JACOBEAN TRAGEDY

The Quest for Moral Order

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For only by breasting in full the storm and cloud of life, breasting it and passing through it and above it, can the dramatist who feels the weight of mortal things liberate himself from the pressure, and rise, as we all seek to rise, to content and joy.

MATTHEW ARNOLD

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FOR

CLIFFORD AND JONATHAN

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Preface

In *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* I suggested that to be truly great tragedy must spring from the artist's moral concern, his need to come to terms with the fact of evil in the world, and out of his exploration of disaster to arrive at some comprehensive vision of the relation of human suffering to human joy. I suggested also that the great ages of tragedy have been those in which an established system of values was being challenged by a new scepticism, and that Shakespeare was able to effect his tragic reconciliation by affirming in poetic terms the validity of his age's Christian humanism. His tragedies lead to a sense of order, justice and divine purpose in the universe.

I propose in the following pages to explore the manner in which Shakespeare's fellow dramatists, each in his own way, met the same challenge of a growing Jacobean scepticism and disenchantment with traditional values. The writers of tragedy I have chosen to consider are those who I believe most seriously attempted the kind of resolution of the problem of mankind's relation to the forces of evil in the world at which Shakespeare aimed. None succeeded in the same way, but the tragedies they wrote are all conditioned by this quest for moral order, and when they are examined in these terms they reveal new dimensions. This does not imply that they may not be studied with profit in other ways.

Like all who venture to write in this area, I have been profoundly indebted to the late Professor Una M. Ellis-Fermor's *Jacobean Drama*, and the reader will perceive also that I have been strongly influenced by Miss M. C. Bradbrook's *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* and Professor F. P. Wilson's *Elizabethan and Jacobean*. When my work was in final draft,

The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy by Robert Ornstein was published by the University of Wisconsin Press. Although Professor Ornstein and I approach the subject through different avenues and with different premisses and come usually to quite different conclusions, we are both concerned with the moral value of Jacobean tragedy. I regret that I did not see his work in time to make more use of it, but I have tried to indicate in my notes some of our areas of agreement and, more often, disagreement.

For my references to specific plays it has been difficult to find texts of a uniform reliability. I have been able to use the excellent 'Revels Plays' editions under the general editorship of Professor Clifford Leech for *The Changeling* (ed. N. W. Bawcutt, London, 1958) and *The White Devil* (ed. J. R. Brown, London, 1960). For Middleton's *Women Beware Women* I have used the edition by A. H. Bullen (London, 1885), and for the plays of George Chapman I have relied upon the editions of the late T. M. Parrott (London, 1910 and 1914). For *The Duchess of Malfi* I have modernized the spelling of F. L. Lucas's 1958 edition, based upon his own 1927 monumental edition of Webster's complete plays. For *A Woman Killed With Kindness* I have used the Mermaid edition by A. Wilson Verity (London, 1888), and for *The Rape of Lucrece* I have modernized the edition by Allan Holaday (Urbana, Ill., 1950). For the Cyril Tourneur plays I have modernized the text of Allardyce Nicoll (London, 1929), and for the John Ford plays that of Henry de Vocht (Louvain, 1927). To facilitate reference, I have retained the line numberings of the particular editions I have used. I am grateful to the editors of *ELH*, *Modern Language Review*, *The Tulane Drama Review* and *Tulane Studies in English* for permission to reprint some portions of the book which were printed in more tentative form while the work was in progress.

The earliest portions of this book in time of composition were read to a highly critical group of undergraduates in Miss Enid Welsford's sitting-room in Cambridge in the Spring of 1959. For the comments of all my listeners, and particularly those of Miss Welsford, I have continued to be grateful.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The most important writer of tragedy in the Jacobean era, of course, is William Shakespeare. Not only do such plays as *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth* represent the highest reaches tragedy has attained in any age by the perfection with which they mirror a vision of man's relation to his universe, but the plays of Shakespeare served also as models for his Jacobean contemporaries to emulate. Beaumont and Fletcher, Heywood, Webster and Ford all reveal the influence of their master. But Shakespeare, while he taught his contemporary dramatists much of their craft, is still not one of them. While they imitate his language and ape his situations, the writers of tragedy in the early years of the seventeenth century generally find it difficult to accept without question the view of man's position in the universe which gives to Shakespeare's greatest tragedies their most significant form.

