedding. The disgraceful Lent thus leads eventually to an equally profane Easter. Lurching from one sacrament to another, the play takes in half the Christian calendar and raucously materializes it. 'I.G.' could be forgiven for thinking that Middleton is not so much ignoring him as deliberately setting out to upset him.

In a final twist, Sir Walter's exposure, which saves Moll from marrying him, is too late to save Tim from marrying his supposed niece, who turns out to be his cast-off mistress. The Yellowhammers are disappointed but not inconsolable:

So fortune seldom deals two marriages
With one hand, and both lucky: the best is,
One feast will serve them both! (5.4.122-4)

Their only son has married a whore, but at least they can save a bit on the wedding. How are we supposed to hear that tone, typical of both the breezy moral obtuseness of the Yellowhammers and the sardonic materialism of the play as a whole? Often it is heard as satire: Cheapside is being denounced as a wasteland of blind egotism, and the point of the line is the gap between what marriage ought to mean and what it means to Yellowhammer. On the other hand, this is the closing gesture of the comedy, the conventional moment when a fictional invitation to dinner merges into a real acknowledgement of the audience's applause; as such, it is consistent with the play's festive affirmations of fertility and resourcefulness. The city's lechery and greed are not merely immoral, they are also the motor of pleasure, productivity, dirty new life. Insofar as the dramatic mode of *A Chaste Maid* holds both those perspectives together, we could perhaps (somewhat anachronistically) call it realism.

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Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* Lady Elizabeth's, Hope (1614)

St Bartholomew's Fair was held every August at Smithfield, roughly where his hospital is now. It was a cloth market, but also a fun fair, with sporting contests, sideshows, and food and drink stalls. It had a classic carnival ambivalence: venerated as a City institution dating back to the thirteenth century, and deplored as a scene of drunkenness, fornication and petty crime. Jonson's comedy tells the story of a day at the Fair, which it represents visually by two permanent locations: the roast-pork-and-bottle-ale booth, and the stocks. The booth is run by the enormous pig-woman Ursula, who is also a supplier of prostitutes and receiver of stolen goods; it advertises itself by the sign of a pig's head. The stocks belong to the Watch, the rudimentary local police force, who restrain malefactors there until they can bring them before the Fair's own court, the Court of Pie-powders. So the stage juxtaposes the emblems of appetite and control, flesh and the law. It is a good diagram of what the play is about.

For a brief but reverberant moment at the end of the fourth act, three men sit together in the stocks. One is Humphrey Waspé, who should be minding his employer, the young country gentleman Bartholomew Cokes. Cokes is a difficult charge: his brainless delight at the sights of the Fair has led to his losing his purchases, his hat, his cloak, his purse and his fiancée. Waspé, more and more enraged as the day went on, finally got into a fight with the Watch and was arrested. Next to him in the stocks is a preacher named Zeal-of-the-land Busy. He is attached to a Puritan widow who came to the Fair with her daughter and son-in-law, ostensibly because the daughter, who is pregnant, had a longing to eat roast pork. Busy came along to guard them from the temptations of the Fair, but having consumed vast amounts of Ursula's pork and beer, he launched a violent attack on the market produce, especially the gingerbread-men, which he regards as popish images. Alongside these two, ironically, sits Justice Overdo, the magistrate of the Court of Pie-powders itself. Having decided to adopt a proactive law enforcement policy, he has spent the day spying on people, disguised as a wandering half-wit. It has not gone well: his cover was so odd that he was denounced to the Watch because people thought he must be deliberately drawing a crowd for the benefit of a pickpocket.

These stories are only a sample – the play has about thirty named characters, and I have not mentioned half of them – but they suggest its comic logic. The three men in the stocks are all governors: the tutor guides youth and folly, the preacher wars against the flesh and the devil, the justice controls the disorders of society. All of them have ended up in the same undignified situation, and, meanwhile, their little states are ungoverned: the citizens who came to the Fair in protective family groups are wandering around on their own or with strangers, and two of them, the Puritan widow's daughter and the Justice's wife, are in Ursula's tent being prepared for a night on the game. Moreover, the legal process is itself a travesty. Justice Overdo was fingered by a young gentleman who really is a pickpocket; the Watch are on the look-out for unthreatening offenders who will pay to be let off; and, symbolically, the spiralling confusion of the day cannot be resolved because nobody can find the Justice.

In short, the play is anarchic even by the standards of Renaissance festive comedy. Its plot is too complicated to recount – its intricacy is one source of the impression of chaos – but its essential action is discrowning. Every pretension to authority is turned over and, what is more, stays turned over: there is no formal restoration of order at the end. The fifth act assembles the entire cast for a puppet play; in front of the onstage audience Waspe, Busy and Overdo attempt in turn to reassert their authority, but each of them ludicrously fails. After the last debacle, Overdo is persuaded to invite everyone to his house for supper – pimps, cutpurses and all. They take the puppets and finish the play there. Thus the festival is allowed to continue beyond the time and space allotted to it: rather than the City governing the Fair, the Fair takes over the City.

This is a surprising conclusion in the play's context. By 1614, Jonson had been the principal deviser of Court masques for nearly a decade, and was becoming the effective poet laureate of Jacobean England. The earliest edition of *Bartholomew Fair* (1640) advertises the play's dedication to the king, and records that it was performed at the Hope on 31 October 1614, and then again at Court the next day. The Court performance had a special prologue and epilogue, addressed to James, and audibly confident that the play will please him. The idea of a libertine comedy of 'discrowning' seems at odds with this display of royal favour: have we missed something?

The prologue promises anti-Puritan satire, and this theme was central to the play's seventeenth-century reputation. Indeed it is arguable that the

Puritan stereotype of today – the bigoted, Bible-thumping enemy of pleasure – originates not in any direct historical experience, but precisely in this play. It was a reasonable bet that James would enjoy this; his own book *Basilicon Doron*, published in 1603, attacks Puritans as ‘very pests in the Church and Commonweal’.⁷ ‘Puritan’ meant different things in different circles, but James’s meaning is clear enough. For him, Puritans are Protestants who think that their inner faith entitles them to override civil and ecclesiastical authority; consequently, although they speak the language of law and discipline, they are really a force for lawlessness and confusion. Jonson dramatizes exactly this idea. He refers not to Puritanism by name, but to

the zealous noise

Of your land’s faction, scandalized at toys,
As babies, hobby-horses, puppet-plays,
And suchlike rage, whereof the petulant ways
Yourself have known, and have been vexed with long. (Prologue, 3–7)

‘Noise’, ‘faction’, ‘rage’, ‘petulant’, ‘vexed’ – above all, these people appear as agents of discord. So Zeal-of-the-land Busy is shown constantly taking offence at things: long hair, tobacco, gingerbread, dolls, Latin. The things are mostly harmless; what causes the offence is his own rage – he can hardly speak without threatening a breach of the peace. A *political* definition of Puritanism as a source of dispute in the church is skilfully translated into a compulsively disputatious *character*.

Busy of course denounces the Fair, but he has a lot in common with it. At its heart, a group of drinking companions play a game called ‘vapours’. The rules are simple: each player has to disagree completely with whatever the previous player said. A ‘vapour’, then, is a senseless gesture of self-assertion; the term goes beyond the game and virtually constitutes the atmosphere of the Fair. Aggression informs the characters’ names, for example: Wasp, Quarlous (= ‘quarrelsome’), Ursula (= ‘she-bear’), Knockem, Trouble-all – this last being a madman who runs around harassing people at random, and is, in effect, a schematically

⁷ King James VI and I, *Political Writings*, ed. J. P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 26.

inverted personification of law and order. The Fair is a society perpetually on the brink of a fight.

Politically, then, the three figures in the stocks can be seen not simply as overthrown rulers, but as representatives of the very disorder over which they are supposed to rule. Waspe and Busy are not true governors but vapourers, stirring up dissension. Overdo is equally disruptive in a different way. Dressed in eccentric rags, he presents himself to the audience as a wise magistrate in the guise of a fool. But behind his back, as he talks to us, we see the Fair making use of him for its own purposes. His costume was more appropriate than he realized: he is a fool in the guise of a wise magistrate. Like his companions, he claims to bring order to the Fair but actually compounds its confusion.

These ironies make it easier to fit the play's celebration of lawlessness into Jonson's royal poetics. Behind the divisive egotisms of the would-be governors is the idea of the magistrate they all fail to be; as in a Court masque, the true authority is not visible on the stage because he is in the audience. But although we can imagine the king seeing the play like that, we are not obliged to share his perspective. There is more play in the signs than that.

For example, on St Bartholomew's Day, 1611, a sermon at Paul's Cross attacked various sins and abuses of London, predictably including plays. The preacher, Robert Milles, had heard people affirm that a play can do you as much good as a sermon, and he was appalled at the impiety of the comparison:

To compare a lascivious stage to this sacred pulpit and oracle of truth? To compare a silken counterfeit to a prophet, to God's angel, to his minister, to the distributor of God's heavenly mysteries? And to compare the idle and scurrile invention of an illiterate bricklayer, to the holy, pure, and powerful word of God?⁸

This is directly aimed at Jonson – perhaps the most formidably literate bricklayer in the history of the trade. Perhaps Zeal-of-the-land Busy is his retaliation? The puppet show in Act 5 is in full swing when Busy interrupts it:

⁸ Robert Milles, *Abrahams suite for Sodome: A sermon preached at Pauls Crosse* (London, 1612), f. Dr.

Hold thy peace, thy scurrility, shut up thy mouth, thy profession is damnable, and in pleading for it, thou dost plead for Baal. I have long opened my mouth wide, and gaped, I have gaped as the oyster for the tide, after thy destruction. (5.5.15–19)

This is caricature: the sub-biblical rhetoric imitates the preacher's, but pushes everything further so as to discredit the original. Something similar is true of the character: real antitheatrical preachers were educated clergymen like Milles, but by putting their arguments and tones into the mouth of the plebeian Busy, Jonson represents them as marginal and ignorant. And the dramatic situation works in the same way again: Milles's attack on the theatre becomes Busy's attack on a puppet show. The showman's response is to put up one of the puppets to defend its profession, so the ensuing debate is short on dignity:

Busy: His profession is profane, it is profane, idol.
Puppet: It is not profane!
Puppet-master: It is not profane, he says.
Busy: It is profane.
Puppet: It is not profane.
Busy: It is profane.
Puppet: It is not profane. (5.5.56–62)

Jonson defends the theatre, not by engaging reasonably with the issues, but by placing them in a clownish space where his adversary cannot get at them without becoming a clown himself. The equivalence of preachers and players, which so shocked Milles, is neatly demonstrated on the stage.

To put it more theoretically: the mode of representation in *Bartholomew Fair* is not referential but parodic. The puppets denote not puppets but actors. The fanatical Puritan is not really a representation of a fanatical Puritan but an *unfair* representation of a moderate Puritan. The pig-booth-cum-whorehouse with its fire and flesh is not so much a slice of Jacobean street life as a cartoon version of Hell. The stage Fair is not simply a documentary account of the real one, but a low-comedy commonwealth, a focused, pungent metaphor for society and the state. And so on: once the mechanism is up and running it goes on working automatically. So it becomes possible, after all, to see Justice Overdo, the

little magistrate with great ideas, as a puppet-sized caricature of the great magistrate to whom the play is otherwise so obsequiously dedicated.

In another of the play's set-pieces, the singer Nightingale performs a warning ballad about the wickedness of cutpurses. Overdo approves of the song because, like him, it denounces criminal behaviour. But what he has not realized is that Nightingale is a cutpurse's accomplice: the true purpose of the ballad is to distract people's attention while their purses are stolen. The magistrate would like to enlist the performing artist in the cause of law and order, but finds that, in this case as in that of the play as a whole, he is a thoroughly unreliable ally.

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John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* King's (1614)

The modern status of *The Duchess of Malfi* is contradictory. Around 1820, connoisseurs began saying that Webster was the finest English dramatist except for Shakespeare, and this estimate has been continually repeated. Between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century the *Duchess* had eight professional productions – more than any other non-Shakespearean early modern play. In the 1930s it was almost certainly the first Jacobean play to be produced for television; and since 1945 it has been regularly performed and anthologized. Shakespeare aside, then, this is the early seventeenth-century theatre's official masterpiece. And yet this distinguished reception is interrupted by repeated complaints about the play's failings. Its action is insufficiently motivated; its language is pedantic and opaque; its structure is broken-backed; its theatricality is vulgar sensationalism; its corpse-littered denouement makes audiences giggle – it is not a classic play after all, but an outdated one.

So the play hangs suspended between epochs. Whereas Shakespeare's major plays are clearly part of the modern repertoire, and (say) Jonson's court masques are clearly not, a play such as the *Duchess* both is and is not. What has secured it a place in our theatre and, equally, what stops it being at home there?

Part of its appeal is the clandestine marriage at the centre of the plot. The Duchess, a young widow, marries Antonio Bologna, the master of her household, and has three children with him. She keeps her marriage secret, partly because her tyrannical brothers have ordered her not to remarry, and partly because she has transgressed a boundary of rank: Antonio is a gentleman, but certainly not an aristocrat. These are alien conditions: the power of the dynasty's men, and the sanctity of the distinction between noble and common, tie the plot to its premodern moment. But paradoxically this gives the marriage itself a modern, middle-class character. The Duchess and her brothers are princes; for them, the family is a highly public order, and it is as the guardians of that order that the brothers assume the right to control and ultimately to execute their erring sister. The family formed by the Duchess and Antonio, on the other hand, is private and powerless. It has no external

relationships because no one knows of its existence, and no internal hierarchy because the husband continues to act as the paid servant of the wife: it is a structureless personal space, socially invisible and politically innocent. So what comes into view is an idealized nuclear family, made strange and poignant by its precarious position at the heart of a Renaissance court.

The Duchess's misalliance, then, appears in nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival as that recognizably Victorian gesture, the apotheosis of privacy. The fourth act is almost a self-contained saint's play: the Duchess is imprisoned, psychologically tortured and eventually strangled, punctuating her ordeal with moments of scaffold heroism:

Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength
Must pull down heaven upon me: –
Yet stay; heaven-gates are not so highly arch'd
As princes' palaces, they that enter there
Must go upon their knees. (4.2.230–4)

The regal performance of humility makes her sound like Mary Queen of Scots, but the context is quite different: she is suffering not for any religious or political cause but for a purely personal choice; and she is addressing neither a public nor posterity, but her brother's executioners in a closed prison. Her death is as private as her marriage; she is a martyr of domesticity:

I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy
Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
Say her prayers, ere she sleep. Now what you please –
What death? (4.2.203–6)

In short, despite her aristocratic sublimity (or all the more effectively because of it), she is a *bourgeois* tragic heroine.

This account of the role is matched by the play's narrative structure. It begins and ends not with the Duchess but with the relationship between two of her employees: Antonio and Bosola. Bosola is a soldier of fortune hired by the brothers to spy on the Duchess: appointed to her household at their request, he informs on her, and then organizes her arrest and persecution for them, only to suffer a revulsion and turn against them after

her death. He tries to save Antonio, but ends up killing him in the first of an involved sequence of errors which also destroys both brothers and Bosola himself. As master of ceremonies in the fourth act, and the brothers' nemesis in the fifth, Bosola is an increasingly choric figure, his discursive authority complementing Antonio's generic authority as the heroine's lover. Thus the dominant point of view in the play is not the aristocratic one, but that of two servants whose relationships with the ruling family lead them first to promotion and then to destruction. A social solidarity between the two characters beats against their position as enemies within the plot.

This is especially conspicuous in the scene where Bosola tricks the Duchess into confiding in him. She tells him that Antonio is her husband and he responds entirely in the language of 'preferment' (social advancement):

Fortunate lady!
For you have made your private nuptial bed
The humble and fair seminary of peace:
No question but many an unbenefic'd scholar
Shall pray for you for this deed, and rejoice
That some preferment in the world can yet
Arise from merit. (3.2.280–6)

Bosola is lying; his next move will be to betray Antonio to the Duchess's brothers. When the plot requires it, he says the opposite: 'Fie, madam, / Forget this base, low fellow'. But it is that contemptuous voice that sounds inauthentic, and the praise of promotion by merit that elicits his eloquence – unsurprisingly, since resentment at the neglect of his own merit was what made him a spy in the first place. So in a strange reversal, the Duchess's husband joins with her executioner in a single ideological image: that of the *carrière ouverte aux talents*. Here again, the edge of social resentment offers later spectators a bourgeois tragedy.

Besides this, the play recommends itself to modern taste at the level of style. Few dramatic reputations are so dependent on striking individual lines: if other grounds of praise fail, Webster is still celebrated as the person who wrote: 'Look you, the stars shine still' (4.1.100), and 'Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young' (4.2.264), and 'We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded / Which way please them'

(5.4.54–5), and ‘and now, I pray, let me / Be laid by, and never thought of [Dies]’ (5.5.89–90). What is memorable about these famous lines is the way they are surrounded by silence. To follow the thought from the dramatic situation to the utterance involves a mental jump, and in making the jump you seem to traverse a chasm of unarticulated experience. These fractures in the verbal surface are the play’s code for intense feeling, as opposed to this theatre’s normal emotional vehicle, which is rhetoric. *Behind* the rhetorically expressed selves of these princes and courtiers are their secret true selves, emerging only in fragmentary exclamations and irregular impulses of violence or sacrifice. In this respect, too, Webster plays to the poetic values of post-romantic spectators.

A bourgeois heroine, then, an ideology of upward mobility, and a romantic mistrust of artificial speech – it is easy to see how the play gained its toe-hold in the bourgeois theatre. But why no more than a toe-hold? Among the things that connect us with the Duchess, what things separate us from her?

One particular scene shows several of them. It is not one of the play’s legendary moments, but it is representative of its method and of its strangeness. Suspecting that the Duchess is with child, Bosola presents her with some early season apricots. She eats them with an excessive relish that betrays a pregnant woman’s craving, and then he tells her, with assumed concern, that they were ripened in horse-dung. Either because of this suggestion or because they are unripe, the apricots make her sick and bring on her labour. It is a jarring little scene because its Rabelaisian confusion of physical functions – eating overlaps with sex, and vomiting with giving birth – makes the Duchess’s body grotesque. Devouring, swelling, puking, sweating, the incontinent female is laid out before the contained male gaze of the spy.

The effect of this is not only to subject Webster’s dignified tragic heroine to comic indignity, though that is surprising enough. More radically, it compromises the unity of the dramatic character. Much later, after the murder, the Duchess makes two posthumous appearances. She revives briefly in the torture chamber as Bosola repents over her body: ‘her eye opes, / And heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut, / To take me up to mercy’ (4.2.347–9). And when Antonio listens to an echo in a ruined abbey, it is her voice that he hears, and her face that he momentarily sees, ‘folded in sorrow’ (5.3.45). Coming after the hagiological persecution scenes, both these late *coups de théâtre* work to stage the Duchess

as a celestial figure. There are difficulties here for a modern actress. To work as a bourgeois tragedy, the play needs an authoritative private consciousness, an experiencing subject to make the fatal choice and live through its consequences. The Duchess offers fragments of that unitary human voice, but it is interrupted and ironized by other, external tones, sometimes gross and satiric, sometimes angelic and exemplary. The jagged alterities make us uncomfortably aware that this is not our world.

