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I

Some contentions

NO BODY OF English drama stands to gain more from the recent shifts in understanding the relationship between puritanism and theatre[1] than the drama of 1632–1642, since judgments of the quality of this drama depend crucially on beliefs about its responsiveness, or indifference, towards puritanism. The closure of the theatres in 1642 by a puritan-inspired parliament looks very much like the inevitable consequence of the rise of powerful new ideas, social attitudes and economic forces which puritanism broadly represented, a new order fundamentally opposed to the old, traditional ways for which the dramatists were the spokesmen and which puritanism quickly invalidated upon achieving power. The traditional view presents the drama of 1632–42 as unwilling to acknowledge these new threatening forces and withdrawing into a world of escapism, fantasy and romance, designed to divert its courtly auditors from the reality of their impending doom. By helping to foster the frivolous 'Cavalier mentality' the stage is held to have contributed to the national crisis and assured its own demise, as well as to have cut itself off from all that was serious or meaningful in contemporary experience;[2] already 'decadent', it was ripe for the cropping. Thus the decline and collapse of the theatre in this period has been seen as the unavoidable corollary of the simultaneous triumph of puritanism, but it is a picture which, we are gradually coming to see, simply will not square with the facts and often obscures them. I shall be contending that the drama of the 1630s, perhaps more than any earlier drama, did persistently engage in debating the political issues of its day, and repeatedly articulated attitudes which can

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only be labelled 'opposition' or 'puritan'. The political aspects of these plays frequently carry major levels of meaning, or even their primary meanings. To appreciate them fully it is necessary to attend continually to their political dimensions, but these have been hidden by misleading suppositions about their historical context and by insufficient concern for their sensitivity to 'opposition' points of view, tendencies which we are at last in a position to correct.

So this drama has great interest in its own right. While lacking that undergrowth of engaging minor talent which buttressed the theatre of earlier generations, it still produced several writers of distinction (notably Brome, Massinger and Shirley, on whom I shall chiefly be concentrating), and many plays of real, lasting merit. But it is also important for what it confirms or denies about the larger trends of the English theatre. As the last decade of the Renaissance stage in England, it presents the prime test case for many basic assumptions underlying our reading of the greater Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

It is axiomatic in theatre studies that the drama was protected and fostered by the court, reflected its values, and always strove for closer identification with it; E. K. Chambers's monumental *Elizabethan Stage* opens with seven chapters headed 'The Court'. The dramatists have been repeatedly represented as inherently conservative and conformist, apologists for established hierarchies and degree and passive submission to the God-given ruler. Emotionally attached to a humane and ordered past, they had only hostility for the disruptive effects of the new science, commerce and mechanistic philosophy (Shakespeare has been seen as the great proponent of Tudor orthodoxy, and Jonson as the scourge of the rising acquisitive classes). To attack the stage, sustained as it was by royal prerogative, was, we are told, covertly to attack the monarchy,[3] so government critics drifted naturally into opposition to theatre; conversely, players ridiculed the puritans. Already in Shakespeare's lifetime, the theatre's national basis, on which the greatness of his plays was built, is supposed to have been disintegrating. The middle classes withdrew from the playhouses, audiences became progressively more elegant.

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New dramatists preferred to write for the fashionable and restricted 'private' playhouses which rapidly developed into an exclusive Cavalier milieu, while the old-style open-air 'public' theatres faded into obscurity. As the drama reorganized on a class basis, it became the plaything of a dominant but unpopular elite. After the Restoration, it is the 'private' theatres, patronized by royalty, that alone survive.

These assumptions rest heavily – crucially – on the developments of 1632–42. This is regarded as the decade when the court finally 'invaded' the theatre.[4] Charles's queen took to acting in plays and even visited the Blackfriars playhouse; court masques became increasingly sumptuous; courtier-playwrights, perceiving dramatic authorship to be a new road to royal favour, appeared. Outside the court, the 'public' playhouses, only three of which now survived (the Globe, Fortune and Red Bull), scarcely saw a new play. The creative initiative seems to have fallen to the 'private' theatres (the Blackfriars, Phoenix and Salisbury Court), and their repertoire was becoming gradually dominated by court taste. The decade produced the first romantic–heroic plays of love and honour, and comedies of fashionable London life, the concerns and sentiments of which appear to be increasingly courtly. These look like decisive steps towards 1660, and indeed some critics have expressed an absence of surprise that when the puritan William Prynne thunderously criticized the stage the court responded as if to a personal attack, and that when parliament went to war on the king in 1642, the stage fell with the monarchy and remained inhibited until the court's return eighteen years later. The limits 1632–42 have been generally taken as marking the culminating steps in the underlying tendencies of the English Renaissance theatre: the stage's failure was a product of circumstance, but it was also a consummation which it had sought.

