ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Subject of Tragedy

Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama

Catherine Belsey

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First published in 1985, *The Subject of Tragedy* takes the drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the starting point for an analysis of the differential identities of man and woman. Catherine Belsey charts, in a range of fictional and non-fictional texts, the production in the Renaissance of a meaning for subjectivity that is identifiably modern. The subject of liberal humanism – self-determining, free origin of language, choice and action – is highlighted as the product of a specific period in which man was the subject to which woman was related.

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To Andrew,
who has lived through the whole of this
and is inscribed in all of it

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PREFACE

This book has three main aims. The first is to contribute to the construction of a history of the subject in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The human subject, the self, is the central figure in the drama which is liberal humanism, the consensual orthodoxy of the west. The subject is to be found at the heart of our political institutions, the economic system and the family, voting, exercising rights, working, consuming, falling in love, marrying and becoming a parent. And yet the subject has conventionally no history, perhaps because liberal humanism depends on the belief that in its essence the subject does not change, that liberal humanism itself expresses a human nature which, despite its diversity, is always at the most basic, the most intimate level, the same. I do not share this belief or the conservatism it implies.

The second aim is to demonstrate, by placing woman side by side with man, that at the moment when the modern subject was in the process of construction, the 'common-gender noun' largely failed to include women in the range of its meanings. Man is the subject of liberal humanism. Woman has meaning in relation to man. And yet the instability which is the result of this asymmetry is the ground of protest, resistance, feminism. The history of women since the seventeenth century has been the history of a struggle to secure for woman the rights and benefits man has awarded himself.

At a more fundamental level it is also the history of an effort to redefine the terms of liberal humanism itself, to challenge the meanings and values which give rise to the asymmetry.

Thirdly, I have tried to bring together history and literature (or fiction, since 'literature' implies a value judgement which is irrelevant to my argument). It is true that historians frequently dip into fiction in quest of evidence, and that literary critics often feel it necessary to take account of the background to the text. But the relationship I propose between fiction and history is not one of foreground and background, text and context. The project is to construct a history of the meanings which delimit at a specific moment what it is possible to say, to understand, and consequently to be. People make history under determinate conditions. One of these conditions is subjectivity itself, and this is in turn an effect of discourse. To be a subject is to be able to speak, to give meaning. But the range of meanings it is possible to give at a particular historical moment is determined outside the subject. The subject is not the origin of meanings, not even the meanings of subjectivity itself. Fiction, especially in the period from the sixteenth century to the present, is about what it is to be a subject – in the process of making decisions, taking action, falling in love, being a parent.... Fictional texts also address themselves to readers or audiences, offering them specific subject-positions from which the texts most readily make sense. In that it both defines subjectivity and addresses the subject, fiction is a primary location of the production of meanings of and for the subject. The fiction of the past, intelligible in its period to the extent that it participates in the meanings in circulation in that period, constitutes, therefore, a starting-point for the construction of a history of the subject.

In quoting texts from the past I have modernized the typography but reproduced the spelling given in my source. Abbreviated references are provided in the text, and full details of the editions cited are supplied in the bibliography. Plays

are identified by their titles, and all other works by their authors or editors.

Chapter 5, 'Alice Arden's crime', is a revised version of an essay which first appeared in *Renaissance Drama* 13 in 1982. It is reproduced by permission of Northwestern University Press. I have also drawn on the following earlier publications: 'Shakespeare's "vaulting ambition"', *English Language Notes* 10, 1973:198–201; 'The stage plan of *The Castle of Perseverance*', *Theatre Notebook* 28, 1974:124–32; 'Tragedy, justice and the subject', *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Francis Barker *et al.*, Colchester, University of Essex, 1981:166–86; and 'Literature, history, politics', *Literature and History* 9, 1983:17–27.

