

***Some Jacobean drama examined***  
***And analyzed in term of M. M. Bakhtin's***  
***The Dialogic Imagination and the notion of***  
***"Aporia" By Jacques Derrida***

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The traditional view of Jacobean theatre (excluding Shakespeare's) is dramatically ineffective because of its failure to produce consistent characters or coherent moral standards needs be traced to the school of New Criticism, which always sought to find an ultimate unity perceptible through the complexities and paradoxes of literature. The recognition in postmodernist critical theory of the prevalence in great literature of aporia , of internal parody , and of unresolved clashes of values , with subtexts undercutting main themes to reflect the final complexity of the human condition , offers an opportunity for reconsidering and reevaluating these plays . The change in critical theory in recent years thus permits us to reconsider these plays and to accord them a deeper regard than has been traditional in academic circles.

It has become a critical commonplace that the Jacobean and early Caroline periods of English literary history saw a sudden change in the audiences for drama and the systems of patronage that fostered its development. As Andrew Gurr and Peter Thomson have both noted, the growth of essentially private playhouses, such as the Blackfriars and the Phoenix or Cockpit in Drury Lane provided a relatively sophisticated repertory season, as opposed to the shorter runs at the public theaters, such as the second Fortune, the Globe and the Red Bull, often disdained for their pantomimes and more broadly based entertainments. For the dramatists who will provide the main focus for my study, this is of some consequence. The anticipation of audience antagonism is evident in most of Middleton's prefaces, for example, and challenges the assumption that the playwright assumed the role of communal spokesman. The conclusions to Ford's work are designed to be "interrogative" in Catherine Belsey's sense, to offer contradictory and unresolvable signals, and Webster's highly allusive verse becomes even more allusive at moments of the greatest dramatic intensity.

In Margot Heinemann's *Puritanism and Theatre* (1980) and Martin Butler's *Theatre and Crisis* (1984), as well as Kevin Sharpe's *Criticism and Compliment* (1987), Stuart culture emerges as fractured and far more ideologically combative than most commentators had hitherto allowed.

Whereas Court and Country had often been regarded as providing mutually exclusive images (see Zagorin, Rivers and Alston), recent research has uncovered much new material that points to potent civic self-consciousness. Social mobility engendered other mutabilities, and it is my contention that we can devise critical methods that can take account of how accepted Elizabethan genres and conventions were parodied or extended in the plays under investigation.

Questioning of convention lies behind the pervasive parodies of courtly love discourse in *The Changeling*. Beatrice Joanna, instead of acting as an integrated character in accordance with tradition, attempts to conform simultaneously to the contrasted ways she is perceived: for Alsemero, an idealized image, for DeFlores, a self-degraded victim. Similarly, the theatrical use of the aside (approximately two-thirds of the first ninety lines are expressed by this means), again suggests a dichotomy between the perceived and the actual. It also portrays the divide between private and public, that is a salient characteristic of Ford's tragic protagonists (see *The Broken Heart* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*). Social expectation is a debilitating obligation and visits moral Paradoxes on most of his significant characters.

There is a case to be made that these dramatists 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 a more variegated and hence less predictable form of response from Court, or other private audiences. With the opening of the Blackfriars and Red Bull auditoria, and several less enduring venues, 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. A breach has opened between public expectations 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 formalisation 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-Five 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) and Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603) 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. One such method can be found in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, and his understanding of the "dialogic" imagination.

Bakhtin's unique contribution to literary study lies in his attempt to fuse historical and formalist interpretations of literature. Bakhtin's central concerns can be illustrated with reference to two associated ideas: (a) that language is not solely a system of differences with no positive link to reality, but rather composed of historically specific speech acts that are only fully comprehensible given a particular social organization, and (b) 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.

- (a) 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 (see the four essays collected in Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981).
- (b) He 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 (in his *Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1984) "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.

Both of these perceptions allow us to see how literary forms can challenge the univocal and authoritative status of the "author", manifest in "monologic" work. In contrast, a "dialogue" with the reader may employ several parodic or allusive borrowings from other kinds of writings and authors, and "carnivalization" supplies a "polyphonic" or multiple-voiced account with little attempt at "closure" that 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 in his *The Dialogic Imagination*, "the word in living conversation is directly, blatantly oriented towards a future answer word. It provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction" (p. 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 anyone time constitute "literature".

Thus far, this is to construe Bakhtin's work merely as an aesthetics (which would be misleading). The stylistic variety of the Jacobean plays for analysis defies attempts to discover in them a coherence or even a secure "intention". 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". Meaning is always in process; indeed, it is often so multiple that it forms a "heteroglossia" of social voices so numerous in origin that it would be fruitless to try to isolate them for analysis: "all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup" (*DI*, p. 428). "Carnivalized" writing is thus merely an especially marked example of Bakhtin's perception of how literature is a *social* product.