Thomas Heywood is one exception. Conservative like Shakespeare, he continued to espouse throughout his career a view of the universe as the harmonious creation of an ever-loving God, the parts of creation observing order and degree, with every element enjoying its proper function as part of the divine plan. Man was at the centre of the universe, the noblest work of God, his life guided and controlled by the power of divine providence. In such a view of the world evil was real and active, and Heywood like Shakespeare is not afraid to portray its operation, but the means of overcoming evil are always available to man, and although sinners like Macbeth might suffer damnation, the movement of the cosmos was towards a constant rebirth of good out of evil. The end of tragedy written in terms of such a cosmic view was always reconciliation, with the forces of evil at least

temporarily vanquished in spite of the horror they have wrought. In *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* I have tried to suggest that Shakespeare's tragedies represent successive attempts to embody in drama steadily more comprehensive visions of the eternal conflict of man against the forces of evil in the world, so as to lead to an affirmation of order and design in the universe, and that they do this in terms of the optimistic Christian humanism of the early Renaissance which stressed always the dignity of man and the providence of God.[1]

But Shakespeare wrote his profoundest plays in an age when their philosophical assumptions already were beginning to appear anachronistic, when Christian humanism was losing its dominance in the more thoughtful minds, and newer, more pessimistic notions of man's position in the universe were gaining supremacy. The seventeenth century is one in which man, as F. P. Wilson has written, 'revised his conception of the external universe and of his relation to it, revised also his conception of himself and of the powers of his mind. . . . Where the emphasis had been upon order and degree, hierarchy and discipline, man's duty to God and the Prince, some now placed it on rights – the rights of the individual conscience, of criticism, of reason.'[2] It is an age out of which finally was to emerge in triumph at the end of the century the new belief in progress and human perfectibility which Francis Bacon had heralded, and it was to be the true beginning of our modern era, but the seventeenth century had to go first through a period of doubt, confusion, and profound pessimism. The Jacobean dramatists do not reflect the new scientific optimism of Bacon, although in Webster's emphasis upon the dignity of human life in spite of the world's corruption there may be some suggestion of what finally is to come. Jacobean tragedy more generally reflects the uncertainty of an age no longer able to

[1] See Herschel Baker, *The Dignity of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947); Douglas Bush, *The Renaissance and English Humanism* (Toronto, 1939); Hardin Craig, *The Enchanted Glass* (New York, 1936); E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1943).

[2] *Seventeenth Century Prose* (Berkeley, Calif., 1960), p. 1. See also Wilson's brilliant analysis of the cleavage between the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras in *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Oxford, 1945). Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the decline of Christian humanism in the seventeenth century is Herschel Baker, *The Wars of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952).

believe in the old ideals, searching almost frantically for new ones to replace them, but incapable yet of finding them.

The early seventeenth century is the age of paradox. This is a dominant literary exercise of the time, developed in the best of Jacobean prose, and a cardinal element in its metaphysical poetry. I have already indicated that Shakespeare, in his final tragedies, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, when he had thoroughly explored the implications of his own Christian humanism, came at last to a paradox which he could not resolve.[1] These final plays reveal a world in which man may be destroyed by evils which are the inevitable concomitants of those very virtues which make him great, and in which the lust of Antony or the pride of Coriolanus – examples of vice in traditional terms – may have an heroic quality to which we cannot help but give our emotional acquiescence while we recognize the corruption of divine order from which it springs and its utter sinfulness in terms of traditional morality. Shakespeare brought his hero at the end of *Coriolanus* to a point where he could not renounce sin without also renouncing virtue. In these final plays of paradox, and not in the great positive affirmations of *Othello*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare reveals his affinity to the Jacobean dramatists who were his fellows and successors.