The wisdom and scholarship of G. K. Hunter first stimulated my interest in the drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when he supervised my research at the University of Warwick. He is not to blame for the consequences. In the course of writing the book I have incurred debts to Paul Atkinson, Simon Barker, Ying Chang, Martin Coyle, Tom Dawkes, Terry Hawkes, Margot Heinemann, Ludmilla Jordanova, Valerie Lucas, Kate McLuskie and Robin Moffet. I am grateful to them for their help. In addition, I have discussed much of the material with Francis Barker. Antony Easthope made valuable comments on Chapter 2. I owe Felbrigg to Peter Hulme. Andrew Belsey, Jonathan Dollimore, Terry Eagleton and Chris Weedon read the manuscript. Their incisive criticisms have made a world of difference.

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I
INTRODUCTION: READING THE PAST

History is always in practice a reading of the past. We make a narrative out of the available 'documents', the written texts (and maps and buildings and suits of armour) we interpret in order to produce a knowledge of a world which is no longer present. And yet it is always from the present that we produce this knowledge: from the present in the sense that it is only from what is still extant, still available, that we make it; and from the present in the sense that we make it out of an understanding formed by the present. We bring what we know now to bear on what remains from the past to produce an intelligible history.

Criticism is always in practice a reading of texts. *Hamlet* does not 'speak for itself'. Dr Johnson's *Hamlet* and Coleridge's, Bradley's and Ernest Jones's, are all different, produced, like history, by bringing to bear on the extant material the knowledges available at different moments, with the effect of producing a range of interpretations. In the case of *Hamlet* the 'document', the written text, is not one but several, the effects of editorial accretions on the basis of three distinct Jacobean versions, each new edition the result of assumptions about what 'makes sense', historically, as a tragedy, as a play by Shakespeare, as *Hamlet*. But this is only the beginning of the problem. Even if there were a pristine *Hamlet*, an *authorized* version direct from the pen of Shakespeare, we should still

have no choice but to read it from the present, to produce for it a meaning intelligible from our own place in history.

To read the past, to read a text from the past, is thus always to make an interpretation which is in a sense an anachronism. Time travel is a fantasy. We cannot reproduce the conditions – the economy, the diseases, the manners, the language and the corresponding subjectivity – of another century. To do so would be, in any case, to eliminate the difference which makes the fantasy pleasurable: it would be to erase the recollection of the present, to cease to be, precisely, a traveller. Reading the past depends on this difference. The real anachronism, then, is of another kind. Here history as time travel gives way to history as costume drama, the reconstruction of the past as the present in fancy dress. The project is to explain away the surface strangeness of another century in order to release its profound continuity with the present. The past is read as – and for – evidence that change is always only superficial, that human nature, what it is to be a person, a man or a woman, a wife or a husband, is palpably unchanging. This history militates against radical commitment by denying the possibility of change.

The visitor to Felbrigg Hall in Norfolk considering the exterior of the house from the south-west is able to identify the articulation of two quite distinct moments. Only fifty years divides the west wing chronologically from the south front, and yet that the two are held physically together seems a triumph of mortar over probability. The west wing, designed in the 1670s and completed during the course of the next decade or so, belongs eminently to the modern world. The facade is of warm red brick, with three symmetrical bays, the middle one projecting very slightly, so that the effect is of a single but differentiated plane. The two storeys, with regularly positioned long, slender windows, are surmounted by a hipped roof with a row of dormer windows. The emphasis is on proportion and elegance, and decoration is modestly confined to the moulded pediments above the two doorways on

the ground floor. The west wing is harmonious, familiar, intelligible, a sympathetic object of the twentieth-century gaze.

