**Untying and Deconstructing the text in Post-Shakespearean Renaissance Tragedies: Theoretical underpinnings**

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There is a case to be made that the Jacobean dramatists namely, Thomas Middleton, Cyril Tourneur, John Webster and John Ford were changing the scope of tragedy as generally perceived away from both Senecan and Aristotelian models. In this, they included elements of self-parody, where the capacity of the self to fashion itself is satirized. Out of this generic polyphony, something distinctive emerged.

Recent studies of Jacobean theatre note the shift of emphasis from more integrated audiences to more variegated assemblies, hence providing less predictable forms of response from Court, or other private audiences – a change in theatrical conditions that fostered the heteroglossia of the tests presented there. With the opening of the Blackfriars and Red Bull auditoria, and several less enduring venues, the theatre drew on several aspects of class consciousness, not just one. This may be witnessed in Webster's relationship with his audiences; in both his prefaces to *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, he complains (in the printed versions of 1612-14) of ill-judging critics and a malcontent audience.

In his dedicatory note to the play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, he refers to "the ignorant scorners of the Muses (that like worms in libraries seem to live only to destroy learning) shall wither, neglected and forgotten". In addition, his "To The Reader" of *The White Devil*, expresses a similar complaint of ill-judging critics:

And that since that time I have noted, most of the people that come to that playhouse resemble those ignorant asses (who, visiting stationers' shops, their use is not to inquire for good books, but new books)... , for should a man present to such an auditory, the most sententious tragedy

that ever was written, observing all the critical laws, as height of style and gravity of person, enrich it with the sententious Chorus, and, as it were life and death, in the passionate and weighty *Nuntius*: yet after all this divine rapture, *Odura messorum ilia*, the breath that comes from the uncapable multitude is able to poison it.

A breach has opened between public expectation and private (writerly) vocation. One cannot account for this perception by recourse to changes in theatrical conditions alone. As Catherine Belsey (in *The Subject of Tragedy*) and Jonathan Dollimore (in *Radical Tragedy*) both point out, James' accession (and the formalization of the Mastership of the Revels) brought a certain cultural relief, but at the same time it helped exploit the isolating effects of fundamentalist Anglicanism, where the sentiments of James' re-issued Basilicon Doron helped sway public belief towards the more deterministic aspects of the Thirty-Nine Articles – namely, (a) the personal responsibility felt in saving one's soul, and (b) the alarming doubt as to whether one were going to be successful or not.

Several contemporary tragedies reflect more complex writer-audience relationships, and a concentration on Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611), John Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604), Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610) can help illustrate how much the form was capable of reflecting such collision with harsh realism. In examining these works, we are in need of a model or method that can take stock of how a variegated audience can be part of the overall effect. And once again Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the "dialogic" imagination can prove a valuable aid.

Mikhail Bakhtin's unique contribution to literary study lies, as we have noted, in his attempt to fuse historical and formalist interpretations of literature. Language, he argues, is not solely a system of differences with no

positive link to reality, but rather composed of historically specific "utterances" that are only fully comprehensible given a particular social organization, and that literary work often provides an opportunity to play with orthodox social references by allusion of irony, a subversion of what exists to provide a glimpse of what could be. He emphasizes the "dialogue" formed between a writer and his/her "potential" audience. This is always veiled when we view this speech act from a historical or social distance. Analysis of these "dialogic" factors is a safeguard against the great sin of anachronism. Also it takes far more seriously than is the traditional case apparently fractured and perhaps "unofficial" forms of writing (such as the Socratic dialogue or Menippean satire). Because of their close engagement with a particular historical period, they provide privileged access to social, and not just aesthetic, assumptions. Literary value, from this perspective, is never metaphysical, but always relative to our historical location. This process of literary expression Bakhtin termed "carnivalization", where the popular and communal forms of celebration associated with "carnival" (fool becoming wise or beggars kings) invade the more acceptable, and hence safer, genres (*Dialogic,* 279).

Both of these perceptions allow us to see how literary forms can challenge the univocal and authoritative status of the "author", manifested in "monologic" work. In contrast, a "dialogue" with the reader may employ several parodic or allusive borrowing from other kinds of writings and authors, and "carnivalization" supplies a "polyphonic" or multiple-voiced account with little attempt at "closure" which would derive from the placing of such varied accents in some hierarchy. This textual subtlety involves the reader in an active way. As Bakhtin put it, "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly oriented towards future answer word. It provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction "(*Dialogic*, 280). "Context" cannot be confined to verbal limits.

