

Jacobean Drama

Introduction:

Jacobean drama (that is, the drama of the age of James I-1603-1625) was a decadent form of the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The Elizabethan age was the golden age of English drama. But with the turn of the century the drama in England also took a turn. It does not mean that there were no dramatists left. There certainly was a large number of them, but none of them could come anywhere near Shakespeare. Just as after Chaucer poetry in England suffered a decline, similarly after Shakespeare had given his best (that is, after the sixteenth century) drama also suffered a decline. With the passage of time it grew more and more decadent, till with Shirley in the age of Charles I the old kind of drama expired and even theatres were closed (in 1642). "It was inevitable", says Long "that drama should decline after Shakespeare, for the simple reason that there was no other great enough to fill his place."

The dramatists of the Jacobean age can be divided into two classes as follows:

- (i) The dramatists of the old school-Dekker, Heywood, Webster, Beaumont, and Fletcher.
- (ii) The satiric group-Chapman, Jonson, Marston, Middleton, and Tourneur.

The Change of Patrons:

One of the reason for the decadence in Jacobean drama was its loss of national spirit and patronage. In the age of Elizabeth, drama was truly national, as 'it was patronised alike by the queen, the nobles the courtiers, and groundlings. But in the age of James I, it lost contact with common people and came to be patronised by, to quote Hardin Craig, "the courtly classes, their hangers-on, and the socially irresponsible parts of the population." Consequently, to quote the same critic "the stage spoke not to all men, but to men with somewhat specialized interests" Dramatists had to cater to the somewhat decadent courtly taste with tales of intrigue, cruelty, and immorality couched in a high-flown, "polished" style.

Marked Foreign Influence:

The drama of the age of James shows, unlike that of the age of Elizabeth, a very marked foreign influence, for more ill than good. In this connexion Hardin Craig observes: "The older dramatists and their audiences had been satisfied with such intrigue as was afforded by the Italian short story. Their patriotism had sent them to Holjnshead, who had rifled Geoffrey of Monmouth... But in the new age foreign influences of increased potency made themselves felt. Dramatists borrowed the declamatory themes and exaggerated sentiments of Spanish drama, and discovered new ranges of intrigue, crime, and licentiousness in Italy and Italian subjects. Specifically they revived the drama of revenge and, driving it to the extreme, converted it into a drama of horror."

Plot-construction:

In spite of the overall inferiority of Jacobean dramatists to Elizabethan dramatists, some credit must be given to them for their gift of plot-construction. Elizabethan dramatists, including Shakespeare, did not show any skill at architectonics. Moreover, they were generally too lazy to invent plots for themselves and were content to borrow them rather too frequently. It does not mean, however, that they were plagiarists pure and simple. Shakespeare borrowed the plots of most of his plays, but by virtue of his imagination, dramatic skill, poetic gift, and psychological insight transformed them into altogether new entities. But the fact remains that he was a borrower. "The Jacobean dramatists",

observes Hardin Craig, "seem for the first time to have begun to invent plots to suit their own tastes and ends." This is particularly true of the comic dramatists like Marston and Ben Jonson. Secondly, Jacobean dramatists show a greater skill in the construction and development of their plots. In many of them the various threads of the action are carefully interwoven into a wonderful harmony of texture seldom to be met with in Elizabethan plays. Jonson, Middleton, and Fletcher were particularly endowed with the gift of plot-construction. Ben Jonson's *Alchemist* is, according to Coleridge, one of the three literary works of the world (the two others being Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*) which have perfectly constructed plots. But what applies to the above-named dramatists does not apply to all Jacobean dramatists. Many of them, such as Dekker, are egregious offenders in this respect. As Janet Spens points out in *Elizabethan Drama*, "the lack of connexion between plot and sub-plot was one of the most marked vices of the post-Shakespearean dramatists, and Dekker happens to offer the most absurd instance of it. There is unity in Dekker's better plays, but it is the unity of the novel rather than that of the drama."

New Experiments:

In addition to their overall better plot-construction Jacobean dramatists may be credited with setting up some new patterns of drama. It was they who gave us the following kinds of drama, till then unattempted, or indifferently attempted, in England:

- (i) Domestic drama : such as Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*.
- (ii) Drama glorifying a particular profession : such as Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (which came, however, in 1599).
- (iii) Drama showing the life and manners of the people of London: such as many of Ben Jonson's comedies.
- (iv) Drama dealing with social problems, mostly prostitution: such as Dekker's *The Honest Whore*. This kind of drama later came to be practised by no less a distinguished dramatist than George Bernard Shaw.

Moral Laxity:

After giving Jacobean drama its due, let us discuss some elements of decadence which appear in it. One of these elements is its moral laxity. As we have already said, Jacobean drama was patronised mostly by the courtly classes which were known for their lack of moral discipline. James I himself was, to use the words of Hardin Craig, "a moralist without character." The same is true of most of the dramatists of his age. Some of them made fairly sincere attempts to preach morality, and none of them commended, or even condoned, sin or vice. But that does not absolve them of the charge of showing an almost morbid interest in sexual immorality even though for the purpose of condemning it. Play after play was written on the theme of immoral love. *The White Devil*, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* are all tragedies of illicit love. *A King and No King* is a tragedy of incestuous love. Later, in the Caroline age, Ford produced his very shocking play *'Tis Pity She Is a Whore* in which he openly dealt with the incestuous passion of a brother and sister which ends in disaster for both. Prostitutes appeared as heroines in many a play, such as Dekker's *The Honest Whore* and Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*. Abject debauchees figured prominently in numerous plays. It was only Heywood and Webster who abstained from licentious themes. Heywood looked to the past and, in the words of Irvin Ribner in his *Jacobean Tragedy*, "doggedly continued to assert the moral values of an earlier age in a new

world in which they no longer had great meaning." As regards Webster, the same critic observes that his plays "are an agonised search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of Jacobean scepticism."