The south end of the facade, however, is joined uneasily to the Jacobean building of the 1620s. The western aspect therefore includes, beyond the symmetry of the mellow brick building, a single bay faced with a mixture of stone, flint and brick. The predominant colour is grey. The windows have small leaded panes. Above the bay is a triple chimney-stack and an extravagant Flemish gable adorned by a stone lion. The south front consists of seven bays, alternately one projecting and two deeply recessed. The porch, a triumphal arch with elaborate Doric columns, heavy, ornate capitals and carved heraldry, lays ostentatious claim to magnificence and to dynasty. Above the south front is a tall parapet, and here in the projecting bays, and thus separated by considerable distances, is carved in large, three-dimensional stone letters, cut out against the sky, the message, GLORIA ... DEO IN ... EXCELSIS.

The south front is neither modern nor sympathetic. The familiar Victorian imitations of Jacobean domestic architecture tended to smooth away such excesses of ornamentation, and such overt assertions of authority, divine and genealogical, with the effect of reducing its strangeness. But Jacobean Felbrigg makes no effort to subdue its own self-display or to bring the details of its decoration into harmony with classical proportion. It does not, in other words, submit to the gaze, and by doing so offer to pacify the spectator. The manner of the south front at Felbrigg is insistent and imperative. It seeks obedience rather than consent.

Not that Felbrigg Hall belongs to the repressive apparatus. There are no traces here of the fortification characteristic of the late middle ages – no vestigial moat, gatehouse or corner turrets. Felbrigg is clearly and decisively domestic. But it is not private. Unlike the country houses of the eighteenth century, the Hall was designed in the 1620s to be seen from

the outside. But the meanings it makes visible are hard to read in the twentieth century because they participate in a signifying practice different from our own. Jacobean Felbrigg is strange because it is the signifier of a set of meanings which are now unfamiliar. It indicates an understanding of the family and its social and personal relations which no longer obtains. The south front asks, therefore, to be read in its difference from the west wing. That difference – of signification, meaning, knowledge, and of the corresponding order of subjectivity they produce – a difference of architectural style which is also ultimately a difference at the heart of what it is to be a person, is the material of a history of change.

This book takes as its starting-point not architecture but plays. The project, however, is to identify a similar discontinuity of meanings and knowledges, to chart in the drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the eventual construction of an order of subjectivity which is recognizably modern. The assumption I make is that fiction, like architecture and painting, is a signifying practice which can be understood in its period to the extent that it shares the meanings then in circulation. This is quite distinct from the claim that fiction reflects the practices of its period. That the plays of the early seventeenth century almost without exception condemn enforced marriage does not imply that in the early seventeenth century no parents compelled their children to marry against their will. But the debates about enforced marriage, both on the stage and off it, reveal the meaning and the contests for the meaning of marriage in the period. And their differential allocations of autonomy to the children correspondingly reveal differences of meaning for masculine and feminine freedom of choice.

The project is not, then, a social history of the period, but a (sketch-) map of a discursive field. Questions concerning the number of couples who married without their parents' consent (or the spread of literacy in the period, or the economic alliances of the 1640s), though important and interesting,

are not the primary questions addressed here. Fictional texts do not necessarily mirror the practices prevalent in a social body, but they are a rich repository of the meanings its members understand and contest. And in order to be intelligible at all, fiction necessarily ascribes certain meanings, however plural and contradictory, to subjectivity and to gender. It therefore constitutes a possible place from which to begin an analysis of what it means to be a person, a man or a woman, at a specific historical moment.

That is not to claim, of course, that we can recover from fiction or anywhere else the experience of being a man or a woman in another period. Writing is not the transcription of something anterior to itself, a recoverable presence, 'how it felt'. Meanings are not the record of experience, though they may define the conditions of its possibility. On the assumption that meanings are first learned, rather than experienced or felt, the meanings in circulation at a given moment specify the limits of what can be said and understood. The range of ways of understanding what it is to be a person is given in signifying practice.

