

The Transformation of the Tragic Vision in Jacobean Drama

John Webster, John Ford and Thomas Middleton

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Introduction

Artistic forms do not develop alongside historical events. The accession of James I in 1603 had a gradual and indirect effect on the factors that fostered dramatic representations. However, if the term Jacobean Tragedy is accurate when considering aesthetic forms, then we must observe what distinguishes it from earlier ideals and artistic techniques. Distinguished from the dominant forms of Renaissance drama which preceded it, and having implications for the type of plays that were to be written in the Caroline period, Jacobean drama, though diverse and profuse, marks a departure from its Elizabethan maturity.

It is the aim of this thesis to examine several plays in a new context: that of the apparent decadence of vision and dilution of tragic form which critics have generally observed in relation to the works of John Webster , John Ford and Thomas Middleton. This decadence and dilution is not a matter of simple chronology, which places the plays of Middleton before those of Ford. For the purpose of this thesis, I have treated the six plays almost synchronously, as contributing comparable elements of plot, character, theme, and setting to the transformation of the tragic genre in the period.

It does not attempt to be totally comprehensive in its scope because it focusses on those plays which might show that their authors are grappling with emergent and at times, radical redefinitions of the tragic genre as a whole. A distinct tendency towards a similar approach is manifested in the three dramatists' works which, among other things, embody consistent patterns in their new experiments with the tragic genre and in their sceptical representations of the plays' social contexts and themes. The plays of Cyril Touneur such

as *The Atheist's Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, are not chosen for instance, not only because there are problems surrounding the authorship of these particular plays, but because it was considered that they are not consistently part of the new directions mapped out here.

There has been immense recent critical interest in the tragedies of this period largely because their aim is taken to be one of *interrogations and criticism* of what were traditional responses to dramatic expression. This was only made possible by cultural forces that emerged from a more general debate about the nature of man and his duty to God. This has several effects on the secular realm of how man should organize his society politically and ideologically. The particular identity of the widely divergent Jacobean drama which is produced by a range of dramatists with individual styles, embodies the tension and the struggles of the peculiar character of the Jacobean period which, as Clive Bloom puts it,

saw itself as precariously balanced between an older stable order of harmony between aristocrat and peasant and the new threat posed by an expanding, increasingly alienated urban society of merchants and artisans.¹

As Jonathan Dollimore has argued there were subversive preoccupations not confined just to artistic representations, taking in "a critique of ideology, the demystification of political and power relations and the decentring of 'man' "².

It has therefore been my approach to examine closely the kinds of mixed response called for by the plays studied. What type of complex 'reading' is required to understand their 'ambiguous' conclusions? Why do they contain so few strong moral examples or powerful political authorities in the representation of character and action?

In depicting a disintegration of those forces that ensure social cohesion, are those writers celebrating new found freedom or are

they more interested in representing new dangers? or both at the same time? It is therefore essential that a full context for these plays is sought outside conventional artistic parameters, since these questions imply a continuum between the theatre and general history .

Unlike the dramatic realizations of Elizabethan dramatic conventions which invariably tended to see individual human experience in relation to divine purpose, the dramatic works of John Webster, John Ford and Thomas Middleton demonstrate the disintegration of a preconceived divine purpose, and the ideals of human strength and integrity in perverse societies and debauched courts which are teeming with corruption and characterized by dislocation and subversiveness.

This inevitably leads to new formal directions taken by tragedy and also an alternative responsiveness on behalf of its audience in terms of the comic and satiric confusion, the aesthetic incoherence and the deliberately "impure" art which these plays collectively manifest.

Despite its technological advancement, modern life seems to be permeated with tragedy. The objective, methodical disbelief in divine doctrines; the incessant drive for scientific perfection (paradoxically parallel to the sickening awareness of our inadequacy); the wars, the hatreds, the racial discriminations; the insane scurrying after uniqueness and variety and prestige; all these and many other matters are tragic indications pointing in one direction: pathos.

The idea of tragedy touches almost all aspects of modern life. Yet, however we manifest it in our literature, tragedy seems incapable of elevating our souls to the sublimity which classic literature assumed it to fulfill. Today we read about the tragic death of an ordinary 'Salesman'; we lament the tragic toll of highway accidents or flood casualties; we mourn the tragic loss of a great champion or hero in much the same automatic fashion. Neither a realistic nor an elevated presentation of these actions in literature excite us beyond the matter of fact and the normal. Tragedy fails in its modern aspect to

transcend our unshakeable scepticism and cynicism. Its proportions are no longer heroic and its dimensions are narrowed down to ordinary everyday occurrences³.