The forms of writing favored by Bakhtin are dynamic (as opposed to monumental) and responsive or tactical (as opposed to polemical). They may not be idiomatic in form, but they still reach out to a local readership with a focussed set of meanings, and, in so doing, often have to dismantle the canonical tastes that at any one time constitute "literature".

What is often left out of the equation is the necessary part played in the work of interpretation by a third term between the writer and the intended readership: audience-as-writer or writer-as-own-reader (for there is very little to differentiate these concepts). If the "author" is always a relative concept, and never an absolute, then texts never issue from the "individual subject".

What Bakhtin highlights is the divided nature of audience expectation, its official responses warring with its unofficial desires. A literary text especially the drama enters into dialogue with the traditional and the established. What we have to do is make a distinction between any culture's official image of itself (which is always impossibly coherent and unitary) and on the other hand, its series of divisions and lack of order which make drama possible.

Jacobean drama, unlike its Elizabethan maturity, does not obey the normal Aristotelian pattern where there is only one action and everything conduces to that action. In order to simplify dramatic symbols, commentators ignore various areas of symbolic effect. Deconstruction chooses not to ignore those because its goal is not clear prosaic statements of the author's apparent intention but an understanding of how we project our desires for coherence onto their literary texts. Literary texts have symbolic existence rather than an actual or prosaic existence. Therefore, deconstructionists are always on the look out for irony where the manifest

meaning of one scene or one speech is always undermined by the total effect of the whole document.

The text's own gap of self-doubt and of not knowing where to go has been defined by Derrida in has book *Aporias*. He states that:

… The very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the inferiority of a secret. There, in sum, is this place of aporia, there is no longer any problem (12).

Thus, a moment of "aporia" becomes an impasse for the commentator who wishes to simplify; it is also an opportunity to grant the dramatic text its own unprosaic power. For there to be clear distinctions between Good and Evil, there must be a simplification of the human condition. The revenger, however, in carrying out his purpose seeks his own demise in a deep sense, not consciously but as part of a mechanism over which he/she has no control.

While Derrida's approach is universal, applying to all texts, this present study is, limited by chronology, by dates linking it to the reign of James I. This is not merely fortuitous, for, as I have attempted to point out, the Jacobean period seemed similarly confronted by aporistic forces, even if it also demonstrated desperate attempts to pull away from them. Studies of reader response add to our sense of how horizons of meaning lend preliminary constructive power to textual signs. They further quasi-sociological investigation into how certain texts *have been read*. Notion of predicted readers or an audience will affect how an author regards the whole process of art and its relation to social expectation. Playwrights, especially,

may entertain the illusion of a free hand to play, yet, especially in the early modern period, a published text's relation to an original intention was never a direct one. Transindividual factors may be understood as *potentially* operational across a broad area of cultural activity and so may be capable of validation at that generalized level. In Patrocinio P. Schweickart's work on the perspectivity of feminist reading there is a careful decision to resist total subjectivity, that is, to avoid the premise that the only valuable meanings one discovers in, or brings to, the literary work are ones that others are unlikely to share! That they may be in the eyes of the "world" accidental or eccentric does not mean that we can be sure that they are more telling or simply more genuine. Validity, in Schweickart's sense, can be invoked simply by recognizing that a reading can win assent from a particular community of readers at particular time. And that latter point can be linked to political awareness.

The consensus on Jacobean tragedy has fostered the growth of certain norms of expectations. As Howard Norland complained, there seems to be no clear moral direction or endorsement of accepted social values. There is also some concern at the mixed nature of the entertainment offered, how the grotesque and farcical contribute to or detract from the tragic effect. There are also some other considerations that might relegate these plays to the position of context rather than canonical texts, what Northrop Frye calls in reference to the tragic myth; "a disinterested quality in literary experience" (*Anatomy*, 206). Far from balance and objectivity, Jacobean tragedy veers toward local effect and deep emotional involvement with one crucial difference from Shakespeare's tragic experience – the lack of a clear heroic code that would enable us to favor such tragic heroes without reservations. Is it the case, as Brian Morris and Roma Gill point out, that this creates a problem of tone in order to add to and clarify such readings of Jacobean tragedy (*The Atheist's*, xxx). I intend to use Derrida's concept of "aporia"

coupled with *Bakhtin's* view of the "dialogic" to erect an alternative standard of assessment, one that takes greater account of the divided nature both of theatrical creation and also an audience's response.

