

BLOOD, LOVE AND TEARS: RENAISSANCE ENTERTAINMENT

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All the pathos and dramatism implied in Winston Churchill's much-quoted sentence seems to have been the current fare throughout the history of popular literature. In times of national or personal crisis this terrible promise seems to give life some tinge of glory and sense of catharsis to the point of making the situation more bearable. Sixteenth century Europe was experiencing a commotion of physical borders and class definition intense enough to reverberate into the realms of literature: "blood, sweat and tears" becomes the symbolic battleground of the thirst for power in Shakespeare's tragedies or in other great themes of the moment, such as the Faustian myth. Michel Foucault has argued in his work how power and knowledge develop together, since "the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge (and) knowledge induces effects of power".¹ Thus, the process of accomplishing either goal is cluttered with symbols of blood, sweat or tears.

But Faustus or Macbeth mark the end of the transcendental notions of knowledge and power in literature, and, as Julia Kristeva puts it, "the serenity of the symbol was replaced by the strained ambivalence of the sign's connection, which lays claim to resemblance and identification of the elements it holds together, while first postulating their radical difference. (...) the sign refers back to entities both of lesser scope and more concretized than those of the symbol".² The transcendence of the literary

¹ Madan Sarup: *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Harvester 1988 (p. 82).

² Julia Kristeva: *Desire in Language*, Basil Blackwell 1987 (pp. 39-40).

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message in tragedies and historical plays is, then, replaced by a poignant touch of humour or satire which creates an effect of exaggeration or caricature that displaces the center of the actual problem out of the focus of the perceptive audience.

The negative aspects embodied in the acquisition of power are going to be “mediated upon”, an uncomfortable present is going to be exorcised by the force of language through the prerogative of literature, taking advantage of the fact that “there is no direct access to that real which would be unmediated by the structure of our various discourses about it”.¹ Therefore, the contemporary discourse will forget that “during the whole of Shakespeare’s lifetime there was not a single year when Europe was not engaged in war. (That) there could have been no period during Shakespeare’s adult life when he would not see broken men returning from battle”,² that there were inflation, underemployment, penury and the constant threats of famine and plague.

If reality is the site of darkness and strife, as Northrop Frye would put it, reality must be reified in terms of romance and melodrama, and “sweat” substituted by “love” as an easier vehicle for the reification and a more comprehensible subject matter to identify with. The measure of the intensity of that love is solved by Frye’s words: “If literature is didactic, it tends to injure its own integrity; if it ceases wholly to be didactic, it tends to injure its own seriousness. (...) Irony preserves the seriousness of literature by demanding an expanded perspective on the action it presents, but it preserves the integrity of literature by not limiting or prescribing for that perspective”.³ Peter Ure also expands on the same aspect while analyzing Ben Jonson and fellow satirists and points out the successful combination of ingredients: archetypally vicious characters commented

¹ Linda Hutcheon: “History and/as Intertext”, *Future Indicative*, John Moss (ed.), U. of Ottawa Press 1986 (p. 173).

² Joel Hurstfield: “The Historical and Social Background”, *A New Companion to Shakespearean Studies*, K. Muir and S. Schoenbaum (eds), Cambridge U. P. 1971 (p. 173).

³ Northrop Frye: *The Stubborn Structure*, Methuen 1970 (p. 169).

upon by similarly affected individuals, all of them responding to their own peculiar internal logic.¹

The world, or underworld, of criminal types, plus the still slippery boundaries between science and superstition and the need to displace political fears and social inequalities multiply the manifestations of popular literature, even within the parameters established above. The popular taste goes not only for romance and melodrama, but also for stories of marvels and portents, strange happenings, crime stories and accounts about witches and the devil. Insofar blood is taken and tears shed, morbidity exacted and local colour assured, the audience is guaranteed and so is readership. Still, themes and preferences are not new, they go back to broadsides and oral literature and will stretch forward to contemporary serials and soap operas, since there will always be some thwarted desire to sublimate.