This so-called existential feeling of tragedy is paradoxically the result of awareness. We are too much aware of the ingredients of life; aware, that is, of the futile mortality of human existence, aware of our inability to contact anything beyond it. Our spiritual failure, juxtaposed with scientific achievements, creates a great sense of psychological perplexity. The social manifestation of this perplexity is reflected in a vulgarly sensual lust for life and in the literature which dominates a great part of our reading of poetry and prose fiction. The actual motive behind this sensuality is, I think, anxiety and despair, which seems to stem from a cowardly and irresponsible lack of belief. We have grown simply to be a race of nonbelievers. Nor are we possessed with enough courage to overcome this feeling of anxiety and despair. Our dejected surrender is, therefore, a sign of a deteriorated morality. Science is perhaps mainly responsible for this tendency of not believing. We tend to be sceptical of everything that is not proved scientifically. Yet for all its experimentation, science has not been able to assuage our discontent.

All generalisations are vulnerable, but the similarity of the Jacobean era to modern times seems so striking that one is inclined to believe that ours is only a more sophisticated extension of their raw uneasiness. The Renaissance represents a civilization that is only now beginning to disintegrate. Now that European, or more generally western civilization seems to have reached its climax -far beyond the expectations of the most optimistic -we are observing a moral relapse which will perhaps be the virus of disintegration.

If, however, it is hard to find any plausible explanation for our anxiety, the Jacobeans may be more easily excused and their reactions more readily pardoned. They had emerged from medieval conventions of belief and hierarchy into a bewildering maze of new habits of thought and new values. These proved, despite their brilliance, to be threatening to their peace of mind and their sense of security.

Critical changes in the nation's social and economic structure and changes in moral attitude were accompanied by a gloomy vision of the degeneracy and decay of the society. Margot Heinemann in *Puritanism and Theatre*; Thomas Middleton and *Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1980) (p.3), defines the quality of the Jacobean age by stating that "England was in the process of change from a society based on rank and status to one based more directly on wealth and property"⁴. The startling growth of the population, especially in London, and London's financial dominance indicates the materialistic aspect of the Jacobean age. The nobility and gentry, who depended on inherited wealth derived from the ownership of land, flocked to London, which became a centre for conspicuous consumption and display. By the seventeenth century, the richest merchants were wealthier than the majority of peers.

Therefore, the Jacobean era witnessed unusually rapid change and tension, involving most social groupings in one way or another. Many of the recurrent themes and situations developed in both tragedy and comedy were suggested or given audience appeal by real conflicts in society and its standards of value, which were new enough to be newsworthy. Convention cannot be plucked by the root, and the tension between medieval and renaissance concepts resulted in a chaotic absorption in life. The secular obsession in which they indulged was only a sub-conscious attempt to escape the perplexing labyrinth in which they found themselves. Intellectuals developed such scepticism that they too contributed to a worsening of the spiritual climate.

Jacobean Tragedy: Its Characteristics and Scope

A critical dilemma arises when considering Jacobean tragedy. The experience we normally get from reading and seeing the plays is emotionally incoherent. Some critics view Jacobean tragedy as "impure" when compared and contrasted to Shakespearean plays such as *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*, which are fairly classified as "pure art" in terms of the tragic absolutes which they maintain. M. C. Bradbrook's and T. S. Eliot's critical verdict on John Webster's plays, for example, indicates that Webster's dramatic technique needs to be understood in relation to the 'confusion of convention and realism' which is assumed to be the key to Webster's alleged failure as a dramatist.⁵ They would say that Webster's method of mixing unrealistic conventions with psychological-realistic representation leads to a lack of satisfying structure in his plays.⁶ Obviously, both of John Webster's main 'tragedies' are representative of the "impure art" of the Jacobeans. Both plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, mark a noticeable deviation from the traditional tragic experience which we undergo and encounter upon reading or seeing any of the above-mentioned Shakespearean plays.