Neither social history, nor the history of experience, this book is offered, none the less, as more than a history of ideas. The destination of meaning is the subject. To be a subject is to have access to signifying practice, to identify with the 'I' of utterance and the 'I' who speaks. The subject is held in place in a specific discourse, a specific knowledge, by the meanings available there. In so far as signifying practice always precedes the individual, is always learned, the subject is a subjected being, an effect of the meanings it seems to possess. Subjectivity is discursively produced and is constrained by the range of subject-positions defined by the discourses in which the concrete individual participates. Utterance – and action – outside the range of meanings in circulation in a society is psychotic. In this sense existing discourses determine not only what can be said and understood, but the nature of subjectivity itself, what it is possible to be. Subjects as agents

act in accordance with what they are, 'work by themselves' to produce and reproduce the social formation of which they are a product.

Or to challenge it. Signifying practice is never static, and meanings are neither single nor fixed. Meaning is perpetually deferred by its existence as difference within a specific discourse; it is perpetually displaced by the trace of alterity within the identity which is no more than an effect of difference. A specific discourse is always embattled, forever defending the limits of what is admissible, legitimate or intelligible, attempting to arrest the play of meaning as it slides towards plurality. Alternative discourses propose alternative knowledges, alternative meanings. For these reasons, signifying practice is also the location of resistances. Since meaning is plural, to be able to speak is to be able to take part in the contest for meaning which issues in the production of new subject-positions, new determinations of what it is possible to be.

In this sense signifying practice is not outside the material struggles taking place in a social formation. And fiction, as a location of meanings and contests for meaning, is itself a political practice. Fiction defines and redefines the subject, problematizes the areas of subjectivity which seem most natural, most inevitable, most evidently given. It also addresses the subject. A specific text proffers a specific subject-position from which it is most readily intelligible. It offers to pacify or to disrupt, to impel or to enlist, constructing (and naturalizing) a place for the subject in the process.

Despotic regimes have always recognized, though in rather different terms, the close relationship between fiction and politics, and have subjected works of art to detailed censorship. The Tudor monarchs took drama under increasingly central control from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. The elaborate system developed in the period of licensing plays and players is indicative of the government's concern with the political implications of drama. The Stuarts extended royal control by

converting the prominent London companies into servants of members of the royal family. Meanwhile, the jurisdiction of the Revels Office gradually increased. By the seventeenth century the Master of the Revels was responsible for ensuring that no seditious matter was presented on the stage. He was empowered to require the alteration of single words, passages or whole scenes, or to suppress plays in their entirety. Texts were changed, and playwrights were imprisoned. Liberal humanism, by contrast, locates drama either above the level of politics (as art) or below it (as mere entertainment). Although sexual censorship continued into the 1960s, liberal democracy tends to refer questions of political censorship to reviewers, who largely 'work by themselves' to protect orthodoxy by condemning what is radical as bad art (or boring), often without mentioning politics at all.

I use the term 'liberal humanism' to denote the ruling assumptions, values and meanings of the modern epoch. Liberal humanism, laying claim to be both natural and universal, was produced in the interests of the bourgeois class which came to power in the second half of the seventeenth century. There are, of course, dangers in collapsing the historical specificities and the ideological differences of three centuries into a single term. Liberal humanism is not an unchanging, homogeneous, unified essence, and the development, often contradictory, of the discourses and institutions which sustain it, deserves detailed analysis. But there are alternative dangers in a specificity which never risks generalization. We may point to large differences as well as small ones, woods as well as trees, epochs as well as decades. To find in Locke, for instance (as we do not, say, in Hooker) a liberalism and a humanism which still recognizably constitute elements of twentieth-century common sense is not to deny the importance of the specific location of Locke's texts in the 1690s on the one hand, or the subsequent and continuing debates and divisions within liberal humanism on the other.

Indeed, the rise of the New Right could be held to obviate the need for a critical analysis of liberal humanism itself. The time may come, it might be argued, when we shall look back with nostalgia to the liberal-humanist present. But liberal humanism, which in another sense of both those plural terms is often neither liberal nor humanist, is a contradictory phenomenon. While it is true that major reforms have been made in its name, it also provides the framework for a market economy, defended by a powerful police force, and a naturalization of inequality both in the state and in the family which is profoundly authoritarian. There is a sense in which John Stuart Mill and F. A. Hayek, at opposite ends of a continuum, share a discourse. It is a discourse which excludes both Marxism and post-structuralism.