Victor Neuburg² records some pieces and titles popular in England in the sixteenth century: “A description of a monstrous Chylde borne at Chychester in Sussex, 1562”, “A Proper Newe Sonet Declaring the Lamentation of Beckless (a Market Towne in) Suffolke, which was in the Great Winde Upon S. Andrewes Eve Last Past Most Pittifully Burned with Fire, to the Losse by Estimation of Twentie Thousande Pound and Upwarde, and to the Number of Foure Score Dwelling Houses, 1586”, “The arraignment and burning of Margaret Ferne-seede, for the Murder of her late Husband Anthony Ferne-seede, found dead in Packham Field neere Lambeth, having once before attempted to poyson him with broth, being executed in S. Georges-fields the last of Februarie ... “ published in 1608. These are just a few examples of the kind of discourse admitted as entertainment in Elizabethan times and which provide a background to the common understanding and enjoyment of literature. As long as we remain by theme and taste and leave aside style and articulation, we can quote Neuburg in that “at this period it would be difficult to make a clear division between popular literature and some overspill from serious literature, for each borrowed from the other” (p. 25).

¹ Peter Ure: “Shakespeare and the Drama of his Time”, *A New Companion to Shakespearean Studies*, op. cit. p. 217.

² Victor Neuburg: *Popular Literature*, Penguin Books 1977.

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In "A Newe Ballade of a Lover Extolling His Ladye", dated 1563, the poet borrows freely from the semantic fields of blood and tears to express his love in heart-rending terms. He invokes the anger of the universe (gods, stars, the sun, fowls, animals and fish) upon his body to prove his love for her. Some of the tortures he imagines fall within the purest gothic tradition:

to slaye / my corpes with cruell panges of death (line 19)
mine eyes / should send forth bloody streames (l. 28)
a serpent / my corps to flay with bloody wounds (l. 43)
the lyon / my fleshe to teare and gnawe (l. 52)

The tirade, that started with an allusion to the gods, ends accordingly and with a feeling for effect by completing the cycle in hell. Yet, the poet dares all, endures all in this mythical journey of pain and chastisement - only with the absence of her love is death finally effected.

Michael Drayton abounds in the same idea and in similar terms a few years later. His sonnet "An Evil Spirit" (1599) considers beauty and love as a curse that "haunts", "possesses", "tempts to each ill", "torments" and "tortures" the unwary poet, brought to "sighs", "tears", "despair" and "sudden death" - in short, love proves to be the Evil Spirit of the title. But the couplet twists the tail indeed by reconciling opposites and, therefore, subverting all the negative connotations of the poem into pleasurable and piercing feelings. The loved one is both a "good sweet angel" and a "wicked evil spirit":

Thus am I still provoked to every evil
By this good wicked spirit, sweet angel-devil.

This ambivalence pertaining women is extended throughout most literary pieces. Women are either good or wicked, angels to husband and family or pure devils. This simplification is carried out with some reserve, with ample written evidence to testify that women are fundamentally good but easy prey to the temptations of the world. The treatise "Hic Mulier; or, The Man-Woman" (1620) refers all evils to woman following wicked new fashions, such as modifying her dress, till then "fit for her modesty" or having her hair cut when "the long hair of a woman is the ornament of her

sex”.¹ Similarly, the theatre was considered an occasion of sin for women, as quoted by another anonymous moralist: “muchas esposas pecadoras confesaban en su lecho de muerte que era el inicial error de asistir al teatro el que había apartado sus mentes de la contemplación de la virtud, precipitándolas a la resbaladiza senda de la perdición”.² The shadows and masks integrating the theatrical atmosphere have always been the ideal setting for illicit looks, clandestine dates and, eventually, perdition.

One of the most common and compelling female archetype is the innocent adolescent or faithful wife acting unawares as a seductress, attracting the lust of the villain through her mere passive presence, victorious over the wordy turmoil going on on stage. This peaceful lamb is capable of the most atrocious crimes once she falls in love with the seducer (should we say, with the seduced?) or is convinced of a cause. Lady Macbeth is the most famous resolute woman in English literature but, by no means, the only one. Alice Arden is such another doubtful Renaissance heroine, of *Arden of Feversham*, play written in 1591 out of the account given in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* of a murder committed in 1551. The title page summarizes all we need to remember:

The lamentable and true tragedy of Master Arden of Feversham in Kent. Who was most wickedly murdered by the means of his disloyal and wanton wife, who, for the love she bare to one Mosbie, hired two desperate ruffians, Black Will and Shakebag, to kill him. Wherein is showed the great malice and dissimulation of a wicked woman, the unsatiable desire of filthy lust, and the shameful end of all murderers.

T. W. Craig, in his introduction to *Minor Elizabethan Tragedies*, lists the evident attractions of the play: realism, moralism, sensationalism, suspense and intrigue. Alice was a contented wife till Mosbie came her way, when she became most anxious to dispense with her husband, loathing every minute she remained married to him. She scolded her lover:

For if thou beest as resolute as I,

¹ Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus: *Half Humankind* (Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640), Univ. of Illinois Press 1985 (p. 270).