The classic formulation of the nature of the Shakespearean tragic experience (the "pure" art of Shakespearean tragedy) is given by A. C. Bradley in his lecture: "The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy": "Whatever may be said of accidents, circumstances and the like, human action is, after all, presented to us as the central fact in tragedy, and also as the main cause of the catastrophe. That necessity which so much impresses us is, after all, chiefly the necessary connection of actions and consequences. For these actions we, without even raising a question on the subject, hold the agents responsible; and the tragedy would disappear for us if we did not. The critical action is, in greater or lesser degree, wrong or bad. The catastrophe is, in the main, the return of this action on the head of the agent. It is an example of justice; and that order which present alike

within the agents and outside them, infallibly brings it about, is therefore just. The rigour of its justice is terrible, no doubt, for a tragedy is a terrible story; but in spite of fear and pity, we acquiesce, because our sense of justice is satisfied".⁷

A more recent and 'revealing' formulation of the nature of Shakespearean tragic experience is provided by John Bayley: "But with Shakespeare the mere fact and story of consciousness replaces both action and idea. It is the imminence of action which brings that consciousness into prominence, but it remains independent of action. The tragedy itself may be bounded in a nutshell, but the minds of Hamlet, of Macbeth and Othello, make them kings of infinite space. The usurpation by the mind of both practical action and purposeful idea in tragedy - the mind of a murderer, a revenger, a man and a woman in love - this is far from being the sum of Shakespearean tragedy; but it is the most important feature of Shakespeare's relations with the tragic form".⁸ This notion has been called into question by, among others, Catherine Belsey. In her book, *The Subject of Tragedy*, she argues that the idealistic conception of the subject which liberal humanism proposes - that the subject is the free unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history, knowing, autonomous and unified essence - is undermined by a cultural, materialist conception of the self. According to Belsey's political argument, the whole premise of traditional literary criticism is based on the fallacy that human nature does not change. Belsey claims that the human subject does not constitute an essence (a core of being), but it is culturally and politically constructed. She goes on to say that there are only conceptions of the self which are constructed according to the assumptions of a particular culture. Therefore, the appeal to universal truths is not valid any longer. It is relative to social, political and cultural contradictions and constraints.⁹

If, as Belsey believes, Jacobean tragedy exhibits a greater interest in political and social concerns, it is remarkable that they do so whilst

exciting particularly powerful emotion. Both the audience's response and the represented passions form an almost baroque symbiosis, where contrivances of form intensify the emotion, not detract from it. Madeleine Doran has noted the lack of coherence, the absence of any morally sustaining convention in Jacobean drama and the manner in which "action and statement, action and character, or different parts of the action, pull in different directions".¹⁰ However, it is possible to advance an alternative hypothesis: that how we relate our description of plot to our accounts of the emotions unlocked by it, actually describes a potentially successful formal synthesis, where its passionate and lyrical moments stand out in greater relief because they are regarded in contexts that seem initially to be inappropriate. The plots of Jacobean tragedy are highly artificial, Senecan, and based on stereotyped villainy. The convoluted structures of deception and intrigue constitute the plays' narratives. As Cyrus Hoy has remarked; "To the extent that the plot of a Jacobean tragedy is an imitation of human deviousness, it is doomed to a labyrinthine complexity".¹¹

In considering tragedy, one must be prepared to recognize that (with the exception of Shakespeare's plays of the period) Jacobean tragedy has almost nothing to do with flaws of character destroying men who are in general better than the average. Jacobean tragedy has, on the contrary, subtly drained away the essence of Aristotle's pronouncements on the nature of tragic personages. Although they are drawn from high estate, such as *The Duchess of Malfi* herself, yet they are not better than the average; even distinctly worse in a moral sense. Hoy is surely accurate when he claims that:

Jacobean tragedy is in effect Senecan tragedy of the revenge variety; its hero is as often as not a villain, and its artifice is compact of intrigues masterminded by a principal manipulator, counter-intrigues mounted by his adversary, disguises (often several of them, one superimposed upon another) [as in *The Duchess*

of *Malfi*, *The White Devil*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Broken Heart*], and a denouement that features a disconcerting exposure of the parties to the villainy that has been seen to be rampant.¹²

