

POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF DRAMA IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND

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Almost exactly at the mid-point of the seventeenth century the axe severed King Charles' neck. The sudden cease of majesty in 1649 was not only "the signal for an excited debate about what form of government might best succeed monarchy, and how authority might be reconciled with personal rights"⁷⁷ but also something desired by society and provoked by the dramatists since Elizabethan times. The imprisonment and murder of Richard II in Pomfret castle was its anticipation and premonition. The beheading of the king was the direct result of the Tudor and Stuart policy of extending the powers of the crown beyond acceptable limits. The theory of divine right was a natural ally of royal absolutism in politics for it placed the king legally and morally above all human law and restraint. It strengthened the right of the monarch to assert his authority without interference by Parliament or legal claim but eventually caused the disintegration of the hierarchical world when kings tried to retain the sacredness of status without fully accepting the sacred function and to impose their particular will and not the will of God. Under these conditions of despotism the Elizabethan world picture became less credible and more objectionable. The discrepancy between the ideal programme and the actual performance gave rise to a strong opposition and political awareness. The theatre became the popular dramatic framework to oppose the establishment. In this way Renaissance drama set out not only to teach and reflect reality but to change it. It was very conscious of the historical context. Therefore drama was more than just a literary genre. It was believed to be a powerful instrument for clarifying facts and opposing the present state of things. The theatre was for leisure and entertainment but also a place of social propaganda and political provocation since it was the

⁷⁷ G. Parry, *The Seventeenth Century. The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1603-1700* (London and New York: Longman, 1989) 212.

consequence of a pragmatic conception of literature⁷⁸ with an almost exclusive emphasis on the effect of the theatrical artifact. What mattered was action and transformation. The dramatic performance was intended to have a metatheatrical performative dimension with an actual influence on the historical context, showing an interpretation of contemporary events and pretending to transform history. A new sensitivity to social reality and politics made possible the political consciousness of drama in Renaissance England. Thus literary drama became political theatre.

Renaissance preoccupation with politics in England was no less keen than that of twentieth century. It meant "a lively concern with men not only in their private and personal but in their public and formal relations. And this concern included questions of power and subordination, of mutual relations within a constituted society, of the ends and methods of public actions..."⁷⁹ Its application was immediate and restricted, with practical connotations since "They talked more of the monarch than of monarchy, more of the sovereign than of sovereignty"⁸⁰ There was political interest everywhere, drama being a social force shaping those efforts and expectations from a literary point of view. It is important to notice the peculiarity of the political approach through drama because it requires a literary presentation within a theatrical framework, enriching and enlarging its social potentialities. This singularity comes from the fact that the dramatist "thinks in the way a playwright thinks. He works through a form that deals not in theory but in practical demonstration, and his medium is the actor."⁸¹ So what we get is just the political concern presented in a dramatic sequence. We should bear in mind that literature at that time dealt with specific issues and aimed at concrete targets. It was the response to particular purposes and provocations:

Men wrote poetry or plays, composed meditations, or devised treatises on one subject or another, but their writings

⁷⁸ Cfr. M. Roston, *Sixteenth-Century English Literature* (Hong-Kong: Macmillan, 1982), ch. 1, "The Dual Vision".

⁷⁹ L.C. Knights, "Shakespeare's Politics: with Some Reflections on the Nature of Tradition", (Ed) K. Muir, *Interpretations of Shakespeare* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1985) 86-87.

⁸⁰ Ch. Morris, *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953) 1-2.

⁸¹ A. Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Political Drama* (London: Routledge, 1988) XI.

had a function, which was specific and addressed particular issues and problems that exerted pressure on the time. Writers were conscious of genres and conventions (without using such terms), as well as of the innumerable tropes of rhetoric, but these were means to an end, serviceable instruments that allowed access to the large subjects that exercised men's imaginations.⁸²

This might be the ultimate cause of the political implications of Renaissance literature in England⁸³ There was a positive interest in matters related to authority and the effective exercise of power. The political concern was intensely felt in drama because the theatre was the place where people shared their common awareness of the historical situation through the provocative action and manipulation of the playwright. This means that drama was not neutral at all. It was used and abused in order to subvert some forms of power and demystify imposed patterns of beliefs. This can be seen in tragedy, the genre that traditionally was thought to be most capable of transcending the historical moment and representing universal truths, which had a metatheatrical involvement in the transformation of reality. Contemporary formulations of the tragic made reference to particular affairs such as the representation of tyranny. The dramatist was not indifferent to the historical events that took place during his lifetime since the plays were reflection of his political positions. Thus "Marlowe, Massinger and Middleton all assumed that Spain was aggressive, expansionist and dangerous."⁸⁴ as shown in the distortion of the history portrayed in some of their plays. To make matters worse Middleton's *A Game of Chess* was seen as an offence against Spain, which made the Spanish Ambassador send a letter of protest to King James I, arguing that the play was a direct criticism of the king's pro-Spanish policy. That is the reason why D. Carlos Coloma wrote a detailed report of this play showing his indignation over its performance.