² Héctor Tizón: *Shakespeare*, Ediciones Urbión 1984 (p. 45).

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We'll have him murder'd as he walks the streets. (Sc. I, ll. 443-444)

In spite of so much cruelty and blood, men do share part of the guilt; they admit to lust for power and flesh, and to deceit. While Alice Arden follows an irrational notion of love, Mosbie calculates the pros and cons of courting her:

I have neglected matters of import
That would have stated me above thy state (...)
I left the marriage of an honest maid,
Whose dowry would have weigh'd down all thy wealth,
Whose beauty and demeanour far exceeded thee.
(Sc. VIII, ll. 83-84, 88-90)

“State”, “wealth” and “beauty” are, then, the false pillars of love, word much used and abused in popular literature, but void of any transcendental sense. *Arden of Feversham* contains very good examples of its playful possibilities, such as:

It is not love that loves to anger love. (Mosbie)
It is not love that loves to murder love. (Alice) (Sc. VIII, ll. 58-59)

Alice: Nay, he must leave to live that we may love,
May love, may live; for what is life but love?
And love shall last as long as life remains,
And life shall end before my love depart. (Sc. X, ll. 86-89)

Love and women are simplified to the point of becoming mere literary functions, not to be dismissed but not to be taken in full consideration either. Thomas Arden, characteristically, exalts his wife to heights difficult to reach and to contest and purports to live happily and without care ever after: “For dear I hold her love, as dear as heaven” (Scene I, line 39).

Religion is the haven of male arguments to keep women safely in their proper place “lower than men’s in the hierarchies of the world, but placed at the very heart of Christianity”.¹ The argument is convenient to

¹ Elaine Beilin: *Redeeming Eve* (Women Writers of the English Renaissance), Princeton U. P. 1987 (p. xv).

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deal even with the Queen, as Edmund Spenser wisely put it in *The Fairie Queene*:

But virtuous women wisely understand
That they were born to base humility,
Unless the heavens them lift to lawful sovereignty. (B. 5, c. 5, stz.
25)

National and domestic politics are thus solved to everybody's contentment: Queen Elizabeth's power emanates directly from God, and no common woman can be so pretentious as to compete with the Queen in that respect, but they can model themselves on such an elated example while exercising the virtue of modesty.

A pamphlet written in 1616 warns women, though, of the perils of given themselves over to religious theories, while abounding on the frailty of women and their proneness to excess. The writer also takes advantage of the opportunity to make a political statement and capitalizes on the morbidity of the people who enjoy a tragic story and bloody details all the best if they know they are well out of it. The pamphlet tells the story of "A pitiless Mother that most unnaturally at one time murdered two of her own Children at Acton, within six miles of London, upon holy thursday last, 1616, the ninth of May, being a Gentlewoman named Margaret Vincent, wife of Mr Jarvis Vincent of the same Town, With her Examination, Confession, and true discovery of all the proceedinges in the said bloody accident".

The details of name, date and place in the title entice the prospective reader with the first requirement for popular success: the pretence to reality. Once this is established, the gruesome description of the actual murder and the ravishing fit of madness of Margaret become facts that everybody should rightfully know - were it all fiction, the reader might feel the force of his macabre curiosity and forbear the knowledge. But, as it is presented, people, specially women, must learn it in order to be forewarned, since, the aforesaid Margaret "Twelve or Fourteen Years had she lived in marriage with her husband well beloved, having for their comforts divers pretty children between them, with all other things in plenty (as health, riches, and suchlike) to increase concord, and no necessity that might be hindrance to

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contentment”.¹ This time it is no light infatuation that induces the faulty logic of crime and murder, but a more powerful enemy that sores above the social and political crisis of England at the time: frail Margaret Vincent falls prey “into the hands of Roman Wolves (who had) the sweet Lamb, her soul, thus entangled by their persuasions” that, to preserve her children’s innocence of sin, decides to kill them before their time.

There is more to popular literature than mere entertainment, there is a morality well disguised and much enforced by the factual powers: that crime is appropriate for literature but it doesn’t pay, that it is much more rewarding to remain within lawful binds and boundaries and that an uncontrollable pursuit of pleasure or knowledge always brings madness and death in the end. Those who must satisfy such inmoderate compulsions will fare much better by indulging in the entertaining vice of literature.

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¹ *Half Humankind*, op. cit. p. 362.