However, I wish to suggest that the evidence of this decade in fact calls these certainties into question. I shall argue that the best courtly plays were vehicles of criticism rather than compliment (chapters 3–4); that puritanism was often compatible with theatre-going (chapters 5–6); that the plays of the private theatres

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were engaged in debating serious and pressing issues (chapters 7 and 9); that all the life of the drama was not confined to the private playhouses but the popular theatre tradition still exerted a vital, formative influence (chapter 8). Most of all, we distort this drama fatally if we read it simply as a mouthpiece to the court, subservient, helplessly dependent, toadying. Rather, it seems to me strongest where it is most critical and questioning, scrutinizing received platitudes, proposing alternatives, engaging most closely with the contradictions inherent in living in a time of change and uncertainty. These qualities are surely common to all better drama, but in the 1630s it comes to mean increasingly that the stage is most exciting where it is most responsive to 'opposition' or 'puritan' feeling, and that the more purely courtly tradition, which has made all the running so far, is both the least interesting and least significant aspect of the period. The courtly stage is the modern annexe to the great cathedral of the professional theatre (with all its well established bourgeois and popular sympathies), not vice versa.

For this reason, I have made a major break in this study between chapters 4 and 5 to correspond to what I take to be this fundamental distinction in the theatres, between drama written principally for the court, and drama intended for other, wider audiences. These non-courtly stages – both 'public' and 'private' – were not sinking inexorably into a morbid condition of ever more intransigent Cavalierism, but inherited and continued to develop the rich, varied and essentially independent-minded tradition of the Elizabethan–Jacobean professional theatre. Their relatively free treatment of political subjects corresponds with their continued *detachment* from the court. As for court drama, that was another story entirely. The dramatists who wrote for Whitehall had a much narrower freedom of manoeuvre. They were limited in the material they could use, the diversity of opinion they could express, the range of conflicting or unresolved attitudes which they could incorporate into their plays. The assumptions underlying court drama are much more constricted, rigid and defined than are those which obtained on the non-courtly stage, and the non-courtly drama has been devalued

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exactly in proportion to the extent that it has been read as if subscribing to these alien assumptions.

So I wish to establish the importance and pervasiveness of un- and anti-courtly sentiment in this drama, and the continuing breadth and seriousness of the non-courtly drama. On the other hand, although the shift between courtly and non-courtly drama obviously has significance for the extent and freedom with which politics is discussed, I do not believe that we can make a simple correlation between courtly and non-courtly drama and courtly and non-courtly in politics (where this distinction is much harder to maintain consistently). The crisis of 1642 has been seen also as a cultural crisis in which the two nations that were England, one popish, cultivated and Italianate, the other puritan, iconoclastic and insular, achieved their inevitable collision.[5] But the lines of demarcation are much less absolute on the ground; Milton is only the most obvious example of someone who has affinities with both categories. 'Cavalier' and 'puritan', 'court' and 'country' were not fixed norms of sensibility or behaviour to one or other of which every individual conformed, but values in a continual state of flux or dialectic, each perpetually modifying and modified by the other as they issued into the experience of their time; nor can they be detached neatly, as a stereotyped pair of attitudes, from the confusions and complexity of the experience within which they were embodied and realized. Both exerted their claims simultaneously on all members of society, and they, subjected to many conflicting pressures, differed among themselves as variously, and contradicted themselves as often as we do now, so that the crisis not only divided men among themselves but caused a species of division in the minds of all. Variousness is something on which drama thrives, and in the 1630s the stage, rather than becoming the casualty of a cultural divide, was able to draw strength from the conflicting prejudices and aspirations still coexisting richly in its audience – the opposed tensions and tendencies within society which would ultimately fly apart but which at present still continued to overlap and interact. For example, Charles's court was by no means wholly in agreement with the way he was ruling and the best courtly drama is that

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which finds a voice for the dissent of those who are anxious about, or actively opposed to the tendencies of his government (chapters 3–4). Similarly, the non-courtly 'opposition' to Charles was not a uniform movement, but an alliance of opinion that cut broadly across the social spectrum and yoked many different kinds of discontent; nor were these people all looking for the same solutions to their grievances. The 'opposition' feeling which is expressed in 'private' theatre plays (chapters 7 and 9) often has a rather gentlemanly stamp; but the attitudes of the 'public' theatre drama (chapter 8) are altogether more violently plebeian, radical and levelling. There is here a society seriously at disagreement with itself; but the disagreements have not yet entirely polarized into mutually exclusive counter-cultures.

