Black Farce in Jacobean and 1960s Theatre

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Abstract

The genre of black farce, which appeared in certain plays of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (notably The Revenger's Tragedy, Women Beware Women, The Changeling, The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta and 'Tis Pity She's a Whore), re-emerged on the stage of the 1960s - both in new work by Joe Orton, Peter Barnes, Peter Nichols and Henry Livings and in an unprecedented number of revivals of the Jacobean plays which rediscovered their blackly farcical elements and illuminated their relationship to contemporary modes.

This thesis examines black farce as a genre of simultaneous and equally (though precariously) balanced farce and horror, characterised by excess, physicality, taboo-breaking, ambivalence and disharmony. Black farce provokes an uncertain audience response, in which a combined sense of shock and laughter leads to feelings of discomfort and disorientation. Building upon this definition of the genre, I argue that the reason for its appearance in the Renaissance and its re-emergence in the 1960s lies in a paradoxical sense of exhilaration and horror felt by playwrights in response to bewilderingly rapid social change and the dismantling of many established structures and codes.

In the first section of the thesis, the genre of black farce is defined and studied through its correspondences with and distinctions from closely related genres with which it coincides and overlaps.

The precise nature of the relationship between the plays of the two periods is then demonstrated through the analysis of their blackly farcical treatment of four broad, central themes: madness, violence, death and sex. As well as revealing some close specific parallels between particular Jacobean and 1960s plays, this analysis locates the dramatic constructions of those themes within their respective sociological contexts, thus indicating the various factors that gave rise to black farce's particular combination of exhilaration and despair in societies more than three and a half centuries apart.

In the final section, a detailed examination of the professional revivals of Jacobean plays during the 1960s shows how the fruitful contact between new and old highlighted and enriched the relationship between them.

The three sections of the thesis combine to confirm the strong network of correspondences between the theatres of the late sixteenth/early seventeenth centuries and the 1960s, thus enhancing our understanding of both.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me, Sarah C. Rutherford, and that the work is my own.

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Introduction

'[I]n the British drama of the 1960’s, a new tone of comedy and disillusion seems to raise its head,' writes Ronald Bryden in his introduction to Peter Barnes’ play The Bewitched.¹ This tone, which characterises work such as ‘the black farce of Joe Orton, . . . one could only, at the time, describe loosely as Jacobean’:

a sense of things falling apart, a bitter delight in their new randomness, an appalled disgust at the superstition and brutality revealed by the collapse of the old order, which brought to mind Ben Jonson, Donne and Webster. By comparison, the playwrights of the 1950s – John Osborne, Arnold Wesker – seemed like survivals from a more confident, neo-Elizabethan age: isolated Raleighs offended by the new era’s lack of respect for language, craft, the principle of merit. (pp. 186-87)

An certain impressionistic analogy between 1960s black farce and Jacobean drama, then, though not quite axiomatic, is hardly new. Ever since the works of Joe Orton, Peter Barnes, Peter Nichols, Henry Livings and others first appeared on stage, theatre critics and scholars have – though ‘loosely’, as Bryden observes – alluded to their Jacobean affinities, often drawing more general historical parallels between the two eras in question.² Allardyce Nicoll in his 1968 study of English drama stated that, in theatrical terms, ‘the nearest parallel to the present decade is the decade between 1600 and 1610.’³ More specifically, Nicholas Brooke in his 1979 discussion of Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy stated that although the coexistence of tragedy and comedy ‘in such definitive form’ as in Middleton and Rowley’s The Changeling ‘has become unfamiliar through later centuries . . . much recent drama tends towards

²For a full account of responses to new work and Jacobean revivals in the theatre of the 1960s, see Chapter 6.
the same perception. Many of Orton’s farces have been described in terms of Jacobean revenge tragedies; his bravado and macabre humour has been compared with that of Marlowe, Tourneur and Middleton, the work of Peter Barnes (adapter of plays by Marston and Jonson) has been likened to ‘the savage farce of Marlowe, the dramas of the revenge convention and those tragedies intercut with flashes of comedy’, and the ‘tone, technique and deaths’ of Peter Nichols’ The National Health have been found to correspond with those of The Revenger’s Tragedy.

In addition to these passing references, two brief studies have examined somewhat more thoroughly some of the specific connections between the Jacobeans and one playwright of the 1960s: Joe Orton. In 1978, Manfred Draudt of the University of Vienna wrote an article in English Studies entitled ‘Comic, Tragic, or Absurd? On some parallels between the farces of Joe Orton and seventeenth-century tragedy’. Here he described many ‘surprising parallels and links between Hamlet and Loot’ as well as ‘illuminating affinities of Ortonian farce and Jacobean tragedy (especially The Revenger’s Tragedy) which are even more remarkable.’ Beginning with an extended comparison of the first two plays, Draudt adumbrated several close similarities of theme, tone, episode and device, while emphasising the difference in overall generic structure between Shakespeare’s and Orton’s plays:

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The identification of parallels between an Elizabethan black verse tragedy and a modern farce may lead to a reconsideration of the relationship of the genres and point to basic characteristics common to the ‘tragic’ and the ‘comic’. Yet such an analysis may also contribute towards enhancing our awareness of the peculiar natures of Shakespeare’s and Orton’s plays respectively, because it directs our attention towards the differences in function and meaning of these common elements when viewed within the context of the individual play. (p. 206)

Draudt then proceeded to highlight the ‘even more remarkable’ affinities between Orton’s work and other Jacobean tragedies, notably The Revenger’s Tragedy. Here the generic link was felt to be much closer, due to the ‘close proximity of [non-Shakespearean] Jacobean tragedy and farce’ (p. 206). Arguing for ‘a very direct influence’ (a justifiable speculation which I shall tackle in Chapter 6), Draudit once again noted a variety of parallels between Ortonian farces such as What the Butler Saw and Loot and the Jacobean Revenger’s Tragedy (as well as, in passing, The Changeling). His primary focus, though, was generic, as his conclusion demonstrates:

The recurrence of certain themes (such as death, evil, sexual passion) together with certain techniques (such as incongruity, contrast, irony, paradox) seems to prove that ‘mirth and compassion’ are not ‘things incompatible’, as Sidney and the neoclassical critics maintained; rather the tragic and the comic spring from the same roots, as Socrates is said to have believed.

... in twentieth-century farce, which at first sight may seem to have nothing in common with the greatest Elizabethan blank verse tragedies, many techniques and themes of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries come to a new life.

(pp. 216-17)

Eight years later, William Hutchings of the University of Birmingham, Alabama gave a paper to the Themes in Drama conference in California, in which he took one of the plays discussed by Draudit (of whom he showed no awareness) and further elaborated upon the ‘Jacobean assimilations’ that it displays. The play was Orton’s What the Butler Saw, ‘a virtual compendium of the most outrageous excesses of Jacobean drama transposed into a modern context – an assimilation of such standard
motifs as the changeling, inadvertent incest, madness and tragicomic violence into a twentieth-century setting. Like Draudt, Hutchings argued that Orton knowingly exploited the Jacobean tradition; furthermore, he suggested that an awareness of ‘the playwright’s literary conception of the play’ helps to counter accusations of generic incoherence and to justify the play’s ‘problematical shift in tone’ which is often evaded by directors:

In *What the Butler Saw*, the prevalence of such Jacobean motifs not only helps to explain the unity and cohesion of the text in a way that other analyses of the work have not done, but it also provides ample precedent for both the outrageousness of the characters’ actions and the violence of the play’s ending. (pp. 228, 231)

One objective of Hutchings’ study, therefore, was to provide a literary solution to a theatrical dilemma: how to handle the final ten minutes of *What the Butler Saw* – ‘arguably the trickiest in modern drama’ – in which injured characters, ‘anguished [and] fainting’, turn ‘white and ill’, moaning and clutching at wounds ‘streaming blood’.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the madcap antics and wild confusions of the play’s characters become far more serious and sinister; theirs is not the usually ‘painless’ violence of most farce, whose characters typically display a certain Punch-and-Judy resiliency if not an apparent imperviousness to pain. (p. 231)

This analysis led Hutchings to a similar conclusion to that of Draudt regarding the nature of farce. Like his predecessor, Hutchings was interested in the incompatibilities of tone that Orton succeeded in synthesising within his work:

... and in accommodating within it the outrageousness of the Jacobean aesthetic as well, *What the Butler Saw* extends – and therefore, to an extent, redefines – the capabilities of farce as both a literary genre and as a theatrical form. (p. 234)

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Both Draudt and Hutchings, therefore, find that an examination of some of the parallels between the work of Joe Orton and certain Jacobean playwrights leads them to a reconsideration of the genre of farce – to the discovery of a darker, bloodier tone that farce may encompass, which had apparently reappeared on the stage of the 1960s in the same form that had characterised much of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century tragedy.

The present study arises from the same recognition of an affinity of genre between the drama of these two periods that inspired both Draudt and Hutchings. The relationship between Joe Orton and Jacobean tragedy – primarily *The Revenger's Tragedy* – that was analysed by these two scholars accordingly remains central to this work. I also share their focus on the particular form of farce that constitutes the link between Jacobean and 1960s drama – a form that I define as ‘black farce’. Building on these starting points, I demonstrate that the parallels with and assimilations of Jacobean drama exhibited in the 1960s goes further than the work of Joe Orton, as illustrated by three of his contemporaries, all writers of black farce: Peter Barnes, Peter Nichols and Henry Livings. In addition, I look beyond the genre of black farce to discover what sociological and cultural factors shared by the two periods may have provoked its appearance and reappearance. Furthermore, I add a major dimension to the relationship by examining the nature and significance of the ‘Renaissance revival’ in the 1960s – a revival that both confirms the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s black farce and enhances our understanding of it.

I begin this thesis, therefore, with a detailed examination of the nature of black farce in terms of its constituent genres – the ‘incompatibles’ of horror and farce – and in terms of its correspondences with and distinctions from other closely related
Introduction

genres. The definition of black farce established in Chapter 1 forms the basis of the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s theatre that I investigate throughout the remainder of the thesis; though there are, as Draudt and Hutchings have indicated, undoubtedly various other connections and parallels that may be drawn, the genre of black farce encompasses most elegantly the fundamental significance of the analogy, pointing us towards the extra-literary conflicts and paradoxes that lie behind the attraction of 1960s playwrights to what may be called the Jacobean aesthetic.

The nature of black farce thus established, I select four broad themes with which to demonstrate both the exploitation of the genre within the drama of the two periods and the contemporary attitudes to those themes that generated a blackly farcical treatment of them on stage. The themes – madness, violence, death and sex – have been chosen because of the large amount of attention they receive from both Jacobean and 1960s playwrights, and indeed their centrality to the genre of black farce. All four are inevitably associated with the taboos and physicality of the genre; and the exploration of their most horrific aspects within a farcical framework illustrates how the ambivalence of contemporary approaches to these subjects was reflected in the despair and exhilaration expressed by black farce.

Finally, having analysed the parallels between the black farce of the two periods in terms of their respective sociological contexts, I look directly at the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s drama as it was played out on the stage of the 1960s. Here, black farce was rediscovered not only in the new writing of the decade but also in an unprecedented surge of new, blackly farcical interpretations of Jacobean plays, some of which were suddenly revived for the first time since their original productions. Press coverage of the 1960s Jacobean revivals, analyses in programme
notes, unpublished communications from directors to actors and other contemporary evidence all combine to demonstrate how the revivals interacted with the new writing itself. In addition, a number of personal interviews with those who made the decision to stage these works reveal the directors’ specific reasons for suddenly retrieving long-neglected works from obscurity at that particular moment; their awareness of the plays’ contemporary relevance in terms of both genre and theme, in both the theatre and in society as a whole, adds further ramifications to the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s black farce.