For Bakhtin (and contemporaries), therefore, "literariness" ceases to be an end in itself, as literature is regarded as inescapably social *in composition* as well as consumption. This foregrounds the otherwise ignored prefatory material before the printed versions of the plays. For example, the mixture of styles in *The Atheist's Tragedy* and *The Maid's Tragedy* that veers between farce and traditional tragic forms (especially Act III.1 *or* the former [Montferrat's funeral] and-V.11 of the latter) is no blemish but rather a continuation of both plays' resolve to test common assumptions as to human nature in extreme situations (see especially the dialogue between Borachio and D'Amville in the opening act *ofAT*). The same rapid alternation between alternative stock responses to "character" is explored in *RTs* opening, when Tourneur (or Middleton) has Vindice comment on the torchlit procession both in the guise of Morality Interlocutor for the audience and also as a satirist. In *Sejanus* Jonson's anti-hero is part of a comment on contemporary matters. His "To the Readers", concedes that "to some nice nostril" the quotations might savour affected", but that he is drawing up a radical contract with his audience. In Stanley Fish's phrase, this is an "interpretive community", where certain constraining norms for readerly comprehension actually structure authorial intention.

Fish's ideas (collected in his *Is There A Text in This Class?*) open out the opportunity to examine more sociological aspects of theatre-going. This "affective stylistics" regards meaning as "an event rather than an entity" (*Text*, p. 3}, part readerly experience, part historically located record. Meanings can be revised and altered without the idea that closure finishes the process. Description" and "Interpretation" are not simultaneous, or even linked, activities, as they proceed from premises that are not fully shared. The Jacobean theatre is foreign to our assumptions of what "literature" might be: a thing apart, 'with discursive rules that constitute a communal set

of understood signals that bind audience and theatre company together in a shared enterprise. For Fish, "interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading: they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them" (*Text*, p. 13). What binds Fish's theories to Bakhtin's is their consideration of the reader or audience role in the formation of literature.

One further critical principle is especially relevant, the principle of "aporia" as defined in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978). In Derrida's use, an "aporia" is an impasse, or moment of critical and textual indecision, which is a truer state of affairs than any simplification. In truth, the matter is never, according to Derrida, resolvable, because the nature of all figurative expression is intransitive (i.e. not moving towards a moment of clarity and unitary meaning). His term for this undecidability is difference, or a constant deferring of final meaning (see his *Position*, pp. 39-40).

This principle entails a focus on the rhetorical strategies readers or audiences take up in reference to a play in order that its action is comprehensible. For example, revenge in *Hamlet* may be understood as referring to the crisis or late Elizabethan government, where the threat of usurpation was deeply felt, yet its stage life (within Shakespeare's lifetime, but beyond Elizabeth's) had it take on several "unintended" meanings to do with James I's succession. Did Shakespeare remove the play from circulation because it now referred to matters that had irrevocably changed? No, because its symbolic power was applicable across a much wider spectrum of reference, and because the initial context was not determining. The action now takes on a multiplicity of "meanings", and the only common and enduring core of this lies in the sign itself, not what can be derived from it.

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.

There are specific reasons why the concept of aporia is pertinent to Jacobean drama. Critical assessment of Jacobean drama has usually been negative because of the contradictory elements in character and the general feeling of irresolution in moral perspective. Madeleine Doran, like Una Ellis Fermor and others, has noted the lack of moral coherence; a position repeatedly endorsed by later critics such as Clive Bloom who writes of the potent disharmony in these works, or Jonathan Dollimore who points to a fundamental opposition between attempted coherence and actual incoherence. However, contrary to the current critical assessments on Jacobean play in which the inconsistencies, fragmentations, the decentring of man and the ambivalent theatrical responses not only constituted a flaw but ultimately reflected the instability and the social upheavals of that period, it is my contention that the conflicting and contradictory aspect of that drama might be conceived as vital and dramatically positive features. To put it differently, my attempt to bring together Derridian "aporia" and Bakhtinian dialogic in relation to Jacobean drama could spark a totally different conclusion. In the same way as Shakespeare's Jacobean phase - *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* reveal a greater complexity in characterization, often irresolution in conclusions, revealing thereby his maturity and ripeness, I would argue that the more mature the drama is, the less resolved it would be seen in terms of moral and dramatic impact. Consequently, the

irresolution and the clash which constitute the hallmarks of Jacobean drama, such as -*The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Atheist Tragedy*, *The*

*Maid's Tragedy* and *The Malcontent* might be examined as staging and inscribing a developmental and positive trait rather than a disrupting and detracting component.

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## תקציר

הערכה ביקורתית של הדרמה העיקובינית היתה 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 "אפוריה" (aporia) אצל דרידה עשויים להיות לנו לעזר רב-ערך.

הכרתה של התיאוריה הביקורתית הפוסט-מודרנית בשכיחותן של האפוריה, הפארודיה הפנימית ושל התנגשות ערכים שלא באה על פתרונה בספרות הגדולה, נותנת לנו הזדמנות לשיקול ולהערכה מחודשים של מחזות אלה, תוך הסתכלות בתמלילי המשנה הנוגסים בערכם של הנושאים העיקריים המשקפים את מורכבותם המוחלטת של מצבי האדם.

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