⁸² G. Parry, 5

⁸³ English poetry is also concerned with politics since "Some of the greatest English Renaissance poets were politicians, and all of them tried to influence public affairs through their writings... Sir Philip Sidney believed that writing could be as politically important as practical statecraft..." Cfr. D. Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 1.

⁸⁴ J. Loftis, *Renaissance Drama in England and Spain. Topical Allusions and History Plays* (Princeton University Press, 1987) 219.

Thus drama was used to criticize the government's policy. However this, in turn, saw it as a twofold political issue. It was considered either as a public danger threatening the security and stability of the state or as an entertainment which could keep people away from any kind of political involvement in that particular historical context. At this point it is interesting to observe the different policy followed by Queen Elizabeth I and King James I regarding the official view of drama. Hence in contrast to Elizabeth, James made it a matter of royal policy not only to seek control of drama but also to advocate the celebration of festivals. He saw in drama a very effective instrument for supporting monarchy and his personal formulation of divine rights, the court masque being "The principle vehicle for royal elevation throughout the reign"⁸⁵ in which all arts combined to honour the king. Ben Jonson was the dramatist who devised and created these masques where the monarch was the essential point of reference. He could be represented by the principle of harmony or the source of ideal beauty, as wisdom or heroic virtue. But the important thing to underline is that masques "functioned socially and politically"⁸⁶ In this way he "necessarily defined his authority in opposition to radical Protestantism where Elizabeth had successfully avoided such confrontation"⁸⁷ because her appreciation of this political issue was of a different kind. She was very careful not to arouse opposition to the central administration either by actively supporting the theatre or by enforcing rules that would suppress it in spite of the strong claims for enacting legislation against theatrical performances since they were considered negative practices that persisted despite the Reformation.

The bad times that the theatre faced is a revealing proof of its highly social reputation as a place of political subversion and opposition. There were strong warnings against the evils of the performances of popular theatre. Stephen Gosson in *Plays Confuted in fiue Actions* asserted that "stage playes are the doctrine and invention of the Devill...because playing is one of those politique hornes which our enemie dosseth against the Gospell"⁸⁸ As a social institution, professional theatre was viewed by the

⁸⁵ G. Parry, 16.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 17.

⁸⁷ L. Tennenhouse, "Strategies of State and Political Plays", (eds.) J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare. New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester University Press, 1985) 116.

⁸⁸ Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in fiue Actions* (London, 1590).

authorities as harmful. It was at the mercy of prejudices and policy with local corporations being hostile to stage-playing. Thus most of the opposition to it came from the local government in London because the authorities thought that it was a real danger to the good order of the city. However it is convenient to point out that this pejorative consideration of the theatre was not only a moral issue but also a political one because as Thomas Nashe points out "there were already in existence plenty of brothels and places to gamble and booze"⁸⁹ and the players were the only to be "pitiously persecuted by the Lord Mayor"⁹⁰ In opposition to this situation of oppression and lack of freedom, the dramatist tried to answer dramatically the authorities with plays highly concerned with political matters. This was the case of *the Isle of Dogs*, written by Jonson and Nashe in collaboration. As a result of its performance the theatres of London were closed during the summer of 1597. Suppression was the long-term policy of the Corporation. However with theatres operating outside its immediate control, it had to change its tactics. If at present they could not suppress the actors, they might deprive them of their audiences. The attack on drama came from different sides. So preachers in the pulpit threatened perdition to anyone who entered a playhouse; writers were commissioned to denounce the theatre in pamphlets and the Corporation appealed to the freemen of London guilds not to allow their apprentices or servants to go to plays. It might well be that the moral concern about performances in playhouses was a consequence of the social fear of losing control of people because the official order maintained by the state and supported by the Church was in great danger of losing power. Finally they succeeded in the closing of the theatres. The drastic act of the Puritan Parliament on the 2 September 1642 made clear that "public stage-plays shall cease and be forborne". And a possible reason for their closure was a political one, "the distracted estate of England, threatened with a cloud of blood by civil war..." Therefore what was at stake was not the nature of the performance but the possibility of social disorder through dramatic action. The real point was that the control of the theatre meant the control of power.

Undoubtedly Renaissance drama presents a positive interest in political matters. It is not something fashionable in modern criticism or only

⁸⁹ En Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986) 40.