By the second half of James I's reign, the drama had available the technical and artistic means for creating those spectacles of grotesque and baroque horror and heart-wounding pity that bear witness to the sense of evil, depravity, degeneration, preoccupation with death, the vanity of human striving and the nightmare unpredictability of the society and life being depicted, which informs the Jacobean tragic vision. Instances of grotesque horror and torture are abundant in Jacobean drama, including the death of Vittoria Corombona in *The White Devil*, the Duchess of Malfi surrounded by madmen in her prison, and Giovanni entering with Annabella's heart on his dagger in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. In his article, "Masques and Murderers: Dramatic Method and Ideology in Revenge Tragedy and the Court Masque", Darryll Grantley refers to the consistent element of baroque horror and bodily dismemberment which is pervasive in Jacobean drama. He argues:

Other macabre effects in these plays involve the use of specific stage props, objects which either possess or are invested with qualities of exotic horror. These include the severed head of the executed younger brother and the disguised and poisoned skeleton with which the Duke is murdered in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the fumed picture and poisoned helmet in *The White Devil*, both unusual murder weapons, the dead man's hand and wax dummies in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the death's head which is used, as a pillow in *The Atheist's Tragedy* and the murdered man's finger in *The Changeling*.¹³

Such spectacles have an extravagant theatricality which makes great demands on our credulity.

The greatest Jacobean tragedies address themselves directly to the perversities of human will, moral disintegration, and the decadence of society whether spiritual or religious. The plays are saturated with a consciousness of human evil characterized by violence, death, deception, injustice, bribes, incest, deprivation, treachery, alienation. All of these contribute to a perversion of values which eventually leads to pessimistic, nihilistic, and desperate visions of human experience.

Jacobean drama addresses the decline in traditional renaissance concepts of state and attempts to combat its machiavellianism and materialism. The drama presents an image of growing social disorder, depicting rankly corrupt and debauched courts that may indirectly reflect that of James I. The ultimate reason for the darkness, the pervasive corruption and the nihilistic vision of Jacobean plays is the absence of traditional natural law from its world view. It is distinguished from the Elizabethan by its emphasis on the disintegration of the old social order, the sceptical deterioration of providentialism and the decentering of man. As Arthur C. Kirsch puts it: "... this drama declines when it is no longer

sustained by metaphysical reverberations, when providence disappears as a principle of structure as well as belief'.¹⁴

Influenced by Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill, E. p. Thompson, and Raymond Williams and assisted by the ideas of playwright Bertholt Brecht, Jonathan Dollimore, in *Radical Tragedy*, subjects the plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to a radical and materialist critique. Concerned with linking the period's literature to contemporary documentation of social and political history, Dollimore tries to make "a connection in the early seventeenth century between the undermining of these institutions [both church and state] and a theatre in which they and their ideological legitimization were subjected to sceptical, interrogative and subversive representations" (p.4).

He goes on to state that "Jacobean tragedy discloses ideology as misrepresentation, it interrogates ideology from within, seizing on and exposing its contradictions and inconsistencies and offering alternative ways of understanding social and political process" (p.8).

Unlike the metaphysical tradition of humanist criticism which has tended to read the plays of the period for their ultimate affirmation of a universal moral order and the essential dignity of man, Dollimore's critical perspective 'presupposes' that in the major tragedies of the period, sceptical disintegration of the providential dimension is accounted for. Moreover , he argues that decentring of man is the basis of an increasingly penetrating social and political realism.

Jonathan Dollimore's radical verdict on Jacobean drama is relevant and worth quoting. He asserts that: "it is, then, a tragedy which violates those cherished aesthetic principles which legislate that the ultimate aim of art is to order discordant elements, to explore conflict in order ultimately to resolve it, to explore suffering in order ultimately to transcend it".¹⁵ He points out also that Jacobean literary texts have inscribed within them this fundamental opposition between attempted coherence and actual incoherence and so 'express the contradictions of the social reality in which they are produced'.¹⁶

In addition to religious scepticism, a chaotic vision of humanity, the sceptical disintegration of providentialism and the decentring of man which characterize Jacobean drama, it is relevant too to point out that the protagonists are composed of inconsistencies and contradictions. They are depicted as bereaved, dispossessed, corrupt, malcontent, alienated from their societies, satirical and vengeful. Jacobean protagonists are characterized by moral culpability, ambiguity, double-nature, discontinuous identity and social displacement. They lack the essentialist self-sufficiency which is the source of the individual's tragic potential in the previous Elizabethan phase of tragedy. The protagonists of Jacobean drama -Bosola, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Flamineo in *The White Devil*, Giovanni in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* -are decentred to reveal the social forces that both make and destroy them. Jacobean drama represents the vulnerability of the individual to the exploitation and machiavellianism of the court.