In selecting the group of Jacobean plays that I use to exemplify the link with the 1960s, I have chosen those works that contain the largest amount of ‘blackly farcical’ material within their ostensibly tragic frameworks and that were of particular interest to the 1960s professional theatre. These plays are Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus*, John Webster’s *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*, John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*; and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, still attributed to Tourneur in the 1960s but now commonly acknowledged to be the work of Middleton. Though Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy* and John Marston’s two *Antonio* plays (which were adapted by Peter Barnes in the 1970s) contain numerous scenes that could arguably be defined as black farce, they were passed over in the general rush to dust off forgotten works of the Jacobeans on the professional stage of the 1960s; their exclusion from the

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'Renaissance revival', therefore, disqualifies them from detailed discussion here. *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, despite their well-known grotesqueries, are omitted for the opposite reason; though Jan Kott may have argued for Shakespeare's special relevance in 1964, his plays have retained a uniquely consistent presence on the stage since their first appearance: 'the evidence of Shakespeare's continuing importance is available all around us,' as Ejner J. Jensen wrote in his own justification of the same omission from his study of Elizabethan revivals. As Gary Taylor has shown, every age reinvents Shakespeare to suit its own ends; by contrast, many of the Jacobean works in question were ignored entirely by each successive age between the seventeenth century and the 1960s. In addition, as Draudt explained, the parallels with the plays of the 1960s provided by the work of Shakespeare's contemporaries, in which black farce is not necessarily subservient to a strictly tragic framework, are 'even more remarkable' than those provided by Shakespeare himself.

Though I agree with Valerie Traub and others that the terms 'Renaissance' and 'Jacobean' are loaded with erroneous assumptions regarding the universality of new learning and the privileging of 'the dominant ideology, and specifically, the court, as arbiter of social practice', I have chosen to adopt those terms partly for convenience's sake to cover a group of plays almost all of which appeared during the

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17On the questionable tragic status of many Jacobean 'tragedies', see Chapter 1 below.
reign of James I, and partly in acknowledgement of the accepted usage of those terms during the 1960s. My usage is thus in accordance with that of my primary sources, but should not be taken to imply anything beyond the period in which the group of plays already named was written. This usage, furthermore, includes applying the term ‘Jacobean’ sufficiently ‘loosely’ to include Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta and ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore, none of which was written while James was on the throne; as the following chapters make clear, their episodes of black farce (and those of The Jew of Malta in particular) make them indispensable to a discussion of the genre. And indeed, in spite of the medieval trappings of Doctor Faustus, Marlowe is (especially during the 1960s) commonly viewed as a forerunner of a Jacobean aesthetic that by no means ended abruptly with the death of the king. As Clifford Leech observed in 1965, although the preoccupation with both tragedy and satire in the genre of ‘Jacobean tragedy’ – ‘a special variant of tragic drama’ – did not grow ‘generally prominent’ until the turn of the century, Marlowe may be seen as ahead of his time:

No Jacobean went further than Marlowe in his exposure of the vanity and cruelty that go along with conquest and power; no one exceeded him in his intimate concern with physical suffering . . . . 19

‘Again and again,’ wrote Ejner J. Jensen in 1978, ‘the plays [of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries] can be set over against some of our most significant contemporary dramas with results that are reciprocally illuminating’ (p. 230). It is this reciprocal illumination that is the objective of the following pages.
1 Mirth and killing

BLACK FARCE

'True,' writes Alastair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature*, 'the urge to define is nearly irresistible. Everyone writing about a group of works seems to feel that “he must commit himself to some kind of formal definition of the genre.”'\(^1\) True indeed. And as Fowler himself is the first to admit, this urge exists because the concept of genre, limited and contentious though it may be, retains its powers of correlation and illumination in spite of the entirely justifiable charges of imprecision, subjectivity and mutability that are frequently laid at its door. '[T]actful critics,' wrote Paul Hernadi a decade before Fowler, having warned of the potential for meaningless connections that genre may encourage, 'can focus on any kind of generic similarity without losing sight of the limitations inherent in their preferred approach'\(^2\) – and this judicious awareness both of the pitfalls and of the utility of genre is shared by many critics, particularly in the environs of black farce and related genres.\(^3\) Mathew Winston, most typically, cautiously concludes one of his discussions of the 'black humor' genre with the statement that 'The test of my notion of black humor, as of any other literary concept, must be its applicability to individual novels and plays and its utility in

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enabling us to make significant connections and fine discriminations; and it is this model of sceptical pragmatism that I intend to follow in my discussion of black farce in Jacobean and 1960s theatre.

The linguistic origins of the term 'black farce' may be traced to André Breton's *Anthologie de L'humour noir*, first published in 1939. Under this title Breton collected forty-five disparate authors and artists including Swift, Kafka, de Sade, Dalí and Picasso. Whatever the precise nature of *humour noir* (and it was never made entirely clear by Breton), the term appears simply to have been appropriated by the North Americans and the British entirely for their own purposes; in the United States, 'critics picked it up, ignorant of its origins, and applied it to a seemingly new variety of American fiction of the late 1950s and early 1960s', while in Britain it was applied to the theatre, usually in the modified form of 'black comedy'. By 1965, the theatrical term was sufficiently well known in Britain for Peter Shaffer to play upon it in the name of one of his works.

The term 'black farce' appears to have arisen in the 1960s as a variation of 'black comedy'. The modulation between the two genres is encapsulated by Maurice Charney when he describes the work of Joe Orton as 'the black comedy version of

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farce’ (he might just as easily speak of ‘the farcical version of black comedy’);⁷ indeed, the term ‘black farce’ – far less common than its comic counterpart – is used most often in relation to Orton, where it indicates an escalation of the boisterous aggression of traditional farce to include horrific, taboo or potentially tragic themes.⁸ Peter Nichols, identifying elements of what he understands as black farce in his own work, cites the ‘pretty grim but also hilariously funny’ second scene of The National Health as one example. Here, a farcical misunderstanding with a bedpan is played out concurrently with a lingering, painful death and the horror of institutional indifference and incompetence: ‘There are two elements going which are in conflict – you force the audience to work it out for themselves.’⁹ And as we shall see in Chapter 6, Peter Barnes himself describes the relationship between his own work and Jacobean drama in terms of black farce.

Although the term ‘black farce’ did not enter the language until the 1960s, certain critics also immediately found it a useful – if anachronistic – description for elements of some Jacobean plays. J. W. Lever, for example, described in 1971 some of the ‘concomitant effects’ to the bloody horrors of plays such as Antonio’s Revenge and ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore as black farce.¹⁰ Theatre critics were particularly liberal with the term, and the significance of this will be discussed in Chapter 6.¹¹

⁹Interview with the author, 4 April 1996.
Where the term 'black farce' does occur, definition is rarely attempted. There is certainly no model interpretation of the phrase, and it does not appear in any of the standard dictionaries and encyclopaedias. What I intend to provide, therefore, is a purely functional description of the term that can be used to describe what Winston calls 'significant connections' – in this case, between two specific groups of plays three and a half centuries apart. This process of definition will not take place in a theoretical vacuum, however; it will be carried out through analysis of the genre's component parts – 'blackness' and farce – and through examination of its relationship to – and distinction from – the overlapping genres of black comedy, black humor and many others with which it is frequently confused, conflated and equated. 'Every work of literature,' writes Fowler, 'belongs to at least one genre' (p. 20); and the works to which I am attaching the mixed label 'black farce' are particularly prone to multi-generic categorising. The process of disentanglement, then, will of course necessitate engagement with established models and definitions. Illustrative examples from the plays in question will play little part, as these form the substance of the following chapters. Most importantly, all references to 'black farce' in those chapters will refer to the working definition established here, as opposed to any variations – whether implicit or explicit – invoked by other critics.

Before embarking on this process, a few points concerning the scope of this generic parallel must be established. First, black farce is a genre of the 1960s; I am therefore consciously applying it anachronistically to Jacobean plays. Furthermore, while it may be possible to refer to some of the plays under consideration – particularly the works of Orton – as black farces, I am not attempting to place each work in its entirety into this classification. Patrick O’Neill, discussing black humor in
1960s American fiction and in Jacobean drama, notes that though there are certainly valid generic parallels to be drawn, it must be remembered that black humor is ‘only one of many strands’ in the seventeenth-century form; Winston likewise contrasts the use of the same genre at ‘odd and disruptive moments within a work’ in the seventeenth century with ‘the prevalent tone’ of black humor in much American and European writing since World War II.12 Manfred Draudt makes the point most helpfully when he compares Loot with Jacobean plays such as Hamlet:

Ironic, satiric, absurd, and macabre elements clearly dominate Loot, for they are the vehicles through which the author conveys his intention: the ridicule and parody of accepted mores and of various traditional norms and forms, including the thriller-form of the play itself. In Hamlet these elements constitute only one particular – though very significant – part of a whole ‘symphony’ of tones and modes, which gain in importance through juxtaposition with the more serious aspects. (p. 206)

Finally, a useful caveat regarding such comparison comes from John Boni’s analogy between the ‘black comedy’ (black humor) of American fiction and Jacobean drama:

I use the term ‘analogy’ because I do not wish to argue that the forms are exactly the same but rather to emphasize recourse to similar combinations of forms at a distance of three and one-half centuries for roughly similar reasons. The examination of such a close similarity will tell us something about our age and theirs and about the readiness of art to conform to whatever shape is necessary for it to convey a relevant vision. (Boni, p. 202)

It is these concepts – of generic ‘strands’ rather than definitions of entire plays, and of analogy rather than exact identification – that must be constantly borne in mind throughout the following discussion.

There was, wrote Christopher Booker in 1969, a ‘vogue for blackness’ in the mid-1960s.13 This blackness was expressed in the arts, fashion and the media as ‘the

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ultimate pitch of inconsequentiality and despair', a 'horrific and haunting', 'nightmarish and suicidal mood' (pp. 210-211). And these bleak or frenzied films and novels, these bare, darkened television studios, 'kinky' black leather clothes and harshly designed newspapers and magazines were, according to Booker, 'windows on the collective subconscious' of the time (p. 210). In the theatre, what distinguished 'black' subject matter from the more traditional range available to farce was, broadly speaking, its horror. This is what Noël Carroll calls 'horror generated by art' (such as the murder in Camus' The Stranger or the sexual degradation in de Sade's The 120 Days of Sodom), as opposed to 'art-horror', the quite distinct genre of Mary Shelley, Stephen King and films such as Alien and Dawn of the Dead, characterised specifically by effects of fear and nausea aroused by monsters and the supernatural.14 Carroll's 'horror generated by art' accords with the sense distinguished by George Steiner in 1961 from 'tragic terror' by 'the momentary shock, the shiver in the spine' as opposed to the gravity and constancy of human suffering.15 The means by which these shocks and shivers are achieved are discussed at some length by Wendy Griswold in her investigation of the enduring appeal of revenge tragedy both in the English literary canon and (especially after 1955) on the London stage. While Griswold's definition of terror is 'the extreme fear human beings feel in the face of something bad that is about to happen,' horror is based strongly upon notions of taboo.16 Horror 'achieves its impact by violating what is regarded as natural by mixing cultural categories that are customarily separate':

Horror’s fascination derives from its flagrant display of mixed categories. It intrigues us with possibilities: What if one could be both dead and living? Both man and wolf? Both brother and lover? ... Horror is a freak show, attracting us with its forbidden mixtures. ... (pp. 78-79)

Griswold goes on to emphasise that what characterises revenge tragedy is the multiplicity and ingenuity of its horrors, ‘greater in quantity and more various and elaborate than those found in comparable genres’, from necrophilia, incest and rape to madness and severed body parts. In addition to the ‘sheer number of such horrific devices [that] distinguished revenge tragedy from more restrained tragic genres that have perhaps one mad scene or a single ghost’, there is the essential savouring of horror ‘for its own sake’:

Charles Lamb’s description of Webster’s ability ‘to move a horror skilfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear’ can stand for the entire genre. (pp. 79-80, 89)

It is this excess of horror, fascinating yet almost intolerable, that constitutes the ‘blackness’ of black farce.