⁹⁰ Thomas Nashe, in A.L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Globe. His Intellectual and Moral Outlook* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981) 44.

relevant in the case of Shakespeare as the proliferation of recent Shakespearean research shows⁹¹. It is certainly much more decisive and comprehensive than that. Political concern is one of the major preoccupations and intentions of Renaissance drama, which cannot be properly understood without this political involvement. Thus the dramatist becomes not only an artist but something else. His plays are not just mere literary artifacts. They have the aim of changing reality. The playwright acts as interpreter of historical events. He gives us his own personal interpretation through his dramatic approach provoking a certain attitude and predisposition in the audience. He is not neutral in his theatrical presentation of facts and social criticism. This is especially seen in the history play where the dramatist portrays historical events on the basis of certain assumptions. He takes history seriously and once he gets historical information, he manipulates and dramatically interprets the historical data available. In this way we may say that the playwright becomes a historian with his particular literary art and personal ideology. What we get is not historical evidence but a specific interpretation of reality with a concrete meaning. In this case the literary use of historical material is not only due to artistic, linguistic or aesthetic reasons. It is also a consequence of the personal and contextual experience of the author drawn from the ideas and practices of the culture he inhabits as well as of his historical awareness and political ideology. This is the metahistorical element which is essential for the interpretation of history and reality because without it both are meaningless. The term metahistory was coined by Hayden White⁹² proposing a new understanding of historical facts from a literary stand-point. For him a historical work is a verbal structure in the form of a narrative discourse. His conclusions can be summarized by saying that there is not history without interpretation. That is why the playwright translates reality into a specific message with a special code in order to convey a particular meaning to events. Thus the dramatization of historical material is not only intended for theatrical purposes but for historical connotations. Events are, therefore, interpreted in a personal sense. The story of the history

⁹¹ Cfr. L.B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (London: Methuen (1947, rpt.1980); W. Sanders: *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); J. Wilders, *The Lost Garden. A View of Shakespeare's English and Roman History Plays* (London: Methuen, 1978); G. Holderness (ed.) *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester University Press, 1988).

⁹² Cfr. H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press, 1973), Introduction.

play is not irrelevant. It is not just a dramatic pretext for textual discourse. It has its intention. So we find that the dramatization of the reign of Edward II by Christopher Marlowe is more than a simple account of his life. He is trying to show another view of monarchy since he is investigating the workings of contradictory claims to kingship and the qualities demanded from the monarch in order to win both divine and popular justification for office. The king has no inalienable rights any more. If he is the chosen one, he must also be the most morally apt. Otherwise he should be deposed:

King Edward. Ah, Leicester, weigh how hardly I can brook
To lose my crown and kingdom without cause;
To give ambitious Mortimer my right,
That, like a mountain, overwhelms my bliss;
In which extreme my mind here murder'd is!
But what the heavens appoint I must obey.
Here, take my crown; the life of Edward too:

(5. 1. 51-57)

The life of a king has no sense without his crown. His deposition is not God's plan. His weakness, as in the case of Richard II, makes him unfitted for the throne. From this we learn that history is not pre-arranged because man is a decisive agent which makes it strongly motivated by individual decisions. The ambition of Mortimer makes it no longer possible for the king to reign. In this way drama becomes involved in history. The Elizabethan World Picture is not valid and real because the universe is not perfectly arranged. Man can break the chain and change the succession of historical events. Therefore there is a positive manipulation of history to reflect the playwright's social and political position as well as the common expectations shared by his audience who suffered the oppression of the royal power.

Political awareness, in this context, meant dramatic action which involved a radical desmytification. The dramatist devised his theatrical weapons to subvert a hierarchical order where man was nothing but a toy. Therefore he arranged his dramatic strategies to achieve his political aims. It was not just the consciousness that something should be done but the need to show specific forms of subversion and opposition to reality. One of the most recurrent and repeated strategies to change the historical situation is revenge. It seems to me that revenge was meaningful in Renaissance drama for several reasons. To see it only as a dramatic subgenre is not fully to understand its

complete function. Revenge is also relevant within the dramatic framework for its metatheatrical sense with social and political connotations. This major theme of Renaissance tragedy was popular "because it touched important questions of the day; the social problems of personal honour and the survival of feudal lawlessness, the political problem of tyranny and resistance; and the supreme question of providence."⁹³ Revenge was a tragic nonsense with existential implications. It is the only device Hieronimo has to carry out his own private vengeance because "Private blood-revenge...had no legal place in Elizabethan England"⁹⁴ He is out to avenge the murder, by Lorenzo and Balthazar, of his son Horatio. However he is not the only one seeking revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Don Andrea looks for revenge for his death in battle at the hands of Balthazar. Bel-imperia, for her part, tries to avenge him because he was her lover. Balthazar and Lorenzo are very concerned with putting into practice their vengeful desires on Horatio for winning Bel-imperia's love. Thus revenge is omnipresent. That is why "vengeance shapes the entire action"⁹⁵ of the play. Its importance and relevance is stressed by the fact that Revenge is personified in the play being one of its characters. It is Hieronimo's obsession. He wants to remain within the law and to accept the rules of a divinely arranged society since the king is the supreme judge on earth as God's representative:

So, I tell you this, for learning and for law,
 There's not any advocate in Spain
 That can prevail, or will take half the pain
 That he will in pursuit of equity.