Gloom and Pessimism:

This scepticism led the Jacobean age to spiritual vacuity and despair. The courtiers, in particular, became voluptuous cynics. But this voluptuousness was not without the agonising sense of melancholy arising chiefly from the prospect of human mortality without any Christian consolation regarding the future. Themes of death, time, and mutability engaged the attention of most writers and the tragedies of the Jacobean period, too, are exhibitives of what Ribner calls a "spirit of negation and disillusion, despair and spiritual no-confidence." Shakespearean tragedy does give rise to the feelings of pity and fear, and even awe, but it does not create any pessimistic feeling. There are death and destruction no doubt, but the human spirit rises phoenix-like from the pyre with a new, resplendent glory. But this kind of reassuring feeling is absent from Jacobean tragedy. All that happens in it is quite earthly, lacking the spiritual dimension of Hamlet, and still less, the much vaster, cosmic dimension of Lear. The scepticism, gloom, despair, and pessimism of the age are thus reflected by its tragedy also.

Melodramatic Sensationalism:

The English have always had, in spite of the long line of critics from Sidney to Dryden to Addison to Dr. Johnson, a taste for crude and melodramatic sensationalism generally of the kind of physical violence and bloodshed. Even Elizabethan dramatists including Shakespeare could not do without catering to the popular taste by introducing into their tragedies a large number of murders and scenes of violence. They might have been partly influenced by the tradition of Senecan revenge tragedy, but the popular taste for "blood and thunder" was also a dictating factor. Considered from the point of view of story alone, such plays as Marlowe's Tamburlaine and The Jew of Malta, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy are all melodramas. But their melodramatic nature does not force itself on the eye or the ear, thanks to the rare poetic power which sustains them in a higher region. But the same is not true of the Jacobean melodramatic tragedies. With the departure or decay of the poetic power they have not much left to recommend themselves to us. Most of the tragedies of the age only succeed in covering the stage in the last act with a virtual rivulet of blood so revolting to the refined eye.

Sentimentalism:

On the other side of the scale to this artless and unthinking bloodshed was the Jacobean tendency towards sentimentalism. To quote Allardyce Nicoll, "there is apparent in the audience of the seventeenth century an increasing love of pathos and of what may be called sentimentalism." The pathos sought to be created by Jacobean dramatists is generally of the artificial kind. But some plays, such as Heywood's Woman Killed with Kindness, contain some really pathetic scenes. The death scene of the duchess in Webster's The Duchess of Malfi is one of the superb examples of pathos in the whole range of English literature. But such scenes are more of the nature of an exception than a rule. The pathos of Lear's or Cordelia's or Edward II's death is seldom captured by a Jacobean dramatist. Allardyce, Nicoll observes about these dramatists : "The dramatists employ every means, illegitimate as well as legitimate, to stir the emotions of the spectators and to present before them something of novelty."

Satire and Realism:

The Jacobean age brought into vogue a new kind of realistic and satiric comedy aimed at the exposure of London life and manners and the vices and follies of the times. The exposure was effected for the purpose of correction through satire and ridicule. We find comedy writers like Ben Jonson and Marston holding the mirror to their age and lashing the follies of the Londoners. Their plays are quite realistic with real London as their background. They do not transport us to the fairyland atmosphere of the romantic comedies such as *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What they give us is a much more direct criticism of life. Ben Jonson was quite articulate about his aim.

I'll strip the ragged follies of the time

Naked, as at their birth;

And with a whip of steel

Print wounding lashes in their iron ribs.

Marston and Ben Jonson were engaged in what is known as "the War of Theatres" and wrote stinging satires against each other: The humour of Jacobean comedy was no longer the genial, puckish, fresh and refreshing humour of Shakespeare's comedies, but the bitter and satirical humour which always arises from

Poor Characterisation:

Jacobean drama suffered decadence in the all-important field of characterisation. It could not boast of a character of the stature and psychological complexity of Shakespeare's *Lear* or *Hamlet*, or even Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*. Jacobean dramatists relied for dramatic effect more on the situation than on the character. In the field of comedy, the Jacobean age presents conventional and wooden types, as, for instance, Ben Jonson's "humours." In the field of tragedy, we have again some highly conventional and recurring characters such as, to use the words of Nicoll, the "Headstrong monarch", the "lustful tyrant," "a predetermined hero, often a husband, and with him the inevitable heroine either sinning or sinned against." Then there is the "faithful friend" of the hero. "Again, there are," says Nicoll, "sudden and wholly unpsychological revolutions of character which mar the majority of these dramas and we realize that there could be no possible delving into the depths of personality such as we find in Shakespeare."

Poor Poetry:

Poetically, Jacobean drama is much less rich than Elizabethan drama. The passionate lyricism of Shakespeare and the grandeur of Marlowe's mighty line became things of the past. Rhetorical devices took the place of true poetry. In Ben Jonson's tragedies, *Catiline* and *Sejanus*, there is more of oratory than poetry. Playwrights such as Dekker, Heywood, and Tourneur handled blank verse quite loosely, nor could they breathe into it that pulsating life and poetic beauty which constitute an overwhelming proportion of the pleasure we derive from Elizabethan drama.