This is also a matter of verbal texture. At the beginning of the 'apricots' scene, Bosola has this speech, while talking with Antonio:

Some would think the souls of princes were brought forth by some more weighty cause than those of meaner persons – they are deceived, there's the same hand to them: the like passions sway them, the same reason that makes a vicar go to law for a tithe-pig and undo his neighbours, makes them spoil a whole province, and batter down goodly cities with the cannon. *Enter Duchess* (2.1.101–7)

How does this reflection bear on the action? It could be heard as supportive of the Duchess's marriage, on the grounds that the social distinctions she is transgressing are trivial anyway. But then her entrance, visibly pregnant, turns the satire against her: there she is, the ruler of a dukedom, but she is swayed by the same passions, subject to the same consequences, as the commonest slut. And the examples Bosola chooses – the grasping vicar and the destructive prince – give the whole assertion a misanthropic twist, implying that we are all not simply equal, but equally vicious. A 'great' man is nothing but an ordinary man in a position to do great harm. This raises the possibility that Bosola, who eventually kills not only the Duchess but her princely brothers as well, does so out of class hatred.

This kind of uncertainty runs through the role. Time and again, when an audience wants to know what Bosola is thinking or feeling, what it gets is a tangential tirade, or an aphorism whose application is uncertain. He seems not so much an individual consciousness as a montage of quotations – and indeed that is what he is: Webster is an exceptionally allusive writer, collecting phrases from his reading and pasting them into the script with intricate effect. The speech I quoted a moment ago, for example, is adapted from Montaigne. Often these borrowings are not fully integrated into the play: they still breathe the air of their former

contexts, and so their cumulative effect is hauntingly disjunctive, as if the characters are too preoccupied by their own thoughts to concentrate on the plot.

In other words, what alienates us from the *Duchess*, despite its almost inadvertent modernity, is the unnaturalness of its dramatic method. The heroine, the villain and the dialogue are all constructed in ways that disrupt the illusion of spontaneous human interaction and move the action towards a theatre of the device: riddle, emblem, pageant, pastiche. This makes it extremely hard to do in a theatre whose basic operating concept is character. It also means that one valuable effect of doing it all the same is that our own dramatic codes are stretched and disconcerted by the attempt.

Further Reading

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Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling* Lady Elizabeth's, Cockpit (1622)

The Changeling has a schematic double-plot structure: there is a family tragedy and, independent though skilfully connected, a comedy set in a lunatic asylum. There is some evidence that it was the comedy that ensured the play's popularity in the seventeenth century, but in the twentieth this judgement was reversed, with critics either dismissing the mad-house scenes as an embarrassment or else justifying them in thematic terms as an ironic counterpoint to the tragedy. I shall conform to modern prejudice and concentrate on the tragedy here.

Like several Jacobean plays, it owes much of its modern reputation to T. S. Eliot. In an influential essay, 'Thomas Middleton' (1927), he argued that although the plot is conventional and absurd, the tragedy transcends convention and connects with something permanent in human nature. For Eliot, this transcendence is confirmed in the heroine's dying words to her father, after her guilt has been revealed:

I that am of your blood was taken from you
For your better health; look no more upon't,
But cast it to the ground regardlessly,
Let the common sewer take it from distinction.

In a speech like this, Eliot declares, Middleton is not just a Jacobean theatre professional but a transhistorically great poet. And indeed he had already made it part of modern literature in his own great poem *Gerontion*, changing its words but accurately preserving its rhythms, its alienation, its pitilessly level tone:

I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?

That speech, then, forms a way into the question of *The Changeling's* 'greatness', and of its historical specificity. First, we need the dramatic context.

The speaker is Beatrice-Joanna, the daughter of a nobleman named Vermandero. At the beginning of the play, she is about to marry the husband her father has chosen, Alonzo de Piracquo, but she meets and falls mutually in love with another man, Alsemero. In themselves, the two men are equally eligible, but the engagement is binding. However, there is a fourth man in the picture: De Flores. He too is infatuated with Beatrice-Joanna, but he is not a conceivable suitor: he is low-born, he is facially disfigured, and he inspires irrational distaste in Beatrice-Joanna herself. She commissions him to kill Piracquo, hoping to be rid of her unwanted husband and unwanted admirer at once. He carries out the murder, but then demands that she become his mistress. She can see no alternative and complies, so that when she marries Alsemero as she hoped, she is already an adulteress. After the wedding Alsemero learns about her liaison with De Flores, and in denying his accusations Beatrice-Joanna confesses to the murder. The whole story comes out, and De Flores kills Beatrice-Joanna and himself; it is after she is fatally wounded that she makes the speech with which we began.

When Eliot refers this tale of sex and violence to permanent human nature, he means the implacable working out of the consequences of Beatrice-Joanna's choice. She supposed that one quick crime would remove two inconvenient people but otherwise leave the world just as it was before. In masterfully paced stages, she discovers that things don't work like that: actions have consequences, and what we have done is an inseparable part of what we are. We watch her move, at terrible cost, from moral idiocy to moral awareness, and it is this journey, according to Eliot, that is as 'universal' as *Oedipus Rex*, despite the B-movie style of the narrative detail. The sublimity of her last speech, then, is not only a matter of poetic technique: it is that she speaks without illusions because her life is over. Everything is known now; in a dizzying paradox, she is both self-possessed and utterly lost; her lucid despair is that of the damned souls in Dante's *Inferno*.

We could agree that Eliot chose a great speech; all the same, two ironies attach to his use of it. The first is that it was probably written by Middleton's collaborator William Rowley. No one has ever claimed that Rowley was a great poet: whatever suggests greatness in these lines also suggests that authorship mattered less in the Renaissance theatre than it does to literary historians. Rather, the quality of this writing emerges from the shared conventions, or the dramatic moment, or the heat of

collaboration, or luck – the distinction between the theatre professional and the great poet is not after all so clear. And secondly, the first line Eliot quotes has taken a slight but crucial deflection from one of the play's nineteenth-century editors. The earliest edition actually reads, 'I am that of your blood was taken from you / For your better health' (5.3.150–3). This is a medical metaphor: 'I am *that part* of your blood which a doctor takes from you to make you well.' Not understanding the slightly compressed syntax, the editor assumed a typesetting error and switched the two words round, thus producing a statement which is more sublime precisely because it is comparatively vague. Beatrice-Joanna says something more limited than Eliot heard.

It is also something less 'eternal' – not only because the image is based on an obsolete medical procedure, but also because she is speaking within a definite ideology of the family. She is Vermandero's blood in the sense that she is his daughter, but her transgression makes her alien to him: she is his originally, but now taken from him for his own good. That is the idea that leads, through a pun on 'blood', to the image of therapeutic bleeding: in that case, too, your blood is removed in the hope that the loss will make you better. With savage self-condemnation, she defines herself as excrement, a discarded part of Vermandero which it would be unhygienic for him to try to retain.

We could argue, against Eliot, that this gesture is not universally human at all, but violently gendered. Here is the outline of such a reading. This is a daughter addressing a father within an oppressively masculine order. She speaks as belonging wholly to her father: more than simply his property, the metaphor makes her part of his body. If she is no longer that, she is nothing: the other possibility – autonomy – is in these terms literally unthinkable. This is because the family, the 'blood' in that dynastic sense, belongs to men: Vermandero's line, with whatever riches and honours attach to it, is supposed to pass from him to Beatrice-Joanna's husband, and from him to her son, and so on. Women in such a system are not inheritors of the blood-line but channels for it.

This patriarchal logic subjects women to contradictory injunctions. On the one hand, it means that a marriageable daughter consists essentially of her body, the container for her father's blood and her husband's seed. She is strictly a sexual object: she is not supposed to be a moral agent, but a passive instrument in the hands of men. On the other hand, the whole system depends on her resisting everything that might compromise her

chastity; in that sense, she is required to be a moral agent, and absolutely forbidden to be a passive instrument in the hands of men. In other words, the masculine order rests on two assumptions about women: that they control their own bodies; and that they do not. As feminist criticism has shown in detail, this contradiction generated a gaudy variety of male fantasies and anxieties about women, traceable in plays like this.

Thus the central event in Beatrice-Joanna's fall, surprisingly perhaps, is not the murder but the loss of her virginity. Discovering that Alsemero has a quasi-medical virginity test in his closet, she memorizes the instructions for it, and then fakes the required reactions in a scene of grotesque comedy. She still fears exposure on the wedding night, though, and makes her waiting woman Diaphanta take her place in Alsemero's bed under cover of darkness. In a further comic touch, Diaphanta fails to emerge from the bedchamber at the appointed time, so Beatrice-Joanna spends her wedding night in an agony of both apprehension (Diaphanta is risking discovery) and humiliation (Diaphanta is evidently enjoying losing *her* virginity). Through such devices, the play hovers over the moment of deflowering, dramatizing it, travestyng it, giving each figure a sinister double so that there are two brides, two bridegrooms, two wedding nights. This is the structure that gives the character of De Flores its force. As his name suggests, it is above all as the man who takes Beatrice-Joanna's virginity that he has significance: base, hideous, the object of inexplicable phobias, he is the external form of her desire. When she chose a man against her father's wishes, it was *this* man that, without knowing it, she was really choosing. That proposition is also worked out at the level of character: disgusted and terrified when De Flores first claims her, Beatrice-Joanna grows with him by degrees into a bitter sexual comradeship. At the end, when he stabs her offstage, her screams momentarily make it seem that the two of them are snatching a final, literally obscene, gratification. They die together, and Alsemero, the handsome husband who, he now discovers, never slept with her at all, comforts Vermandero: 'Sir, you have yet a son's duty living, / Please you, accept it' (5.3.216–17). Having got rid of the woman, the contradictory element, the male family can reconstruct its right and proper relationships. If we re-read Beatrice-Joanna's famous speech with this patriarchal resolution in front of us, we now hear an extra note in it – not only self-condemnation, but also an outsider's mockery. You'll all manage *much* better if you can forget about my existence . . .

To understand the play in this sense is to question its foundation in permanent human nature. Not only does it situate the play inside a gender system which, while not unique to the early seventeenth century, is by no means universal; it also asks what the 'human' means for an order that makes such fundamental distinctions between men and women. Persuasive as it is, though, this is not the only way of specifying the voice we hear in Eliot's chosen speech. For example, we could point out that 'blood', besides all the connotations we have already noted, also signifies social rank. As Vermandero's daughter, Beatrice-Joanna is of noble blood, but murder is egalitarian, as De Flores brutally points out when she tries to pull rank on him:

Look but into your conscience, read me there,
'Tis a true book, you'll find me there your equal.
Push, fly not to your birth, but settle you
In what the act has made you. (3.4.132-5)

On this point of view, Beatrice-Joanna is not so much the victim of oppressive social relationships as their spoilt product: because De Flores and Diaphanta are her social inferiors, she has a purely instrumental view of them, which is annihilatingly mocked by events. In this context, the substitutions around the wedding night suddenly appear as a specifically social changing of places, the well-born husband cuckolded by the hanger-on, the bride replaced in bed by her maid. This subversive story gives a different point again to the line, 'Let the common sewer take it from distinction': noble and ignoble kinds of blood all look the same once they are spilt. The play is apparently more sceptical about class hierarchies than sexual ones: Beatrice-Joanna's 'distinction' is exposed to a baleful, class-conscious moralism, arguably associated with the Puritan dimension of Middleton's London culture.

In general, then, ideological reading shivers the sublime unity of the tragedy into partial, sharply angled facets. It is for each reader, or performer, to judge whether these specifications intensify or dissipate its power in the present. Or indeed whether the play might speak universally and divisively at once, imitating its own characters' alarming capacity for change.

Further Reading

- Deborah G. Burks, '“I'll want my will else”: *The Changeling* and Women's Complicity with their Rapists', *English Literary History* 62 (1995), 759–90.
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- Michael Neill, '“Hidden Malady”: Death, Discovery, and Indistinction in *The Changeling*', *Renaissance Drama* 22 (1991), 95–121.

Philip Massinger, *The Roman Actor* King's, Blackfriars (1626)

This is probably the first play Massinger wrote after becoming the King's Men's principal playwright in 1625; and it is a reflection on what it is to be both an actor and a king's man. Nowhere else does this theatre set out so explicitly to represent itself and its relations with power. For us, then, it is a uniquely inviting play, a mirror held up to the very thing we are studying. If we want to understand Renaissance drama, can we not just look in this mirror?

It is not as simple as that. Reflection entails distance, which Massinger secures by setting the play in imperial Rome. The emperor, Domitian, is a despot whose political life mostly consists of having people killed. He has two favourites: Domitia, a senator's wife whom he makes his mistress at the beginning of the play; and Paris, the leading actor of the troupe that entertains him. The main action is that Domitia falls in love with Paris, and claims him as imperiously as Domitian claimed her. Led by Domitia's enemies to the scene of his betrayal, the emperor kills Paris, but cannot bring himself either to punish or to forgive Domitia. As he dithers, she joins the gathering conspiracy against him, and he is assassinated.

Massinger's telling of this story includes a sequence of theatrical set-pieces. In the first act, the actors are arraigned before the Senate, and Paris mounts an extended rhetorical defence of theatre. In the second, Domitian forces a miser to watch an interlude called *The Cure of Avarice*. In the third, Paris plays a lover at the request of Domitia, who is so carried away by her passion that she loses track of the distinction between play and reality. And in the fourth, Domitian responds to his discovery of Domitia and Paris by commanding the performance of a play, *The False Servant*, which mirrors what has just happened. Paris plays the false servant, and Domitian himself the cuckolded master, so that he can murder his favourite actor while both are in role. What is this proliferation of metatheatrical incident saying about theatre itself?

The Roman Actor has been called the most antitheatrical play of the English Renaissance. The interpretation goes like this. At the beginning of the play, Paris claims that actors are public benefactors who hold virtue and honour up for admiration, and expose vice and folly to shame.

However, the performances we see him give do not support this argument. *The Cure of Avarice* ought to hold up a mirror to the miser so that he sees his deformity and seeks to mend it; in fact, he deplores the conversion of the miser in the play and thinks he should have stuck to his principles. The love story, *Iphis and Anaxarete*, has even feebler moral pretensions: its function is to indulge Domitia's passions – her lust for Paris, and also her vindictiveness towards a defeated rival, whom she humiliates by making her play *Anaxarete*. And *The False Servant* is hardly a representation at all, merely decor for the emperor's revenge. If Puritans denounce the stage as a place of falsehood, lust and fury, Massinger's picture of it seems designed to confirm their views.

Moreover – so the case continues – the actors are not the only ones to present plays within the play. The emperor himself stages spectacular triumphs, and senators who fail to enjoy them are punished. Two of them are publicly tortured to death; Domitian is urged to take his revenge privately, but disdains the suggestion that he might be worried about the people's reactions. The execution is followed almost without a break by *Iphis and Anaxarete*, so we can compare the two imperial spectacles, the sadistic and the lascivious. Theatre, in other words, is represented not only as morally corrupting, but also as the special medium of tyranny: the monarch's taste for it is evidence of his depravity, and the actors' subservience to him shows the emptiness of their claim to moral seriousness. Paris on this view is no better than Domitia: both are doing well because they 'know to soothe the prince's appetite, / And serve his lusts' (1.2.80–1).

According to this reading of the play, then, the theatre it projects onto ancient Rome is the ethically and politically indefensible practice that appears in the antitheatrical polemics of its own age. But this seems a strange way for the king's own actors to portray their profession at the beginning of a new patron's reign; moreover, a brilliant recent production⁹ showed that the script in revival doesn't *play* antitheatrical. Rather, it claims a place in that small but cherished repertoire of plays (from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Our Country's Good*) in which actors celebrate acting. Of course, performance is not proof: a production may sentimentalize a judgemental script. But it is at least worth asking what textual cues prompt this benign version of the Roman actors.

⁹ Directed by Sean Holmes for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2002.

The most obvious one is that Paris is the hero. After his death he is carried off to sad music, followed by the emperor, who promises to enclose his ashes in a golden urn. The contrast with the emperor's own unmourned death at the end of the play is pointed: it is the player who deserves and gets the imperial exit. And Paris is comparably honoured throughout, praised by everyone except the contemptible spy Aretinus. Even Domitian and Domitia, monsters of egocentricity who use and despise one another, are both selflessly in love with Paris. It is the star role: everything points Paris out for admiration.

This matters because he is the play's representative of theatre in general. When he is accused in the Senate, it is specifically not a personal accusation:

In thee, as being the chief of thy profession,
I do accuse the quality of treason. (1.3.32–3)

Paris immediately accepts the general application:

If I free not myself
(And in myself the rest of my profession)
From these false imputations . . . (1.3.43–5)

The acting profession is accused and defended 'in' Paris by a logic which is itself theatrical: he stands for the theatre, just as, a few lines later, Domitian stands for royal power when he is referred to as 'Caesar (in whose great name / All kings are comprehended)'. Paris (who is lovable) means actors and Domitian (who is hateful) means kings.

But Paris is also the hero because he is true to Domitian. What saves his company from attacks in the Senate is not so much his speech as the emperor's favour: the Roman actors, like the London ones who are playing them, are protected by the special regard of the monarch from the hostility of the city. Paris treats this favour as an obligation: propositioned by Domitia, who has the power to punish a refusal with death, he resolves

to die innocent, and have the glory
For all posterity to report that I
Refus'd an empress to preserve my faith
To my great master. (4.2.91–4)

There is something engagingly actorish about this: he chooses the line of action that will look best. But at the heart of his choice is the value of faith to his master; later, when Domitian wrongly accuses him of seducing Domitia, Paris does not try to correct him, but consents to his own execution. In short, the role stages an ideal of loyalty. That Domitian is a psychopath only heightens the idealization: it shows that Paris is acting not out of personal feeling but according to a principle in which 'all kings are comprehended'. He – and 'in' him the King's Majesty's Servants who are staging Massinger's play – is the exemplary servant, faithful unto death. That is where the vindication of the theatre begins. Not that the ruler is not a tyrant, but that it is not the actor's place to judge him. A servant's excellence consists in service, irrespective of whether the master is excellent or vile.

The monarch's regard for the actor, in turn, rests neither on the latter's conformism nor on his dissidence, but on his power to please. This is as deeply built into the defence of theatre as the argument about moral instruction. The actors serve Domitian, 'whom we oft have cheer'd / In his most sullen moods' (1.1.40–1); for themselves, they have no interest except acting:

Our aim is glory, and to leave our names
To aftertimes.
And would they give us leave
There ends all our ambition. (1.1.31–3)

They have no desire, they protest, to 'search into the secrets of the time' (1.3.37): they are mere artists, innocent and, by the same token, irresponsible – for when they present a bad life on the stage,

if there be
Among the auditors one whose conscience tells him
He is of the same mould, we cannot help it. (1.3.112–14)

The theatre's lightness argues for its autonomy. Actors do not need to be controlled because they are not serious – if somebody chooses to *take* them seriously they 'cannot help it'. It is an ironic and somewhat precarious position, much subtler than the claim of moral utility.

In performance, it is substantiated in two ways. One is that the argument about enjoyment is acted out. The script is full of invitations to do

amusing *performances* – grand, absurd, parodic, sexy – and so the actors are confirmed as purveyors of pleasure (in contrast to the emperor, whose specialism is pain). And the other is the effect on the emperor himself. In accordance with the Stoic account of tyranny, the tyrant is no true ruler, but a slave to his passions: his power is illegitimate because, inside him, lust and anger are governing reason instead of being governed by it. For most of the play, we see Domitian in just such slavery, helpless in the grip of his pride, his fear of opposition, and his desire for Domitia. The only significant exceptions are the times when he is watching plays. Then, for once, he sits quietly and takes pleasure in something unconnected to himself. It is his only innocuous pleasure, the only time he takes a break from his imperious appetites and allows himself a moment of freedom. This is of no help to his victims, but it does sketch an opposition between theatre and tyranny.