(3. 13. 51-54)

He expects justice to be prompt and fair in its workings. However it is long delayed and denied by the king. No doubt the latter is the only person qualified to free him from the burden and hardships of revenge. The king is introduced at the centre of an orderly court celebrating the end of a war whose cause was just. But justice seems not to be for all. It is delivered when

⁹³ L. Salingar in B. Ford (ed.), *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) II, 334.

⁹⁴ F.T. Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959) 10.

⁹⁵ J.R. Mulryne (ed.), *The Spanish Tragedy* (London: A. and C. Black, (1970, rpt. 1985), Introduction, XX. This is the edition used in this paper.

both Horatio and Lorenzo claim to have captured Balthazar, and since both desire their rewards and honours, the king must arbitrate the matter. Thus there is no other way but to become the judge of his own cause. Hieronimo is doubtful about his determination because he prides himself on his devotion to justice, his madness being the result of the collision of his human sense of justice with the quite different processes of human and divine justice. His revisions and questions are endless:

How should we term your dealings to be just,
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust?
(3. 2. 10-11)

However he must act without delay with such monstrous deeds", the monstrosity required for such injustice. Much of his conflict, therefore, arises from the split between the old order and the new one. His apparent irrationality is a consequence of a consistent choice: to carry out his existential imperative of restoring harmony and sense, opposing the infection and confusion of that corrupted dramatic universe where revenge becomes a powerful weapon to shape subversion. Thus a private act has political dimension.

A positive dramatic appreciation of womanhood in Renaissance England may be considered as another political strategy used by playwrights to subvert a patriarchal world where women are dependent on male claims. Subversion, in this case, meant rebellion against a situation with no expectations for women. The increasing oppressiveness they suffered from the dominant male ideology within a hierarchical order was theatrically counteracted by dramatic heroines who in Shakespeare's comedies are also presented as intellectually equal to men. Sometimes they are morally stronger, more perceptive and wittier than men. Even they may become more centrally important and psychologically meaningful like Cordelia who is forced to act as mother to her father. Other female characters like Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra and Volumnia dominate their men and decisively alter the course of events. Some of his plays even explore the consequences of female dominance. Thus Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* imposes her intimate aspirations demanding her right to choose her own husband after defeating the most learned doctors in their male perceptions:

Hel. But, if I help, what do you promise me?
King. Make thy demand...

Hel. Then shalt thou give me with thy kingly hand
 What husband in thy power I will command.
 (2. 1. 188-193)

Now she is the winner in a masculine territory. The female universe has regained its role and position within a patriarchal order. This is what has recently been called "Shakespeare's Thatcher phenomenon"⁹⁶ which is not only his because other Renaissance dramatists regarded feminism as a powerful theatrical instrument to subvert male-dominated authority. Thus Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* imposes her femininity in a world of confrontation and radical disorder. She wants to be herself and to love but she finds "that there is no love on earth" (3.3.47). In spite of her innocence she is the cause of the quarrel between Ludowick and Matthias. Under these circumstances Marlowe forces her to challenge male dominance. She cannot live in a place where alienation and degradation are the result of corrupted values. Her radical opposition to such masculinity is directed towards Barabas, her father, the personification of imposed patriarchal repression through hypocrisy and corruption. Her revenge on paternal abuse is extreme. Her decision to fight against male prerogatives makes her enter a nunnery far away from manipulations and impositions. More radical and significant is the case of Beatrice in *The Changeling*, the play written in collaboration by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley. She is determined to create confusion and assume authority in order to be the ruler in that dramatic universe. She succeeds in shattering male expectations by challenging official restrictions in personal choices. It is not possible for her to love Alonzo on her father's wishes. Therefore she is obliged to plot her own dramatic liberation by using men's methods. In this way she becomes the "fair murd'ress" who brought chaos and destruction to a patriarchal world. Now she, being De Flores counterpart, achieves her complete transformation. Finally her deeds, like those of men, are evil.

Dramatic bullets were constantly being aimed at political targets. It was a repeated action carried out with different weapons that directly tried to subvert authority and demystify power through theatrical strategies. Thus the dramatic anticipation of a new world picture made people dream about the

⁹⁶ 20 E.A.J. Honigmann, *Myriad-Minded Shakespeare. Essays Chiefly on the Tragedies and the Problem Comedies* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 131.

possibility of changing reality and served to feed their social expectations. Finally theatrical failure meant political success.