Farce, as an accepted literary genre (though often grudgingly so), inevitably brings with it centuries of disparate associations that make its definition considerably more complex than that of the term ‘black’. The safest starting point, then – as with horror – is with audience reception, for common to all definitions of farce is the elicitation of laughter. In the late seventeenth century, Dryden stated that the ‘end’ of farce was ‘to cause Laughter’,18 and the current OED agrees, describing farce as ‘A dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter.’ Indeed,

while not every theoretician is entirely happy with the word ‘sole’, all place laughter, whether approvingly or otherwise, at the centre of their analyses.\footnote{See for example Smith, p. 6; Davis, \emph{Farce}, p. 1; Barbara Freedman, ‘Errors in Comedy: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Farce’, in Maurice Charney (ed.), \emph{Shakespearean Comedy} (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980), p. 236.} A second essential element is physicality. ‘Farce concentrates itself in the actor’s body’; it is ‘that form of comedy which depends upon visual acting out of its jokes’.\footnote{Eric Bentley, \emph{The Life of the Drama} (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 251; Jessica R. Milner Davis, ‘A Structural Approach to Humour in Farce’, in Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (eds.), \emph{It’s a Funny Thing, Humor} (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1977), p. 391. \ See also Trussler, p. 56.} Finally, although farce may debunk and unmask,\footnote{See for example Bentley, \emph{Life}, pp. 242, 250.} its aims are emphatically not satirical. It depends rather upon an ‘ironic acceptance of human frailty’, studiously avoiding ‘any implication of a need to change social rules or human behaviour’.\footnote{See also Trussler (quoting Brian Rix), p. 58.} Other characteristics include two-dimensional characters, coincidence and complexity of plot.

The physicality of farce is fast, coarse and boisterous. Moreover, it is essentially aggressive, hostile and violent. Yet farce is a highly ordered and disciplined genre,\footnote{See for example Davis, ‘Structural Approach’, pp. 392, 394. \ See also Trussler (quoting Brian Rix), p. 58.} and one of its rules is the strict control of its aggression, which is ‘both sufficiently precise to be psychologically valid and yet sufficiently delimited to qualify as play’ (Davis, \emph{Farce}, p. 85). The violence of farce is, as Eric Bentley says, abstract and pain-free:

Prongs of a rake in the backside are received as pin pricks. Bullets seem to pass right through people, sledge-hammer blows to produce only momentary irritation. \ldots\ [O]ne is permitted the outrage but spared the consequence.\footnote{See for example Davis, ‘Structural Approach’, p. 391.}

This is entirely consistent with the more general models of comedy and humour provided by theorists such as Aristotle and Bergson, who agree that laughter is
incompatible with any emotion aroused by pain. In farce, the audience is ‘insulated from feeling’ and ‘from the wild aggression that is so energetically aroused’; we are therefore free to enjoy the exuberant disorder without the troubling intrusion of conscience or fear. The tendency towards taboo-breaking in farce is similarly restricted. Farce thrives on impropriety, but ‘the licence extended to the rebels and jokers is of a ... limited nature’; farce ‘avoids giving offence’ and is ‘no serious challenge to normal social order’.

By combining the incompatibles of horror (freakish, bloody, horrific) and farce (playful, pain-free, conservative), black farce breaks the rules of both; it allows laughter and play to intrude into the most painful and shocking situations, and violates the insulated world of farce with bloody spectacle and outrage. It is a volatile combination, with one element ever threatening to engulf the other; but in true black farce, the horror and the farce are equally balanced, provoking a disturbed and uncertain audience response.

This basic definition of black farce provides a starting point from which we can begin to distinguish the genre from its most closely related forms – and indeed from which we can identify those correspondences with other genres which further elaborate our description. The first of these related forms is the more obviously relevant of the two independent adaptations of the term *humour noir*: black comedy. The term ‘black comedy’ is often used interchangeably with black farce, but is

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generally applied to writers such as Pinter, Stoppard, Beckett, Ionesco and Albee. The genre has largely been characterised in terms of its effect: 'the laughter that greets black comedy,' wrote Walter Kerr in his treatment of the subject in 1967, 'is sporadic, uncertain, often ill at ease; it is sometimes, to alter Meredith, "no more than a groan."'28 This disturbing uncertainty, caused by an equilibrium between amusement and shock, is certainly shared by black farce – and indeed the two genres do blur into one another to the same extent that comedy and farce in general tend to do. This is because farce belongs within comedy; it is an inherently comic form – 'the fundamental comic form', indeed, according to Kerr ('Comedy Now', p. 39). A black farce, therefore, could also legitimately be described as black comedy; it would simply be a less precise categorisation. For a black comedy to be classed as a black farce, however, it would require the specific characteristics of farce – particularly its raucous physicality – which may well be absent altogether. The works of Orton, Nichols, Barnes and Livings, therefore, may be – and frequently are – described quite adequately as black comedy. This is no surprise. More interestingly, ever since the coinage of the term, elements of Jacobean drama have frequently attracted the label: the deaths of Flamineo and Vittoria in *The White Devil*, for example; the death of the Cardinal in *The Duchess of Malfi*; and *The Jew of Malta* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* in their entireties.29 'Black comedy', then, is a term of some significance for our purposes, and will feature heavily in the discussions that follow.

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Before moving on to the other linguistic descendent of *humour noir*, it must be noted that a number of related literary terms – most importantly ‘tragic farce’ and ‘sick humour’ – were spawned alongside black comedy. ‘Dark comedy’, the phrase coined by J. L. Styan, is one of the many red herrings in this context; though it may sound relevant and may sometimes be used loosely as synonymous with ‘black comedy’, it is in fact much closer to ‘tragicomedy’, despite Styan’s dissatisfaction with the generic implications of that term.30 While Styan does pick up on a developing mode of ‘horror . . . streaked with a vein of perverse humour, . . . farcical cruelty’ in twentieth-century drama (p. 13), his inclusion of playwrights such as Molière, Chekhov, Shaw and Eliot places him in realms where the raucous atrocities of black farce are unknown.

The term ‘tragic farce’ is particularly relevant here as it provides a specific link between Jacobean and 1960s drama. The term appears to have been derived from T. S. Eliot’s discussion of *The Jew of Malta* in 1919. Eliot was the first critic to re-evaluate this form of drama in terms of farce rather than in terms of failed tragedy, and his essay on Christopher Marlowe provided a powerful precedent for the theatrical interpretations of the 1960s:

> If one takes the *Jew of Malta* not as a tragedy, or as a ‘tragedy of blood’, but as a farce, the concluding act becomes intelligible . . . . I say farce, but with the enfeebled humour of our times the word is a misnomer; it is the farce of the old English humour, the terribly serious, even savage comic humour . . . .31

As well as ‘tragic farce’, this passage is also the probable source of the term ‘savage farce’ which appears occasionally in discussions of certain Jacobean and 1960s

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Maurice Charney describes tragic farce as ‘metaphysical, grotesque and tragicomic’; a genre in which ‘the audience is made to feel uneasy’:

It indulges in nervous and self-conscious laughter, because it is not sure how to interpret the play. Everything evokes contradictory impressions . . . . The uncertainty of tone is cultivated by the author to produce a bewillexering, if not also painful experience, as the play shifts unpredictably between the farcical and the tragic, and no way is offered to bridge the discontinuity. (p. 106)

Tragic farce shares with black farce, then, an uncertainty of tone and response, produced by the amalgamation of two apparently irreconcilable genres. Like black farce, too, tragic farce goes beyond the realms of satire:

The comic catharsis is meant to be moral and political, but it usually goes beyond ethical norms to a feeling of weightless, euphoric wish fulfillment. Beyond the moral point of comedy lies the attractive dreamlike zone of pure impulse (and therefore of pure freedom).

(p. 106)

The playwrights – primarily of the 1960s – that Charney includes in his discussion of tragic farce are Stoppard, Handke, Dürrenmatt, Beckett, Pinter and Orton. When he came to write a book-length study of Orton six years later, however, Charney refined this view – though not before he had considered both black comedy and tragic farce as possible labels for What the Butler Saw and, most importantly, made an explicit connection with Jacobean drama. The Revenger’s Tragedy, writes Charney, is ‘one of the strangest and most extravagant of seventeenth-century black comedies’ (italics mine):

It is a wildly, almost hysterically rhetorical play that passes for tragedy only by certain technicalities of the ending. Even better than The Jew of Malta, for which T. S. Eliot coined the term ‘tragic farce,’ The Revenger’s Tragedy exemplifies all the bizarre and unanticipatable shifts in tone that are associated with this paradoxical genre. (Orton, pp. 97-98)

The problem with applying the label ‘tragic farce’ to What the Butler Saw, as Charney realises, is an obvious one: though the play may deal with ‘farical themes with a certain natural relevance to tragedy’ (just as Loot takes ‘a farical view of things normally treated as tragic’ [p. 129]), it is – in the final analysis – ‘hardly tragic’, and therefore can never fulfil the first half of the designation (p. 98). Indeed, there is a fundamental contradiction in describing a genre as ‘tragic’ when its existence is based upon the notion, especially post George Steiner, of the death of tragedy – upon the premise that, according to Charney himself, ‘in a world in which the possibility of tragedy has ceased to exist – because belief in a rational order has been lost – farce has taken over the territory usually claimed for tragedy. It is thus the only dramatic form still viable in an absurd universe’ (Comedy, p. 107). Many commentators on ‘mixed’ generic forms such as tragic farce, black comedy and black humor agree that their emergence is due to this supposed impossibility of tragedy in the twentieth century. Black comedy, for example, is said to be ‘an attempt to fill the hiatus’ left by the loss of tragedy; it ‘derives from the complete absence of any tragic aspiration’.33

John Boni, in the context of black humor, summarises usefully:

Evil and death have traditionally been the concern of tragedy, but as Karl Jaspers’ title has it: Tragedy Is Not Enough in the modern world. Styan says, ending his book The Dark Comedy, ‘The pure and tragic impulse may have been a symptom of a rocklike civilization and shown man’s wish to see his place among the angels.’ Unfortunately, it hardly needs saying that we no longer luxuriate in a ‘rocklike civilization.’ (pp. 203-4)

Indeed, whether or not tragedy is well and truly dead, few critics ever attempt to describe any of the plays of Orton, Barnes, Nichols or Livings as ‘tragic’; the term ‘tragic farce’, therefore, is fundamentally flawed. As I have already established, black
farce is a genre of horror, not of tragic terror. Even the classification of the Jacobean plays in question as ‘tragedies’ does not answer this objection. Firstly, the plays’ overall genres are not what I am attempting to define; even if the plays are tragedies, the elements that I will be discussing as ‘black farce’ within those plays need not be tragic. Secondly, the tragic status of every play in our Jacobean group has in any case been seriously questioned at one time or another; from Eliot’s redesignation of The Jew of Malta onwards, critics repeatedly find ‘serious difficulties’ in these plays’ tragic credentials.34 In 1964, Cyrus Hoy, noting the ‘notoriously bizarre’ nature of Jacobean tragedy in his study of the relationship between comedy, tragedy and tragicomedy, described the ‘most notable achievements of both the Elizabethan and Jacobean tragic stage in the period of its greatest vitality, from the early 1590’s through the early 1620’s – from, that is to say, Marlowe’s Faustus to Middleton’s Women Beware Women and Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore’ (precisely the group of plays under consideration here) as follows:

The sense of the tragic grandeur of human fate is replaced with the sense – often bitterly satiric – of the incongruous grotesquerie of man’s state, with its uneasy, and unlikely, coupling of elements both spiritual and physical, rational and sensual, transcendent and carnal.35

More recently Griswold, though she adopts the convenient and widely accepted term ‘revenge tragedy’ in her study of Renaissance revivals, explains in some detail her

33Hinchliffe, p. 60; Kerr, ‘Comedy Now’, p. 41.
dissatisfaction with the expression, based on the lack of ‘moral competence’ of many of the genre’s protagonists (and the resulting absence of pity and terror), and the fact that her group of plays (which includes almost all of those discussed here) forms a distinct and ‘largely un-Aristotelian’ generic ‘cluster’ that must be distinguished from other forms in more ways than simply a ‘preoccupation with revenge’ (pp. 77-78). Furthermore, the plays were written in a period when dramatists could be remarkably flippant and resistant to generic categorisation, with Marston for example insisting that one of his works was not ‘Comedy, Tragedy, Pastorale, Morall, Nocturnal or Historie . . . but even What You Will’.

As in the twentieth century, when there has been marked distrust surrounding the concept of genre and when playwrights such as Orton have protested in vain that they want to call their works ‘just plays’, a title that includes a generic term such as ‘tragedy’ need not be taken as the definitive label for a play. Indeed, as Fowler warns, ‘Writers often mislabel their works, deliberately or ignorantly, modestly or for an ulterior literary purpose’ (p. 130). Though there is much in the genre of tragic farce to interest us, then, the term may be claimed on the grounds of its tragic nature to be inappropriate to both the 1960s plays in question and to the elements of Jacobean drama that I prefer to designate as the more horrific genre of black farce.