The common feature of liberal humanism, justifying the use of the single phrase, is a commitment to *man*, whose essence is *freedom*. Liberal humanism proposes that the subject is the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history. Unified, knowing and autonomous, the human being seeks a political system which guarantees freedom of choice. Western liberal democracy, it claims, freely chosen, and thus evidently the unconstrained expression of human nature, was born in the seventeenth century with the emergence of the individual and the victory of constitutionalism in the consecutive English revolutions of the 1640s and 1688. But in the century since these views were established as self-evident, doubts have arisen concerning this reading of the past as the triumphant march of progress towards the moment when history levels off into the present. And from the new perspectives which have given rise to these doubts, both liberal humanism and the subject it produces appear to be an effect of a continuing history, rather than its culmination. The individual, it now seems, was not released at last from the heads of people who had waited only for the peace and leisure to cultivate what lay ineluctably within them and within all of us. On the contrary, the liberal-humanist subject,

the product of a specific epoch and a specific class, was constructed in conflict and in contradiction – with conflicting and contradictory consequences.

One of these contradictions is the inequality of freedom. While in theory all *men* are equal, men and women are not symmetrically defined. Man, the centre and hero of liberal humanism, was produced in contradistinction to the objects of his knowledge, and in terms of the relations of power in the economy and the state. Woman was produced in contradistinction to man, and in terms of the relations of power in the family. Woman's story in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries lags behind man's. The field of women's resistance, however, is more sharply defined.

The choice of tragedy as the starting-point for a discussion of the construction of the subject is in one sense an arbitrary one. All signifying practice is the province of such a project. But for precisely this reason any single contribution to the history of the subject has to start somewhere. Fiction, I have already suggested, has a certain specificity in that its topic is above all subjectivity itself – the intimate personal and interpersonal relations which define what it is to be a man or a woman. In addition, while a sermon or a treatise on the same topic relies for its success on the elimination of difficulties, narrative depends for its continuation on obstacles and impediments to the resolution of conflict. Fiction therefore tends to throw into relief the problems and contradictions which are often only implicit in other modes of writing. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the fictional mode which addresses the broadest audience is drama. Performed both at court and in the city, before an audience which was representative of the social range and the social mobility of the capital, the drama of the period before 1642 can be seen as a focus of the contests for the meaning of subjectivity and gender which can also be identified elsewhere. When the theatres reopened in 1660 the stage became a place of affirmation of the common sense, literally the shared mean-

ings, of the new order. And if all narrative foregrounds problems, while comedy moves towards final reconciliation, tragedy is subject to no such imperative. The Renaissance plays I discuss in detail in this book are locations of the intersection of rival discourses, and this rivalry is not resolved.

Tragedy is no more, however, than a point of departure. I make considerable reference to plays not classed as tragedies, and to texts not in the category of fiction. On the assumption that fiction is not outside the meanings in circulation in its period, the specificity of fiction is not to be confused with independence. Claims for the autonomy of art ultimately place it outside signifying practice and outside meaning. In quest of the history of the subject I turn constantly to non-fictional texts. These are not in any sense background material but are primary locations of the meanings and contests for meaning which are my concern. The object of beginning with tragedy is not to privilege these plays but to put them to work for substantial political purposes which replace the mysterious aesthetic and moral pleasures of nineteenth-century criticism.

The Subject of Tragedy is not offered as comprehensive or definitive. It is an attempt to identify a project and to put into practice a way of reading the past. It is also mildly polemical – in the hope that debate may constitute a stimulus to the conditioned production of new knowledges.

Part I: MAN

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