As recently as 1990, Robert N. Watson in his essay on tragedy for <u>the Cambridge Companion of English Renaissance Drama</u> talked of _" the lurid excesses of revenge tragedy " and "the pull of horror on our sympathetic emotions in *the revenger's tragedy* is rarely equal to the pull of excess on our comic intellect" (319-333). Watson does not find this sensation of excess thrilling, but this leads us to one important question: are assumptions about Jacobean tragedy falsely guided by enlightenment prejudices against impurities of from and mixed rhetorical styles?

One of the distracting assumptions behind theatrical criticism is that dramatic works are most powerful when they are cohesive and simple. The cohesion of a work of art does not always ensure its direct display of emotion. It is when our expectations are disappointed that we see a wider world than that suggested by Aristotle. Secondly, there is a reliance on the notion of artistic autonomy when referring to the works of playwrights. As Stephen orgel states in his article, "What is a Text?" "all theatrical literature, must be seen as basically collaborative in nature" (*Staging The Renaissance*, 87). This means not only that a text was staged by many hands and that the distance traveled from text to drama could be a long one, but also that authors often censor themselves on the one hand or simply find the terms to express themselves, on the other, by reference to inevitably abstract notions of audience. This is largely what Bakhtin implies when he favors dialogic texts rather than monologic ones. For Derrida, the figural excess that is produced by any linguistic statement is part of what he calls an "aporia" or "a seemingly insoluble logical difficulty: once a system has been 'shaken' by following its totalizing logic to its final consequences, one finds an excess which cannot be construed within the rules of logic, for the excess can only

be conceived as neither this nor that, or both at the same time – a departure from all rules of logic. Difference often functions as an "aporia": it is difference in neither time nor space and makes both possible" (*Writing and Difference*, xvi-xvii).

What we are addressing are difficulties of understanding contradictions, and in Derrida's terms, difference which is a structure and a movement that cannot be achieved on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. Differance is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [espacement] by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is the production, simultaneously active and passive (the **a** of **differance** indicates this indecision as regards activity and passivity, that which cannot yet be governed and organized by that opposition), of intervals without which the 'full' terms could not signify, could not function (*On Deconstruction*, 97). Instead of high and low or moral/immoral, there is only distinction of items in a dialectical relationship.

In Paul De Man's *Allegories of Reading*, these "hidden articulations and fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities" (247) pit the unofficial images our society provides, seemingly subjective and accidental, against the apparently communal and accepted official images which in the last analysis have actually little to do with dramatic power. As David Underdown amongst others explore, excess was not just an aesthetic liberty; it was also an effect of social comment (44-72). A newly acceptable artistic form such as the drama was particularly well-suited to such representations, dynamic rather than definitive and monumental.

The inability of the tragic protagonists to grasp fully the impact of the action in which they are a part is strangely similar to the difficulties that surround critical interpretation of the plays. Individuals have to simplify in order to achieve motivation and direction. For the Jacobean plays, a

deterministic universe supplied the hope of a cultural core of meaning that was often absent. The irony lies in the lack of manifest divinity that would explain why and how such determinism is part of human existence.

The lack of full narrative resolution in the plays mirrors a pervasive sense of inexorable difficulty that many Jacobean sensed about their culture. Seneca supplied the tragic genre with heroes capable of immense courage and tolerance but was absorbed into a predominantly Christian ambience on the Elizabethan stage.

It is quite clear that far from the wishes of the king and the court, Jacobean England was riddled by cultural conflicts. As Underdown puts it, the main area of conflict for the political classes centered on the refusal of "the Protestant country gentry and middling sort" (the gentry) to countenance "the corrupt and popish extravagance of the Court and its hangers-on" (72).

What was becoming evident but had yet to achieve full political expression, was a split between traditional reliance on a vertical hierarchy and a more democratic emphasis on moral reformation, personal responsibility and individualism. This split is part of both provincial and London life and helps explain the growing distinction between private playhouses (not always needing regal license) and public arenas where the vitality of this debate had to be carefully coded to avoid legal censure.