There is however a second usage of the term ‘tragic farce’ to be considered. Apparently independently of Eliot, Eugène Ionesco sub-titled his play of 1952, The

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37Quoted in Trussler, p. 72. See also Heather Dubrow, Genre (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 83-84.
Chairs, ‘une farce tragique’.38 ‘for it seems to me,’ he stated, ‘that comic and tragic are one, and that the tragedy of man is pure derision’:

In Victimes du Devoir I tried to sink comedy in tragedy: in Les Chaises tragedy in comedy or, if you like, to confront comedy and tragedy in order to link them in a new dramatic synthesis. But it is not a true synthesis, for these two elements do not coalesce, they coexist: one constantly repels the other, they show each other up, criticise and deny one another and, thanks to their opposition, thus succeed dynamically in maintaining a balance and creating tension.39

Ionesco’s ‘tragic farce’, like Eliot’s, clearly overlaps with black farce – particularly in the volatile and conflicting nature of its combined genres. But once again the ‘tragic’ tag is seriously questionable; indeed, even Ionesco himself gestures towards a belief in the death of tragedy in his statement ‘that the tragedy of man is pure derision.’ Ionesco was, of course, one of Martin Esslin’s central Absurdists; and although black farce may share certain important characteristics with the Theatre of the Absurd, it also differs from that genre in significant respects. Black farce does display an acute awareness of the fundamental ‘absurdity’ of the universe, ‘a universe deprived of what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless – absurd.’40 The existential nausea upon which the Theatre of the Absurd is based – here articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre’s Roquentin – was, as we shall see, acutely familiar to the writers of black farce:

... the diversity of things, their individuality, was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder – naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness.41

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Indeed, Orton echoed this very nausea in his statement in 1965 regarding his general disillusionment after a spell in prison for defacing library books:

Before prison, I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere: prison crystallized this. The old whore society really lifted up her skirts and the stench was pretty foul.42

But although black farce may begin with the same assumption as the Absurd, its means of expression are entirely different. The playwrights of the Absurd – notably Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov and Genet – attempt, according to Esslin, ‘to express [their] sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought’ – including dialogue, plot, characterisation, theme and the aim to hold the mirror up to nature (Absurd, pp. 15, 17). In other words, the formal devices of the Theatre of the Absurd ‘show us absurdity rather than telling us about it’ (O’Neill, p. 163). Black farce does no such thing. Its interest in plot, for instance, has the all the committed intricacy and conventional discipline of farce; and it delights in the possibilities of dialogue. As Ronald W. Strang observes of Orton, ‘Unlike the absurd dramatists who explore the inadequacy of language, [he] explores its incongruity.’43

Ionesco’s ‘tragic farce’, therefore, may be said to overlap with black farce in certain respects, but its essentially Absurdist framework means that it by no means coincides with black farce entirely; and Ionesco and his fellow Absurdists (as defined by Esslin) can thus be safely excluded from the genre.

‘Sick humour’ – ‘sick’ in the sense first recorded in 1959 and defined in the OED as ‘macabre, providing amusement by reference to something that is thoroughly

42 ‘The Biter Bitt: Joe Orton Introduces Entertaining Mr Sloane’, Plays and Players, August 1964, p. 16.
unpleasant’ – has much in common with the ‘black’ genres, and is certainly relevant here in that it may be considered a constituent part of black farce. In 1968 Allardyce Nicoll posited the same basis for sick humour as that of the other genres discussed so far when he attributed it to the contemporary mood of ‘baffled anger’.

Freddie, interfering friend of the disabled child’s parents in Nichols’ *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, confirms the impression of humour that is born from pain but – importantly – that does nothing to remove its cause. To Freddie, Sheila and Bri’s jokes about their daughter’s cerebral palsy are something of a delusion:

> Isn’t there a point where the jokes start using *you*? . . . Isn’t that the whole fallacy of the sick joke? It kills the pain but leaves the situation just as it was? . . . The whole issue’s a giggle. I throw you a lifeline and you giggle. The whole country giggling its way to disaster.

Just as black farce as a whole takes the controlled and limited aggression of farce and liberates it, sick jokes within black farce take the inherent hostility of farce (the genre that ‘creates forms that resemble sick fantasies’) a step beyond its boundaries, allowing the horror that should be neutralised by laughter to emerge. But sick humour can only ever provide a unit of a literary genre, never referring to an entire work; and its colloquial, sociocultural rather than literary status means that it need not be examined too closely as a generic term. In addition the term is, as Freddie shows, prone to subjectively pejorative connotations. But this taboo-breaking, discomfiting humour is at the heart of black farce, which is a thoroughly ‘sick’ genre. And the fact that the cultural phenomenon of sick humour arises from disaster and despair has

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useful implications for an investigation of the sources of black farce – as the rest of this chapter shows.

The North American fictional form of black humor – though based on ‘the comic treatment of material which resists comic treatment’ or, put another way, ‘the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying’\(^\text{47}\) – should be, on the surface at least, easily distanced from black farce through its apparent geographical and formal irrelevance to the British theatre. But although some critics insist that the term should be restricted to a specific decade and a specific country – largely on the very practical grounds that it has a tendency to expand almost indefinitely to include ‘everybody good from Andy Warhol and Voltaire back to Aristophanes’\(^\text{48}\) – many extend the group of novelists that includes John Barth, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut and J. P. Donleavy to take in dramatists who elicit a ‘strange response’ in which the audience becomes progressively ‘less sure of when to laugh and when to shudder in horror at a given line or turn in the plot’ (Janoff, ‘Beyond Satire’, pp. 13-14n). Though the term ‘theatrical black humor’ tends to be used to describe what I have defined as black comedy,\(^\text{49}\) *fictional* black humor is more specifically akin to black farce. It has all the ‘murderously farcical’ and ‘cosmically slapstickicky’ physicality of black farce (Feldman, p. 101); it is ‘beyond


Black Farce

satire', and it 'is always affronting taboos, giving offense, recalling people to their gut functions and gut reactions'. It even contains farce's 'two-dimensional characters' and 'doubling and proliferation in the plot'.

The resemblance between black humor and black farce takes on still more significance through the acknowledged relationship between black humor and certain Jacobean plays. Though casual allusions to plays such as Hamlet and King Lear may point us in this direction, there are several considered and thorough studies that establish the connection in some detail. As early as 1974, John Boni wrote an essay in the Western Humanities Review positing an 'analogy in form and values that exists between Jacobean plays [notably The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi and The Revenger's Tragedy] and contemporary novels of the mode which we have come to label "black comedy"' (p. 202). Boni launches his argument from the powerful fact that Pynchon based his 1966 novel The Crying of Lot 49 around The Courier's Tragedy, a spoof Jacobean revenge play supposedly collected in the fictional Plays of Ford, Webster, Tourneur and Wharfinger. Pynchon's extended description of this play is neatly summarised by Boni as follows:

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*Dickstein, p. 191. See also Pratt, p. xxi.


*Black humorists 'are as well aware as any conventional moralizer that the times are out of joint' ('The Black Humorists', Time, 12 February 1965, p. 66 [reprinted in Pratt, pp. 3-9]); and they tend 'to rage blindly, like Lear, at the abysmal pointlessness of the human situation' (Janoff, 'Beyond Satire', p. 12).

*Boni is one of those critics who use the terms 'black humor' and 'black comedy' interchangeably to refer to the novels of Pynchon, Vonnegut, Heller et al.

The Courier’s Tragedy is an excellent parody of its Jacobean genre, containing ingenious deaths by such vile means as poison, torture, stabbing, and mutilation; sexual excesses including adultery, rape, and incest; and of course, political intrigue and overthrow. (p. 201)

The plot of the play bears a ‘bizarre resemblance’ to an event in the Second World War – ‘The same kind of kinky thing, you know’ – and indeed, despite Pynchon’s obvious satirical intentions, ‘his insistent working of the play into the contemporary action of the novel suggests a very real parallelism between us and the Jacobeans and the contemporaneity of much Jacobean drama’:

[I]t is not out of the question to argue that the description [of Wharfinger’s seventeenth-century audience as] “preapocalyptic, death-wishful, sensually fatigued” may apply to us as accurately as to the Jacobeans. (pp. 201-2)

Pynchon’s incorporation of the blackly farcical elements of Jacobean revenge tragedy within his 1960s black humor novel is, as Boni argues, indicative of the similarities between the two forms; not only that, but it would later be invoked by William Hutchings as further evidence of the affinities between What the Butler Saw and Jacobean drama, including ‘myriad complications that are rife with intrigue and incest as well as murder and mutilation in the best (i.e., most excessive) Jacobean style’.56

Having taken Pynchon as his starting point, Boni develops his argument that, in both the Jacobean period and the 1960s, ‘uncertainty is reflected in the development of more flexible art forms, in each case the blending of a grim humor with tragic elements’: ‘The breakdown in integrity of form, in both cases, reflected a breakdown in belief and values’ (pp. 214-15). Drawing a parallel with the uncertainty of the early seventeenth century, he quotes, first, J. L. Styan on the ‘feverishness’ of plays such as The Duchess of Malfi, The Changeling and The Revenger’s Tragedy:
The Jacobean drama is uneasy with doubt, and its troubled heart reflects its feeling about a questionable world. Significantly, there has been a marked revival of interest in [Shakespeare’s] problem comedies since 1946.57

Secondly, Boni cites E. M. W. Tillyard’s admission in The Elizabethan World Picture that ‘by the end of the sixteenth century, three factors had hastened the degeneration of [Elizabethan ‘static’] order: Machiavellian notions of political power, the new science, and the new commercialism.’58 Finally, he repeats the lines from Donne’s First Anniversary that ‘are quoted often because so apt’: “The Element of Fire is quite put out . . . ’Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone; . . . Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot.”59 Boni’s essay, then, coming only four years after the 1960s had ended (and while black humor was still flourishing), immediately picked up on the relationship between the contemporary genre and the blackly farcical elements of some Jacobean plays; moreover, Boni attributed that relationship to sociological factors of disorientation and anxiety that he found characteristic of both periods.

After Boni, allusions to Jacobean drama in discussions of black humor increased. Two years on, Mathew Winston used Hamlet’s ‘sick joke’ about the corpse of Polonius as evidence of an earlier existence of the genre; and his third essay on black humor in 1978 used a quotation from Timon of Athens to draw a parallel between the ‘strange times’ of the present and of the seventeenth century.60 Later, in 1983, Patrick O’Neill described ‘the grotesque piling up of corpses in the final scenes of Jacobean dramas’ as one of the ‘antecedents’ of black humor (p. 163). Finally, in 1984, Ewa Elandt-Jankowska wrote an essay, drawing on the work of Boni, that
attempted ‘to justify the peculiar presence of laughter in *The White Devil* by pointing out its affinity with black humor techniques’ (p. 211) – just as William Hutchings would later justify the horror of *What the Butler Saw* by pointing out its affinity with Jacobean drama. Though Elandt-Jankowska does not comment upon the echo either of *Hamlet* or of Orton in ‘the creed’ of black humor as stated by Lenny Bruce – ‘Everything is rotten – mother is rotten, God is rotten, the flag is rotten’61 – she does state that Bruce ‘very accurately describes the tenor of Webster’s play. In *The White Devil* love, familial bonds, justice and religion are all subjects of ridicule.’ Her study of the play demonstrates how it depends on a ‘comic recognition of the absence of those values which are necessary for society’s basic functions’ that places ‘the tragedy in a black-comic framework’ (p. 212). The audience response, says Elandt-Jankowska, shares with the reader’s response to black humor a ‘sense of outrage and indignation, often mingled with nervous laughter’. She concludes:

The laughter we have attempted to define through the play’s affinity with the techniques of black humor emphasizes the blackness of Webster’s vision rather than the power of his ‘gory imagination.’ Here, as in Tourneur or Marston, the comic verges on the macabre, and the relief that is said to constitute the essential cause of laughter is nowhere to be found in Webster’s Italianate thriller. (p. 217)

The relevance of black humor to black farce, then, is demonstrated through its acknowledged relationship with black comedy and through the specific characteristics – including physicality, non-satirical ridicule, aggression and taboo-breaking – that it shares with black farce. In addition, black humor is demonstrated to bear strong affinities with the Jacobean plays that are the subject of this thesis. It is logical to assume, therefore, that black humor may have arisen in the United States for similar
reasons to the development of black farce in Britain at almost precisely the same time. Accordingly, it is worth examining in some detail the factors that are said to lie behind black humor. Since most discussions of black humor, as well as being far more numerous than those of black farce, are largely based upon authorial standpoint rather than reader/audience reception, their utility lies in their suggestions of possible sources and rationales for the unsettling, jeering hostilities and knockabout violations that black farce shares with this genre.