It is not a political opposition but a structural one: it consists of the idea that in the theatre, things do not really happen. When Domitia woos Paris, she credits him with the virtues of characters she has seen him play. He tries to correct her:

O gracious madam,
How glorious soever, or deform'd,
I do appear in the scene, my part being ended,
And all my borrow'd ornaments put off,
I am no more, nor less, than what I was
Before I enter'd. (4.2.47–52)

The proper quality of the theatre, and the condition of its capacity to carry all the fine meanings Paris claims for it in his speech, is this clear understanding that it displays a likeness of the thing, not the thing itself. This principle is demonstrated in the actors' first interlude, *The Cure of Avarice*. It shows a miser sitting with a rusty key in his mouth, emblematically paralysed by avarice. His son calls a doctor, and together they pretend to break in and steal his money; the shock restores the old man's faculties, whereupon they explain that the theft was a 'device', curative because it only seemed to be a real event.

This is the distinction which the play's tyrants, Domitian and Domitia, seek to override. Domitian makes a real miser watch *The Cure of Avarice*, and expects his reaction to be identical with that of the one in the play;

when it is not, he has him executed. *Iphis and Anaxarete* is interrupted by the real infatuation of Domitia, and Domitian brings a real knife onto the set of *The False Servant*. These scenes are not representations of theatre, but instances of theatre going *wrong* because its rules are violated. The tyrant persistently refuses to distinguish between play and reality, not because there is any great difficulty about the difference, but because he will not admit any limit on the scope of his will: he takes the world to be a *mise-en-scène* which he can always rearrange to suit his own performance. His theatricality is perverse, and what defines and reproves his confusion is the unperverted practice of theatre itself. Acting turns out to be the source, not only of innocent pleasure, but also of true knowledge.

This value is confirmed by the coincidence between the language of the actor and that of the play's serious oppositional ideology: Stoicism. Summoned to appear before the Senate, Paris encourages his fellow-actors by reminding them of all the tragic heroes they have impersonated:

Whate'er our sentence be, think 'tis in sport;
And though condemn'd, let's hear it without sorrow,
As if we were to live again tomorrow. (1.1.55–7)

One of the officers comments, "'Tis spoken like yourself', and certainly the conceit has a graceful professional aptness. But it is also a thoroughly Stoic sentiment: acting exemplifies the power of the mind to rise above contingency and control emotion; and the conventional metaphor of the world as a stage, which Paris also invokes, comes to the aid of the doctrine that the joys and sorrows of the material world are alike illusory. The two Stoic dissidents, who smile calmly as Domitian's hangmen tear their flesh with hooks, come close to the language of the actors, expounding the

grave philosophy, that instructs us
The flesh is but the clothing of the soul,
Which growing out of fashion, though it be
Cast off, or rent, or torn, like ours, 'tis then,
Being itself divine, in her best lustre. (3.2.99–103)

The body appears as a costume, a 'borrow'd ornament' like the actor's fictional dignity, which he puts off to return to his true self.

These speakers are Domitian's opponents, who die defying him; Paris and his actors are his faithful servants. That their respective value systems nevertheless join up suggests something of the theatre's catholicity, its capacity, under royal patronage, to be autonomous and loyal at once, not by compromising between the two, but by embracing their extremes.

Further Reading

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Thomas Heywood, *The Fair Maid of the West*

Queen Henrietta's, Cockpit (1631)

The Fair Maid of the West is two plays: Part 1 is the original, and Part 2 is a sequel. They were, and are, printed together, so that they appear as a unified ten-act drama, but that makes the relationship between the parts look much more straightforward than it really is. Heywood had a very long writing career, and it seems likely that he wrote Part 1 in the reign of Elizabeth, and Part 2 thirty years later. So although the plot is continuous, there is a decisive break in the dramatic idiom: a historical interval in the middle of the script allows us to measure the distance between the theatrical worlds of 1600 and 1630.

The whole play is firmly in the territory of commercial entertainment, and Trevor Nunn (a director both of Shakespeare and of hit musicals) revived it in the 1980s as a romp, an enjoyable reminder that Renaissance drama does not have to be a high-cultural enclave. Episodic, generically mixed and cheerfully implausible, it is a comic-romantic adventure story, subtitled 'A Girl Worth Gold'. This tagline is accurate as well as catchy: the show is much concerned with both.

The story about the girl is that Bess Bridges, an astonishingly beautiful and virtuous Plymouth barmaid, is in love with a gentleman called Spencer. He goes on the 1597 naval expedition to the Azores, leaving her to defend her chastity against all comers, which she vigorously does. When news comes that he has died on the campaign, she exchanges her inn for a ship and sails off to give him honourable burial and avenge his death; of course it turns out that the news was false, and he is alive, and they narrowly fail to connect at the Azores, but after various adventures both end up in the kingdom of Fez, where they are reunited and married at the end of Part 1. Part 2 follows straight on. Mullisheg, the King of Fez, lusts after Bess, and his queen after Spencer; the English party engineer a double bed-trick so that the king and queen make love to each other in the dark. Bess and Spencer almost escape, but then return for a denouement that reconciles all the parties: it feels like a comedy ending, but is only the end of Act 3, so the young couple leave Fez and are shipwrecked and separated in Italy. They find each other all over again at the court of Florence, whose Duke, much like Mullisheg, tries to make Bess his

mistress but is morally defeated by the combination of her virtue and Spencer's honour. This scenario is girl-meets-boy, girl-loses-boy, etc., and also a testing story – Bess is a girl worth gold in the sense that her metal is tried in successive fires and always turns out to be pure.

More interesting, though – certainly more historically distinctive – is the story about the gold. Spencer is rich, and when he goes to war he leaves Bess in charge of his immovable property: if he fails to return, it will be hers. When he thinks he is dying in the Azores, he makes her an additional bequest of £500 a year and entrusts it to his friend Goodlack, with instructions to check whether she has remained chaste: if she has not, Goodlack is to keep the money. Goodlack is not rich, and scrutinizes Bess's reputation very aggressively indeed, but at last he is morally compelled to hand over the legacy. Immediately, Bess turns everything into cash and gives it to Goodlack to buy and equip the ship, promising that once the voyage is over and Spencer laid to rest, it will be his.

Thus Spencer, Goodlack and Bess are all shown impulsively giving money away: one of the play's basic motifs is a gesture that says, 'Take it all!' And in fairytale fashion, this high-mindedness is always rewarded. This is especially true of Bess, because her romantic voyage is clearly a privateering expedition. Privateering was piracy that was licensed by the state on the basis that the victims were the ships of an enemy power (in this case Spain): it was supposed to help the national war effort and afford the shipowners a profit at the same time. Sure enough, Bess's trip is extremely successful: she takes several prizes, and arrives in North Africa a rich woman. Having established the pattern, the play repeats it formulaically. At the court of Fez, Bess offers all her wealth in exchange for Spencer; Mullisheg, moved by their love, loads them with wedding presents. When they flee the court in Part 2, they leave all the presents behind so as not to appear like thieves; when this is discovered, Mullisheg applauds their honour by doubling his bounty. All this wealth is lost in the subsequent shipwreck, but at the end, when they are reunited in Florence, the Duke promises to make them say that Mullisheg was either poor or ungenerous. Thus every time Bess parts with her money, she gets back even more: the play is a capitalist romance, a radiant idealization of the concept of investment. This theme is further specified socially by Bess's accompanying social ascent. One blocking factor at the beginning of the play is that her low birth makes marriage with Spencer impossible; at the end of both parts she is a court lady and the problem has been

solved. In a classic bourgeois fantasy, the barriers of rank give way to new money.

The romance consists not only in the play's wish-fulfilment economics, but also in the interplay between the languages of money and love. Here is Bess, making her momentous decision:

This surplusage of love hath made my loss,
That was but great before, now infinite. –
[*Aside*] It may be compass'd; there's in this my purpose
No impossibility . . .
Four thousand pound besides this legacy
In jewels, gold, and silver I can make,
And every man discharg'd. I am resolv'd
To be a pattern to all maids hereafter
Of constancy in love. (Part 1, 3.4.86–94)

The alternation between infinite love and finite assets is almost comic: before resolving to be an immortal pattern of constancy, Bess checks that she can afford it. But the effect of the juxtaposition is not, as you might expect, to undermine the rhetoric of love. It is rather the other way round: the rhetoric has the effect of ennobling the calculations. In practice, Bess's voyage is an enterprise for profit, but we see it as merely instrumental to her feelings for Spencer, and it is softened and humanized by that subordination. The motive of love redeems the war from its inherent brutality and greed.

Moreover, it is the condition of Bess's success that men all fall in love with her. Her ship is run by Goodlack and another gallant called Roughman; she has triumphed morally over both, and both are her devoted admirers. At both courts, she is in a position to dictate terms, and rescue Spencer from dangers, because the respective rulers are infatuated with her beauty. In short, her attractiveness is the universal solvent of the obstacles that form the plot. She is thus worth gold in the strict sense that she is structurally *equivalent* to gold: like money, she can obtain anything because she is what everybody wants.

Within the framework of the adventure story, then, love and money have a versatile capacity to stand in for one another. It is an effect that could accurately be called ideological, in that it rather beguilingly represents the accumulation of capital through plunder and favouritism as an

inadvertent by-product of love. But at this point we start to come up against the play's other major peculiarity, noted at the outset: the disjunction between Parts 1 and 2. As far as the money is concerned, the difference is obvious. In Part 1 it is independent property, either owned by Spencer and legally transferred to Bess, or else seized as the spoils of war. In Part 2, by contrast, the only form of wealth is royal bounty: it seems that, in absolutist fashion, no one has anything except by grace and favour of the king. Entrepreneur's gold has turned into courtier's gold.

As we would expect by now, the economic change works through to Bess herself. There is a painful contrast between her meeting with Mullisheg in Part 1 and her meeting with the Duke of Florence in Part 2. Both fall instantly in love with her, but she holds Mullisheg at arm's length – 'I only came to see thee for my pleasure' (5.1.40) – until he has signed a document guaranteeing her freedom to come and go as she chooses, whereas Florence appears incognito just in time to save her from being raped by a bandit – she kneels to him as her deliverer; then, when she discovers he is also the Duke, she falls flat on her face; and finally, when he raises her up and kisses her, she silently consents. Again, a bourgeois relationship, based on self-assertion and contractual agreement, has given way to an absolutist one of unconditional submission and benevolence.

This dispiriting shift may also be understood in formal terms: if Bess's 'character' has changed, it is because she is in a different kind of play. For instance, Part 1 is mobile, and Part 2 stationary. Part 1 is set in pubs and streets in Devon and Cornwall, in the Azores, on a ship at sea, and eventually at the court of Fez. Almost every scene ends with one character or another declaring an immediate intention of going somewhere else: what causes a break in the action is literally the determination to move on. In Part 2, all but two scenes have court settings, and the impulse to depart disappears or is frustrated. The spatial possibilities around the action have shrunk. The characteristic dramatic unit changes accordingly: Part 1 is made out of deeds (Bess challenges Roughman to a fight; Bess rescues an English merchant ship from the Spanish), Part 2 out of predicaments (Bess will die if Spencer fails to get back to the ship; Spencer inadvertently takes an oath that obliges him to behave coldly towards Bess). That is, in the later play, characters are repeatedly imprisoned by circumstances, whereas in the earlier one they physically alter or escape them. In Part 1 they have adventures; in Part 2, dilemmas.

Thus the gold, the girl and the show all suffer a sea-change into something courtly and static. If we assume that we are indeed talking about an Elizabethan play and its Caroline sequel, this transformation looks very like a reaction to the changed environment of the theatre itself. The affirmative Bess of Part 1 clearly owes her loose energy to an identification: in her half-legitimate commercial enterprises, and the improvisatory elasticity with which she switches around between moods, ranks and genders, she is a glamorized version of the actors' own equivocal business. Her vulgar patriotism and upward mobility are theirs: the venture is buoyed up by the sentiments of a popular audience. By 1630 this identification has lost its conviction. Theatrical patronage has been consolidated in the hands of the royal family; prestige is migrating from the ageing public amphitheatres to socially exclusive indoor venues;¹⁰ court spectacle itself has acquired an ideological scope and ambition that saps the confidence of other theatrical forms. In short, theatre is moving into the shadow of the throne. That proximity arguably contributed to its eventual fate in 1642, when it was closed down by Parliament; it is also reflected in miniature in the institutionalization of the *Fair Maid of the West*.

What is suspect about this interpretation of the two plays is its implicit idealization of Elizabethan culture. It comes uncomfortably close to a familiar tale of paradise lost: under Elizabeth, drama, sexuality and foreign policy were all straightforward and vigorous; then, after her death, everything got precious and self-defeating. One reason for being wary of this myth is that it was promoted not only in sentimental Victorian histories, but also at the time. Early seventeenth-century playwrights, preachers and politicians were all surprisingly fond of saying that things were managed much better in the old queen's time. It is therefore possible, ironically, that *Fair Maid* Part 1 is not an Elizabethan play after all, but precisely a Jacobean recreation of an idyllic Elizabethan world that never really existed. In the absence of conclusive evidence, readers are free to form their own judgement about that.

¹⁰ The Cockpit, a small indoor house in Drury Lane, was precisely such a venue. Before it opened in 1617, the companies Heywood was associated with mostly occupied popular open-air playhouses. Thus, assuming that Part 1 was in the repertoire before that, it will have been written for an amphitheatre, and Part 2 for a private theatre.

Further Reading

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John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* Queen Henrietta's, Cockpit (1632)

John Ford's tragedy *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is a classic of *modern* drama. Unstageable in England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of its main story (a physical love affair between a brother and a sister), it was presented in 1894 by the experimental Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris, and so fed into the French avant garde, appearing in the 1930s as the only Renaissance play in the proposed repertoire of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Partly because of that resonant endorsement, the major British classical companies have revived it every few years since the 1960s. We can grasp the play by working out this special, fortuitous modernity.

For Artaud, the play is astonishing, bathed in unnatural brilliance by the 'strange sun' which lights all true theatre (Artaud 1971: 19). His praise is the more surprising because the version of theatre to which he annexes Ford's script is a violently anti-literary one: 'Let us do away with this foolish adherence to texts . . . Let dead poets make way for the living' (ibid: 59). As propagandist and practitioner, he was proposing a theatre of sound, gesture, rhythm, fire, anguish – an extreme performance designed to break down all existing codes of social and linguistic representation and release the anarchic energy which they repress. He despised drama that imitated life, or put forward moral opinions, or explored the psychology of its characters. To use the theatre for such purposes was, for Artaud, to make it into a degraded servant of the very order it was uniquely fitted to subvert. The point was not to represent anything, but to actualize the powers that are latent in the unconscious lives of the performers and spectators. Such a theatre would not necessarily be wordless, but it would adopt words as bodily and spiritual acts, vehicles not of meaning but of force. It was a 'Theatre of Cruelty', not in the sense that it depicted acts of grievous bodily harm (though it certainly did), but that its mode of operation was to be compulsive, desperate, as intimate and irresistible as the onset of a disease. This is a dramatic doctrine with no concern whatever for instruction or entertainment, only for transformation and danger.

What does *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* have to offer this project? The whore is Annabella, a merchant's daughter who loses her virginity in a mutually

passionate love affair with her brother Giovanni. Beautiful and eligible, she is courted by three suitors: a nobleman called Soranzo, a gentleman called Grimaldi, and a young fool called Bergetto. The most powerful of the three is Soranzo, who discards his mistress, Hippolita, to clear the way for his intended marriage. Hippolita's husband conspires with Grimaldi to kill Soranzo, but the plot misfires and Bergetto is killed by mistake. Annabella, advised by a Friar who knows about her situation, agrees to marry Soranzo; Hippolita attempts to poison him at his wedding, but is foiled by his servant Vasques, who tricks her into poisoning herself instead. The marriage proceeds, but Soranzo realizes that his bride is pregnant, and discovers, in a fury of jealousy, that the father is Giovanni. He gives a feast to mark his birthday and invites Giovanni with the intention of killing him there. Giovanni, forewarned, first goes to Annabella and kills her, and then, in the final scene, appears at the feast with her heart impaled upon his dagger. In the ensuing confrontation Giovanni and Soranzo both die.

This scenario, which seems to have no single source, is made out of familiar tragic conventions. The Friar tries to care for the secret lovers, but is unable to avert the catastrophe precipitated by the girl's wedding day: this is *Romeo and Juliet* (1596), in which case the significance of the incest is simply that it is impossible for Annabella, even more finally than for Juliet, to marry the man she loves. The murder plots that crowd the play are mostly a matter of revenge for betrayal or dishonour; and by now, over forty years on from *The Spanish Tragedy**, the association between vengeance and masquing is so habitual that it barely needs motivating. The irony of Soranzo's fate – he survives two assassination attempts en route to a marriage that will prove worse than death – is in the tradition of cross-purpose plotting, at once murderous and farcical, that goes back to *The Revenger's Tragedy** and from there to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589). Love, jealousy, error, holocaust: so far from being astonished, a student of revenge tragedy might feel that this play inhabits its genre a little too knowingly. What happens, though, if we try to find the dangerous play that Artaud read?

What counts, from the start of his description, is the play's exuberant affirmation of its central relationship. In the first scene, Artaud says, 'we see before us a man launched on a most arrogant defence of incest, exerting all his youthful, conscious strength both in proclaiming and justifying it' (ibid: 17); in the same marginally ironic tone, he praises the lovers as

'falsifiers, hypocrites and liars for the sake of their superhuman passion obstructed, persecuted by the law, but which they place above the law' (ibid: 18). The dramatic *value* of incest, according to this account, lies in its flamboyant illegality: it functions as the symbolic contrary of everything that is right and proper. The play presents it without nuance and without psychology, and does not plead for sympathy and understanding on the lovers' behalf – on the contrary, the more the story goes on, the more the spectator's attempts to pity Annabella and Giovanni are repelled by their audacity, their intransigence, their readiness to 'trade blow for blow with fate'. These are not the law's hapless victims, but its reckless antagonists; we do not so much weep at their innocence as tremble at their heroic criminality.

It is worth interrupting Artaud at this point to note that he has simplified the play by treating the lovers as a single force. It is true that their initial declaration is written as a conscious and almost symmetrical exchange of obsessions:

<i>Annabella:</i>	On my knees, Brother, even by our mother's dust, I charge you, Do not betray me to your mirth or hate; Love me, or kill me, brother.
<i>Giovanni:</i>	On my knees, Sister, even by my mother's dust, I charge you, Do not betray me to your mirth or hate; Love me, or kill me, sister. (1.2.243–9)

And it is also true that when Annabella is assaulted by Soranzo, she reacts with euphoric defiance, extolling her unnamed lover, laughing and singing in the face of her husband's rage (4.3.1–76), displaying a 'stubborn heroism' no less excessive than her brother's. But Artaud, delighting in such a scene, ignores its ironic relation to an earlier one (3.6) in which the Friar prevails upon Annabella to repent her guilty love: here she is frightened and submissive, while Giovanni is aggressively suspicious. The pressures on Ford's lovers drive them apart as well as together.

