

Anticourt Drama in England 1603–1642

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To Bet-my partner and my friend

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Preface

Despite the bewildering variety of subgenres and mixed genres in seventeenth-century English drama, one recurring subject cuts across them all—court life. Courts were, after all, part of the immediate experience of English people. Their own English court helped to define their sense of history, of national identity, of morality in politics; the court also fired the imaginations of gifted poets and dramatists. On the continent as well as in England, courts became the dominant Renaissance institution, the place where all the varied types—the importunate, the ambitious, the melancholy, the sensual, the avaricious, the pious, and the cunning—could and did meet. They were the place where the crosscurrents of the age inevitably converged, where Christian ideals contended with secular imperatives, personal ambition confronted group loyalty, and the authority of state faced its own corrupting potential.

Many of the plays of the late Elizabethan period, including Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Henriad plays, functioned as encomiums to kingship at the same time that they critically examined the nature of kingship and political authority. In the Jacobean period, however, there arose a much more explicit dissentient drama that expressed the countercurrents of the age. The best plays of Marston, Chapman, Webster, Massinger, and Middleton illustrate this preoccupation as do less frequently read plays by Samuel Daniel and John Day. Some of these works—by Jonson, Webster, and Massinger, for instance—were even composed for the Globe theater. Their contribution to the thought and feeling of the English Renaissance has its own permanence, but it is only when we understand the importance of contemporary con-

cerns—the "local habitation and a name"—underlying these dramatists' "timeless" themes that we can properly appreciate this permanence. Examining such concerns requires no special apology. We in the twentieth century have seen in Ibsenian, Shavian, and Brechtian drama a significant modern theater built on the treatment of contemporary issues. This dramatic heritage can in fact provide us with a heightened appreciation of the seventeenth century's anticourt dramas, whose functions were to challenge received values and allegiances, and even to call into question the prevailing values and institutions of an age.

Jacobean and early Caroline drama presented a variety of anticourt and opposition perspectives before divergent kinds of audiences—sometimes even royal ones. This set of theatrical circumstances indicates that the expectations and protocol governing dramatic satire and historical tragedy differed considerably from those governing the royal masque and triumphal entry. The work of Stephen Orgel has helped us to understand the masque as a mystical confirmation of the beneficent, magical powers of royalty. The royal masque appropriated the language and imagery of absolutism in order to represent the king's divinely ordained authority. In a more sweeping application of this view, Jonathan Goldberg finds that the king's relationship to language defines his identity, and his representation of himself through the mystifying language of state, which he jealously guards, manifests his supreme temporal authority. Thus the city pageants celebrating James's accession in 1603 exist "only in and for the king. His presence gives them life; his absence robs them. Their existence depends upon him."

Our readjusted perceptions of the representation of royal authority in early Stuart drama now threaten, however, to blind us with too much light from this regal vantage point. We are in danger of "discovering" the royal perspective, or its mimetic derivatives, as *the* pervasive influence governing the major Jacobean drama as well.⁴ Anticourt theater in the early seventeenth century suggests a different field of vision. An absolutist perspective can be used (and was) to propound ideas that in effect subverted Stuart orthodoxy, but such forms of representation need to be seen broadly, in conjunction with other anticourt perspectives. We need a comprehensive view of the anticourt dramatic tradition as well as of explicitly royal forms of entertainment in order to begin to construct an adequate interpretation of the Jacobean-Caroline drama.

There is insufficient space to treat fully the literary expressions of dissident political ideas in the Tudor period preceding, but we can briefly point to works that demonstrate the presence of such a tradition, from which dissentient Jacobeans drew. Anticourt attitudes appear early in the Tudor period with Skelton's poetic satire "Why Come Ye Not to Court" (1522), and then,

more prominently, in the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign. Spenser's discursive topical allegory, "Mother Hubberds Tale," with its great passage of complaint on the disconsolate suitors who haunted Elizabeth's court in vain pursuit of rewards, and Donne's Fourth Satire, which elaborates the insight that the court is "A Purgatorie, such as fear'd hell is" (l. 3), are representative poems from each of these decades.⁵ The Juvenalian forms of nondramatic satire that flourished at the close of Elizabeth's reign encouraged the expression of numerous but often unfocused anticourt attitudes. Among these nondramatic antecedents, Joseph Hall's Virgidemiarum (1598) and Edward Guilpin's Skialetheia (1598), with its daring satire on the earl of Essex as the "great Foelix" instructed by Signior Machiavel, were important developments and influenced the early Jacobean anticourt satires produced in the indoor theaters from 1600.6 More important still are the nondramatic satires of Middleton, Tourneur, Marston, and Chapman, all of whom began their careers composing nondramatic satire before turning to the drama as their prime means of expressing anticourt ideas. The potency of their socialpolitical criticism was surely felt by the authorities, for on June 1, 1599, by order of the bishop of London, T[homas] M[iddleton's] Snarlinge Satyres. Tourneur's Transformed Metamorphosis, Marston's Pygmalion's Image and his Scourge of Villanie, in tone and temper the most violent of the group, were all publicly burned.7