Black humor arises, fundamentally, out of ambivalence: an uneasy combination of exuberance, exhilaration and delight with anxiety, anger and despair. Black humorists, 'caught between the wrath and the laughter' (Lewis p. 185), reflected – according to Morris Dickstein, writing in 1975 – a specific historical mood:

If the sense of impotence and fatality in these novels expresses one side of the sensibility of the sixties, their creative exuberance and originality points to another . . . .

The early sixties was itself an ambiguous period, for like these novels it did really have an exuberant and expansive side . . . . But their vision sometimes had a bleak, dead-end character that belied any official optimism. (pp. 191, 206)

Certain contemporary developments were in themselves capable of simultaneously arousing such contradictory responses. Most broadly, as documented by Joseph Boskin in his analysis of 'black' joke cycles in 1960s North American culture, the United States were undergoing 'swift and unsettling changes'; with the optimism of the post-World War II period came the rise both of consumer culture (or, as Janoff put it, 'the incredible materialism that seemed to be undermining the spiritual

\[ \text{Defined as 'the creed' by Hill, p. 344. See Hamlet, I. iv. 65; Orton, 'The Biter Bit', p. 16 (quoted above, p. 27).} \]
toughness of Middle America in general'62) and of the States as an international ‘superpower’:

At the conscious level, the *super* image came to symbolize national and international might. Toward this type of symbol . . . a dual attitude emerged. Giants have been alternately viewed with awe and trepidation, adulation and anxiety, suggesting a lurking demon within the strength of a deity. . . .

. . . black humor arose at a time of bursting economic and material expansion buttressed by a surface optimism regarding the fulfillment of the American Century. This humor . . . disclosed a vast disillusionment regarding vaunted ideals and institutions.63

This ‘vast disillusionment’ – ‘the widespread spiritual revulsion in the sixties against many of our most sacrosanct institutions’ – was deepened by crises such as the Vietnam war and, later, the Watergate scandal, during which ‘the official organs of our society lost much of the respect and credence they had commanded.’64 One of those ‘sacrosanct institutions’ was, of course the church; and as Steve Kurtz argues in his study of black humor and a still more nihilistic form that he describes as ‘crash humor’, the ‘delight in the liberation of cultural activity from theology’ posited by Roland Barthes was accompanied by ‘a deep mourning for the loss of transcendent signifiers.’65 This, says Kurtz, is the cause of what Jean Baudrillard described as the ‘new form of schizophrenia’ in society.66 The decline in religious belief, then, is another source of conflicting responses: ‘An age of spiritual instability,’ wrote Koji Numasawa, another commentator on the black humor phenomenon, ‘inevitably calls

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62Beyonc Satire’, p. 7. See also Numasawa, p. 44, on ‘the bloated materialistic dreams of an affluent society ready to be puffed out in a nuclear burst.’
for a harshly comic vision of the world'. Alongside religion and politics is science – the *terrifying and exhilarating* world of sub-atomic particle physics, antiworlds, time warps, black holes, cloning, microtechnology, and so on – 'a world of pure black humor', according to Patrick O’Neill, the critic who coined the phrase ‘comedy of entropy’ (p. 163; italics mine). It was science, too, that created the sense of apocalypse in the 1960s, as the horrific potential unleashed by nuclear research finally became clear. Black humor, in fact, was also known as ‘apocalyptic comedy’ because of its ‘mingling of the catastrophic and the comic,’ reflecting the both the terror and the titillation of a sense of doom. Conrad Knickerbocker, the first critic to use the term ‘black humor’ – identifying it as ‘Something terrible (to many people) and marvellous (to others)’ that had ‘happened to the national sense of humor since World War II’ – perfectly encapsulated the violently ambivalent nature of the genre’s relationship with both science and politics:

These novels bear one message, forceful, repetitive, almost repetitious: in the midst of progress, as we photograph moon craters, as wars continue, and as power structures proliferate, we regress.

‘In the midst of progress we regress’ could be the slogan both of black humor and of black farce, pointing as it does towards the paradox of exhilaration and despair that underlies these genres. The list of other extra-literary factors named by the commentators on black humor, from the exuberance of the burgeoning civil rights movement to the uncontrollable spectacle of violence, is long, as Janoff wrote in 1972:

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68See for example Pratt, p. xix; Numasawa, p. 44; Pogel and Chamberlain, p. 270.
In a very real sociological sense, the modern impulse toward black humor arose from the disorientation and uncertainty generated by a badly disintegrated American dream.71

As well as ‘apocalyptic comedy’, then, black humor was also known as ‘the novel of disintegration’ or ‘entropic comedy’ (Pratt, p. xix); and this disintegration appeared to result in a loss of belief not only in institutions and authorities such as government and the church, but more generally in established Western values. Over the course of the century, according to O’Neill, society had ‘seen the loss of belief in our selves, in our societies, and in our gods’; by the 1960s we had arrived, in the words of Pratt, at ‘a period of disillusionment and apprehension when confidence in traditional values reached a new low’.72 The mood of ambivalence, then – of liberation and of impotence, of thrilling and terrifying disorientation – was remarkably comprehensive, revealing a ‘philosophical agnosticism’ that Max Schulz, in his encyclopaedia definition of black humor, has described as a ‘suspicion of all traditional, coherent systems of belief other than the all-embracing one (to quote Todd Andrews at the end of John Barth’s The Floating Opera [1956]) that “nothing has intrinsic value”’.73 The sense that the nation – even the world – had gone insane74 aroused a certain ‘paranoiac mood’, ‘a nervousness, a tempo, a near-hysterical new beat in the air, a punishing isolation and loneliness of a strange, frenzied new kind’ that Bruce Jay Friedman, in the foreword to his 1965 anthology of black humor, identified in ‘the

72O’Neill, p. 165; Pratt, p. xix.
74See Knickerbocker, p. 3; Numasawa, p. 42.
Black humor, however, is not simply a response to ‘out of joint’ social conditions, nor can it be ‘dismissed as merely a passing novelistic fad momentarily capitalizing on the vast social malaise’ (Janoff, ‘Beyond Satire’, p. 7). According to its commentators, black humor has a specific function in relation to this malaise, whether for the purposes of author or reader. Many, drawing on the genre’s Jewish connections, take the psychoanalytic line of interpreting black humor as a ‘coping mechanism’, aiming ‘to subvert pain through joking’. Critics write variously in terms of attack, defence and retreat from anguish; black humor is a weapon and a survival shelter, a lance and a shield. In this militant framework, black humor can become more than psychological transcendence; in some theories, black humor is imputed with the formidable goal of preventing disaster. Winston is less ambitious, stating on the one hand that ‘The comedy in black humor helps us overcome our fears,’ but on the other that

With its typical ambivalence, black humor reminds us of the pain and misery beneath what we are laughing at, which are not obviated by the laughter. To this extent it complicates our response to the literature we are reading and to the characters we are reading about. (‘Black Humor’, p. 37. Italics mine.)

Similarly Nancy Pogel and William Chamberlain, discussing cinematic adaptations of black humor fiction, contradict the ‘survival shelter’ metaphor as advanced by Erika

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78Numasawa, p. 56; Ostrovsky, p. 176; Lewis, p. 235; Pratt, p. xxiv.
79See for example Lewis, pp. 193, 235.
Ostrovsky in her analysis of 'Black Humor and the Modern Sensibility' (p. 176), insisting that the genre, 'at its best, permits the audience not a single refuge or crutch' (p. 269).

An alternative to the militant metaphor – though still within the 'coping' framework – is the medicinal: black humor may be cathartic or emetic, a tonic or an antidote. The Freudian theory of comic catharsis assumes black humor to provide a form of relief from pain and misfortune: black humor is a kind of 'cleansing mirth', in which 'The incongruency between form and content transforms the emotional energy of fear and pity into cathartic laughter.'

Like Lewis's aversion theory, however, for many critics this medicinal theory is too affirmative and idealistic to fit the dark ambivalence of black humor. Some, such as Hill, turning away from the comforts of 'cleansing mirth', move towards a more painfully emetic function for an aggressive and discomfiting genre that refuses to draw back from catastrophe (p. 344). Knickerbocker, writing four years earlier than Hill in the first article on black humor, had stated that an emetic response was natural for art when 'societies convulse' (p. 3). For Knickerbocker, however, this function did not belong within a medicinal framework at all. He contrasted black humor with what he called 'white' humor, a type of comedy 'as harmless as Lucille Ball or the Flintstones':

They chuckle at our foibles, but when the chips are down, they support the familiar comforts of the status quo. Their adherents are many, for everyone agrees that a good laugh – moderate of course – is a wonderful tonic in this care-worn world of ours.

Black humor, by contrast, was a 'bitter, perverse, sadistic and sick' genre in which there was 'no tonic, but the gall of truth' (p. 3). Winston, Pogel, Chamberlain and

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80Pratt, p. xxiv; Boskin, p. 325; Hill, p. 344; Knickerbocker, p. 3.
Knickerbocker, with their insistence on the inescapability of the pain within black humor, certainly seem closer to the widely-agreed nature of the genre as uncertain, disturbing and ambivalent, though there is undoubtedly room for some sort of affirmation within black humor, it is more likely to come from the perverse thrill of apocalypse or the exhilaration of frenzied innovation than from the calmer pleasures of evasion and relief. Furthermore, the two metaphors further illustrate with their internal contradictions (lance and shield, emetic and tonic) the inherent ambivalences and incompatibilities of black humor.

The psychological and sociological factors behind black humor, then, provide numerous suggestions towards the attitudes and contexts out of which black farce may have arisen – in both the seventeenth and the twentieth century. There is, however, a large collection of other genres with which black farce bears affinities of varying kinds and strengths. And it is through an examination of all these relationships that a pattern will be built up which will both confirm and develop my definition of black farce and establish more thoroughly the similarities of context implied here.

The last of the twentieth-century genres to be investigated here (though again with a strong relationship to the seventeenth century) is the Theatre of Cruelty. Much more a conscious movement than a genre, in fact, the Theatre of Cruelty was the construct of Antonin Artaud, who published its principles most notably in *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938) – ‘the bible of sick humour,’ according to Laurence Kitchin.82

The Theatre of Cruelty was ‘a savage modern version’ of the melodramatic Théâtre

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81 'The Black Humorists', *Time*, p. 66; Pratt, p. xxiv.
82 p. 23.
du Grand Guignol, an enterprise that lasted from 1897 until 1962, by which time its ‘functions’ of presenting ‘violence, murder, rape, ghostly apparitions and suicide, all intended to chill and delight the spectator’ had been taken over by the Theatre of Cruelty.\(^8\) Grand Guignol is close to black farce in its mixed nature, ‘designed to terrorize and amuse its audiences’; but although ‘the theatre’s characteristic impact was achieved by a violent oscillation between [comedy] and . . . the theatre of fear,’ Grand Guignol differs from black farce in that the farce and the horror did not necessarily appear within the same work.\(^4\) Instead, the theatre operated a system known as ‘la douche écossaise, or “the hot and cold shower”, meaning the alternation of horror and humour plays’ (Callahan, p. 165). Though scenes of farcical violence were common, the simultaneous horror and laughter that is characteristic of black farce was less important to the grandguignolesque. The ‘main attraction’ and ultimate concern of the Théâtre du Grand Guignol (advertised after 1898 as the ‘House of Horror’) was fear, and this overall emphasis on its ‘black’ side is not consistent with the equilibrium achieved by black farce (Callahan, pp. 165, 167).