This complicates Artaud's reading, but also confirms it. For what is striking about 3.6 is the Friar's violence: he torments Annabella with descriptions of Hell until she agrees to marry Soranzo. The operation is

too brutal to win the audience's assent: what we see is Annabella entering on her marriage not because she is convinced, but because she is terrorized. We remember this when the marriage leads directly to the eventual bloodbath. Christian morality thus fails to preside over the world of the play: just as Giovanni's vindication of incest is never conclusively refuted, so here the Friar's sermon is not conclusively endorsed. Rather, the two principles – the incestuous love and the religious doctrine – appear as elemental and antagonistic forces. The play is concerned, not to vindicate either, but to display the horror and splendour of the conflict.

And it is that beggaring of judgement which for Artaud (to return to his account) is the point of the play's climax. Giovanni 'places himself above retribution and crime by a kind of indescribably passionate crime, places himself above threats, above horror by an even greater horror that baffles both law and morals and those who dare to set themselves up as judges' (ibid: 18). The plot seems to be offering a retributive pattern in which the lovers will be punished for their transgression and pitied for their suffering, so that in the end the moral order of the world can be restored and confirmed. But the pattern is ruined by Giovanni's final atrocity; no generic resolution can incorporate his ecstatic selfhood; he renders himself, in every sense, untouchable.

Moreover, it is *as a performer* that he achieves this appalling superhuman state: he prefaces it by urging himself –

Shrink not, courageous hand; stand up, my heart,
And boldly act my last and greater part! (5.5.105–6)

– and its culmination is the act of displaying his sister's bleeding heart before Soranzo and his guests, who are all assembled like an audience. He becomes an actor in an indescribable theatre: like the stage manifestations devised or described by Artaud himself, Giovanni's show is not reducible to an allegorical or representational meaning, but outdoes, in its monstrous actuality, anything it might be said to signify. It does not address its spectators so much as infect them, penetrate them, rip out their hearts (one, Giovanni's father, literally dies when he realizes what he is watching). In the end, then, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* stages, as a sort of play within the play, a mythic version of the theatre Artaud wanted to create.

It is not, of course, that Ford wrote a play for the Theatre of Cruelty. As we saw, Artaud begins by refusing written plays anyway, disgusted by their addiction to the fake coherences of narrative and psychology, and the 'abasement and fearful loss of energy' for which he holds them responsible (ibid: 58). But this particular text has for him a kind of reverse side; in recycling the tacky formulas of Jacobean revenge tragedy, it somehow touches the very sources of energy that its form covers up. It reaches out beyond itself, towards an impossible theatre which could realize its latent power: we read it by the light of the strange sun. How is it possible for a 300-year-old dramatic text to have, or appear to have, this perverse capacity?

It is partly a question of the recycling itself. The texture of the play is made out of several codes, all known. For example, Giovanni declares his love to Annabella in these terms:

O Annabella, I am quite undone.
The love of thee, my sister, and the view
Of thy immortal beauty hath untuned
All harmony both of my rest and life. (1.2.205–8)

This is the conventional hyperbole of the stage lover, but it is more interesting than usual because the dramatic situation freakishly makes it true. Compare the Friar's evocation of Hell:

Then you will wish each kiss your brother gave
Had been a dagger's point; then you shall hear
How he will cry, 'O, would my wicked sister
Had first been damned, when she did yield to lust!' (3.6.27–30)

This is equally conventional, and equally rendered freakish by its prophetic glimpse of the final scene. Or again, at the level of stage language, the structure relentlessly travesties affirmative rituals: Bergetto is murdered on his way to be married; Hippolita poisons herself at Soranzo's wedding banquet; at the end Giovanni brandishes the heart and cries:

You came to feast, my lords, with dainty fare,
I came to feast too, but I digged for food
In a much richer mine than gold . . . (5.6.23–5)

Here the convention is Senecan: the juxtaposition of feasting, dismemberment and devouring recalls *Medea* and *Thyestes*, directly, or as mediated through countless Elizabethan and Jacobean tragic climaxes.¹¹

All these hyperbolic codes – love, eschatology, Roman tragedy – Ford is able to deploy as if with indifference. Love is a set of clichés; the religious language of an Italian Friar is distanced by the English theatre's conventional anti-Catholicism; Seneca is an academic authority, mediated by a generation of playhouse use. As a result, the play is without moral anxiety. Its excesses are a kind of art, practised with a neutrality which humanist critics used to call decadent; its generic security creates the conditions for the ideological recklessness which formed Artaud's opportunity.

Further Reading

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Michael Neill, '“What strange riddle's this?” Deciphering *'Tis Pity She's a Whore'*', in Michael Neill (ed.), *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 153–79.

Zenon Luis-Martinez, *In Words and Deeds: The Spectacle of Incest in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).

¹¹ For more about *Thyestes*, see the section on 'drama', pp. 59–61, above. The play was also in the projected repertoire of the Theatre of Cruelty: a shared admiration for Seneca forms an improbable link between Artaud and Renaissance humanism.

Richard Brome, *A Jovial Crew* Beeston's Boys, Cockpit (1641)

The London theatres were closed down in 1642, and despite the advocacy of recent scholars, the plays of the final years are not much known or revived. This comedy is one of the exceptions: it was staged by the RSC in 1992 in an adapted version which is still in print and still played. This new stage life turns on two obscurely linked points of interest. The first is that the original script is very late indeed. Probably it was first performed, at the Cockpit in Drury Lane, in the winter of 1641–2, and a dedication in the printed edition suggests that it was the last show to be seen there before the war broke out. And the second point of interest is that the jovial crew of the title are a fraternity of rural beggars, so that despite its fashionable address the play ventures further down the social scale than most of its predecessors. There is something intriguing about this sudden visibility of people at the bottom of the social structure, just as the structure itself was going into crisis.

But the play offers nothing like a straightforward representation of seventeenth-century vagrancy. Its beggars are shaped by dramatic function rather than documentary intention, and in particular by their relation to the play's pivotal character, the provincial squire Oldrents. His prosperous household is doubly connected to the beggars' world. He is anxious about his daughters, Rachel and Meriel, because a fortune-teller has told him that they will be beggars. And he also worries about his steward, Springlove, who was himself a beggar child until Oldrents took him into his service and gave him an education; Springlove is grateful and conscientious, but, as his name suggests, each spring tempts him irresistibly to take a holiday from comfort and responsibility to go back on the road with the beggars. Begging, then, appears quite schematically as an anarchic outside to the orderly gentry interior, insidiously intruding and beckoning.

Much the same scheme determines its stage presentation. In the first act Springlove's wanderlust is dramatized by offstage birdsong, at once naturalistic and symbolic: *Nightingale sings. Springlove: Oh sir, you hear I am call'd* (1.1.153). Meanwhile a company of beggars is feasting in the barn: there are descriptions of them, we see food and drink being

taken in, the sound of singing is heard from offstage, and eventually Springlove ‘*opens the scene; the Beggars are discovered in their postures*’ (362) – that is, even when they appear, it is as a formally staged presentation, not on the same representational level as the gentry characters. There are similar effects in the second act, when a beggar-woman is giving birth in the unseen barn, and in the fourth, when another offstage party celebrates the grotesque wedding of two octogenarian beggars, one lame and the other blind. There are no practical obstacles to putting the beggars on the stage; they have more than one spectacular ensemble scene. But an insistent logic places them just out of our range of vision: although they sometimes appear and do tricks for us, they are not quite present.

The marginal space they inhabit is central to the plot. The daughters resolve to go a-begging for a while, making their gentlemanly suitors accompany them: this is partly a whimsical love-test, and partly a temporary escape from a home made tiresome by their father’s melancholy. The young people turn to Springlove for help in carrying out their plan, and so all five leave the house together to join the jovial crew. In the course of some comically inept attempts at begging, they intersect with a subplot concerning Amie, the niece of a local Justice of the Peace, who rather than marry the wealthy fool she is designed for has run away with the Justice’s clerk. The clerk turns out to be little better than the official suitor, but Amie happily joins the quartet of lovers in beggary, and soon pairs off with Springlove. The fifth act presents not only this triple marriage, and the harmless fulfilment of the fortune-teller’s prophecy, but also the revelation that in his youth Oldrents loved a beautiful beggar woman and fathered a child by her. She was granddaughter to a gentleman who had been reduced to destitution by the hard dealing of Oldrents’ grandfather, and her child turns out, conventionally enough, to be none other than Springlove. So the faithful servant is the son and heir, and the wrongs of the past will be righted thanks to the squire’s philanthropy. This denouement makes the beggars into benefactors: their outsideness and illegitimacy have served as both a solvent for the legitimate family’s tensions and a hiding-place for its secret history.

These narrative requirements generate an image of the beggar’s life as a space of freedom, knowledge and delight outside normal society, even in opposition to it – an image we could describe, fairly if anachronistically, as romantic:

Beggars! They are the only people can boast the benefit of a free state, in the full enjoyment of liberty, mirth and ease, having all things in common and nothing wanting of nature's whole provision within the reach of their desires. (2.1.2–5)

That is one of the gentlemanly suitors at the beginning, and his glib idealization will be gently mocked by his subsequent experiences of the cold nights and social humiliations that come with the free state. But in the play as a whole the mockery tempers the idealization rather than destroying it; the touches of low-life realism are softened by the song of the nightingale and, still more, by the recurring opposition between the careless revelry of the beggars and the self-consciousness and anxiety of the property owners. The vagabond idyll survives.

This is surprising if we recall the harshly negative construction of the beggar in the social thought of the age. It was founded in a model we have encountered elsewhere: the graduated, hierarchical order held together by master–servant relationships. Even a person who owns nothing has a recognized position within this order by virtue of serving someone; belonging to a master is the sign of a wider social belonging. Consequently, the unemployed or casually employed poor – people who have nothing and belong to nobody – appear as a radically anti-social force. To live vagrantly, undefined by an occupation, or a master, or a fixed abode, is in theory to be a rebel. And it was in practice a crime: masterless persons were routinely stocked and whipped, and in occasional cases hanged, even if they had not been convicted of any offence other than masterlessness. Many of these were defined as ‘sturdy beggars’ – that is, people who begged without the excuse of sickness or disability: physically able to work, they appeared to have chosen to live off charity instead, and so to be almost indistinguishable from conmen and thieves. The sturdy beggar is normally an object of condemnation and punishment rather than sympathy; but this is the figure Brome has in mind. His ‘merry beggars’ are clever and energetic, they seem to be leading this life from choice rather than necessity, and whenever a magistrate appears they run away. Without doubt they are the kind of beggars the vagrancy laws criminalized. How can they constitute such a positive image?

One part of the answer to that question is that in the end the play is less about beggars than it is about the landed gentry. The squire's name, Oldrents, identifies him as an old-fashioned paternalistic landlord who has

not raised rents in a period of inflation. This character is extensively built up: a discussion of the household accounts stresses his charity; a comic set-piece around the arrival of a visitor displays his household as eccentric and lavishly hospitable; later, as a visitor in someone else's house, he is colourfully critical of the meanness of the entertainment. Beggars are integral to this evocation of traditional rustic liberality. For one thing, they are by definition its recipients. As guests in the old barn, they elicit the generosity of Oldrents himself, of Springlove, and of a comic servant called Randall; it seems that the whole establishment is governed by benevolence rather than calculation; the beggars' presence has the effect of moving the domestic economy out of the sphere of exchange and into that of giving. And for another, they exemplify the ideologically related quality of 'mirth'. Oldrents has a friend called Hearty, a 'decay'd gentleman', who guides him out of his initial state of financial anxiety and into one of merriment. The two of them then develop a curiously conscientious jollity, as if drinking and singing and neglecting one's affairs were a class obligation, demonstrating that a true gentleman values sociability and good fellowship more than a sordid concern for profit. The beggars, being both merry and penniless, offer in this peculiar sense a role model for the gentry. Their mirth is a form of social conservatism: so far from being anti-social, this noisily jovial crew embody an essential sociality. It is perhaps in this sense that the play can be heard speaking about its portentous historical moment: as the social order comes apart, the beggars are an idea, almost desperately mythic and paradoxical, of what holds it together.

They are able to signify in this way, not despite their real-life criminality, but by virtue of it. The fact that vagrancy is an offence in itself makes it possible to stage a group of people who are outside the law, but are never actually seen doing anything wrong; their lawlessness is innocent, and as such latently utopian. Two more associations assist this reverse logic. One is the universal perception of beggars as deceitful: because the laws against begging had exceptions – war veterans, the sick – sturdy beggars were expected to be liars and malingerers. Beggary is thus a condition of false identity, and this is a narrative convenience: the pretend beggars of *A Jovial Crew* fit readily into their roles because real beggars pretend as well. And the other is the overlap between begging and entertaining: beggars often were down-market musicians, clowns or jugglers. So in two separate senses, which nevertheless come together

imaginatively, beggars are thought of as performers, and their world as not only extra-legal but counter-factual.

Clearly a number of the play's motifs come together here: the association between vagrancy and fortune-telling, the choice of begging as a summer game, the staging of the beggars themselves as a series of turns, with tableaux, songs and dances so that at times the show works like a musical. Magic, play, disguise, singing: in detail, the beggars' parts of the play are not so much either realistic or idealized as fictive. Obviously this effect has an element of self-reflexive theatricality: at the play's climax, for example, Oldrents and Hearty watch the supposed beggars perform a play called *The Merry Beggars*, which tells the story of what has just happened and finally merges with the play in the theatre. But that is not the main force of this dramatic mode. Rather, the explicitly imaginary character of the beggars' world makes it a festive enclave: the opposition which might appear temporally as carnival and working time, or spatially as the forest and the city, is here staged sociologically as the beggars and the squire. Literally festive moments – the birth of the baby, the old couple's saturnalian wedding – reinforce this identification, as of course does the way that begging serves as the scene of courtship, the transitional state between ceasing to be a daughter and becoming a wife. From this point of view, the play seems a testimony to theatrical continuity rather than impending revolution: written nearly fifty years after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it suggests how deeply festive English comedy still was.

Further Reading

Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Paola Pugliatti, *Beggary and Theatre in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2003).

Matthew Steggle, *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

Actions That A Man Might Play

What is a play made out of – what is its basic unit of construction? There are various convincing answers to this question, each one implying a different version of drama. For rhetorically trained Renaissance readers of Seneca, a tragedy was an exhibition of eloquence on extreme topics, so the basic unit of construction was the speech. Most twentieth-century English classrooms and greenrooms, on the other hand, were dominated by a broadly liberal and individualist conception of drama; whose answer to the question ‘what is a play made out of?’ was ‘characters’. A more abstract academic answer, reflecting the needs of examiners and directors rather than students and actors, is ‘themes’, as if a play were made out of its author’s opinions about monarchy, or time, or sexual identity. The following section is based upon another answer again, one which is associated in modern times with the work of Bertolt Brecht, but which also seems to me closer to the operating assumptions of Renaissance drama: that a play is made out of *actions*.

The parallel is not very surprising, because English Renaissance plays were an important source of Brecht’s thinking about theatre. The first play he directed alone was an adapted version of Marlowe’s *Edward II*, in Munich in 1924. A memoir of the rehearsals records the directness of his insistence on playing actions. In the adaptation, King Edward’s capture after his defeat in the civil war is brought about through the treachery of one of his followers, Baldock. Judas-like, Baldock hands the king a napkin to wipe his face, as a prearranged sign to the search-party. The actor tried this move in rehearsal, without success:

‘No, no,’ shouted Brecht, ‘Baldock is a traitor.’ He explained: ‘You must show the attitude of one who betrays. Baldock goes up to the one who is betrayed with friendly outstretched arms, gives him the cloth submissively, tenderly, with a broad, sweeping gesture – which at the same time is an alibi for the benefit of the king and his friends. You must show the *Gestus* of a betrayer. The audience must note the behaviour of a betrayer and be struck by it. Betrayal!’¹

The technical term *Gestus* is not easy to translate: it includes ‘gesture’, ‘attitude’, ‘thing done’. But the particular occasion makes it quite clear. What the actor has given Brecht is the bare move: handing Edward the cloth. What he wants to see is not just that but the full, significant action: betraying him. It is not about character (he is not interested in what Baldock is *like*), and not about emotion (he doesn’t care whether Baldock is doing this callously or regretfully or vindictively): it is single-mindedly about the nature of the action itself – as if a spectator had just asked ‘what does it mean to betray someone?’ and the actor had replied, ‘I’ll show you: watch this.’ ‘Gests’, then, are quotable gestures, specifically meaningful pieces of behaviour – as Hamlet puts it in another connection, ‘they are actions that a man might play’.

Although that particular example is not in Marlowe’s original, Brecht was right about Renaissance dramaturgy in general: it offers actors countless opportunities of this kind. Following his capture, for example, Marlowe’s Edward is forced to resign his crown, and in an extended scene rehearses the agonizingly contradictory gesture of handing it over. The equivalent sequence in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* a few years later is profoundly different, but it plays the same action. Both scenes require the actor to show ‘abdicating’, just as Brecht asks him to show ‘betraying’.

This section, then, rather than enumerating the ‘themes’ of Renaissance drama, picks out some of the more common actions which it calls on its actors to play. I have sketched the outline of each action, and the context that gives it weight and meaning. For each one, there will be examples that I have omitted to mention, and alternative ways of playing that I have failed to consider. This is intentional: these are only starting points; not readings, but prompts.

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England: Vorlage, Texte and Materialien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), pp. 257–8. Translation mine.

Attending

Early modern cast lists typically end with an indefinite number of generic extras – gentlemen, waiting women, soldiers, attendants. These characters are easy to overlook: they make little impression on a reader because they do not speak, and they are often left out of revivals because neither the economics nor the ethics of modern theatre are friendly to the idea of the spear carrier. But they are called for in almost every surviving script. It is not that Renaissance theatre had unlimited armies of supers. Evidence about company sizes is fragmentary, but it seems that a production typically involved somewhere between a dozen and twenty actors, the total held down by extensive doubling, and sometimes augmented by stage-hands and front-of-house staff. Given the financial reasons for restraint (additional performers would be paid a daily rate and costumed from stock), even a ‘crowd’ scene will not usually have been very crowded. Shakespeare’s admission that he will stage a battle ‘With four or five most vile and ragged foils’ (*Henry V*, Act 4 Chorus, 50) is probably not a wild underestimate.

These practical limitations make the extras’ ubiquity even more striking. Their difficulty and their importance are both commemorated in a stage direction from Henry Chettle’s *The Tragedy of Hoffman* (1602). A widowed duchess appears for the first time in the fourth act, and since she is vital to the denouement, she needs to make an impression:

Enter as many as may be spared, with lights, and make a lane kneeling
while Martha the Duchess like a mourner with her train passeth through.
(lines 1681–4)

This demands a double set of extras, one group to form the ‘lane’, and another to follow Martha through it. But even while insisting on this extravagance, the script acknowledges that resources are finite, and leaves the company to do what it can.

One reason for extras is that the expressive capacity of early modern stage *setting* is limited: the theatre may look magnificent, but it looks much the same from one show to another. On the whole, if there is anything to see on the stage that is particular to the play, it is being worn or carried: this is a theatre of costumes and props rather than furniture and

sets. Consequently, the visual environment that characterizes an individual or a milieu – that displays the prestige of the Duchess or the power of the Grand Turk or the pretentiousness of a Cheapside shopkeeper – is likely to consist essentially of people. It is well known that the theatre's best costumes cost more than its scripts; certainly one vital function of the supernumerary actors is to wear the clothes.

They have a more organic role as well, though. In the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* (1590), there is an obscurely funny scene in which a French countess patriotically tries to entrap the great English warrior Talbot. She invites him to her house, and when he appears she mocks him for being an ordinary man rather than the outsize figure his reputation suggests. She orders his imprisonment, but he laughs and tells her that it is not really Talbot who is standing in front of her, only his shadow:

Countess: This is a riddling merchant for the nonce:
He will be here, and yet he is not here.
How can these contrarities agree?