The dramatic antecedents of Stuart anticourt drama certainly include the politically dissident impulses as expressed in the English history play, especially in its representation of native rebellions and uprisings. These include John Bale's reform-minded I & II King John (1538), the heavily censored Sir Thomas More (ca. 1596), which explores the social and economic causes of discontent, and Thomas of Woodstock (1591–95), which reflects Elizabethan grievances in portraying the problems of Richard II's reign as stemming from the king's arbitrary powers of prerogative taxation and from his elevation of unscrupulous favorites. Marlowe's unique contribution to the development of heterodox political attitudes in the drama, particularly his demystified representation of courts, holds a place of prominence. So too do Marston's Antonio and Mellida (1599) and Antonio's Revenge (1600) since these initiated the phenomenon of the Italianate anticourt play in England.

Such an inheritance indicates that although Stuart anticourt drama manifested itself in a variety of forms, it nevertheless issued from a well-established literary tradition. In this regard some will immediately recognize that the present study begins chronologically where David Bevington's *Tudor Drama and Politics* ends. Although Bevington's work limits its approach, as its subtitle indicates, to topical meaning, it is cautious in its identifications and adept in its handling of themes—the best we have of its kind. The present study treats topicality in the sections on the contemporary satire of the child

actors and on the opposition drama of the 1620s, but it is not limited to this approach. Broader notions of *application*, hortatory *example*, and political *representation*—areas of significant development in the last generation—are

equally essential.

No one term, including John Peter's idea of complaint literature (which, in contrast to satire, he defines as impersonal and allegorical), can appropriately convey the variety of anticourt plays produced in the Jacobean and Caroline periods. ¹⁰ However, in describing the phenomenon that underlies the creation of these several kinds of plays, I have found the term *anticourt drama* to be the most useful because it covers a range of attitudes to court life and policy that may vary from critical to condemnatory. In this study I have applied the term broadly to those plays that critically depict the political policies and ideology of Renaissance courts and kings, with their absolutist claims and far-reaching authority—Chapman's and Massinger's political plays, for example—and to those that depict modern court *life* as spiritually corrupting—Webster's Italianate court tragedies, for example.

The term is not intended to signify any organized movement toward political or social reform, much less an inexorable development toward any grand historical moment such as the English civil war, but it is intended to reveal the persistence of a dramatic tradition which features the counterrepresentation of kings and courts and which cuts across class lines. In treating this subject, I have tried to be comprehensive without being exhaustive, to be empirical before being ideological. I have also avoided the older method of trying to make the plays fit into a single cultural overview; 11 this approach is too undifferentiating to provide an accurate perception of the ways that various kinds of plays are tied to more specific, often shifting cultural conditions. The Jacobean and Caroline periods supported a variety of theaters and audiences. I have, therefore, presented plays in groups, generally by genre, with attention in introductory sections to the theaters producing them and the sociological makeup of their audiences.

Such an approach seems to me especially important in treating well-known plays such as *The Revenger's Tragedy, The White Devil,* and *The Duchess of Malfi,* whose significance seems to have been fixed for us (reductively) by the old New Criticism. Even if we praise them for treating universal themes of love, lust, self-affirmation, and self-destruction, we need to view them, not as belonging exclusively to that category of literature Wellek and Warren call "unique," "timeless," works of art," but as citizen-oriented Italianate tragedies whose social criticism and anticourt perspective help to

define their purpose and significance.