Though Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty was never as strongly established as the Théâtre du Grand Guignol (and certainly not as commercially successful), it went on to be far more influential in the theatre as a whole. Artaud’s practice of his doctrine was sporadic and short-lived, but *The Theatre and Its Double* and Artaud’s other published writings had a ‘powerful and widespread’ impact upon twentieth-century

\(^{83}\)Hirst, p. 66; Kitchin, p. 22. See also Nicoll, p. 133.
theatre—particularly, in Britain, upon Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz, whose 1960s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ work with the Royal Shakespeare Company will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. In spite of Artaud’s somewhat half-hearted and often cryptic protestations that ‘This cruelty is not sadistic or bloody, at least not exclusively so,’ the Theatre of Cruelty shares with black farce a central obsession with violence, sexuality and taboo: ‘direct, violent action . . . , horrible crimes and superhuman self-sacrifices’. Its emphasis, like that of black farce, is overwhelmingly physical: ‘In our present degenerative state,’ declared Artaud, ‘metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body’ (‘First Manifesto’, p. 76). Furthermore, as Esslin points out, ‘the Artaudian theatre is by no means to be without humour’ — ‘HUMOUR as DESTRUCTION’, as Artaud would have it. The Theatre of Cruelty is ‘a theatre of mixed means, not merely a fusion of contrasted dramatic forms but an amalgam of every stage technique available’ (Hirst, p. 110). Farce was certainly amongst those forms and techniques; Artaud was fascinated by the genre, and conceived of ‘cruel’ humour ‘as a dislocation of sensibility through anarchy, the juxtaposition of incompatible elements which turns the expected order of things upside down’. His notion of ‘total laughter’, too — ‘laughter extending from paralysed slavering [sic] to convulsed, side-holding sobbing’ — though extreme, suggests the bewildered and painful laughter provoked by black farce.

Because of these powerful affinities with black farce (the shaken and disturbed audience, the taboo-breaking violence and sexuality, the mixture of forms, the physicality and the ambivalent laughter), the Theatre of Cruelty has come to be associated with the twentieth-century plays and — even more often — with the seventeenth-century works with which I am concerned here. David L. Hirst’s comparison of Peter Barnes with the Theatre of Cruelty, indeed, succeeds in relating both to Jacobean drama. Barnes continues the tradition of savage, negative writing ‘intercut with flashes of comedy’ that was ‘inherited from’ Marlowe, Webster, Middleton and Shakespeare (‘in his central, tragic phase’); this writing ‘also has much in common with Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty’ in that it is ‘theatre of mixed means’, combining ‘slapstick comedy and coarse farce with stark horror’, driving home to the audience a recognition of the world’s insanity and shocking us ‘into an awareness of the potentiality of human cruelty’ (Hirst, pp. 124-26). The Royal Shakespeare Company’s Theatre of Cruelty season of 1964 crystallised this intimate relationship between Jacobean, Artaudian and 1960s theatre; and indeed the Jacobean connection was inherent in Artaud’s theories from the beginning. In ‘Theatre and the Plague’, Artaud discussed Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* at some length, as an illustration of his statement regarding the way in which a ‘real stage play disturbs our peace of mind’ (p. 17). What Artaud admired about the play was the ‘excess’ of its ‘horror and bloodshed’, its liberation from all restraint (pp. 17-18). The sexuality and violence of *Tis Pity* are expressed through the boldest incongruities, exceeding all boundaries and ‘making the audience gasp with anxiety in case anything should ever end it’ (p. 18). Though J. W. Lever, in his 1971 study of Jacobean drama, makes no reference to this passage, his discussion of the final scene also connects it both to the
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Theatre of Cruelty and to the genre of black farce.\textsuperscript{90} In addition, Artaud included in his plan for the 1928 season of the Alfred Jarry Theatre a production of \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy}; and when he came to formulate his programme of plays for the Theatre of Cruelty, he included 'Elizabethan theatre works', as well as an 'adaptation of a Shakespearean work, absolutely consistent with our present confused state of mind, whether this be an apocryphal Shakespeare play such as \textit{Arden of Faversham} or another play from that period.'\textsuperscript{91} More recently, William L. Stull has extended this connection, examining in some detail the manner in which \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy} anticipates the methods of the Theatre of Cruelty. Applying Thomas Rymer's famous description of \textit{Othello} as 'a Bloody Farce' to \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy}, Stull notes the use made by the playwright (whom he names as Tourneur) of 'black humour' in a Cruelty-like 'revolt against decadent stage conventions and numbed audience response' (pp. 36, 38, 40-41). Furthermore, Stull's generalised discussion of the extra-literary factors behind the original 'Jacobean Theatre of Cruelty' and its re-emergence in the twentieth century – particularly as expressed on the stage of the 1960s – coincides with the possibilities suggested by my study of black humor and other genres closely related to black farce. The reasons for the 'disturbing modernity' of \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy}, writes Stull, 'are at once aesthetic and historical' (p. 35).

The play arose out of 'a period of political instability and aesthetic confusion':

As L. G. Salingar suggested in his study of "The Revenger's Tragedy" and the Morality Tradition," the object of Tourneur's long-recognized 'disgust' is not so much the individuals he portrays as 'the process they represent, the disintegration of a whole social order' . . . (p. 35)

\textsuperscript{90}Lever, p. 11. See above, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{91}'The Alfred Jarry Theatre (1928 Season)', \textit{Collected Works}, Volume Two, p. 28; 'First Manifesto', p. 76.
By way of comparison, Stull goes on to quote Artaud in ‘Theatre and Cruelty’:

In the anguished, catastrophic times we live in, we feel an urgent need for theatre that is not overshadowed by events, but arouses deep echoes within us and predominates over our unsettled period. (p. 64)

Like the commentators on black humor, then, Stull believes that both the Jacobean and the modern Theatres of Cruelty were part of what Boni called ‘The breakdown in integrity of form [that] reflected a breakdown in belief and values’ (p. 202). The breaking down of cultural and aesthetic barriers, the aggression and the provoking of an uncertain response all arose out of two separate periods that were characterised by a remarkably similar strain of anxiety and ambivalence.

The most striking difference between the Theatre of Cruelty and black farce – and the primary reason why the former term is not, in the end, suitable to define the ‘significant connections’ I am aiming to describe – lies in Artaud’s rejection of the dramatic script (a legacy that was to be inherited by the Absurdists).92 ‘Words mean little to the mind,’ he wrote, later adding that it was necessary to ‘break the theatre’s subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere in between gesture and thought.’93 It is for this reason that the Elizabethan works that Artaud had in mind for his theatre programme were to be ‘stripped of the lines’ (‘First Manifesto’, p. 76). Similarly, Ronald Bryden commented in the review that famously dubbed Orton ‘the Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility’ that ‘Its words set aside, “Mr Sloane” becomes purest Artaud . . . . But then, what was the Theatre of Cruelty but an attempt to overthrow dialogue?’94 In black farce, ironic asides and grotesque puns colour and complicate our response to the horror; take

92On Artaud’s anticipation of/influence on the Absurd, see Esslin, Absurd, p. 280; Hinchliffe, p. 51.
93‘Theatre and Cruelty’, p. 66; ‘First Manifesto’, p. 68.
these away and only the violence and the slapstick remain. Reduction of comic content is not the disaster for the Theatre of Cruelty that it would be for black farce; though Artaud sought a particular kind of pained laughter, comedy is no more vital to Cruelty than it is to Grand Guignol, which placed a similar emphasis on 'blackness' rather than farce. Finally, though black farce seeks an Artaudian impact upon and confrontation with its 'shaken and irritated' audience, 'doing everything the director can do to the sensibilities of actor and spectator', 95 I have already established in my analysis of black humor that black farce has no great didactic mission. Artaud, on the other hand, aspired no less than to 'heal and dominate life'. His theatre was to change minds – indeed, to change 'Society, Man and the World'. 96

I am not one of those who believe that civilisation should change so that the theatre can change; but I believe that the theatre used in a higher, and the most difficult sense possible, sense has the power to influence the nature and development of things. 97

The Theatre of Cruelty, then, is helpful to our definition of black farce in that it illuminates the way in which violent and sexual taboos, combined with a refusal to be limited by either cultural or generic boundaries, may be manipulated to create an overwhelming impact on its audience, beyond what is normally possible in the theatre. To Artaud as to the black farceurs, 'life itself is in decline', and the only response is to 'put his trust in the dark forces of Dionysian vitality with all their violence and mystery'. 98 Though laughter is peripheral to Artaud's vision, though language is all but rejected and though his mission is altogether more earth-shattering than that of

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96 Artaud, Aliénor l'Acteur, 12 May 1947 (quoted in Esslin, Artaud, p. 76); Esslin, p. 76.
97 Quoted in Esslin, Artaud, p. 81.
98 'Theatre and Culture', Collected Works, Volume Four, p. 1; Esslin, Artaud, p. 80.
Black farce, the techniques and motifs with which the theoretical Theatre of Cruelty consciously echoed the Jacobean's certainly paved the way for the dark frenzy of 1960s black farce.

While the forms most obviously related to the 1960s genre of black farce inevitably belong to the twentieth century, there are a few with a longer history which require some scrutiny in this regard. Perhaps the easiest to dismiss – in spite of its elusive nature – is the term ‘tragicomedy’. Though David L. Hirst, in his book on the genre, would have us believe that the term is broad enough to encompass black comedy, comedy of menace and savage farce (including Marlowe, Webster, Middleton, Barnes and Nichols), neither seventeenth- nor twentieth-century usages of the term support this idiosyncratically loose definition. In the Renaissance, John Fletcher followed Italian playwright and theorist Giambattista Guarini in defending tragicomedy against critics of mixed form, defining it as follows:

A tragicomedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy.99

Clearly this definition is entirely incompatible with plays such as The Revenger's Tragedy, The Jew of Malta and the rest, all of which positively revel in ‘mirth and killing’; and accordingly, the label was largely attached to works by Fletcher, Heywood, Marston, Massinger and Shirley rather than those of Marlowe, Webster or Middleton. Nor is ‘tragicomedy’ any more applicable to twentieth-century black farces than it is, as Winston points out, to black humor:

It resembles tragicomedy only insofar as it uses the devices of both comedy and, to a lesser extent, tragedy. But the median nature of tragicomedy, which avoids the

extremes of “mirth and killing,” is at odds with black humor’s violent juxtaposition and combination of just such extremes. (‘Humour Noir’, p. 274)

Of course, interpretations of the term have varied greatly over the centuries, and few critics of twentieth-century tragicomedy confine themselves strictly to the Fletcherian interpretation. Most, however, apply the tag to a small group of dramatists that includes Beckett (who used it to describe Waiting for Godot), Pinter, Shepard and perhaps also Ionesco and Genet. John Orr has usefully discussed the twentieth-century form in his book, Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture; and although tragicomedy is found to demonstrate ‘the coexistence of amusement and pity, terror and laughter,’ it crucially lacks ‘the violent immediacy of Artaud’ that is displayed by black farce. To expand the term ‘tragicomedy’ to include what Hirst calls a ‘volatile mix’ branch of the genre, then (as distinct from the ‘careful synthesis’ suggested by Guarini and others), makes it so inclusive as to be almost meaningless; and in its more restricted definition it is far too moderate to be of great relevance to the dissonant excesses of black farce.

In the search for a description that will express those dissonant excesses, ‘the grotesque’ – a term mentioned several times in passing already – presents itself as a far more suitable established term than tragicomedy. The specific characteristics of the grotesque are highly relevant to the plays in question, and its history from the Renaissance to the twentieth century sheds ample light on the nature and function of black farce. To begin with, essential to every definition of the grotesque throughout its history is the concept of ‘incompatibles’; the grotesque is ‘disharmony gone

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Black Farce

wild’, ‘a fundamentally ambivalent thing’, ‘a violent clash of opposites’ (Thomson, p. 11). The incompatibles in question may be the human and the animal, the dreamlike and the real or, most commonly, the ludicrous and the terrible, frivolity and the macabre, laughter and revulsion.\(^\text{102}\) John Ruskin, in his influential nineteenth-century account of the grotesque in visual art, insists on this comic/horrific combination as central to the concept, emphasising their balanced dependence on one another:

First, then, it seems to me that the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; . . . there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all idea of jest.\(^\text{103}\)

Lee Byron Jennings, in his 1963 discussion of the grotesque in post-Romantic German literature, agrees, adding that ‘it simultaneously arouses reactions of fear and amusement in the observer’; and in 1972 Philip Thomson, in his book on the grotesque as a literary genre, lays down ‘the co-presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable’ as the foundation of his definition.\(^\text{104}\) Black farce, then, surely belongs here. Its farce belongs to the exuberance of the grotesque, the Lebenstrubfluss that T. A. Meyer associated with the genre:

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\(^{103}\) *The Stones of Venice* (London: Smith, Elder & Co.; 1853), §XXIII.