Talbot: That will I show you presently.
Winds his horn. Drums strike up; a peal of ordinance. Enter Soldiers.
How say you, madam? Are you now persuaded
That Talbot is but shadow of himself?
These are his substance . . . (2.3.57–63)

It is a metatheatrical trick: the actor impersonating Talbot is indeed his 'shadow', divorced from his substance. But it encodes a serious proposition: it is true that Talbot, like most of the powerful barons who make up the casts of Elizabethan historical drama, is not reducible to a visible individual. What he is also includes his rank, his dynasty, his lands, his status in the kingdom, his capacity for physical coercion. And like Talbot in this scene, the theatre shows these supplements by summoning up a display of followers. It is a kind of political characterization: the extras embody the great man's greatness, the player king is substantiated by his 'train'.

This visual syntax partly copies the theatricality of actual ruling-class life. The heights of Court politics belonged to whoever could best serve the monarch, and this was a question not only of personal loyalty and competence, but also of resources. A great Elizabethan courtier such as

the Earl of Essex had a personal following of several hundred men, who could work (and network) on their patron's behalf in normal times, and on feast-days and military musters literally appear at his back or in his colours to advertise his wealth, his influence and his usefulness to the state. As we have seen, one possible component of this diverse aristocratic entourage might be a troupe of players: it was as The Earl of Leicester's Men, The Lord Admiral's Servants, and so on, that theatre companies identified themselves. Thus when the theatre uses a parade of extras to dramatize personal ascendancy, it is reflecting its own social role.

Read in this way, extras provide not only background but also quite precise dramatic messages. Jonson's Roman tragedy *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), for example, is about a hubristic imperial favourite who rules Rome for a while, but is eventually brought down by a long letter to the Senate from the machiavellian emperor Tiberius. At the beginning of the big scene, the senators are all grouped sycophantically around Sejanus where he sits on the benches. As the letter is read out, they begin to move away from him, the most perceptive or cowardly first, the rest following in ones and twos, until eventually he sits alone, contemplating his nemesis. The fall of greatness, the paradigmatic theme of tragedy, is done in a visual image: we *see* his power slipping away from him.

Besides particular effects of that kind, attendants also shape the general conditions of performance by constituting a semi-permanent onstage audience. At the end of *Hamlet*^{*}, for example, the fatal duel is played out in a setting defined by a stage direction as

A table prepared, Trumpets, Drums, and Officers with cushions, foils, daggers; King, Queen, Laertes, and all the State. (5.2.224)

And at the crisis, Hamlet unexpectedly turns to the 'State':

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time – as this fell sergeant, Death,
Is strict in his arrest – O! I could tell you –
But let it be. (334–8)

Privileged to witness everything but unable to intervene, these mute figures are our equivalents on the stage. But then exactly because they *are* on the stage, they have the effect of making the principal actors conscious

that they are being watched. It is the spectators' respect that makes honour, their contempt that constitutes disgrace – hence Hamlet's concern, despite his lordly condescension to their marginality, that they should hear his story. He is in this respect typical of the noble characters of early modern drama: they all conduct their most intimate affairs under the eyes of attendants. That is why they behave and speak with such elaborate artificiality; and that is why they are so supremely at home on stage.

Being a Woman

Being a woman on the Renaissance stage is something a man does: it is not a natural condition but a deliberate action. Because the professional theatre is an all-male institution, its notation of gender is radically asymmetrical: 'man' goes without saying, but 'woman' needs to be acted out. The effect of this necessity is to heighten sexual difference: women in the plays are the more distinctly represented as female because the representation itself is male. Women are other.

At its most reductive, that means misogynistic stereotypes. A woman's mind changes like the moon. A woman's tongue is never still. A widow's tears are soon dried. These commonplaces are not only pronounced by men playing men, but also enacted by boys playing women. In *Arden of Faversham* (1591), for example, the hero's unfaithful wife Alice is trying to murder him. In one attempt, she and her lover deliberately taunt and provoke him in order to start a fight in which he can be killed. The fight begins, but Arden succeeds in driving off his assailants; so Alice at once retrieves the situation by persuading him that the provocation never happened, that he has misinterpreted a little friendly foolery, and that he must apologize for his unreasonable jealousy. The scene is an animated version of 'A woman is never at a loss for an excuse', and invites the knowing male laughter that attaches to jokes and proverbs on the same theme.

But performing the story, as opposed to just telling it, runs deeper than that. First the audience watch the event, then they hear Alice's description of it; the visual and verbal messages they get from the stage undermine one another, and so they share Arden's disorientation. Protagonist and spectator are drawn together into the nightmarish theatre of Othello and Leontes, where all the sexual and social signs are untrustworthy. It is the paranoid version of women's otherness: we know what they seem, but never what they are. But this particular slander is substantiated, as it were, by the fact that the woman we see on the stage is literally not what she seems, but a painted boy.

Anti-feminist types, then, are produced in the theatre not just by a generalized cultural misogyny, but by the particular conditions of their staging. Femininity as a stage discourse, a distinctive dramatic voice, is inescapably divided, because it speaks both in the first person (*as a woman*) and in the third person (*about women*). The tension is

particularly easy to hear, because of the polemical edge, in Fletcher's fantastical comedy of female rebellion, *The Woman's Prize* (1611). Here is the heroine denouncing obedient wives as tame birds:

Hang those tame-hearted eyasses, that no sooner
See the lure out, and hear their husbands holla,
But cry like kites upon 'em: the free haggard
(Which is that woman that hath wing, and knows it,
Spirit, and plume) will make an hundred checks,
To show her freedom, sail in every air,
And look out every pleasure; not regarding
Lure, nor quarry, till her pitch command
What she desires, making her foundered keeper
Be glad to fling out trains, and golden ones,
To take her down again. (1.2.147–57)

A haggard is a wild hawk, not bred in captivity but accustomed to fly and hunt for itself. It's a splendid image for what is a conscious feminist principle: as another woman in the play tells her suitor, 'My beauty was born free, and free I'll give it / To him that loves, not buys me' (1.2.37–8). But the accents of the exasperated husband come clearly through in the exaggeration of 'an hundred checks' (there's no end to the tricks they get up to) and the implication of 'golden' trains (they just want to spend your money). And of course the metaphor as a whole makes the husband a human being and the wife a little wild creature, albeit one that can fly. The more obvious point of view, in a way, is that of the falconer, for whom a hawk that can't be trained is simply not worth keeping. So the two voices – 'as a woman' and 'about women' – remain in unresolved tension through the speech, and the play. The stage language is unstable.

This is not simply a formal effect of the fact that there are no women on the stage. That absence is itself not an accident, after all, but a culturally informed choice. What underlies it is a prevalent though not unquestionable belief that a good woman is modest, quiet and private; since it is hard to be a professional actor without being bold, loud and public, it follows that an actress would have to be a bad woman; the theatre excludes such people for the sake of its own reputation. But then to exhibit women in the all-male theatre is to incur a version of the same dilemma. How are these depicted women to speak and act on stage? If

they project themselves strongly, they are unwomanly, but if they shrink from the public gaze into silence and self-suppression, they count for nothing. So here again, the theatrical representation of women is contradictory.

However, the contradiction is not necessarily inhibiting; rather, it appears in the drama in the form of negations and displacements. Perhaps the most obvious of these is transvestism. Take for example the love-lorn girl who disguises herself as a boy so as to be near her uncaring or unknowing man. She is an enduring figure: she appears in the episodic romance *Clyomon and Clamydes*, which probably dates back to the 1570s, when the playhouses first opened, and she features in Shirley's comedy *The Sisters*, which was written for the very last Blackfriars season, in 1642. Quite often, as in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601) and Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (1609), she is required, in her role as uncannily attractive page, to go between her master and her rival, which means that she is not only prevented from telling her love, but equally forbidden to express her pain. She is thus a model of female modesty so extreme as to be spectacular – forced to remain silent about her desires, and sexually invisible inside the costume of a boy. In this way the 'nothingness' of being a woman is paradoxically realized: the male disguise mediates an intense, sometimes masochistic, femininity.

Another displacement, very different in tone, is the virago, the woman who does not disguise herself but who acts 'mannishly'. Again an early example shows a helpfully schematic pattern. Thomas Preston's *Cambises*, probably a 1560s play, with a morality drama dimension, alternates tragic scenes, centred on the tyrant of the title, with slapstick centred on the Vice, Ambidexter. In the tragedy the women are victims, as wives and mothers, of the tyrant's cruelty: their dramatic function is to be innocent and weep. In the comedy, on the contrary, there are two women – a whore called Meretrix and a rustic wife called Marian – who are both cheerfully aggressive, bullying the clownish men around them and at least holding their own in actual fights. The opposition is not that the tragic women are good and the comic ones bad. Instead, and more interestingly, they are all good, but in widely different senses. The tyrant's unhappy queen is a good woman in the sense that she is modest, pious, and so on; Meretrix in the sense suggested by her own words of scorn about the men – 'Tut! tut! in the camp such soldiers there be / One good woman would beat away two or three!' (289–90).

In other words, there is a comic space where the things a woman is not supposed to be become a matter for celebration and enjoyment. This does not mean that the prevailing norms abruptly vanish: rather, they are refracted by the workings of genre. Whereas the weeping queens are located in a serious fictional society, the comedy world is performance-based, oriented towards the audience in the theatre: the characters are clowns with an explicit awareness of their role as entertainers. So the 'mannish' assertiveness of the women characters is contained by the framework of something like a game. Moreover, the game includes the principle of inversion: the women rule in an upside-down world, a temporary holiday from what is known to be right and proper. Once again this is in line, at least, with the theatre's routine travesty: the first inversion, triggering the others, is that boys dress up in skirts and wigs.

Although this ludic way of being a woman is based in popular comedy, it is not confined to it. It is the convention that produces the Roaring Girl and the Fair Maid of the West; but arguably it is also what makes comic space for Cleopatra to bewilder the Romans in *Antony and Cleopatra*, or Paulina to unpick the deadly rule of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. Precisely because they do not really exist on this stage but are always imagined, women come to stand as projections, or reflections, or travesties, of the masculine world that imagines them. They subvert us, bless us, lead us astray, judge us; they are much wiser than us and much sillier; they are closer to the animals and closer to the angels – but what they cannot do is *be* us. Which raises the question, prominent in recent feminist studies of this drama, of how the real women who formed a significant proportion of its audience were supposed to imagine themselves.

Conjuring

‘Conjuring’ in this period is not doing tricks but summoning supernatural beings – though as Ben Jonson’s comedy *The Alchemist* (1610) makes dazzlingly clear, the two activities could overlap. Faustus with his book and staff, conjuring up the devil, was one of the founding figures of the Elizabethan stage. Greene spectacularly foreshadows it in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589); Lady Macbeth psychologizes it when she invokes the ministers of darkness who eventually invade her sleep; Prospero in *The Tempest** offers a sort of healing answer to it when he appears with the same props and calls up his spirits, only to renounce his power and dismiss them. There are other, less central invocations. After the Duchess of Malfi’s murder, her husband communicates with her, apparently without realizing what he is doing, by the half-naturalized means of talking to an echo. In *The Atheist’s Tragedy* (1611), sacrilegious acts in a churchyard trigger a lurid series of apparitions both genuine and fake. Even Jonson is interested in such effects. In *The Devil Is An Ass* (1616), the foolish protagonist raises a junior Mephistophilis called Pug, and in *Sejanus His Fall* (1603) an offering to the goddess Fortuna is ominously refused when the statue averts its face. As we saw earlier, the English Renaissance stage was not a sacred space: it was effectively prohibited from being one by regulations that kept drama and religion firmly apart. But its secular character was not final; the wooden O of the theatre was a bit like a conjuror’s circle; the spirits were not far away.

Their persistence is noticeable in Fletcher’s comedy *The Chances* (1617). As its title suggests, this is a consciously secular play, its action shaped not by metaphysical design but by chance. Two gallants visit Bologna and, in a technically inventive first act of eleven scenes, run into a series of adventures involving a sword-fight, a lady in distress and an abandoned baby. These puzzling fragments eventually resolve themselves into the clandestine marriage of the Duke of Ferrara, whose friends the gallants become. The tone is negligent and gentlemanly – it feels like a Restoration comedy. Late in the play, though, when the Duke’s wife Constantia, unaware that she is safe, goes into hiding with her baby, her husband commissions a wizard to find them by his art. There is a spectacular scene with songs, spells, a dance of spirits, and finally a vision of Constantia with the child. At this point it transpires that this is not a vision but the

mother and baby in person, and the wizard presides over a general reunion. He explains that he is not really a magician but a schoolmaster, and that the 'spirits' are his pupils. Because people believe that he can conjure, they come to him whenever they lose or find things; as a result, he has become a sort of clearing house, and really can help them. His magic show was a trick, but only for the sake of 'mirth, / And pleasing, if I can, all parties' (5.3.176–7).

This gesture of disenchantment is especially apt, not only resolving the supernatural into the natural in general terms, but specifically returning to the idea of 'the chances': what looked like magical clairvoyance turns out to be the result of an accumulation of coincidences. All the same, explaining that the magic was deceptive does not altogether dispel it, because the audience were deceived too. The act of conjuring is so much more theatrically compelling than the subsequent explanation that the explanation cannot comprehend the act as completely as it claims to.

In other words, conjuring on stage opens up not a sacred space but an equivocal one, in which assorted types of appearance – theatre, vision, haunting, hallucination, trick – are interchangeable. Fletcher's wizard, benignly staging the denouement, is a Prospero in reverse: he presents spirits and later admits that they were actors, whereas Prospero presented actors and later admitted that they were spirits. In a way he looks further back too, to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597), in which schoolchildren dress up as fairies to pinch the disguised Falstaff for his wicked desires: although there is no attempt to deceive the audience in that case, the multiple illusions generate an analogous, illogical feeling that the comedy has indeed been resolved by supernatural means. A little later, in *As You Like It* (1599), the concluding weddings are graced by Hymen, the god of marriage. Is the god miraculously present, or is this an actor secretly briefed by the heroine? There are no indications either way, because the effect of the ending's artificiality is to suspend the difference.

In Shakespeare the suspension tends to be celebratory; in the satiric, punitive atmosphere of city comedy it turns diabolic. Most of Shirley's *The Lady of Pleasure* (1635) is as firmly anchored in the social as *The Chances*, tracing Lady Bornwell's imprudent career in London high society. She manages an adulterous affair with the help of a cunning old bawd, whose scheme carries the play beyond its comic realism. The lover presents himself for the assignation, and is met by an ugly old crone (actually the bawd), who promises him that in the darkness of the bedroom

she will become magically young and vigorous; he takes her word, and acquires a mistress whose face he never sees. Ironically, he tells Lady Bornwell herself about his mysterious affair: he is worried that he may be sleeping with the devil, and then she is shocked into reformation by seeing herself in the mirror of his narrative. Rather reverberantly, then, the fake-necromantic nonsense serves to dramatize social and psychological kinds of darkness. This logic too is reversible. In Middleton's comedy *A Mad World, My Masters* (1606), a repenting rake is tempted to relapse by a visitor who appears to be his mistress, but turns out to be a devil assuming her form to lure him to destruction. Since most of the play has consisted of scams and intrigues, one would expect a seeming devil to prove to be one of the human characters in disguise. Here it is the other way round, but the reversal makes surprisingly little difference. Although theologically a woman pretending to be a devil is not at all the same thing as a devil pretending to be a woman, theatrically they are almost indistinguishable. Either way round, the device intimates a superstitious attitude to the theatre itself – that in causing non-existent persons to appear as if they were alive, it too is in the conjuring business.

Cuckolding

Evidently there was something fascinating about the figure of the cuckold, the man whose wife sleeps with someone else. The key plays in this book were chosen for a variety of reasons, but if we look through them from this peculiar point of view, we find (confining ourselves to major characters) Alsemero, the cuckolded bridegroom in *The Changeling*; Allwit, the complaisant cuckold of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*; Amintor, the husband of the king's mistress in *The Maid's Tragedy*; Soranzo, cuckolded by his brother-in-law in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*; the Duke in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, who dies watching his wife having sex with his bastard son. To this list we should certainly add the husbands like Kiteley in *Every Man In His Humour*, or Corvino in *Volpone*, who believe themselves to be cuckolds and are wrong. That last type in particular plays right across the generic range: Shakespeare's most purely farcical protagonist is a jealous husband (Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and so is his most painfully tragic one (Othello). Cuckoldry is both serious and silly, heroic and contemptible; it is one of the universally significant actions of early modern drama.

What does it signify? We might start from two peculiarities of usage. First, the transitive verb denotes *what the wife and her lover do to the husband*: they cuckold him. It is striking that today, although we still regard adultery as an important and problematic event, we do not have a word for that particular relation. There has been a historical change in the way the story is told. And second, the term is asymmetrically gendered: only a man can be said to be cuckolded. A woman whose husband is unfaithful to her is by no means dramatically invisible, though it is true that male infidelity is normally presented as a more trivial offence than female infidelity. But however she is viewed, the betrayed wife will never be described as a cuckold. It is a men-only category.

This must be because it is the man who is supposed to govern the family. He is legally the head of his household, and this is both an economic fact (he is the sole owner of the property) and a political role (the relation between husband and wife is officially analogous with that between parent and child, or king and subject). His authority is compromised at both these levels if his wife is unfaithful, his domestic sovereignty by the rival king who has invaded her, and his possession of the estate by his inability to be sure that his heirs are his own children. Cuckolding is

therefore a kind of rebellion as male infidelity is not: it does not merely hurt the husband's feelings but also subverts his power. This is why the cuckold is as it were communal property, held up to derision in festive games and ballads. This is not a purely personal matter; it is about the order of society. A cuckold is a failing ruler.

This political dimension is especially visible at the lowest pitch of the theme, in its folklore and jokes. Digs about weak backs, old age and cold constitutions repeatedly associate cuckoldry with impotence. A husband who knows and accepts his wife's adultery is called a 'wittol', which is probably a short form of 'witting cuckold', but also came to mean simply a half-wit. 'Cuckold' itself echoes the call of the cuckoo: the cock fails to defend his territory and has to put up with alien chicks in his nest. And above all, there are the endless references to the horns that are fancifully supposed to grow on a cuckold's forehead: the origin of this legend is a matter of anthropological debate, but whatever its source, its effect is to represent the cuckold as an animal – a stag perhaps, or more aptly an ox (a bull which has been castrated to render it unaggressive and useful). All these popular associations characterize the cuckold as less than a man – eunuch, idiot, bird, animal, monster. They combine to suggest, then, that to be cuckolded is not so much a particular misfortune as a general debasement: it is the abrupt descent from high to low that makes it an (apparently) inexhaustible source of laughter.

It then serves the stage as a way of dramatizing other kinds of ascendancy and subordination. In city comedy, for example, it is a convention that citizens' wives are all longing to be seduced by courtiers: the story of the husband, the wife and the lover here becomes a way of negotiating the complicated class relationships of early seventeenth-century London. Cuckoldry in this case is a sign of social humiliation: the citizen's horns remind him that he is only a shopkeeper, whose job is to ensure that his posh customers are satisfied. On the other hand, many of the plays deliberately reverse the conventional expectation, so that the fine gentlemen are confounded and the chastity of the City's wives vindicated. When that happens, what is dramatized is the courtier's lack of substance. His superficial allure is of a piece with his dependence on credit and favour, whereas the virtuous if predictable marriage connotes bourgeois thrift. Thus the contest between the husband and the lover is effectively a skirmish in a war between classes. A sophisticated example of the genre, *Eastward Ho!* (1605), has it both ways. The bankrupt gentleman Sir Petronel Flash is

ensnared by the usurer Security, who sees pitilessly through his social pretensions to the economic desperation beneath. But Security, his eyes on the estate, fails to notice Sir Petronel seducing Mrs Security: each party to the deal manages to humiliate the other. The skirmish ends in a score draw.