One response in the last decade to the old formalist criticism has been to treat Shakespearean and Jacobean plays as ideological tracts, or would-be tracts, reflecting twentieth-century concerns. Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical*

Tragedy is a pertinent example of this approach.¹³ This work brings a welcome passion for intellectual history and controversy to the interpretation of seventeenth-century plays, but the experience of the plays themselves as coherent dramatic works is often lost in the search for philosophical cruxes. So too is the distinction between the plays Shakespeare tended to write as compared with those of his more reform-minded competitors. Dollimore's work is perhaps an extreme expression of a corrective movement in Renaissance studies that views literary works as part of a seamless discourse that includes political speeches, sermons, treatises, ballads, and other forms of written expression. This redirection in the focus and method of literary study, which has come to be called "the new historicism," has been accurately summed up by Stephen Greenblatt: "recent criticism has been less concerned to establish the organic unity of literary works and more open to such works as fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interest. occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses."14 My own treatment of the plays within the anticourt tradition places considerable emphasis on "dissensions" or, in my words, "countercurrents," "ambivalence," and even "alienation," but I remain concerned to show the coherence these plays had for contemporary audiences. Toward this end, plays are treated individually, but within generic groups. In my view this method offers the most promising way of demonstrating the ideological, spiritual, and dramatic power of the plays constituting the anticourt dramatic tradition. 15

In the present study I have explored chronologically the related development of the five major expressions, as I have found them, of anticourt drama in the early Stuart period. Each of these groups of plays manifests a view of English or Continental courts that is distinct from the others but also distinctly related to them. Among these several groups, the satiric or tragic points of focus highlight quite different features of court life, varying from government policy to court culture, ethics, and ideology; yet these groups are not only related but united in their critical views of the institution contemporaries referred to by that overarching term "the court." Stated somewhat differently: the five groups of anticourt dramas examined in this study may be viewed as part of a constellation of attitudes toward the Renaissance court in its various functions. Just as the astronomical constellation Saggita (appositely identified in myth as the arrow that Hercules used to slay Zeus' eagle) reveals itself as consisting of five principal stars, each a distinct but constituent part of that configuration we recognize as "Saggita," so too does this study discern a configuration of five distinct but related varieties of anticourt drama. To treat the development of anticourt drama in this flexible way seems to me an appropriate means of recording the dynamic multisidedness the court world signified to contemporaries.

Within each section of this study, I have treated at close quarters the

principal plays constituting the particular group, attending at the end of sections to the norms by which Stuart officials variously legitimized and censored such literature. The first group comprises the plays performed by the child actors. At the Blackfriars theater between 1603 and 1608, the Children of the Queen's Revels presented daring topical satires and lampoons on James's court and ministers. Capitalizing on the immunity that child actors traditionally enjoyed until official sanctions humbled them, this company became a center for the expression of anticourt, anti-Jacobean, and anti-Scottish attitudes.

The second group comprises the ideological tragedies of learned writers, both courtly and professional. The philosophical closet tragedies of Samuel Daniel and Fulke Greville, both disaffected Jacobean courtiers who had been preferred in Elizabeth's reign, use court settings in ancient Greece or sixteenth-century Persia to examine absolutist tyrannies while expressing at the same time their disaffection with the contemporary practice of government in England. Among professional dramatists such as Chapman and Jonson, a related form of ideological tragedy developed in which predominantly Roman and contemporary French court settings are used to explore, as in a laboratory, the nature of the modern state. Since these dramatists wrote for gentle audiences, issues of political principle, fealty, and personal honor, often placed in agonizing conflict with one another, make the stuff of their drama.

The popular subgenre of Italianate tragedy, composed for performance before largely citizen audiences in London's outdoor theaters, contrasts markedly with the two prior groups. These tragedies, including some of the most extensively studied of the period—The Revenger's Tragedy, The White Devil. The Duchess of Malfi and Women Beware Women-are generically anticourt. For the most part, these tragedies were not construed, nor do they appear to have been written, as specific attacks against James or his ministers; they are not topical in so limited a sense. Rather, they employ their nominally Italian settings to present universally applicable themes on the repellent, spiritually corruptive nature of court life. Since their basic concerns are expressed through conventional topoi, which provided a fund of accepted ideas for the edification of citizen, noble, and even royal audiences, such plays could usually be presented with approval. But for the very reason that this kind of theater was so conventionalized, these dramatists had remarkable latitude in presenting the most damning portrayals of modern court life that English theater ever produced—an admonitory mirror for the age.