We are not to assume that the tragedy of the Elizabethan period was universally orthodox in its moral position. There has been intellectual division and dissent in every era in human history, and among the Elizabethan dramatists there was an important tradition of scepticism whose leading exponent was Christopher Marlowe. He had questioned the order and perfection of the universe and the workings of divine providence in all his plays; even in *Dr Faustus*, with its outward framework of religious belief and its morality play technique, Marlowe had protested against a system of values which decreed damnation as the price of knowledge and the power inherent in it. Professor Una M. Ellis-Fermor has indicated the spirit of Marlovian tragedy, with its steadily increasing sense of human limitations and its tone of human defeat, as that which comes to dominate the Jacobean era, and she has seen this 'mood of spiritual despair' as the

[1] *See Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London, 1960), pp. 168–201.

product of Marlowe's continuing exploration of the political system of Niccolò Machiavelli.[1]

Although Machiavelli had tried to divorce politics from ethics as two separate areas of human concern, he did not entirely succeed in doing so. The inevitable ethical implications of his political creed tended to emphasize a new materialistic view of the universe in direct opposition to the divinely oriented Christian humanism of Richard Hooker and William Shakespeare, and this new materialism, Miss Ellis-Fermor holds, fostered the spiritual uncertainty of Jacobean tragedy. But the emergence of Machiavelli in Italy in the early years of the sixteenth century is merely one evidence of the spirit of scepticism which is as much a part of the Renaissance as its Christian humanism. Bruno and Montaigne exerted a wide influence as well, and the new astronomy in the early seventeenth century was a direct challenge to all which men traditionally had believed about the permanence and immutability of the heavens.

The brief career of Christopher Marlowe may serve as a kind of index to the shifting currents of Renaissance thought. He came up to Cambridge as a Parker Foundation scholar, destined for the Anglican ministry and presumably committed to its doctrinal position which he must have absorbed at the King's School in Canterbury. After his wide reading of theology in the library at Corpus Christi College, he seems to have turned to the new Renaissance scepticism, and in his *Tamburlaine* we find an enthusiastic espousal of the premisses of Machiavelli, coupled with an exuberance and faith in the potentialities of mankind. He breathes the spirit of Renaissance vitality and optimism. But in the second part of *Tamburlaine* we find already a painful awareness of the limitations placed upon mankind by the very fact of mortality. As he grows older his disillusion steadily increases until in *Edward II* we find him rejecting his earlier faith in the fall of Mortimer,[2] and if *Dr Faustus* is his final play, as is now generally

[1] *The Jacobean Drama* (London, 1936), pp. 1–5. See also Wilson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean*, pp. 100–1; Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, Wis., 1960), pp. 24–31.

[2] I have dealt with these matters in 'Marlowe and Machiavelli', *Comp. Lit.*, VI (1954), 349–56, and *The English History Play in The Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 127–36.

supposed, it may be also his most pessimistic statement of human limitation and frustration. Marlowe began, in short, embracing the new challenge to the old orthodoxy, and he ended disillusioned with the new but still incapable of accepting the old. He arrived at the spirit of negation and disillusion which is the mark of Jacobean tragedy.

Seventeenth-century literature reflects this lack of spiritual certainty in its concern with death, time, and mutability, and in the pervasive spirit of melancholy already fully drawn in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the subject for pseudo-scientific analysis in Burton's *Anatomy*, and surviving in the quiet sadness of Ford's *Broken Heart*. There is a renewed interest in a notion which has its roots in the waning of the Middle Ages, but which in the seventeenth century becomes an important source of controversy and a leading motif in literature: the idea that the world is in its antiquity, nearing the end of a long period of progressive decay which had begun with the fall of man, and rapidly approaching total dissolution. It has been argued that the revival of this belief owed much to the new astronomy.[1] The discovery in 1572 of a new celestial body among the fixed stars led men to question the very notion that there were fixed stars. The heavens no longer appeared to be the immutable evidence of an unchanging, perfectly unified creation, in which the destiny of mankind, past and future, could be read. The continuing discoveries of the astronomers culminated in Galileo's discovery in 1612 of spots in the sun, which seemed to indicate that the heavens themselves were subject to decay. Dr Godfrey Goodman in 1616 proclaimed his thesis of a decaying world in his widely influential *The Fall of Man*, in which he related this decay to the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, as Sir Walter Ralegh had related it some two years before in his *History of the World*. Goodman was answered in 1627 by Dr George Hakewill in his finally more important work, *An Apology of the Power and Providence of God in the Government of the World*, which espoused instead the idea of human progress.

[1] George Williamson, 'Mutability, Decay and Seventeenth Century Melancholy,' *ELH*, II (1935), 121–50. See also D. C. Allen, 'The Degeneration of Man and Renaissance Pessimism,' *SP*, XXXV (1938), 202–27; R. F. Jones, *Ancients and Moderns* (St. Louis, Mo., 1936), a condensed version of which appears in *The Seventeenth Century* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1951), pp. 10–40.