The Jacobean age and its culture were fascinated by the clash of public and private identities. The difficulty of ascribing all of the many areas of figurative excess and varied action to some unified and carefully calculated individual intention is simply what those who have read their Derrida and Bakhtin would have expected. Far from identifying the plays under critical consideration as ambiguous, we ought to consider them as polemical, far from reading them as royalist or conformist, we should find their theatre

radical and interventionist, stating multiple truths in multiple voices. This does not mean that these plays are to be regarded as sharing the same political and philosophical platform. The glory of Vindice is his revenge; the saving grace of Charlemont is his refusal to revenge. *The Revenger's Tragedy* stages a multiplicity of diverse voices – whereas Vindice's claim for the reinstitution of justice might be seen as a moral one, yet his hysteric quest for revenge and his poisoning of the duke is horrifying and immoral. However, what these plays do share is the same problematic, the same nexus of anxieties and preoccupations that produce figural vitality in the face of death and the constant reminders of its proximity. No king or guardian angel can intervene to help the individuals in their predicament.

Consequently, my contention is that a similar distinction should be made between the Shakespearean stage and the non-Shakespearean Jacobean drama. Whereas the Shakespearean stage could be seen as essentially centripetal-upholding a sense of moral order and the official conception of monarchy, the non- Shakespearean Jacobean drama which aimed at a more diverse audience, can be seen as closer to the novel in its mingling of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. Viewed from a Bakhtinian critical perspective, Jacobean drama, stages a multiplicity of diverse heteroglot voices and world views which in turn state multiple truths for a diverse audience, and, as such, should not be dismissed as flawed by its moral ambiguity.

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**تلخيص:**

إن نظريات النقد الأدبي Traditional Critical Theory تصنف التراجيديا (Post-Shakespearean) التي صدرت بعد حقبة شكسبير بأنها إنتاج أدبي ينقصه المحور والحل الأخلاقي للمعضلة المجسدة. كذلك أن الشخصيات المصورة في هذه المسرحيات هي ممزقة وغير مستقرة وهنالك جو من الضباب وعدم التأكد (Uncertainty) بمصير الشخصية المركزية والوضع الإنساني الذي ينزلق إلى الهاوية (Abyss).

لكن عندما نطبق نظرية ميخائيل باختين بما يتعلق بقوة الخيال الديالوجي (Dialogic Imagination) ونظرية ديريدا مفهموم الابوريا (Aporia) نستطيع أن نستنتج أن التراجيديا Jacobean مخصصة بالأصل إلى شرائح مجتمع متنوعة وهي قريبة جدا بمضامينها إلى الرواية (Novel) بحيث أنها تقلع عن البؤرة المركزية (Centripetal) بعكس التراجيديا الشكسبيرية التي تجسد المونارخيا Monarchy وتعرض الحل الايجابي الأخلاقي (Moral Resolution of the Conflict) .

**תקציר:**

הערכה ספרותית ביקורתית של הדרמה הפוסט-שקספיריאנית הייתה בדרך כלל שלילית , בשל חוסר יכולתה של זו ליצור דמויות עקביות, ובשל התחושה הכללית של העדר פתרון מנקודת מבט מוסרית .

בניגוד להערכות ביקורתיות כאלה הגורסות כי הדו-ערכיות הינה בבחינת פגם, אני טוען שלפי העקרונות של הביקורת הפוסט-מודרנית אפשר לראות בחוסר העקביות הזאת היבט חיוני וחיובי מבחינה דרמטית. לעניין זה, הבנתו של מיכאיל באכטין (Mikhail Bakhtin) את כוח הדמיון ״הדיאלוגי״ (dialogic) והמושג של ״אופוריה״ (aporia) אצל דרידה עשויים להיות לנו לעזר רב-ערך .

אני גורס כי קיים הבדל חד בין השלב השייקספירי לבין הדרמה היעקוביניית הלא-שייקספירית.בעוד שאת הדרמה השייקספירית יש לראות כשואפת ביסודה למרכז- תוך חיוב הכרת הסדר המוסרי והתפיסה היסודית של המונארכיה- את הדרמה היעקוביניית הלא-שייקספירית, המכוונת לקהל יעד מגוון יותר, יש לראות כקרובה יותר לרמן – בעירוב מגמותיו הצנטריפוגליות הצנטריפטליות. מנקודת מבט באכטיניית בקורתית, הדרמה היעקוביניית מציגה מיגוון של קולות רבים ושונים והשקפות עולם המבטאות אמיתות רבות לקהל יעד מגוון. בתור כזאת, אין לדחותה כפגומה בשל ערפולה המוסרי .