The fourth group, the dissentient plays of the Buckingham era, 1621-28, are anticourt in a narrower sense. Unlike Italianate tragedies, for example, they offered no wholesale condemnations of court life. But, along with a

flood of other literature, these plays opposed recognizable policies of James's and Charles's own courts and championed a parliamentary ideology that directed itself against highly placed court officials and favorites. For this reason this fourth group, which includes the most politically explosive plays of the early Stuart period, warrant the more specific term opposition drama. Middleton's transparent allegory of James's proposed Spanish match for his son in A Game at Chess and Massinger's more patrician attack on Sir Giles Mompesson's odious monopolies in A New Way to Pay Old Debts both exemplify the pattern. Propelled by grievances and apprehensions that England was abandoning its traditional support for the defenders of Protestantism abroad, this politicized drama leaves behind a record of distrust for and disenchantment with crown policy that borders on alienation. In considering in the fifth group the distinctive development of opposition plays from the period of prerogative government to 1642, I have attempted to revise received notions still current that the Caroline drama was politically aseptic, and I have emphasized the emergence in court, city, and country plays of a network of opposition ideas of governance that issue forth from a riveting focus on specific grievances associated with this period.

The social-historical chapters that precede the several parts of this study are not intended to offer definitive renderings of early Stuart history but rather to orient the reader to the selective perceptions among audiences and dramatists in several kinds of theaters of the doings of courts and kings. Readers of the first chapter on the social background to the reign of James I may find, for example, that it highlights the sensational and the scandalous. and they would be right. Such a rendering does not spring from any whiggish distaste for King James—I try to make that point right away—but from the kind of material that the Children of the Queen's Revels at the Blackfriars seized upon for their social satire and, so far as I can tell, from the cravings of that company's more well-to-do, sophisticated audiences. By contrast, the introductory section on the Italianate anticourt tragedies that flourished among citizen audiences in London's outdoor theaters leans heavily on reports from Puritan London and also from parliamentary historians of the later seventeenth century who carried forward early Jacobean anticourt attitudes. These sources offer, it seems to me, our best chance of reconstructing the ambivalence and even hostility to court life that simmered in many of the poorer quarters of London.

Mindful of Foucault's strictures, I do not wish to "privilege" history over literature by rendering the former as a static, linear truth that theatrical representation merely "reflects." ¹⁶ To the contrary, my purpose is to exhibit the dramatic and the political as a mutually constitutive dynamic expression of culture. Nevertheless, history is for me event-centered as well as language-centered. I do not exclude from consideration concrete events as they affect

the drama—acts of licensing and censorship, political addresses and contemporary perceptions of foreign and domestic policy; but the more inclusive kinds of explanation are to be found in the appearance of several varieties of anticourt drama composed for distinctive audiences and theaters throughout the early Stuart period. From these kinds of evidence, I am interested, finally, in exploring the articulation and dispersion in the drama of what we may call an ideology and rhetoric of opposition, an ideology that was in the later seventeenth century to become part of mainstream political discourse.

In offering this study, I have labored to build on past research, documenting amply. My aims, I would simply say, are to provide the cultural perspectives that enable us to better understand the homiletic component in the art of early Stuart anticourt dramas, to demonstrate through analysis of the plays themselves that they indeed constitute a major dramatic tradition, and to show how this tradition contributes to our understanding of the countercurrents in early Stuart England.

Acknowledgments

This study began in 1977 as a response to the dominance of formalist studies of the Jacobean-Caroline drama and took its present shape as a social-political-critical study of the dissident and lost voices in seventeenth-century drama. Over the years I incurred many debts and am pleased,

finally, to acknowledge them in print.

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I

TOPICAL DRAMATIC SATIRE 1603–1608



The Social Background

The Reign of James I

The picture of the court of James I, and of the king himself, as drawn in contemporary histories of the reign is so negative as to verge on caricature. Anthony's Weldon's depiction of James as having large eyes "ever rowling after any stranger that came in his presence," a "tongue too large for his mouth," spindlelegs, and a "circular" walk, "his fingers ever in that walk fidling about his cod-piece," provides such an example. Other reports have come down to the effect that the king so loved hunting he would relieve himself on his horse rather than dismount and that at his court the excess was so great "the most luxurious tyrants" did not rival it, for "dishes, as high as a tall man could well reach, [were] filled with the choycest and dearest viands sea or land could afford: And all this once seen . . . was in a manner throwne away, and fresh set on to the same height, having only this advantage of the other, that it was hot."

These several accounts display an untrustworthy pattern of historiography fostered by Parliamentarians who, without exception, composed their histories after James's death. Similar patterns of analysis have survived into modern times through whig historians. Even the monumental work of S. R. Gardiner, whose exhaustive analysis of the events of the reign is still unrivaled, reveals a teleological conception of English history (reminiscent of such great system-perceivers as Spengler and Hegel) as moving inevitably away from absolutist and monarchist governments to the more advanced liberal or democratic forms.³ To correct Gardiner's inveterate bias, twentieth-century historians have approached the contemporary accounts of the early Stuart period much more cautiously. They have paid more attention to