In this kind of class comedy, cuckolding works primarily as a plot move, affecting the players' external identities. But of course the power of the attack on the cuckold's manhood also consists in its inwardness: it strikes not just at his reputation, but at his sense of himself. Hence its dramatic scope: at full stretch, in *Othello* or *Leontes*, it provides the dramatist with a discourse that forcefully connects public and private spheres. That both those paradigmatic figures are merely imaginary cuckolds is ironic but not really paradoxical: imagining is the cuckold's essential action. Here for example is Malevole, the eponymous hero of Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604), gleefully initiating the newly cuckolded Pietro. The unfortunate husband, he says,

diets strong his blood,
To give her height of hymeneal sweets –

Pietro: O God!

Malevole: Whilst she lisps, and gives him some court *quelquechose*,
Made only to provoke, not satiate;
And yet, even the thaw of her delight
Flows from lewd heat of apprehension,
Only from strange imagination's rankness,
That forms the adulterer's presence in her soul,
And makes her think she clips the foul knave's loins.

Pietro: Affliction to my blood's root! (1.3.136–46)

Pietro's wife actually is being unfaithful, but this makes little difference to the stage transaction, which centres, precisely, on 'strange imagination'. Malevolently, Malevole gets Pietro to imagine being in bed with his wife, and then to imagine *her* imagining being with her lover. The effect of the suggestion is to subvert the husband's identity. His wife's sexual welcome is a deception, not really meant for him; and the husband is not really himself, but a stand-in for the lover. As Pietro says, the speech is an affliction to his blood's root, not only in rendering his blood line uncertain, but also in poisoning the sources of his desire. Like Iago at the same

theatre a year or two later, Malevole undoes his enemy, not by cuckolding him, but by teaching him how to imagine himself as a cuckold.

It is at this point that we can grasp the specifically dramatic energy of the idea. Imagining oneself as other, after all, is the actor's speciality: thinking of a marriage as a network of fantasies – who knows, who pretends not to know, who apprehends, who prompts, who 'forms the adulterer's presence in her soul' – makes it into a theatre full of invented and projected characters. Jealousy is a dramatist, devising scenarios that strangely compel belief even though they are based on nothing.

This is made negatively clear by an odd moment in Chapman's comedy *All Fools* (1599), whose subplot concerns a jealous husband called Cornelio. At the end, Cornelio has a moment's conversation with an old man named Gostanzo, who is taking a break from his own role as a mean father in the main plot. Gostanzo recalls that Cornelio's own mother used to misbehave occasionally; and Cornelio's father's policy was to make a lot of noise at the door when he came home, and then chat with the neighbours for a while so as to give his wife time to get rid of any visitors she would prefer him not to find. 'This was wisdom now,' Gostanzo comments, 'for a man's own quiet' (5.2.202). The story is startling because it sketches a cuckolding that *doesn't* have any great significance. Amid all the horn-mad rhetoric, it casually shows that cultural definitions are not iron laws, and that if playacting has the power to make a drama out of nothing, it is also occasionally capable of performing the same trick backwards.

Dressing Up

In Ben Jonson's comedy *Every Man Out Of His Humour* (1599), Fungoso, a rustic usurer's son, is fixated on a courtier called Fastidious Brisk. Overwhelmed by Brisk's new suit, Fungoso commissions an exact copy from his tailor, only to find, when he proudly appears in it, that Brisk has changed into something even newer. He rushes back to the tailor to meet this fresh challenge, but by the time he takes delivery of his second suit, Brisk is wearing a third one. Fungoso is on his fourth suit by the time the play ends; he is never going to catch up; he is, in a startlingly exact sense, a fashion victim. The gag is exceptional in the neatness of its execution, but not in its choice of target. Fashion was consistently denounced by moralists and satirists as a special weakness of the English. At the risk of flattening the joke, a close reading of poor Fungoso can suggest what was so objectionable about it.

Fashion is an addiction not simply to clothes, but to change. Each new outfit gives Fungoso pleasure only for a few minutes: the moment it is superseded it loses all its value. This obsolescence aligns dressing up with everything that is ephemeral and lacking in solidity. This is noticeable, for instance, in the well-used trope of fields being turned into clothes; we noted it in *The Revenger's Tragedy**, but Jonson is fond of it too. Fields are ancestral, passing from generation to generation, and producing fresh value every year. Fashionable clothes represent the opposite of that idea: they are individual, they are valuable by virtue of their novelty, they depreciate soon and steeply. They are the *negation* of agrarian wealth. The satire is in a strict sense conservative: it idealizes the conservation of resources and demonizes consumption.

This has an obvious class content. The timescale of land is aristocratic: mature trees, inherited traditions, old families. The feverish contemporaneity of fashion, on the other hand, is the timescale of social mobility: new clothes dramatize new money. Fungoso's name mocks him as a mushroom growth, sprouting overnight. The politics of this can be read in the history play *Thomas of Woodstock* (1592), which is much preoccupied with what people wear. It is set in the reign of Richard II, who spends his time with base-born favourites designing ingenious fashions. For example, they invent a chain with one end attached to your toe and the other end to your knee; the concept is that since the toe signifies spurning and contempt, and the knee humility and duty, chaining them

together makes a beautiful coherence between the opposing principles. Meanwhile the queen, an idealized figure, sits with her ladies sewing shirts to give to the poor; and the hero, Woodstock, is the king's brother but dresses like a peasant. A cluster of oppositions comes together here. New fashions denote not only *nouveaux riches*, but also sycophants: the chain is the badge of political servility, whereas Woodstock's plain jerkin signifies his plain speaking, so the play's attack on dressing up is part of its attack on absolute monarchy. Accordingly, this is also a question of location – Woodstock is dressed for his country estate, whereas the favourites are dressed for the court because they have no land. Woodstock's costume is thus a rather complicated theatrical sign. It sets him as a man of the people against the pretensions of the elite. But equally it shows that he is a real aristocrat, as opposed to the dressy fakes surrounding the king.

That last way of putting it brings us close to the heart of the hostility to fashion: the idea that it is a disguise, literally covering up a person's true identity. This is doubly the case with Fungoso: he is trying to look like Fastidious Brisk in particular, and, in general, he is trying to look grander and richer than he really is. The plot maliciously finds him out in the end: he is invited to a dinner in a tavern, and when a fight breaks out he hides under the table; he is still there when everyone else has gone, so the waiters present him with the bill. He tells them that he has no money, but he is so well dressed that they don't believe him. If he were really a gentleman, his honour would not allow him to hide under the table, and if he were really rich, he would not be troubled by the bill: the denouement puts him 'out of his humour' by defining, harshly and exactly, the sense in which he is appearance without substance.

This image of fashion as falsification assumes a fixed relationship between clothes and social roles. Gentlemen and commoners, marquises and baronets, citizens and servants, all have their appropriate and distinguishing dress codes; your clothes are a public statement about who you are, and it is logically possible for this statement to be either true or false. Dressing *up* – up the social scale, that is – is thus a kind of lying. This was the assumption informing the succession of 'sumptuary laws' that were passed in the course of the sixteenth century, laying down in detail what fabrics were permitted at different social levels, and reserving the most expensive for the peerage. It was a static and hierarchical conception of the significance of dress: what a person essentially *is* is always the same,

so what they wear should stay the same too. On the other hand, the fact that the laws needed to be passed – and the fact that they were largely ineffectual – suggests the force of a quite different model: a market where clothes are determined not by rank but by choices which can vary from person to person and from day to day. And one glaring type of such improvisation was the theatre itself: an actor, paradigmatically, is someone who dresses not according to who he is, but according to how he wishes to appear. It was said that actors borrowed clothes from the theatre in order to walk like gentlemen in the street; whether or not this is true, the accusation articulates an uneasy sense of the playhouse as a place where the sartorial markers of class are irresponsibly muddled up.

These suspicions do not simply reflect the fact that all theatre involves pretending. They also turn on this particular theatre's relationship with the clothing trade. Good quality clothes were staggeringly expensive. One cloak could cost £60, three times a schoolmaster's annual salary; within the theatre, there are records of £20 or £30 being spent to dress a single show. Moreover, there was no off-the-peg retailing; almost all clothes were tailor-made. These two factors together meant that there was a large market in second-hand clothes; and the theatres were naturally active in it. At least one theatre entrepreneur, Philip Henslowe, seems actually to have been a clothes dealer, and this makes obvious sense: the wardrobe was much the heaviest of a company's expenses (a new gown cost more than a new play), and the most economical way to manage it would be to buy second-hand where possible, and sell or pawn items that were not being used. So from a certain point of view, the performance of a play was a way of displaying the contents of a clothing store. Drama and fashion were not merely linked by analogy, they were aspects of the same business – which is why they were often denounced in the same polemics.²

However, this also highlights one further refinement in the routine from *Every Man Out Of His Humour*. Part of the joke is the wastefulness: each of Brisk's suits is frantically duplicated, only for the duplicate to be discarded after a single scene. But in fact, of course, this redundancy is an illusion. The company only has one copy of each outfit, worn first by Brisk and then by Fungoso. To the satire, then, the play adds the pleasure

² See Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

of theatrical trickery: we laugh delightedly at the sight of one suit contriving to appear as two. Fashion and theatre are not the same after all: although both of them involve strutting inauthentically about in borrowed clothes, the point of the one is its extravagance, and the point of the other is its economy. The difference has to do with belief. When Fungoso dresses up, he thinks he has become a different person; when the actor dresses up, he knows he is only wearing a costume, which he will soon pass on to someone else.

Feigning

'Feigning' is epidemic in early modern drama. Its persons are constantly expressing emotions they do not feel, shaping actions they do not intend to carry out, assuming characters at odds with their true selves. They do it out of love or a sense of honour, or in order to protect themselves or gain money or power or time. Surprisingly often they do it as a test, 'trying' somebody by fabricating a situation that puts his (or her) virtue under experimental strain. There are more particular reasons too. Othello and Cleopatra both feign patience in defeat in order to make a space in which they can commit suicide. Merry wives in London comedies feign love affairs to punish their husbands' unfounded jealousy. The motives for pretence are as various as the practice is universal.

From countless examples, take a scene in Webster's tragedy *The White Devil* (1612). Brachiano, the libertine hero, has left his wife Isabella for his mistress Vittoria, and Isabella's brother the Duke of Florence forces the estranged couple into a meeting in the hope that they can be reconciled. Isabella is all love and patience, but Brachiano rejects her with defiant cruelty:

Henceforth I'll never lie with thee, by this,
This wedding ring: I'll ne'er more lie with thee.
And this divorce shall be as truly kept,
As if the judge had doom'd it . . . (2.1.194-7)

Isabella sees that this violent unfairness will provoke her brother, so to keep the peace between the two angry men, she suggests telling the Duke that it is Brachiano who wants the reconciliation, and she herself who is refusing it, out of jealousy. Brachiano agrees to this white lie, the Duke joins them, and Isabella replays the divorce scene back to front, screaming abuse of Vittoria at an apparently bemused Brachiano, and concluding:

Henceforth I'll never lie with you, by this,
This wedding ring . . .
And this divorce shall be as truly kept,
As if in thronged court, a thousand ears
Had heard it . . . (2.1.253-7)

The aim of Isabella's deception – to avert a feud between her brother and her husband – is dramatically negligible. The feud has already begun and goes on regardless; the separation is never referred to again; in narrative terms the scene goes nowhere. Its point lies not so much in the reason for Isabella's pretence as in the pretence itself, the performance.

It has a double significance. First, it is a hyperbolic demonstration of womanly virtue. Not only does Isabella meekly endure her husband's vicious treatment; she also manages, with self-sacrificing ingenuity, to take the blame for it. Thus she cuts herself off from every source of comfort in her anguish, solely in order to make life easier for the man who is causing it. This is Christ-like (she is literally suffering for Brachiano's sins), and it acts out, equally literally, the terms of the marriage vow: she is serving, loving and honouring her husband as long as they both shall live. The scene stages the wonderful perfection of a wife: it is the embodiment of a cultural ideal.

Secondly, though, the scene gives the actor the opportunity to express the bitterness which the perfect wife might feel but does not. This hypothetical Isabella would like

To dig the strumpet's eyes out, let her lie
Some twenty months a-dying, to cut off
Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth . . . (2.1.246–8)

So if we watch the two successive scenes in a simple linear way, not considering motives and intentions, what we see is two alternative versions of the *same* moment between the wife and the adulterous husband, one in which she is forbearing, and one in which she is jealous. The assurance that the second emotion is feigned is, from this point of view, merely a stage device to permit its articulation. Protected, as it were, by the agreement to pretend, Isabella hurls at Brachiano all the natural feelings her first response suppressed.

So how is the audience to hear these speeches of feigned anger? As the mark of Isabella's heroic readiness to put herself in the wrong for the sake of others? Or as an inadvertent revelation of the bitterness that lies beneath her wifely mask? As self-denial, or as self-expression? Either, or both. We don't know what she really feels; the writing respects her privacy.

One result of this ultimate indeterminacy is a freedom of movement which is, itself, a powerful source of theatrical pleasure. Feigned actions

are not exactly either true or false but rather provisional: they allow the play to propose plot developments without being committed to them. This is both a narrative suspension (the plot line can be aborted at will by the revelation that it is only a pretence) and an ideological one (a moral or political transgression can be tried out but ultimately withdrawn, so that the boundary of what is acceptable is tested but not violated). Both suspensions contribute for example to the freedom of the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599). The heroine, Rosalind, says to her lover, 'Come, woo me, woo me: for now I am in a holiday humour, and like enough to consent' (4.1.61–2). She can speak with that delighted and unfeminine recklessness because she is disguised as a boy, and has persuaded her lover to make believe that the boy is Rosalind and woo him/her as a holiday game. Their courtship, then, is framed by the pretence that it is a pretence, and so insulated both from consequences and from the rule that a woman should be modest and sober. Feigning demarcates a space in which to play.

The reason why scenes like this are so resonant is also the reason they are so common – that feigning is a second-order use of the communicative language of the play itself. Isabella, let us say, is a perfect wife, neither rebelling against her husband nor resenting his mistress. Nonetheless, she is evidently able to say to herself, 'If I were the opposite of a perfect wife, how would I behave? What would I say?' And that is more or less how the actor would set about representing Isabella if she really was supposed to be rebellious and resentful. So the process of showing an imagined reaction overlaps alarmingly with the process of showing an authentic one. In a theatrical environment, being and feigning are too close for comfort.

It is not surprising, then, that danger hangs around these scenes as well as pleasure. In Middleton's *Maiden's Tragedy* (1611), for example, the 'trying' formula produces a holocaust in the subplot. A jealous husband commissions a friend to test his wife's chastity; she succumbs, and, in order to protect her reputation, stages a scene in which she militantly repels her lover's advances while her husband is spying on her. Unfortunately, the charade is sabotaged by the wife's waiting-woman, who poisons the wife's sword so that she kills her lover instead of pretending to try to. This disaster flushes out all the other concealments, and all four participants are slaughtered amid mutual recrimination. This outcome, somehow appalling and funny at the same time, is a reminder of the insta-

bility of the code of feigning. It is not only that events that seemed real turn out to be pretence: on the whole that is an intentional effect. It is also that what seemed to be pretence turns out to be really happening. This is calculated to dismay the audience as well as the characters, because it affirms the incompletely controllable power of the theatre itself.

Flattering

When Caesar first appears in Ben Jonson's tragedy *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), a senator named Haterius kneels to him, watched by the arch-courtier Sejanus and his arch-critic Arruntius:

Caesar: We not endure these flatteries, let him stand;
Our empire, ensigns, axes, rods, and state
Take not away our human nature from us;
Look up, on us, and fall before the gods.
Sejanus: How like a god speaks Caesar!
Arruntius: There, observe!
He can endure that second, that's no flattery.
O, what is it, proud slime will not believe
Of his own worth . . . ! (1.375–82)

Here is one of the basic actions of court drama: to flatter. Haterius is not flattering, merely behaving appropriately. Caesar's refusal is an affectation, a boastful parade of humility. The real flatterer's response to this implicit request for admiration is instant: Caesar's insistence on his own humanity is, he says, godlike. And – 'There, observe!' – Arruntius draws the audience's attention to the very moment of the action, so that its performance is marked, defined, quotable.

The comic interplay between monarch and flatterer is widely typical. A matching example is Lussurioso's accession to the throne in *The Revenger's Tragedy**:

1 Noble: for natural death,
I hope it will be threescore years a-coming.
Lussurioso: True – no more but threescore years?
1 Noble: Fourscore I hope my lord.
2 Noble: And fivescore I.
3 Noble: But 'tis my hope my lord you shall ne'er die.
Lussurioso: Give me thy hand: these others I rebuke. (5.3.30–5)

The harsh laughter comes from the undignified flattery auction among the courtiers, together with Lussurioso's equally undignified eagerness to

be flattered. No one is being deceived: all the participants know that the exchange is false, but they go on with it regardless because of what they can get out of it. This network of knowing pretence gives the *gest* a distinctively theatrical character; it works like an actors' game.

It is not just amusement, though. The wickedness of flatterers is an almost obsessive component of the theatre's image of monarchy. It is a recurrent accusation, for example, in Marlowe's *Edward II* (1592). When Edward's enemies invade England, they speak like this:

- Mortimer:* We may remove these flatterers from the king
That havocs England's wealth and treasury.
- Sir John:* Sound trumpets, my lord, and forward let us march.
Edward will think we come to flatter him.
- Kent:* I would he never had been flattered more. (4.4.26–30)

The curious thing about this triple emphasis is that on the whole the play does not show Edward being flattered. His barons criticize him relentlessly, and even the characters they accuse of flattery seem affectionate rather than sycophantic. It has less to do with evidence than with polemical convention: bad kings are always said to entertain flatterers. What gives the practice this special resonance?

First, there is the role of theatre itself. *Sejanus* was staged in 1603, and *Volpone** followed in 1606, with its contemptuous nailing of parasites who 'Echo my lord, and lick away a moth' (3.1.22). In between, on Twelfth Night 1605, Jonson had inaugurated his career as court masque writer to James I, whom he represented on that occasion as a kind of sun

Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force
To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a corpse.
His light sciential is, and past mere nature,
Can salve the rude defects of every creature. (224–7)

Jonson was present at the performance, and so presumably able, like Arruntius, to judge how hard the king found it to endure being described as godlike. This irony suggests that when the theatre pillories flatterers, it may be exorcising a spectre of its own; it depicts the artful parasite again and again, because it is never quite sure that it is not a self-portrait.