It is also relevant to note that those tragedies with female protagonists in the Jacobean period focus upon love and marriage, and have different themes and conventions than other tragedies. Women in these plays are defined by their sexual relationships. The Jacobean period saw women as tragic heroines for the first time in the history of English stage. Jacobean tragedies manipulate conventional treatments of women so as to achieve a dual exploration of the nature of authority and the nature of the psychological process of self-creation. Plays such as *The Duchess of*

Malfi, The White Devil, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, The Broken Heart, and The Changeling embody and highlight the subordination, oppression and subjection of women to the patriarchal system which restricted their freedom. Any woman transgressing the system of difference denoting 'nature' was outlawed as murderous or demonic, whore and witch. Webster's women, The Duchess and Vittoria, raise doubts about the traditional exercise of male authority. Their courage and defiance of their fate, and the manner by which they struggle to assert their integrity, or affirm their identities in a fallen society are paramount dramatic depictions which 'penetrate' through the inner selves and memories of the audience so that their effects are unforgettable.

The Subject of Tragedy analyzes the convergence of historical events and philosophical changes behind the rise of female protagonists of Jacobean tragedy. Belsey relates the emergence of the tragic heroine to the growing autonomy of the hero: "Woman has meaning in relation to man. And yet the instability which is the result of this asymmetry is the ground of protest, resistance, feminism" (p. a). This asymmetry, according to Belsey's argument, is one of the contradictions which characterized liberal humanism -the inequality of freedom:

While in theory all men are equal, men and women are not symmetrically defined. Man, the centre and hero of liberal humanism, was produced in contradistinction to the objects of his knowledge, and in terms of the relations of power in the economy and the state. Woman was produced in contradistinction to man, and in terms of the relations of power in the family.(p.a).

Belsey's sharpest discussion relates to the plight of women in an age that allotted them no coherent subjective position, no place to speak from. Belsey views the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as one of oppression and resistance.

Also pervasive is the blending of the "all-but-incompatible" modes of satire and tragedy; in this blending they may be mutually reinforced so as to produce artistically valid drama in the hybrid form of tragic satire. The subtle blending of tragedy, satire, and romance that characterizes such tragedies as *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The dramatists combine the conventional generic forms to match their own increasing awareness that reality presents just such a strange mixture of the noble and the ignoble, the sublime and the ridiculous, that no one of the conventional forms can alone convey any adequate sense of it. Since they set out to depict a complex world and a life which is elusive and difficult to characterize, they deviate from an aesthetic or a classical ideal of 'tragedy' which would not convey the irresolution of real and deceptive life.

The satiric dimension also has a didactic function and purpose. It teaches the spectators what they should and should not think, and what they should and should not do. The didactic function of the infusion of satire into the tragic experience is designed to admonish the spectators either explicitly or by implication. Shakespeare's plays, such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, seem to be conceived as imitations of life. No one can deny the "truth to life" of these plays which also embody satiric elements, yet their didactic function is fully integrated. The combination of satire with tragedy in these plays does not destroy a tragic experience which is focussed mainly upon a flawed tragic figure who is in general better than the average.

The significant departure lies in the new mode of representing this figure: that of satiric tragicomedy. Tragicomedy is the form that most fully explores the clash of extremes in the human condition. It demonstrates the incoherences of life and suggests the possibility of survival in the darkness. Plays such as *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Tis Pity She's a Whore* include tragedy and anti-tragedy, which expands and tests the tragic structure through ambiguity,

irony, theatrical self-consciousness, and self-critical rhetoric. Therefore, tragedy in its traditional aesthetic and classical sense is no longer an appropriate mode of artistic or dramatic representation, but is replaced by an extremely popular and dominant mode of the period - tragicomedy. Jacqueline Pearson takes the view that tragicomedy was the most appropriate mode of dramatic representation in the Jacobean period. She argues: "The whole movement of Jacobean tragedy is toward a mixed genre which could express the 'whole truth'... comedy and tragicomedy are treated not only as a threat which tragedy must face and overcome, but also as a form of real reservations about the tragic absolutes and as part of a rigorous critical double-vision."¹⁷ The Jacobean practice of extending tragedy by comic and satirical admixtures, thus produces a 'quasi-tragic' form closer to the dramatists' own non-absolutist interpretation of experience. Moreover, there is too much humour, irony and satire in the plays for our faith in the moral codes to escape untouched.

