

THEMES AND CONVENTIONS
OF
ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Themes are a special form of convention; a topic which is defined by a set of concepts, or perhaps distinguished by certain formulations. This is the literary aspect of conventions, and the easiest for subsequent ages to recover.

A convention may be generally defined as an agreement between writers and readers (or spectators), whereby the artist is allowed to distort and simplify his material through a control of the distribution of emphasis. Conventions which are acknowledged have been erected into a system of rules; the neo-classic conventions, which were largely the creation of Renaissance critics, were thought to have the authority of the Ancients, and to constitute the only right way of making plays; they were prescribed as a duty.

Such 'rules' can be altered only after rebellion or debate – the process is like that of rescinding a law. Those conventions which are based on social assumptions can be tacitly and more easily modified, by the writers or by pressure from the readers. The Elizabethan conventions have never been acknowledged because they were not formulated or defined unless parody implies a convention to be parodied. Parody is one of the more important critical tools in the workshop criticism of the Elizabethan popular theatre, a craftsman's theatre, where tradition governed and an outgrown tradition could be recognised most clearly as discarded by its parody. A really strong work could survive, even thrive, on parody.

The development of the Elizabethan theatre and its conventions would ideally show how the older popular theatres contributed a stock of characters and incidents. Glynne Wickham, in his *Early English Stages*, V. A. Kolve in *The Play of Corpus Christi*, and C. L. Barber in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* have worked in terms of the stage; Wolfgang Clemen in *English Tragedy before Shakespeare* and Madeleine Doran in *Endeavors of Art* showed how, during the later sixteenth century, narrative was turned into full drama by a transposition of themes from one convention into another.

The conventions of the Elizabethan drama were an amalgam of inherited material – ‘sentences’ from classical or proverbial sources; imagery from Virgil, Seneca and Ovid; tropes and figures from various rhetorical sources; stories from classical and English history, from Chaucer, from the Bible; stage groupings or tableaux (sometimes termed ‘presentational imagery’) from older plays, from churches, from city pageantry; these could be fused together in the theatre and a skilled playwright would add his own stamp to the finished work. A great success such as *Dr Faustus* would establish itself as a model; telling scenes and figures could be used for minor features of other plays.

In recent years, manipulation of ancient rules has meant that ‘genre criticism’ has flourished especially in Shakespearean studies, where for instance, *King Lear* can be described as ‘anti-pastoral’.

Since 1935, the conventions of many different kinds of theatre have become familiar upon English stages. There have been visits from Japanese Noh players, whose drama dates from Chaucer’s time and is probably the most ritualistic of any played today, and from the Balinese theatre which inspired Antonin Artaud. Zulu dancers have given their version of *Macbeth* and puppet theatres from Java or the Balkans present traditional plays. The modern English stage often approximates to the Elizabethan, so that not only all the plays of Shakespeare but some of those of his contemporaries are now performed, many

of which have not been on the boards since the sixteenth century. Marlowe, Webster and a limited range of Jonson's plays are the most frequently seen (though Jonson's tragedy has not, to my knowledge, been revived); Ford and Middleton, occasionally *The Revenger's Tragedy*, can be stylised and are in fact easier to revive than more naturalistic plays. Tragedy has transplanted much more readily than comedy, as I have indicated in a concluding chapter to *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* (second edition, 1973).

Two plays which have proved outstandingly powerful on the modern stage are *Dr Faustus* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, and in both the farce which shadows the tragic action has strengthened the basis of tragic effect. Outside Shakespeare's work, the one represents the summit of Elizabethan, and the other of Jacobean, tragedy.

In the fourth act of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the masque of madmen presents a ritual of mockery and humiliation that culminates in violent death. It encompasses the natural and the supernatural, as all efficacious ritual does.¹ Within the narrower perspectives of Jacobean theatre, gods and infernal powers were excluded from the presiding functions, but the contrast between the two worlds of the play and the play-within-the-play brought in an element of mystery and awe. Conventions were no longer decoded unambiguously; different actors read their parts differently.