On the other hand, the praise of the monarch, considered as a political genre, is not simply reducible to lying opportunism. Take Antonio's eulogy on the court of France, at the beginning of *The Duchess of Malfi**. He praises the king for banishing sycophants and dissolute persons,

Consid'ring duly, that a prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general: but if't chance
Some cursed example poison't near the head,
Death and diseases through the whole land spread. (1.1.11–15)

The king is praised, not out of sycophancy, but because his position makes him exemplary. Ideally, the mutuality whereby his bounty flows to his courtiers, and their loyalty and service flow to him, is the model for social relationships in general, filling the whole land with generosity and duty. The relationship of tyrant and flatterer, then, is disturbing because it *resembles* the ideal: it too is a kind of mutuality, but instead of an exchange of appropriate virtues (loyalty and bounty), it is an exchange of base appetites (the courtier's for favours, the tyrant's for power). Flattering the ruler is a travesty of honouring him, and one has to keep denouncing it because the difference between the two is not complete enough for comfort.

Webster's Antonio continues:

And what is't makes this blessed government
But a most provident Council, who dare freely
Inform him the corruption of the times?

The flatterer is the opposite of the provident councillor, whose loyalty to the king is expressed in his daring to speak unwelcome truths. This too is a recurrent image – most famously of all, this is the contrast in *King Lear** between Goneril and Regan on the one hand and Cordelia and Kent on the other. Antonio's phrasing makes it a vindication of the rights of Parliament, but the position of his speech as a kind of tragic prologue relates it also to the theatre's own self-definition: the dramatist can serve his royal patron the most faithfully if he is *not* compelled to flatter, but encouraged to 'freely / Inform him the corruption of the times'.

This is an argument, though, which leads into paradox: it means that the king can expect to be praised by his enemies and attacked by his

friends. Something of the political substance of this inversion can be seen if we pick up the aristocratic note in the denunciation of flatterers. Here it is, for example, in Robert Greene's *James IV*:

Madam, he sets us light that served in court
 In place of credit, in his father's days;
 If we but enter presence of his grace,
 Our payment is a frown, a scoff, a frump;
 Whilst flattering Gnatho pranks it by his side,
 Soothing the careless king in his misdeeds. (2.2.73–8)

'Gnatho' (the parasite in a comedy by Terence) is not only a flatterer but also a slave: this, as in *Edward II* too, is the voice of a hereditary aristocracy deprived of its traditional influence by upstarts. The upstarts must be flatterers, because how else could they have wormed their way into positions so far above their birthright? And they are a serious threat, however frivolous their antics, because they are a sign that the monarch is governing absolutely, counselled by people who owe their position to his favour. (*That is why they tell the king that he is a god – he created them.*)

In other words, the stage flatterer does not only represent a social type – though he no doubt does that too. He is also an indirect representation of the monarch himself, as seen from the point of view of a discontented aristocracy. This is articulated most clearly of all as the rebellion takes shape in Shakespeare's *Richard II**:

Now, afore God, 'tis shame such wrongs are borne
 In him, a royal prince, and many moe
 Of noble blood in this declining land.
 The king is not himself, but basely led
 By flatterers . . . (2.1.238–42)

If the king is not himself, it is not disloyal to resist his power. If flatterers loom so large in drama, it may in the end be not because they are so interesting in themselves, but because political dissent can hardly be articulated without them.

Going Mad

In Renaissance plays there is a high statistical risk of going mad: Hieronimo and his wife, Hamlet and Ophelia, King Lear and Edgar, Lucibella in Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, Cornelia in Webster's *The White Devil*, Troubleall in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. We tend to think of each breakdown psychologically: what is wrong with him? what has driven her to this condition? But we should be warned off this straightforward line of enquiry by a fact which in its way is odder than the frequency itself: that very often the madness is not genuine. Some characters do go mad, but others pretend to be mad, or are maliciously reported to be mad, or are mistakenly believed to be mad, or express themselves so vehemently as to seem mad. Some even pretend to be mad for such obscure reasons that one doubts whether they are sane. All this falsification compromises the idea of madness itself; mad behaviour seems to come not so much from the depths of the psyche as from the requirements of the plot. All things considered, it may be helpful to think of going mad in these plays not as a psychological event at all, but as a structural one.

To be mad, in that case, is first of all to be disorderly. In the language of stage convention: mad women appear with their hair hanging down; mad men have torn and dishevelled clothes; groups of madmen sing out of tune and dance out of time; mad speakers break the order of blank verse with prose and the order of grammar with interjections and unmeaning repetitions. Since madness may be conceived as the overthrow of reason by sub-rational forces in the soul, madmen make animal noises, or play children's games. These sartorial, musical, linguistic and metaphysical disorders are accompanied in performance by physical ones: in *The Devil Is An Ass* (1616), for instance, when the fool Fitzdottrell is faking demonic possession, his accomplices memorably urge him: 'You do not tumble enough. Wallow, gnash!' (5.8.67). In the face of such many-layered irregularity, it is not surprising that the madmen of Renaissance drama (like those of Renaissance London) are controlled with whips, or that the opposite of the word 'mad' is less often 'sane' than 'tame'.

As that implies, to go mad is also to go *down* – morally (to the animal, the appetitive), stylistically (madness allows low comedy into the elevated discourse of tragedy) and socially (since there were almost no free

asylums, the mentally ill poor tended to be beggars). This relationship is brilliantly dramatized in *King Lear*. The despairing Gloucester says:

The king is mad: how stiff is my vild sense
That I stand up, and have ingenious feeling
Of my huge sorrows! (4.6.279–81)

Those who go mad escape the anguish of standing upright; instead they grovel on the ground with Poor Tom, the gibbering, naked beggar who is at the bottom of every hierarchy, living in ditches and eating toads and mice. Psychic, social and physical underworlds coalesce in a single ‘mad’ figure.

However, Tom is not as simple as that. Named ‘Tom o’ Bedlam’ after the Bethlem Hospital near Bishopsgate, he is not an individual, either real or mythic, but a social type. And, like most subtypes of the vagrant, he is identified in underworld literature as a fraud – a rogue who pretends to be mad in order to evade the (savage) laws against able-bodied beggars. This rhymes oddly with the fact that the character in *Lear* is indeed pretending, and that Shakespeare took most of his demonological babble from a pamphlet exposing fraudulent exorcists. We are back in the doubtful space where real and feigned madneses threaten to merge.

It is a structural threat, because the two actions (going mad and feigning) are functionally equivalent. Thus when Claudius refers to Hamlet’s madness as his ‘transformation’ –

so call it,
Sith nor th’ exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was (2.2.5–7)

– he voices the commonsense idea that a man who goes mad is ‘not himself’. But much the same is true of a man in disguise; he, too, fails to resemble what he was. As psychological states, the two things would no doubt be quite different. But as *performances* – which is what they are on the stage – they are analogous. Moreover, the performances can also stand for other kinds of self-alienation, such as anger or love. Think for example of Rosalind’s conventional wisdom in *As You Like It* (1599): ‘love is merely a madness, and . . . deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do’ (3.2.359–60). Thus when, in *The Changeling*^{*}, a lover feigns madness

in order to seduce an asylum-keeper's young wife, he activates just this metaphor and is caught in its irony: that being a lover, he is at the furthest from the truth, not when he pretends he is a lunatic, but when he protests he is not.

Many of these motifs come together in Dekker's city tragicomedy *The Honest Whore Part 1* (1604), whose multiple denouement is set in Bedlam. No one is actually mad, but two characters seem to be. The honest whore herself, Bellafront, is simulating madness in an attempt to escape her condition; when the man who originally took her maidenhead agrees to marry her, her wits instantly return. Within the prevailing order, it is impossible for a whore to transform herself into an honest woman, but Bellafront negotiates it via the non-selfhood of madness. The other seeming-lunatic is Candido, a shopkeeper who defines himself by never losing his temper. His wife, exasperated by his mildness, organizes a series of provocations; in adapting to these without anger, his behaviour becomes increasingly eccentric, and in the end she has him committed. The officers say, in just Claudius's terms, 'you look not like yourself . . . you're changed'; and Candido replies:

Changed, sir, why true, sir. Is change strange? 'Tis not the fashion unless it alter: monarchs turn to beggars; beggars creep into the nests of princes, masters serve their prentices, ladies their serving-men, men turn to women . . . a mad world, a mad world. (4.3.130–7)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the officers take him to Bedlam, where his wife comes repentantly to rescue him at the end.

Candido's speech, like his situation, connects the paradoxes of madness with the trope of carnival inversion. The theatre loves madmen not for themselves, but for their capacity to reflect back the greater madness of the world. In this sense, the stage lunatic is claiming some of the ambiguous privileges of the stage fool. As with the fool, the inversions are satirical but also affirmative: Candido is an exponent of the ultimately Christ-like madness of turning the other cheek; and the play's Bedlam, despite a harsh representation of its injustices, is a pastoral space, where the oppressive roles of official society are tumbled about to produce the happy ending. The disordering of madness always holds out the suggestion, if no more, of a utopian reordering.

Inheriting

Renaissance tragedies, with their high-born casts, are often accused of adopting royal or aristocratic points of view; but on the whole they were not literally written by members of the ruling class. One compelling exception is *Mustapha*, a Senecan drama by the Elizabethan and Jacobean politician Fulke Greville, first Baron Brooke (1554–1628). Written not for the public stage but for private reading, and first published in 1609, the play shows how Soliman, the Emperor of Turkey, comes to regard his loyal and noble son Mustapha as a threat to his power. Prompted by his queen and other evil counsellors, he becomes more and more suspicious of Mustapha, and eventually has him killed before realizing, too late, that he has committed a terrible injustice.

This dramatic structure is built on a contradiction that is central to patriarchal order. On the one hand, monarchy makes sense by virtue of being hereditary; it is as the descendant and ancestor of kings that the present king reigns; inheritance is what enables him to transcend common mortality and (as one says to kings) 'live forever'. Without that dimension, he holds what the childless Macbeth calls 'a barren sceptre', the sign of kingship without the substance. The king's heir is in this sense an aspect of himself. But on the other hand, just this logic makes it obvious that, of all the people around the king, his heir is the one who has the most to gain from his death. Looked at in that light, the son is not part of the father but his structural enemy, in the exact sense that the prince's rise is the same thing as the king's fall. So the moment of transmission from one generation to the next is the risk point of the whole order – the point where its contradictions are most intensely focused, where ideological work is therefore most needed, and to which, consequently, drama returns again and again.

It informs large generic structures: it is easy to see how both tragedy and comedy can work to negotiate the transition – tragedy by bringing about the destruction of the last generation, comedy by preparing the creation of the next. *Macbeth* (1606) is an example of the ironic continuities involved. Macbeth, devoid of ancestors and successors, interrupts the royal line, declaring war not only on his immediate enemies, but on the idea of lineage itself, slaughtering the fatherly Duncan and the sons of Banquo and Macduff, and ending alone and sterile in his castle, tormented by the vision of a line of kings descended from someone else. Finally,

Duncan's heir assumes the government of a land which is united because its divisions have been violently eliminated: it is as if the dangerous transition from father to son has been enacted through a ritual of blood. Malcolm stands among the corpses, speaking with a sort of shy triumphalism that recalls other fresh-faced heirs: Richmond over the body of Richard III, the child-princes at the end of both Webster's tragedies, the new King Edward, shrilly imprisoning his mother's lover at the end of Marlowe's *Edward II*. When the fathers are exhausted, contaminated, finished, the boy claims his inheritance.

Comedies extend this impersonal logic differently, because falling in love is not only a matter of individual feeling, or even a mechanism for producing the next generation, but a means of joining up divided entities: properties, estates, kingdoms. At the end of *The Tempest**, Gonzalo reacts to the engagement of Ferdinand and Miranda by exclaiming:

Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue
Should become kings of Naples? (5.1.205–6)

He instantly reads the young couple in terms of the titles their offspring will inherit: they constitute the happy ending of the comedy, not for sentimental reasons but because Milan and Naples, wrongly united by Antonio's treachery, are now to be rightly united by marriage. Weddings are as instrumental for playwrights as they were for real dynastic politicians: in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (1609), for instance, the true king is in love with the usurper's daughter, so that their eventual marriage will be a bloodless resolution of the political problem. The logic of inheritance is so immediately understood that the bride is virtually an allegory of the kingdom, and vice versa: to get the one is to get the other.

This generic perspective can make the theatrical workings of inheritance seem timeless, a perennial family romance played out with the fairytale counters of kings and queens, princes and princesses. And certainly these stories about parents and children have an obvious universality of application: *Hamlet* and *Lear*, no less than *Oedipus* and *Electra*, serve the modern world as languages in which to settle accounts with both biological and political fathers. But the theme is also quite historically specific, reflecting a pre-capitalist society in which the most significant and prestigious form of wealth is inherited land, and a pre-democratic state

whose integrity depends on the idea of hereditary monarchy. And in fact Greville, a Secretary of State as well as a poet, articulates it in an unsurprisingly direct political fashion.

For him, that is, the essential point about Soliman is not that he is a universal father figure, but that he is a tyrant. His relationship with his son is only a privileged instance of the general character of his regime, showing the political logic of tyranny in magnified and intimate form. Thus Mustapha's sister, Camena, accepts her father's monarchical authority, but argues that the gods have given it to him to govern his subjects, not to destroy them:

As reason deals within with frailty,
Which kills not passions that rebellious are,
But adds, subtracts, keeps down ambitious spirits,
So must power form, not ruin instruments. (2.3.175–8)

Dealing, adding, subtracting, forming – royal power in the state is like reason in the individual: it should be an organizing force, not a punitive one. The true king has the same interests as his subjects: he is strong if they are strong, he is ruined by their ruin. The tyrant, on the contrary, has a fundamentally antagonistic relationship with his people: he fears their strength, and grows stronger by weakening them. Thus the heir becomes a constitutional metaphor: he is the dramatic embodiment of the political class, which the true king embraces, and the tyrant hates and fears.

Inheriting, in other words, is the act that confirms that the king rules on behalf of a community and not only for himself. This logic applies to private inheritance as well. We saw for instance how Jonson's Volpone accumulates wealth by getting people to bribe him to leave it to them in his will; the condition of the scam is that he has no natural heirs; he is an absolute individual, a pure contestant in the struggle for wealth and power. He is in a precise and monstrous sense anti-social: his only relationship with the world around him is a relentless drive to possess it. Conversely, the proper transmission of the estate, or the realm, appears as the essence of sociality, because it assigns the object to something greater than any individual; it is by inheriting and bequeathing that we escape the tyrant's deadly isolation and partake of one another. That is perhaps why modern spectators, more or less democratic, feminist and individualistic,

nevertheless warm to patriarchal romances in which stolen kingdoms are restored to their owners and lost daughters reunited with their fathers. Acting the story of inheritance makes the audience feel like a good society.

Plotting

The plot was a distinct and recognized stage in the making of a play. Before writing any dialogue, the dramatist would set out the action in a document which, like a modern treatment, could be shown to a company as the basis for a contract to write the script itself. This 'paper plot' was also useful in cases of co-authorship: once it was settled, the different writers could be assigned their scenes in the confidence that the play would add up in the end. One or two practitioners were apparently known as good plotters; that did not necessarily mean that they were good writers. Plotting was a separable technique.

The word acquired this sense only in the 1590s and early seventeenth century: it was the rise of professional theatre that marked plotting out as a specialism. Intriguingly, this is also the moment of emergence of another meaning – 'to scheme, lay plans, contrive, conspire' – which passed irrevocably into the language following the 'Gunpowder Plot' of 5 November 1605. Plotting was a significant activity in Renaissance courts because the monarchical centralization of power meant that most military and constitutional forms of opposition were out of the question. Moreover, the Elizabethan secret service depended a good deal on informers and *agents provocateurs*, so that it was (and is) often difficult to tell the difference between an authentic conspiracy and one that was simulated for the purpose of entrapment: even in real life, a plot might turn out to be fictitious. There were empirical links as well as metaphorical ones. Ben Jonson probably helped to expose the Gunpowder Plot, and certainly knew Robert Poley, a government spy who was also one of the people present when Christopher Marlowe was murdered. Anthony Munday, the author or co-author of several plays, was also an informer against Catholic activists; one literary commentator described him, in all innocence perhaps, as 'our best plotter'. Playwriting and spying were both ways for *déclassé* intellectuals to make a living; both occupations required a facility in making up plots; it is not so surprising that the two cultural circles occasionally overlapped.

Within the plays the overlap appears in the figure of the stage plotter, the deviously inventive character who serves as the author's dramatic alias. Revenge heroes often play this role: Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy** and Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy** plan murderous

conspiracies which are in the same breath theatrical spectacles; at the end of Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) the avenger Lodovico surveys the blood-spattered outcome of his plot and comments, 'I limn'd this night-piece and it was my best' (5.6.294) – the artist stepping back to admire the completed canvas. In comedy, the trickster occupies a comparable position: for example Jonson's schemers – Brainworm in *Every Man In His Humour*^{*}, Mosca in *Volpone*^{*}, Face in *The Alchemist* (1610) – are forced by circumstances into more and more elaborate improvisation until they are effectively devising the entire show.

It's a structural pun between plots and *the* plot, and its centrality is clear from the ease with which the effect can be doubled and tripled. In Marston's virtuoso tragicomedy *The Malcontent* (1604), for instance, the plotter is comprehensively outplotted. The current Duke, a usurper named Pietro, is confronted by the still more villainous Mendoza. First Mendoza cuckolds Pietro, putting the blame on a fall-guy called Ferneze; then he has Pietro murdered by the malcontent Malevole; finally, having become Duke, he covers his tracks by poisoning Malevole. However, Malevole is really Altofronto, the rightful Duke, and he is ahead of Mendoza at every step. He saves Ferneze and keeps him out of sight; he pretends to have murdered Pietro but actually keeps him safe too; and he avoids taking the poison and fakes his own death. At the climax of the action, then, the three 'murdered' men, Ferneze, Pietro and Altofronto, all reappear and sweep Mendoza from his misappropriated throne. He thought he was orchestrating a plot; now he finds he was only an instrument in somebody else's. This also means that Pietro, the man who actually stole the dukedom, is subjected to a strange virtual punishment, being cuckolded, deposed and murdered, but only within the artificial boundaries of Altofronto's plot. Thus Altofronto's two main enemies are both put through a charade which leaves them physically untouched but symbolically confounded. It is a meta-plot, a practical joke: in short, plotting is the medium in which the play knows itself as a play.

As a result, it often supplements its practical objectives with an aesthetic dimension. Jonson's conmen are out to make money, but also to flaunt their own artistry. The avenger seeks to make sure that his enemy dies, but also that this death is readable, appropriate, even beautiful: the act is semiotic as well as violent. Practicalities and poetics merge, as if the plotters are half-conscious that they are in a play. The most spectacular instance of this equivocation is Iago, a plotter so refined that he

almost leaves the question of objectives behind. What the critics of two centuries developed as a psychological mystery – what is Iago’s motive for devastating the lives of the people around him? – appears in this light rather as a formal tension: the playmaker’s alias breaks cover for a moment as the pursuit of the perfect plot outstrips its rationalization. Disturbingly, the dramatist has entered his play in psychopathic form.

As we saw earlier, this abstraction of the plot is a function of professionalization: certainly the plays of the 1620s and 1630s regularly exhibit a complex facility in plotting that makes earlier work look comparatively amateurish. The developed expectations are neatly summarized in one of the commendatory poems prefixed to John Fletcher’s comedy *The Wild-Goose Chase*, written and played in the early 1620s, but not printed until 1652:

And for thy Plot
 Whene’er we read we have, and have it not,
 And glad to be deceiv’d, finding thy drift
 T’excel our guess at every turn and shift.
 (H. Harington, ‘To the incomparable Mr Fletcher’, lines 9–12)

This praise takes it for granted that a plot is a mechanism for outwitting the beholders and falsifying their guesses. It is to give pleasure through its conscious, artificial ingenuity: this is not a recognizable or probable sequence of events, but a cunning design.