Although there are several differences and conflicts between the genres of satire and tragedy - satire being a low, mean and 'undignified' literary form, whereas tragedy is lofty and noble - yet it is debatable whether the infusion of satiric elements in the tragic structure shatters or reinforces the final effect of the play. As such, the element of satire may be the chief criterion in evaluating the achievements of the major Jacobean tragedians.

Critics also identify an attitude of opposition to aristocratic values, regarded as socially degenerate and nihilistic. The drama attacks aristocracy as morally degenerate. It indicts and satirizes the licentiousness and disintegration of the upper class and its absence of values. The futility and worthlessness of the existing social order, and the inherent corruption and the exploitation of the court, also furnish material for satire.

If we extend this observation further, we might conclude that Jacobean drama in its focus upon degenerate aristocracy, moral

corruption, disintegration and the absence of values prefigures many features of the present age. Even T. S. Eliot acknowledges this aspect of Jacobean drama. The atmosphere created in his *Waste Land* derives from that of Jacobean drama. Its issues, themes, and concerns seem to find an echo in a twentieth century similarly overwhelmed by deprivation, anxiety, victimization and exploitation.

Having presented what I take to be some of the major characteristics of Jacobean drama, I would like to summarize those which create the critical dilemma this "impure" drama has always posed: the overall pattern of equivocation and ambiguity that 'stamps' both characters and actions; absence of grandeur and heroism which typically characterize the main character; their labyrinthine complexity and excrescences of plot; events which are not always clearly motivated; unpredictable and unsure responses on the part of the audience which is confronted by a multiplicity of effects; moral ambivalence, or rather the absence of any morally sustaining convention; a blend of tragedy, satire, romance and irony-distorting tragic absolutes; extreme states of emotions and sensationalism; the disappearance of the providential dimension; the lack of any larger political dimensions; and finally the depiction of a nihilistic and chaotic society which is denied any resolution of order within the confines of the plays. All of the above-mentioned factors pose a critical problem in attempting to classify the plays into generic categories.

Conclusion:

It has been the object of this study to draw attention to emergent and at times radical redefinitions of the tragic genre in the Jacobean period. There are of course several strands of continuity between Elizabethan and Jacobean conceptions of tragedy, but even though earlier devices are retained, there are also new contexts provided for them in terms of the sceptical, interrogative and subversive representations of ideology, church, court and state.

In neo-Senecan forms of tragedy, for example, what appears to be bloody disorder to humans is in fact divine purpose. Within the period explored in the study, it is precisely this belief in providence which is affected. As is manifest in the individual treatments of John Webster, John Ford and Thomas Middleton, this new scepticism has a direct effect on aesthetic form. Arthur C. Kirsch and Jonathan Dollimore adopt complementary positions, as indicated in the Introduction. Whereas Arthur C. Kirsch argued that "... this drama declines when it is no longer sustained by metaphysical reverberations, when providence disappears as a principle of structure as well as belief"¹⁸, Dollimore's position is that tragedy can still be powerful when such idealism is absent; indeed, tragedy could make an art out of exploring such dissonance.

Throughout this study, choice has been made of three very individualistic and very different dramatists. In the work of Webster, Ford and Middleton, there are, however, certain consistent patterns which mark out the historical period in which they were writing as one of particularly intense debate and subversive preoccupations with a number of basic human concerns. It is a period which Clive Bloom describes, as one "of decadence, of a vulgarising of humanistic values -of a mounting political, artistic and cultural hysteria"¹⁹.

Unlike the Aristotelian pattern of tragedy in which disorder is

ultimately contained by a cathartic cleansing and restitution of order, the plays I have considered question the basis of all authority be it metaphysical or secular and consequently there is a striking alternative offered at the level of form to the orthodox tragic model.

In representing church and court life as devoid of spiritual and moral leadership, Webster, for instance, portrays a world which is teeming with corruption and where the Machiavel is free to offer a new materialism. This leads to a resolute demystification in representations of political and power relations, the decentring of man, accentuating the capacity of individuals to order their future and destiny in a perverse society .