In Middleton's *The Changeling*, the fantastic madmen are kept separate from the tragic plot, whose ironic development

¹ Whilst the element of the supernatural still inhered in drama of the sixteenth century, it faded in Jacobean times, except for such a highly traditional work as *The Revenger's Tragedy* or such an exceptional example as *The Duchess of Malfi*, with its mixture of the symbolic and naturalistic. Thus in Shakespeare, his historical tragedies are more ritualistic than his later plays, and even in *Richard II*, as explained below in chapter 10, sacramentalism is defeated by *real politik*. The ritualistic productions of *King Richard II* (1974) and *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1966) by the Royal Shakespeare Company may be compared with their unfortunate imposing of a similar form on *The Changeling* (1978), with excessive use of mime, symbolic costumes and a consequent loss of intimacy, in a play originally given at the tiny Cockpit Theatre. More matter with less art would have served better.

depends on psychological progression – or rather degeneration. They were supplied by William Rowley. Yet the two, brought together, give a double vision, although in a different union from Webster. To Middleton, as a possible early work, has sometimes been ascribed *The Revenger's Tragedy*, traditionally given to the virtually unknown Cyril Tournear; in this play the ironic plot structure is highly conventional. If both plays are Middleton's, he could span the two extremes of formal convention and psychological observation.

Only a small proportion of the known plays survive. It was inevitable that writers working at the speed of these dramatists should evolve some conventions recoverable in part only. For tragedy, they at first relied on Kyd and Marlowe, with their highly individual reforming of 'Senecal' traditions; in this way a body of plots, a range of character types, and a set of maxims grew up, on which anyone could draw. Such a body of material is of little value in itself; those dramatists who used it in an unenlightened way produced shapeless and incoherent plays.

But the great writers formed a true convention, to which each could contribute, strengthening each other. Revenge plays share a certain 'criticism of life', and the genre is only a vehicle for it, unified and made poetic in the imagery and idiom. The essential structure of Elizabethan drama lies below the level of narrative or character, in the words. The greatest poets are also the greatest dramatists. They innovate, they distil and they unify the most heterogeneous material. Thematic imagery embodies the judgment without didactic or dogmatic fixation.

The themes of the drama are therefore exemplified in the practice of the greater tragic writers. Tragedies of Revenge, tragedies of stoicism, tragedies of infidels and black monsters were among the themes originally part of my plan; all but the last have since been investigated, and this consisted of a line of simple atrocity plays, descending from Marlowe, and including *The Battle of Alcazar*, *Lust's Dominion* and, in Jacobean times, a series (played perhaps for kicks) by boys of the King's Revels,

such as *Mulleasses the Turk*, *A Christian Turned Turk*, and *The Rebellion*. It was Shakespeare's company who put on the majority of surviving plays on 'Late Horrible Murders', although their rivals, the Admiral's Men, also featured such news items, technically classed as 'Tragedy'.

It is worth recalling that in the midst of Shakespeare's greatest tragic productions, in 1606 the King's Men put on such a wretched piece as Barnaby Barnes's *The Devil's Charter*, whose only claim to consideration is its open display of male prostitution.

By 1600, workshop practices had set up various models of tragedy, comedy, history and pastoral; the theatres themselves became differentiated in terms of distinct types of audience and their varied expectations.

By the time the Jacobean theatres were established, professional expertise could harden into 'hamming' under the stress of the repertory system. The greatest tragic triumphs of the age are very largely clustered in the early years of James. Webster to some extent, Middleton more obviously, and Ford most plainly of all, were individualising radically a common tradition that if still accessible, needed rare concentration and purity of vision if it were to be wrought into poetic form. Ford was writing for the tiny enclosed theatre that had once been a cockpit, where much of the audience looked down as in a deep well. Into the well of the immediate past – largely the Shakespearean past – it was necessary to look for images of tragic truth. A great deal of untruth, by the name of tragi-comedy, or pseudo-tragedy, was current in the final decades of what had been the Elizabethan theatre.