There was, of course, a well-oiled machine of censorship which exerted strong constraints on the players' freedom of expression, but this could be circumvented with caution in the non-courtly theatre, and even at court devices could be used which, without openly bringing political events and issues on stage, alluded to them obliquely. An unusually clear example is provided by a court play of 1620 'in which a king with his two sons has one of them put to death, simply upon suspicion that he wished to deprive him of his crown, and the other son actually did deprive him of it afterwards. This moved the king [James] in an extraordinary manner, both inwardly and outwardly'.[6] This corresponds with nothing in the immediate political situation (Prince Henry had been dead for seven years), and it has no obvious allegorical significance, yet James evidently saw something unpalatable here. Probably in these basic motifs of tyrannical kingship, misplaced trust and misused power he recognized a generalized but intended likeness to what were actually very real issues in contemporary politics. It was often in devices of this kind, that work not through direct statement or allegory but through analogy and oblique reflection – mirrors for magistrates, in fact – that dramatists reflected the political concerns of 1632–42.

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2

Drama and the Caroline crisis

The '*ex post facto*' view

IF A PRINCIPAL PREOCCUPATION of this drama is politics, the critical problem is one of historical perspective, and here there exist widely-held preconceptions which pervasively distort and predetermine discussion of the drama of the pre-revolutionary period. These can be illustrated from Clifford Leech's essay 'The Caroline audience'[1] which may be taken as representative of the critical position (it is by no means an extreme example). To Leech, the quality of this drama was entirely dictated by its situation; its artistic inferiority he openly asserts was coded into the historical processes of which it was a part. The basic proposition is that 'Masques and plays were for these people a way of escape from the unpleasantness of political circumstance and a means of cultivating the graces . . . It is difficult not to take an *ex post facto* view, but the Caroline audience seems like a community of people waiting for its own dissolution, sipping its hemlock daintily.' A playwright could be good only 'in spite of his time' (p. 161).

The concession to an *ex post facto* view, with its suggestion that the decline of the drama in these last years was somehow inevitable, is entirely characteristic. On the one hand, it reflects the popular notion that this was the *decadence* of the drama, a term surviving from late Victorian attempts to make literary criticism scientific by appropriating Darwinian evolutionary language to describe English Renaissance drama as a *species* which 'died' in 1642 (while the fitter strain, puritanism, survived). The fallacies behind this have been exposed,[2] but *decadence* remains a persistently-used term, with its pejorative implications for the

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1630s that the stage was already in a state of irreversible organic decay. On the other hand, it also reflects Leech's nagging foreknowledge that the theatres were indeed shortly to be closed down, a foreknowledge which he implicitly attributes to the playwrights and their audiences themselves, characterizing their culture as one already in a process of retreat, narrow, isolated and toppling into imminent collapse. He continually berates the theatre-goers for their failure to come to terms with the coming nemesis, describing them as 'shallow', 'inattentive' and 'frivolous' (pp. 161, 168). Their palates were sick, for they lived a 'vicarious existence' and desired only dishes that pleased and were 'untroublesome to the jaded guest' (p. 178). The dramatists had to provide 'etiolated gracefulness' (p. 172), sophisticated bawdry (p. 177), 'a romantic escape into a world where there were none of the threats that they themselves knew but instead elegant menaces that were foreign to them' (p. 173). The one quality 'indispensable for success was some measure of withdrawal from the actual' (p. 178). A society of fashion and fickleness, they were ready to be swept away, and they knew it.