What is perhaps of great significance in terms of literary history is the way that these rapid changes of outlook have an effect on matters of form. If, as many critics have pointed out, the plays I have considered are guilty of a lack of impact at their conclusion, then we cannot say that this is necessarily a case of miscalculation. Without divine intervention and without ideal human strength, these plots represent a world lacking in providential ordering and also orthodox heroism.

Footnotes

1. Clive Bloom, *Jacobean Poetry and Prose* (Basingstoke, 1988), p.2. For further study, the following list of references are helpful in terms of the Jacobean period's characteristics, its ideology and literature: firstly, Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century, 1600-1660* (Oxford, 1962), p.1 where he refers to the Jacobean age as an age of transition, marked by disruptive forces and terrifying flux leading all to chaos. Secondly, Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore, 1983), pp.1-3. Thirdly, Alan Sinfield, *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660* (London, 1983). Finally refer to G. P. V. Akrigg, *Jacobean Pageant or the Court of James I* (London, 1962), chs 14 and 17, and L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London, 1937; rept. 1962), pp.267-274.
2. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2nd ed (Brighton, 1989), p.4.
3. The decline in the concept and possibility of tragedy in the twentieth century has been a topic of academic discussion and exploration over the past twenty years. For further details see for example, George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London, 1961). Or, J. L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy, The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*, 2nd ed (London, 1968). Also, Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, Revised edition (London, 1979).
4. For further study, see F. J. Fisher, "The Development of London as a Centre of Conspicuous Consumption in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th ser., 30 (1948), pp.37 -50. In his article, Fisher discusses the immense and rapid growth of London which gave the opportunity for and became the main centre of

the commercial theatre. The process of change, whether materialistic or otherwise, led to a shake-up of social and moral codes.

5. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York, 1950), pp.96, 97.
6. M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, 2nd ed (Cambridge, 1952), pp.187, 194,211.
7. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1905; rept. 1958), pp.22-23.
8. John Bayley, *Shakespeare and Tragedy* (London, 1981), p.6.
9. Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London, 1985), pp.7 -10.
10. Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art* (Madison, 1954), p.354. She is also quoted by Cyrus Roy, " Artifice and Reality and the Decline of Jacobean Drama" in *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 13-14 (1970-71),169-180.
11. Cyrus Roy, "Artifice and Reality and the Decline of Jacobean Drama", *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 13-14 (1970-71), 169-180 (p.177). The article is revealing in terms of its exploration and discussion of the characteristics of Jacobean drama.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.174-175.
13. Darryll Grantley, "Masques and Murderers: Dramatic Method and Ideology in Revenge Tragedy and the Court Masque" in *Jacobean Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Basingstoke, 1988), pp.194- 212 (p.202).
14. Arthur C. Kirsch, *Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives* (Charlottesville, 1972), p.129.
15. Jonathan Dollimore, *op. cit.*, p.8.
16. *Ibid.*, p.68.
17. Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedie in the Plays of John*

Webster (Manchester, 1980), p.55.

18. Arthur C. Kirsch, *op.cit*, p.59.
19. Clive Bloom, *op.cit*, p.1-7.
20. Cyrus Hoy, "Jacobean Tragedy and the Mannerist Style", *Shakespeare Survey*, 26 (1973), 49-67 (p.49).
21. For further study, refer to R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1938, reprinted 1961), and to Alan Sinfield, *op.cit*.
22. The relation between the Refomation and economics is discussed by Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965), ch. 10, "Conspicuous expenditure", pp.249-268.
23. Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London, 1960), pp.35-36.
24. *Ibid.*, p.40.
25. *Ibid.*, pp.52, 53 respectively.
26. For a detailed study of the economic situation see L. C. Knights, , *op.cit*. and for the political situation see George M. Trevelyan, *England Under the Stuarts* (London, 1904).
27. L. G. Salinger, "The Social Setting", *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 2, ed. by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1955), p.21.
28. *Ibid.*
29. For further study, see Daniel C. Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple, Ben Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli* (New York, 1968).
30. Alvin Kernan, "The Plays and the Playwrights" in *The Revels History of Drama in English*, Vol. III, 1576-1613, ed. by Clifford Leech and T. W. Craik (London, 1975), pp.384-403 (p.385).
31. For further details, consult J. Goldberg, *James I and the Politics Literature* (Baltimore, 1983), pp.I-3.