The plot of *The Wild-Goose Chase* deserves the description. It is a triple courtship in which all six participants are scheming to score off their respective lovers. The total effect is unsummarizably complicated, but one strand will serve to illustrate the style. Pinac loves Lillia-Bianca, and she will accept him eventually, but she has been playing mischievously hard to get. To make her regret trifling with his affections, Pinac pays a prostitute to impersonate a great heiress and announces that he is marrying her. Sure enough, Lillia meets him on his way to the wedding and speaks repentantly of her light behaviour; but when he seeks to take advantage of her position to propose to her on his own terms, she reveals that she knows who his bride really is, ironically wishes him well, and leaves him dumbfounded. This is exactly an example of Fletcher’s plot ‘excelling our guess’, and it is brought about by the apparent success of Pinac’s plot, followed by its abrupt exposure. The plot is made out of plots.

It is fair to say of this characteristic sequence that it is plot *rather than* narrative. The events I have outlined would be difficult to narrate convincingly or even coherently; they work, rather, as a devised set of pre-conditions for the lovers' encounter on the stage. A plotter is not someone who tells a story but someone who contrives a situation. The dramatic pay-off of this is that the artificial positions are occasions for the expression of authentic feeling. Because Pinac is only pretending to marry someone else and Lillia is only pretending to believe him, both are released into a space where they can speak far more freely than in scenes that are not so highly worked. It is as if the equivocation between plotting and the plot works to draw the characters into the writing of the play, and they are strangely empowered by this invitation.

Rising from the Dead

The most spectacular of Shakespeare's many resurrections is that of the queen at the end of *The Winter's Tale* (1610). Long ago, the king, Leontes, was gripped by the conviction that his wife Hermione was unfaithful, and her baby daughter illegitimate; he banished the daughter, and Hermione died of grief. Now the king has repented and the baby has grown up as an innocent shepherdess in a faraway country. She finds her way home, and father and daughter are reunited. That is the happy ending offered by the source, but Shakespeare pushes it further. The rejoicing court is invited to view a statue of the long-dead queen; it is astonishingly lifelike; it appears to breathe; after intense contemplation, it moves, steps down from its pedestal and embraces the king and the princess. It is not (or perhaps it is no longer) a statue at all: Hermione is restored alive.

It is an extraordinary scene in modern revival – at once a miracle and a fake, ludicrous and overwhelmingly moving. Commentators have related it both to other seeming-dead Shakespearean heroines, like Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, or Imogen in *Cymbeline*, and to myths of miraculous restoration which Shakespeare found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But it was also a cliché of the contemporary stage. Take, for example, that knowing anthology of dramatic devices, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle**. In the 'London Merchant' plot, the merchant forbids the marriage of his daughter Luce to his disobedient apprentice Jasper, and locks her up to prevent it. Jasper pretends to have died, and is carried into the house in a coffin; then Luce escapes in the same coffin, while Jasper stays in the house, puts flour on his face, and appears to the merchant as a vengeful ghost. The merchant therefore believes that Jasper is dead and haunting him, and that Luce has incomprehensibly vanished. He repents his hostility, like Leontes, and calls on Jasper's father, who gets him to express the wish that the young couple were in life again – whereupon they are miraculously revived, having been hiding in the next room. The audience do not share the merchant's wonder, or, if they do, it is in a spirit of consciously enjoyable silliness: the miracle is parodic, and the condition of the parody is the recognizability of the device. That old seeming-dead routine!

One simple reason for it is the popularity of tragicomedy, which early seventeenth-century dramatists especially cultivated. It was generally

understood that tragedy must, and comedy must not, lead to death, and this obviously placed contradictory demands on tragicomic plots. Hence the device of the death that later turns out to have been illusory: it means that a character can both die and not die, and so inhabit tragic and comic worlds at the same time. Tragicomedy is the generic home of the quasi-miraculous return to life. But that way of putting it rephrases the phenomenon rather than explaining it. If tragedy and comedy are as simply incompatible as that, what is the point of forcing them together?

One answer to that question would point to the special place of death in the rhetoric of love. All over the erotic landscape of the Renaissance, lovers long to die for one another; they experience separation as death, and, according to the universal innuendo that calls orgasm ‘dying’, they also die together. Luce, confronted with Jasper’s coffin, goes unerringly into this amorous register: she does a song full of blackness, yew trees and sighing, and says:

Thou sable cloth, sad cover of my joys,
I lift thee up, and thus I meet with death. (4.4.274–5)

Then she lifts the pall and encounters the living Jasper. He offers to die in earnest for an earlier offence; she replies, ‘This death I’ll give you for it’, and kisses him. Rising from the dead, then, is a sexual image, substantiating the extreme language of desire.

This can also be seen, for instance, in Marston’s baroque tragicomedy *Antonio and Mellida* (1599). Antonio, disguised as a woman in the hostile court of Mellida’s father, recounts his own stormy death in a sea-battle, responding tearfully to Mellida’s tearful response before eventually tearing off his wig. The story, elaborated out of classical tags and pieces of Arcadian romance, is really decor for the lovers’ mutual enjoyment – an exotic verbal *pas de deux*. It is even reprised: in Act 5 a further twist of the plot has Antonio come on in a coffin, and rise from it into the arms of Mellida, who manages to be astonished all over again.

That suggests that the seeming-dead plot is nothing more than an ad hoc mechanism for producing the effect. Sometimes it does feel like that, but the plots have their own regularity, their own meanings. Luce and Mellida, in stylistically very different plays, are both being compelled by heavy fathers to marry the wrong man. As we saw, exactly the same

predicament triggers the farcical death and resurrection of Moll Yellowhammer in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside**; and for modern audiences the leading exemplar of this recurrent reason to 'die' is Juliet. Hermione represents a slightly different pattern – the wronged woman. Dorothea, the king's wife in Greene's romance *James IV* (1590), is supposedly murdered because of James's passion for another woman, but returns as a mysterious veiled figure whom he must penitently accept. Another king, in Dekker's *Satiromastix* (1601), seeks to exert his *droit de seigneur* over an innocent bride who, rather than dishonour, chooses to take a poison which turns out to have been a sleeping-potion; Dekker repeats the device in more than one subsequent play, sometimes so sketchily as to suggest that audiences were primed to pick it up very quickly.

What these rather diverse stories have in common is the impasse created by arbitrary power. As father, or as husband, or as king, the man who is doing the wrong is, within the terms of the play, the ruler of the world; consequently the daughter, or the wife, or the young lovers considered together, can find redress only by leaving the world. To die is to deploy, as it were, a power which exceeds that of the ruler; death is the outside of the network of relationships that constitutes the society of the play. Those who return from death, then, are impossibly able to exercise this uncanny, asocial authority *within* ordinary society. It is a fantasy of justice.

However appealing that is in itself, it carries conviction on the stage only because of an underlying authorization which is so obvious that there is a danger of overlooking it: that of Christ. Over and over again, when the supposedly dead person appears, the reactions of those around are quasi-devotional: they kneel, they kiss the newly living hand, they ask for reassurance that she is not a spirit, if they wronged her they confess it and are forgiven. In other words, they behave as if the resurrection is a miracle, and the person restored to them is a saint. This is, exactly, the gestic vocabulary of the theatre which came to an end only twenty years or so before Dorothea and Juliet first died and rose again. Not only in stagings of the Passion, but also in saints' plays, especially concerning the Blessed Virgin and St Mary Magdalen, resurrection was the action at the very heart of medieval drama. It is this ritual enactment, displaced by the Reformation, that is scattered across our plays in a strange variety of sentimental and parodic transformations. When the coffin pops open, it signals the revival of more than just the juvenile leads.

Seducing

Among other grounds of offence, opponents of the new theatre pointed to its seductiveness. Here is an exemplary warning from a pamphlet written in 1580:

Many have been entangled with the webs of these spiders, who would gladly have been at liberty when they could not. The webs are so subtly spun, that there is no man that is once within them, that can avoid them without danger. None can come within those snares that may escape untaken, be she maid, matron, or whatsoever; such force have their enchantments of pleasure to draw the affections of the mind.³

This language is first of all theological: the players are like devils, drawing the soul into sin. But it is also sexual: the victims of the entanglement are men in the second sentence but inadvertently turn into women in the third, because imagining the audience as the object of temptation has the effect of feminizing it. The corrupting power of pleasure has seduction as its very paradigm; the universal type of the onset of sin is the chaste woman who listens to the tempter and falls.

Although the context here is an attack on the theatre, the same language is spoken in plays. In Middleton's tragedy *Women Beware Women* (1621), for example, the heroine is lured into the power of a libertine Duke, who takes possession of her in a scene which is part seduction and part rape. Afterwards, the courtier who managed the affair congratulates himself:

How prettily the poor fool was beguiled,
How unexpectedly; it's a witty age.
Never were finer snares for women's honesties
Than are devised in these days; no spider's web
Made of a daintier thread, than are now practised
To catch love's flesh-fly by the silver wing. (2.2.395–400)

³ *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, published 1580 (New York: Garland facsimile, 1973), pp. 96–7.

This is the same metaphor as the pamphlet's, with the same antitheatrical suspicion of wit, fineness, devices. The playwrights and their critics share a common vocabulary: it could be argued that behind the polemics they are on the same side.

But the superimposition of theological and sexual codes has rather complicated effects when seduction is played out on the stage. Take a well-known Shakespearean example: the scene between Lady Anne and Richard of Gloucester early in *Richard III* (1592). The sacred framework could hardly be more pronounced: Richard is deformed, villainous, comic – a stage devil – and opens his courtship by interrupting the funeral ceremony of the saintly king he has murdered. Schematically, good is being assailed by evil:

Anne: No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.

Richard: But I know none, and therefore am no beast.

Anne: O wonderful, when devils tell the truth!

Richard: More wonderful, when angels are so angry. (1.2.71–4)

But in Richard's mouth, of course, 'angel', 'saint', 'heavenly', are not so much religious terms as clichés from Elizabethan love poetry. He is doubling as diabolic tempter and secular lover.

The doubling generates an uncanny ambivalence. It is not that there is any doubt about Richard's general wickedness, or about his complete insincerity in this scene. Rather, there is doubt about what sort of dramatic transaction we are watching, what genre we are in. For if in morality drama this is a temptation scene, in comedy it is a wooing scene of a quite traditional kind: the one where a woman who has been somehow imprisoned – by mourning, or self-denial, or a jealous guardian – is released by the summons to love. In this version of the seduction routine, what is at stake is not a fall into sin but an awakening into life; and that benign structure disturbingly underlies Richard's brutality. She almost kills him but drops the sword; she relaxes her bitter, scowling face and smiles; she abandons the funeral and prepares for marriage. Like a comedy heroine (Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, for example), she meets a sexually charged figure, full of desire and deceit, who persuades her to leave the dead fathers and brothers behind her, and live.

This tension between love scene and scene of damnation, liberation and entrapment, plays unpredictably across the repertoire. Take

Volpone's assault on the virtue of Corvino's wife, Celia. It is an exploitative trick, a threatened rape, an unequivocal image of purity exposed to violation. But that moral structure is loosened by the fantastical lyricism and classical poise of Volpone's rhetoric, especially when these qualities are set against the husband's brutish jealousy. The language of seduction has a dimension of utopian freedom (otherwise it wouldn't seduce); and so the triumph of wifely chastity is less wholehearted than it ought to be.

Jonson pushes this anomaly still harder in later plays. In *The Devil Is An Ass* (1616), for instance, the heroine is married to a fool called Fitzdottrel, who accepts a deal proposed by the hero, Wittipol: in exchange for an expensive cloak, Fitzdottrel allows Wittipol to speak to his wife for a quarter of an hour, in his presence but uninterrupted. The agreed encounter ensues, and Wittipol frankly propositions the wife, pointing out how the immediate situation demonstrates her husband's sordidness and his own disinterested love. The device gives the illicit lover moral and emotional authority over the lawful husband: the emblematic meaning of seduction is comprehensively turned upside down – so much so that Jonson later has to rescue the play's decorum by revealing that Wittipol never intended to consummate his courtship, but was only seeking to rescue Mrs Fitzdottrell from the consequences of her husband's folly. The very lameness of this revision is a measure of how unstable the values in play have become.

What complicates the staging of seduction, and makes such paradoxes possible, is its self-referentiality. It is repeatedly and variously a metatheatrical set-piece. Richard is acting the lover, somewhere between deception and parody. Cesario woos Olivia, and Volpone Celia, in several levels of disguise. In the great seduction scene in *The Revenger's Tragedy*^{*}, Vindice, disguised as a court pimp, tries to corrupt his sister, covertly hoping that she will hold firm; she does, but then, in a moment of sickening uncertainty, pretends to have surrendered in order to scare her frailer mother. The scene in *The Devil Is An Ass* is the most ingenious of all. The two men set their watches and agree a starting point, so that Wittipol's speech has the character of a conscious, framed performance. And the running time really is somewhere between ten and fifteen minutes, so the action in Fitzdottrel's parlour is coterminous with the action on the Blackfriars stage. Not only that, but Fitzdottrel has commanded his wife to remain silent; when Wittipol realizes this, he moves to her position on the stage and speaks, on her behalf, the answer he

would like to hear. Thus everything conspires to present the invitation to love as a dramatic performance. As the antitheatrical pamphlet implied, the seducer is a kind of actor, and the actor is a kind of seducer. They are structural allies, however much the play editorializes on the side of chastity, because both are in the business of exploiting the enchantments of pleasure to draw the affections of the mind.

Swaggering

When Pistol, one of Falstaff's sidekicks in the second part of *Henry IV*, turns up at the Boar's Head tavern, the landlady is reluctant to let him in because she is told he is a 'swaggering rascal': 'Shut the door, there comes no swaggerers here; I have not liv'd all this while to have swaggering now' (2 *Henry IV*, 2.4.71ff.). She can't even bear to hear the word – 'I am the worse when one says swagger' – which is perhaps a joke about its being fashionable. It was one of a cluster of new terms – 'huffing', 'roaring', 'braggadocio' – which reflected the machismo of the contemporary London streets, and indicated, not just innocently showing off, but seeking to dominate by verbal and gestic aggression. You could be said to swagger *with* someone, as you might fight with someone, but it doesn't mean the same thing; on the contrary, if you swagger successfully you don't need to fight. Swaggering is intimidation as a style.

As such, it is akin to bluffing, and one way to stage the swaggerer is to arrange for his bluff to be called. Recurrently, the big talker is tested by the comic plot and found to be a coward: the classic example is Falstaff, but something similar happens to Jonson's pseudo-gliadiator Bobadill in *Every Man In His Humour*^{*}, and a year or two later, in *Satiromastix* (1601), Dekker does it to a blustering poet who is clearly meant to represent Jonson himself. The taunt is also sexual; to swagger and then not perform is specifically a failure of masculinity. So it is not surprising that the cross-dressing heroines we have encountered – Bess in *The Fair Maid of the West*^{*} and Moll in *The Roaring Girl*^{*} – both have scenes where they humiliate a braggart by first disarming him and then revealing that he has yielded to a girl. The act of 'drawing' marks the break between show and substance: this, implicitly, is when we find out what our man is really made of.

But that harshly judgemental moment is not all there is to it. Pistol comes into the Boar's Head despite the landlady's reservations, and, sure enough, gets into a violent and pointless confrontation with the local whore. Urged to leave, he declaims:

These be good humours indeed! Shall packhorses
And hollow pamper'd jades of Asia,
Which cannot go but thirty mile a day,

Compare with Caesars and with Cannibals
And Troiant Greeks? (2.4.163–7)

This is a rather blurry memory of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, who harnesses the kings he has conquered to his chariot and drives them before him in what became one of the best-known stage images in the whole of English Renaissance drama:

Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia!
What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day
And have so proud a chariot at your heels
And such a coachman as great Tamburlaine . . . ? (2 *Tamburlaine*, 4.3.1–4)

What is the relationship, here, between the character who is being quoted and the one who is quoting him, the conquering hero and the swaggering rascal?

Most obviously, it is comic incongruity: the high language (triumphing over the kings of Asia) is applied to a low situation (being thrown out of the pub). But high and low are more intricately connected than that. For one thing, Tamburlaine is 'low' himself, a shepherd whose victories are essentially successful banditry, and whose treatment of the defeated kings is a form of comic debasement. Not only that, but, as we saw in discussing the play, the decisive dramatic form of Tamburlaine's power is his big speeches; he rapidly became a byword for aggressively inflated rhetoric. As early as 1589, for example, Thomas Nashe was sniping at 'alchemists of eloquence who (mounted on the stage of arrogance) think to outbrave better pens with the swelling bombast of bragging blank verse'.⁴ In this kind of attack the arrogance of Tamburlaine, vaunting himself above kings and emperors, is almost indistinguishable from that of Marlowe, pushing ahead of better poets with his showy verse; the conflation locates Tamburlaine, after all, in the touchy little world of literary London. And there are indeed signs that he had currency on the street: in 1593, when the city had one of its periodic outbreaks of xenophobia, one of the provocations was a verse pinned to a church door, threaten-

⁴ Preface to Greene's *Menaphon*, in Thomas Nashe, *Works*, ed. R. B. McKerrow (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), vol. 3, p. 311.

ing violence against immigrant craftsmen, and signed ‘Tamburlaine’.⁵ In short, it seems from several points of view that the conquering hero precisely is a swaggering rascal.

The literal connection between the two levels, of course, is the heroic actor. Pistol’s fantasy is not that he is Tamburlaine at the gates of Babylon, but that he is Edward Alleyn on the stage of the Rose. Alleyn was the tragic theatre’s first star, and several of his subsequent roles are copies of Tamburlaine. Here for instance is the tyrant Scilla in Thomas Lodge’s *The Wounds of Civil War*, staged by Alleyn’s company and printed in 1594:

For, were the throne where matchless glory sits
Impal’d with furies threatening blood and death,
Begirt with famine and those fatal fears
That dwell below amidst the dreadful vast,
Tut, Scilla’s sparkling eyes should dim with clear
The burning brands of their consuming light,
And master fancy with a forward mind,
And mask repining fear with awful power.
For men of baser metal and conceit
Cannot conceive the beauty of my thought.
I, crowned with a wreath of warlike state,
Imagine thoughts more greater than a crown . . . (2.1.6–16)

The driving pentameters and hyperbolic imagery are sub-Marlowe, but what is startling is the stress on *theatrical* resources. Although what Scilla is saying is that nothing can discourage him from seizing the crown, the powers he claims as his own are not political at all; they have to do with ‘mastering’ fancy, ‘masking’ fear and ‘imagining’ great thoughts; they are the distinctive powers of the actor. This is only quite tenuously a speech about governing Rome; the speaker’s real constituency is the audience in the theatre, which he will dominate by his eyes, his voice, his imagination, his nerve – in other (less dazzled) words, by swaggering.

So it is not just that the Eastcheap bully apes the dramatic hero; it is equally that the dramatic hero is the apotheosis of the Eastcheap bully. Neither of them is going to fight anyone, the one because he is really a

⁵ The verse is described in Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), pp. 40–1.

coward, the other because he is really an actor. Both radiate energy, despite their fraudulence, because of the intensity with which they imagine being greater and more glorious than they are. That is why bombast remains at the heart of Elizabethan popular theatre, however many times the tyrant is demonized or the braggart exposed and shamed. Swelling, boasting, threatening and commanding the crowd, the theatre's great swaggerers embody the beautiful thought that power can fall into the hands of those who are not entitled to it.

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