\(^{104}\) Jennings, p. 10; Thomson, p. 3.
Here belongs all that teems and gushes and bubbles with life, all in which one sees that the stream of life does not flow feebly nor moderately, but rushes on its way chattering and turbulent.\textsuperscript{105}

Its ‘blackness’, on the other hand, is part of the grotesque’s horror and monstrosity,\textsuperscript{106} typical ‘ingredients’ of the grotesque, according to another classic account of the subject by Wolfgang Kayser, include nocturnal and poisonous animals, skulls, skeletons and madness.\textsuperscript{107} Yet to separate these two contradictory elements of the grotesque is, as Ruskin states, misleading, for the important thing is that, in the grotesque as in black farce, horror and laughter \textit{coexist}, however disharmoniously, in both subject matter and style.

Unsurprisingly, discussions of the context and function of the grotesque repeatedly echo (or, more often, prefigure) those of the smaller and more specialised mixed genre of black humor. Like black humor, the grotesque seems to arise out of rapid and bewildering changes in society; as Anna Lydia Motto and John Clark comment, quoting Horace’s injunction against the grotesque in the \textit{Ars Poetica}, ‘it is exactly such “meaningless ideas” and “sick men’s dreams” that periodically are necessary to describe civilization.’\textsuperscript{108} This is the stance of bewildered yet exuberant disillusionment that black farce shares with the Absurd; and once again John Ruskin’s description of ‘the master of the true grotesques’ seems apt:

It is because the dreadfulness of the universe around him weighs upon his heart, that his work is wild . . . . (III. III. §XLV)


\textsuperscript{107}\textit{Das Groteske; seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung} (Gerhart Stalling Verlag, Oldenburg & Hamburg Gesamtherstellung, 1957), pp. 195-98. Quoted in Clayborough, p. 64.

Accordingly Neil Rhodes, in his study of the Elizabethan grotesque, describes how the
genre, implying 'vast social destruction', emerged in the sixteenth century out of
educational expansion, convulsions in the social hierarchy and a post-war penury that
was exacerbated by the plague, famine, inflation, the 'foolish ostentation of the young
rich, and their exploitation by ruthless opportunists'; the resulting 'vision of the new
urban society... was both horrible and fascinating' (pp. 3, 47). Thomson agrees that
the 'violent clash of opposites' in the grotesque expresses 'the problematical nature of
existence':

It is no accident that the grotesque in art and literature tends to be prevalent in
societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation.

And he goes on to note that recent years (he is writing in 1974) have been 'just such
an era convulsed by momentous social and intellectual changes' (p. 11). The
grotesque, however, is less often seen as a simple mechanism for coping with such
convulsions than as the more complex and less solution-orientated form that I
ultimately concluded black humor to be. The purpose of the grotesque, indeed, is
much the same as that of black farce: 'to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader
up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him
with a radically different, disturbing perspective'.

Rhodes describes how this perspective-altering confrontation works in Thomas Nashe’s account of the
executions of Zadoch and Cutwolfe in The Unfortunate Traveller:

Grotesque of this kind makes us laugh, but our laughter chokes on an awareness of
the scene’s actual horror. Tugging us in two ways, the grotesque becomes a
penetrating examiner of our concept of what is entertaining, what is festive.

(p. 44)

In its somewhat ambiguous defensive mode, the grotesque ‘can create anxiety, as well as relieve it,’ as Michael Steig argues, quoting Thomas Cramer:

\[\ldots\] ‘the grotesque is the feeling of anxiety aroused by means of the comic pushed to the extreme,’ but conversely, ‘the grotesque is the defeat by means of the comic, of anxiety in the face of the inexplicable.’\[10\]

Both aggressive and defensive theories emphasise the fact that tensions are left unresolved, pain is not transcended and the result is disorientation and perturbation.

This enduring discomfort contrasts with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, the sociocultural phenomenon and attitude to life on which (he suggests) the aesthetic form of the grotesque is based. The notion of ‘carnivalised writing’ arises from Bakhtin’s attempt to locate the work of François Rabelais in the popular culture forms of his time, demonstrating how he absorbed and reproduced the spirit of Renaissance carnival in his work. As expressed in the varied popular-festive life of the time, the carnival spirit identified by Bakhtin is one of ambivalence, physicality and misrule, and its dominant movement is one of ‘uncrowning’ (Bakhtin, p. 217). Despite carnival’s blatant aggression, however, its emphasis is ultimately affirmative and benign.\[11\] It may express itself through the image of the grotesque body – unfinished, deformed, mutilated – but, as we shall see in Chapter 4, the outcome of bodily degradation, in Bakhtin’s carnival framework, is rebirth, renewal and the continuity of ‘the collective ancestral body of all the people’:

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. (Bakhtin, pp. 19, 21)


This optimistic, 'gay and gracious' perspective (p. 19) has been characterised by some critics as excessively indulgent and utopian,\textsuperscript{112} as Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson acknowledge in their study of Bakhtin, his theory of carnival 'addresses catastrophe and terror in a highly benevolent and unrealistic way,' ignoring 'the dangers of carnivallistic violence and antinomian energy.'\textsuperscript{113} To be fair, it must be acknowledged that Bakhtin makes no attempt to apply his theory to Jacobean drama; certainly the balance of Bakhtinian grotesque is tipped too much towards the genre's joyful, celebratory side for it to retain the true ambivalence that makes it relevant to black farce.

While Bakhtin's affirmative, carnivalesque grotesque can only ever overlap with black farce, then, the truly ambivalent grotesque, as described by Ruskin, can be said to contain and include black farce as one of its constituent genres. It is a genre of excess and exaggeration, disharmoniously combining laughter and horror; its emphasis is on the physical, dwelling on abnormality and taboo; it elicits disorientation in its audience; and it expresses through exuberance and through ugliness 'the problematical nature of existence'. It was also particularly prominent in the seventeenth century and in the post-war period of the twentieth. Neil Rhodes has most thoroughly examined the Elizabethan grotesque in his book on the subject, particularly in relation to pamphlet literature and satirical comedy; but his analysis of the sociological factors behind the genre, as I have already indicated, is equally relevant to the plays in question here. The Revenger's Tragedy is particularly noted

\textsuperscript{112}See for example Dentith, p. 76; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (London: Methuen, 1986).

for the ‘fierce grotesquerie’ of its wit; more specifically, Peter Stallybrass has examined the way in which the grotesquerie of the court in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is, in an inversion of Bakhtin’s framework, set in opposition to the dispossessed Vindice’s non-grotesque ideal, the ‘ideal of the enclosed body’ as represented by female chastity. Stallybrass’s analysis also reveals how the Jacobean theatre was seen as inherently excessive and ‘hybridized’, and that the ‘intermixing of high and low, religion and profanation, male and female . . . is most frequently located in the actor’s body’, thus making Jacobean drama almost innately grotesque (pp. 125-26). Indeed, the grotesque is so regularly associated with the bloodier Jacobean dramatic works that, as Wendy Griswold suggests, ‘the common usage of the term “Jacobean”’ has come to denote the ‘grotesque marriage of blood and sex [that] is a distinctive feature of these plays’ (p. 62). Similarly, Frances K. Barasch commented in 1968 that ‘In fiction and drama, in the theater and in art, the grotesque has appeared as the single most characteristic expression of our time’; ‘the grotesque’ was, according to Robert Heilman’s 1973 account of contemporary drama, ‘a new critical term that in the 1960s seemed well on the way to becoming fashionable’. Certainly Orton’s plays have been repeatedly described as grotesque; and Peter Davison, in his study of the popular tradition in the theatre, specifically makes the connection between the seventeenth- and the twentieth-century genre, noting the presence of ‘grotesque humour’ in Peter Nichols’ writing by describing *The National Health* as ‘a work very

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much in the tradition of the bitter satires of the Jacobean period in tone, technique and deaths. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* springs to mind. ¹¹⁸ The grotesque, then, though too large a category to serve as a precise definition of the generic link between the Jacobean and the 1960s groups of plays I am discussing, does much to enhance our understanding of black farce (which may be described as a grotesque genre) and its occurrence in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries.

From this analysis of black farce in relation to a number of associated forms, several significant conclusions can be drawn. Black farce can be said to be a grotesque and blackly comical genre that overlaps to varying degrees with tragic farce and the Theatres of the Absurd and of Cruelty; it contains elements of sick humour; and it is the theatrical equivalent of black humor. It consists of an equal and simultaneous combination of farce and horror, but has little or nothing in common with satire or tragicomedy. Black farce is characterised by excess, physicality, taboo-breaking, ambivalence and disharmony. Audience response to black farce commonly includes simultaneous shock and laughter, pain and amusement; and this strange combination results in feelings of uncertainty, discomfort, self-consciousness, bewilderment and disorientation. In addition, further conclusions may be drawn regarding the seventeenth- and twentieth-century contexts from which black farce has arisen. Certain moods and attitudes have been highlighted by the examination of the genres with which black farce intersects. Behind the Absurd, by definition, is a sense of nausea at a disjointed and purposeless universe; sick humour reveals a ‘baffled anger’, the Theatre of Cruelty confusion and instability; black humor arises out of an

uncertain combination of terror and excitement; and the grotesque reflects horror and fascination at social convulsions. What all of these forms share with black farce is a sense of simultaneous exhilaration and horror, which is reflected in their generic mixture. Many social factors have already been suggested as the cause of this almost hysterical mood, from the spectacle of the plague and the new materialism to the atrocities of Vietnam and the decline of religious belief. Rather than undertake the historian’s task of analysing these factors in isolation, however, I will now take four of the broadest themes that preoccupy the writers of both Jacobean and 1960s black farce – madness, violence, death and sex – and examine how their manifestation in the two societies in question relates to their blackly farcical representation on stage. More importantly, I will use the analysis of these themes to demonstrate the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s theatre, thus revealing how the black farce of the Jacobeans reappeared in a remarkably similar form on the stage of the 1960s.

2 To make a frightful pleasure

MADNESS

'Surely we're all mad people,' quoted Joe Orton as the epigraph to What the Butler Saw, 'and they / Whom we think are, are not.' The lines come from The Revenger's Tragedy: on the title page of a black farce set in a microcosmic madhouse, a dramatist of the 1960s specifically alludes to a Jacobean world of absurd and desperate lunacy. Orton's conscious acknowledgement of his dramatic predecessor in the realm of insanity is unsurprising: in the two groups of plays under discussion madness is a constant presence, and in both it combines a cavorting, manic glee with a dark, tormented frenzy. Indeed, it is almost easier to list those Jacobean and 1960s plays that do not deal with madness in some form than those that do. Edgar Allison Peers many years ago counted between twenty and thirty Renaissance plays 'of which it may fairly be said that the conception of madness enters definitely into the plot' - most notably, of course, Hamlet and King Lear - and Louis B. Wright later added a few more: amongst the plays under consideration here there is The Changeling with, as in What the Butler Saw, its madhouse setting; the disturbing comic-grotesque foolery of the Ward in Women Beware Women; the stock device of feigned madness, employed for example by Flamineo in The White Devil; and the masque of madmen set loose to torment the Duchess of Malfi. The dramatists reflected a preoccupation which, as we shall see, was shared by many sections of society; the Renaissance, indeed, was 'a

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period in the cultural history of Europe when the phenomenon of madness receives particular attention.\(^3\)

A similar rash of plays dealing with the subject appeared in the 1960s. While writing his own madhouse play, Orton paused to note ‘how fashionable madness is at the moment’;\(^4\) he had just spotted a poster for a film called *Libido Means Lust* (‘What happens when a sadistic sex maniac falls in love!’) and a review of the dramatisation of *Diary of a Madman*, the film of the *Marat/Sade* was also just out. A couple of months later Peter Nichols’ groundbreaking portrayal of cerebral palsy as a form of madness,\(^5\) *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, would reach the stage, closely followed by Henry Livings’ *Good Grief!*, exploring ‘the fine line between the sane and the insane’;\(^6\) *What the Butler Saw* would receive its première only months after the opening of Peter Barnes’ satire on the mental disintegration of the aristocracy in *The Ruling Class*. And these are only the most overt representations; the plays of both periods are peopled with characters who exhibit extreme symptoms of irrationality and inhabit a world devoid of logic or order, and who nonetheless go about their business without the slightest suggestion of certifiable mental illness. Like Jacobean society, the world of the 1960s was suffused with a fascination for insanity – so much so that by 1972 Keath Fraser would consider the ‘paradoxical theme of madness and


\(^5\)See below, p. 62: Joe is called a ‘crackpot’ and Nichols himself discusses the play in terms of madness. However, as cerebral palsy is not strictly a psychiatric illness, *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* will not be central to this chapter.
sanity in a psychiatric clinic' as portrayed in *What the Butler Saw* 'hackneyed'; theyears later Robert S. Kinsman could describe with confidence how in the preceding twenty years 'we have been so familiarized with the realm of unreason – abnormal, irrational and chemomystical.' In addition, the most famous book on madness of the 1960s – social historian Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* – was itself concerned with how the modern experience of the condition had developed since the Middle Ages, noting how 'from the fifteenth century on, the face of madness has haunted the imagination of Western man' (p. 15). Foucault’s more complex statement that the 'world of the seventeenth century is strangely hospitable, in all senses, to madness' (p. 37), furthermore, alluded to a late Renaissance movement that, as we shall see, was to provoke controversy and debate throughout the 1960s, thus highlighting certain parallels of ambivalence and transition between the two periods.