The effects of this perspective on criticism are really quite extraordinary, for at every point conceptions of what the drama ought to have been intervene to modify discussion of what it *was*. Leech feels that the playwrights must have falsified their perceptions to write as they did. He attributes 'unease' to Massinger, 'impatience' to Brome, 'compromises' to Davenant and 'discomfort' to Heywood (pp. 161, 173). Against their wills they tormented 'their natural bent of mind . . . into the fashionable curve, but the continual modifications of this curve made them at times almost lose heart' (p. 181). The common feature of all these plays is their irony. No playwright dare speak of what he perceives, the complacency of each play is implicitly undermined by the 'realities' which surround it. Conversely, when a playwright does seem to be speaking out of turn, an *ex post facto* glance at his later career and opinions, or at the future history of the theatre, often suffices to discount the seriousness of his criticisms.[3]

Clearly, it is highly unsatisfactory that deep-rooted convictions

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about the inevitability of the decline of Caroline drama should interfere so radically with criticism of the plays (and even, in some text-book accounts, replace discussion of them altogether). I believe we are witnessing here a kind of critical Whiggery corresponding broadly with the Whiggish perspectives on the seventeenth century that have come under fire among historians in recent years,[4] since these critical judgments are couched so firmly in political terms. The drama is bad because its cause, inevitably, seems bad. Once the decline of the theatre is associated with the crisis of confidence in the court, the dramatists come to be castigated, with assurance born of wisdom after the event, for belonging to what always seems to have been the wrong side. Leech's *ex post facto* view involves a commitment (which can be matched in the comments of many other writers)[5] to a simplified view of the seventeenth-century crisis as one continuous movement, a two-handed struggle between parliamentary rule and royal absolutism in politics, and patriotic puritanism and hispanophile crypto-Catholicism in religion, which begins at the accession of James and accelerates in a uniform crescendo culminating inexorably in the execution of Charles in 1649. In this perspective, the 1630s stage seems involved in a systematic divide which already has several decades' history and is expanding rapidly and uncontrollably. Leech's backwards look onto the crisis reads 1632–42 as a 'high road to civil war',[6] fraught with difficulties that inevitably foreshadow the breakdowns of 1642 and 1649, and this superimposes the polarizations of subsequent conflicts, between 'Cavalier' and 'puritan', back onto earlier years. Hence the dramatists are discussed in terms suggesting that the nation was already irrevocably and decisively split, and that the only choice open to them was a single, simple one between court and parliament, and that a decision to write for the stage was equivalent to acceptance of a narrow and doomed set of attitudes. The standard book on the 1630s theatre (by Alfred Harbage) is called, simply, *Cavalier Drama*.

In the 1640s, Cavalier propagandists tried to suggest that this was indeed the case. In 1647, the royalist publisher Humphrey Moseley issued a collected edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's

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plays, prefacing them with thirty-seven sets of commendatory verses, many solicited from prominent Cavaliers such as the soldier Sir George Lisle (executed at Colchester, 1648) and the journalist Sir John Berkenhead. Four years later, a similar collection followed for the amateur dramatist William Cartwright, this time with fifty-three sets of verses! These were conscious acts of propaganda. The verses are arranged to give prominence to the well-known loyalists, and several versifiers, especially in the 1651 volume, can be shown to have been too young to have known the theatres before they closed in 1642, and they speak of 'reading' rather than 'seeing' the plays. They reflect the atmosphere of Civil War Oxford, not peace-time London, but it was very useful to Moseley to be able to suggest that such divisions between loyal and disloyal subjects had always been there, and that the Cavaliers were sensitive to the arts while their opponents were ignorant blockheads. By contrast, 'dammees' and sectaries appeared together on stage in one play of the 1630s, Brome's *Weeding of Covent Garden* (1632), but without any suggestion that there was a political divide between them, nor even that the audience should see themselves in the 'Dammees'.[7] England clearly did plunge into a tremendous crisis in 1642, one that had roots striking deep into the economic, social and religious changes that were profoundly transforming their society and the consequences of which may, in the last analysis, have been beyond the capacity of any but the most able and flexible government to overcome. But to infer that the nation was polarizing into two neatly opposed sides throughout the 1630s, and that any royal regime would inevitably have been swept towards a disastrous and unavoidable collapse is to attribute a purposiveness to events that is unwarranted and suspiciously teleological.

So it is necessary to look at the characteristics of politics in this period not only because this is a study of political drama, but because the prevailing *general* critical perspective here is determined entirely by presuppositions about the long-standing foreseeability of the failure of Charles's government and about the exclusiveness of the Cavalier–puritan divide. I have come to

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