Madness, ideal subject that it is for the genre, is fully exploited by the dramatists of both periods in all its blackly farcical potential. For them, madness has a certain inherent theatricality about it: Rance in *What the Butler Saw* relishes the 'melodramatic' nature of lunatics and their suitability as objects of entertainment (p. 427), while Barnes would later write in the context of both physical and mental handicaps, 'Cripples are the rest of us, dramatized.' In 1961 Foucault, analysing the Renaissance fascination with insanity, demonstrated that theatre itself is a form of

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madness by quoting Mondory’s ironic Henry V-style speech from Georges de Scudéry’s _Comédie des comédiens_ of 1635:

‘I do not know,’ Mondory says in the prologue to Scudéry’s play, ‘what extravagance has today come over my companions, but it is so great that I am forced to believe that some spell has robbed them of their reason, and the worst of it is that they are trying to make me lose mine, and you yours as well. They wish to persuade me that I am not on a stage, that this is the city of Lyons, that over there is an inn, and there an innyard where actors who are not ourselves, yet who are, are performing a Pastoral.’ In this extravaganza, the theater develops its truth, which is illusion. Which is, in the strict sense, madness. (pp. 34-35)

Madness and theatre, then, are inextricably linked in both the Renaissance and the 1960s. Black farce, moreover, may be seen as a specifically mad genre, an unholy alliance of two forms which are, in their own ways, essentially mad: farce (boisterous, manic, frenzied) and horror (‘a freak show, attracting with its forbidden mixtures’ [Griswold, p. 79]). This generic component of madness is recognised by Duncan Salkeld in his work on _Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare_; although I would obviously differ from him in his choice of classification, his analysis is valid:

Tales of madness are unsettling. They have a strange and enduring power to fascinate, amuse and appal beyond the limits of their own historical moment. They seem to be tragi-comedy itself: familiar, yet at the same time uncannily removed from everyday experience; entertaining but profoundly disturbing.11

The farcical business of Livings’ _Eh?_ is created by the unstable and terrifying Val, whose behaviour illustrates the uneasy humour of the mad, causing Mrs Murray to wonder, ‘Is laughter the source of fear or fear the source of laughter?’12 Mathew Winston’s ‘grotesque black humor’ demonstrates perfectly how the crossing of lines merges from the psychological into the generic:

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12_Eh?_ (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), pp. 12, 37.
The madman is a central figure in grotesque black humor; his lack of rational thought and his mannerisms are comical, but his insight into a disjunctive and chaotic world is frightening. He sees a world where nothing has a sharp outline, where one thing continually becomes another through metaphor or metamorphosis. The same perspective prevails in other states that approach madness: delirium, dream, or intoxication. All are conditions in which one’s normal certainties and the ability to evaluate rationally break down; in which it is difficult to distinguish between what is funny and what is frightening, and where one may suddenly turn into the other. (p. 283; italics mine)

Indeed, Robert Rentoul Reed, in his study of Bedlam on the Jacobean stage, pictures the entire temper of the Jacobean stage as ‘a patient in the psychopathic ward running amuck with fever, his brains afire, as Robert Burton might have diagnosed him’ (p. 1). Whether explicit or otherwise, madness is something without which black farce cannot exist.

The exploitation of the mentally ill for the purposes of entertainment is one source of the disturbing ambivalences of both Jacobean and 1960s black farce. The principle of shameless abuse of the insane held by Orton’s psychiatrists (‘The purpose of my husband’s clinic isn’t to cure, but to liberate and exploit madness,’ says Mrs Prentice [p. 388]) would certainly have been familiar to the Jacobeans; as Orton rightly noted in his musings on the contemporary vogue for madness in entertainment, ‘Four hundred years ago they’d’ve gone to Bedlam for the afternoon’ (Diaries, p. 114). In 1609/10, for example, Lord Percy listed amongst the London amusements he had visited along with the Lady Penelope and her two sisters: the lions in the Tower, ‘the show of Bethlehem, the place where the prince was created, and the fireworks at the Artillery Gardens’, this accords well with allusions to the madhouse in much Jacobean drama, where, for example, ‘mad folks’ are listed amongst such other
entertainments as ‘masques, plays, [and] Puritan preachings’. But while the Jacobeans may have been a good deal more robust in their responses to spectacles of insanity than the ‘startled’ reactions to Peter Nichols’ comic treatment of a child suffering from cerebral palsy in A Day in the Death of Joe Egg as a ‘crackpot’ (along with jokes about ‘The Thalidomide Kid’ [Plays: One, pp. 65-66]), their reputed brutality in this area is often greatly exaggerated. The enduring critical tendency to view the masque of madmen in The Duchess of Malfi as purely ‘comic entertainment’, for example (Wright, pp. 51-52), is a particularly common misinterpretation that evades the possibility of a more complex response. The masque is a particularly vivid expression of black farce, depending upon an uncomfortable alternation between amusement and pity, fascination and revulsion. Both ‘sport’ and ‘tyranny’ (IV. ii. 43, 61), the spectacle is emphatically ridiculous, comic and absurd, yet simultaneously cruel, horrific and laden with the death-filled ominousness of its language. Likewise The Changeling illustrates that the abuse and exploitation meted out by madhouse owner Alibius were not expected to be granted approval by contemporary audiences. The language of Isabella, a contrast to Alibius as a rare figure of honour in the play, makes clear the deep ambivalence that characterises the portrayal of the mad in black farce:

14 Ben Jonson, Epicoene: or The Silent Woman (London: Ernest Benn [New Mermaids], 1979), II. ii. 33. See also Dekker’s The Honest Whore, Part I, where the Duke plans to cover his intention to prevent the marriage of Infelice to Hippolito at Bethlem Monastery under a pretence of setting out for the presumably unremarkable (and hence plausible) purpose ‘to see the lunatics’ (V. i), in Thomas Dekker, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Ernest Benn [Mermaids], 1949), p. 173; Dekker and Webster’s North-ward Hoe, in The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker (London: John Pearson, 1873), pp. 60-63; Fletcher’s The Pilgrim, in The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon, Vol. VI, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 121-205.
15 Nichols, interview with the author, London, 4 April 1996.
You were commending once to-day to me
Your last come lunatic, what a proper
Body there was without brains to guide it,
And what a pitiful delight appear'd
In that defect, as if your wisdom had found
A mirth in madness; pray, sir, let me partake,
If there be such a pleasure.16

With her paradox of ‘pitiful delight’ and her repeated ‘if’, Isabella illustrates her competing curiosity and compassion; but her misgivings are soon distressingly confirmed:

Alack, alack, 'tis too full of pity
To be laugh'd at . . . (43-44)

Later she reacts with disgust to Alibius’ plan to exploit to the full the ‘frightful pleasure’ of madmen appearing at Beatrice’s wedding (260) (another wonderfully ambivalent phrase, utterly true to the grotesque) by training the patients to perform a dance for the spectators:

Y’have a fine trade on’t,
Madmen and fools are a staple commodity. (275-76)

Isabella’s concern – a contrast to the rather more sanguine madhouse-keeper’s wife, Orton’s Mrs Prentice (‘The purpose of my husband’s clinic isn’t to cure, but to liberate and exploit madness’ [What the Butler Saw, p. 388]) – demonstrates the fact that any simplistic dichotomy between the supposedly ultra-sensitive and humourless modern audience and a rollicking, unthinking Jacobean one will not hold.17 It is

17See for example Peers, p. 51: ‘the common Elizabethan treatment of insanity was so far removed from the humane that the subject was regarded rather as one for mirth than for solemnity – for comedy and not for tragedy’; Boni, pp. 208-9: the ‘grotesque horrors’ endured by the Duchess of Malfi ‘would have brought laughter from the Elizabethan audience whose sense of humour varied somewhat from ours.’
precisely in exploiting the ambivalences of its audience that black farce provokes our unease.

The ambivalences engaged and portrayed by both Jacobean and 1960s black farce reflect the transitional status of madness in the two periods. In the Renaissance, the topic of madness was a ‘confused, charged, and contested’ one,18 with theological and biochemical theories, relating to devil-possession and the humours system respectively, somewhat ‘awkwardly correlated’.19 But despite the persistence of some medieval approaches to the punitive treatment of the insane, a new humanity was emerging in the theoretical works of writers such as Johann Weyer, Timothy Bright and Reginald Scot, who not only rejected the diagnosis of the apparently insane as witches in Kramer and Sprenger’s fifteenth-century Malleus Maleficarum, but also exhibited a new compassion in their concern to reduce mental suffering.20 Weyer, for example – identified by psychoanalyst and medical historian Gregory Zilboorg as a precursor of modern psychiatry21 – vehemently insisted that ‘there is this natural reason why neither the frenzied nor the mad should be punished because of some transgression: they are tormented enough by their frenzy and punished enough by their misfortune’ (p. 572). These were the very early days of modern clinical psychiatry, with scholars heroically wrestling with definitions and diagnoses, as here

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18 Carol Thomas Neely, “‘Documents in Madness’: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture,’ Shakespeare Quarterly 42 (1991), p. 316.
when Robert Burton finally approaches the task in his compendious *Anatomy of Melancholy*:

... I may now freely procee to treat of my intended subject, to most mens capacity, and after many ambages, perspicuously define what this *Melancholy* is, shew his Name, and *Differences*. The Name is imposed from the matter, and Disease denominated from the materiall cause: as *Bruei* observes, Ἐλαγχόλια, quasi Ἐλαγχολή, from black Choler. And whether it be a cause or an effect, a Disease, or Symptome, let *Donatus Altomarus*, and *Salvianus* decide, I will not contende about it. It hath several Descriptions, Notations, and Definitions, ... ²²

The difficulties of this task will be discussed in more detail later; what is important here is the concept of *categorisation* that was so crucial to the theorists of the seventeenth century – because this concept is precisely what came under vigorous attack in the 1960s.

Thomas S. Szasz, for example, explicitly looked back in accusation at the seventeenth century, developing in his *Manufacture of Madness* (1971) the argument of his earlier *Myth of Mental Illness* (1961) by drawing a direct analogy between the concept of mental illness and that of witchcraft; in other words, instead of welcoming the development of psychiatry as the saviour of all those formerly accused of witchcraft, he accused psychiatry of simply taking over the role of the witch-hunter in stigmatising society’s deviants:

... medicine replaced theology; the alienist, the inquisitor; and the insane, the witch. The result was the substitution of a medical mass-movement for a religious one, the persecution of mental patients replacing the persecution of heretics. ²³

Szasz was part of the burgeoning ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement of the 1960s in which writers such as the influential R. D. Laing in *The Divided Self* (1960) and *The Politics

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of Experience (1967) were determined to break down the divide between the sane and the insane: to destroy the very divisions and subdivisions that had so preoccupied the Jacobins. ‘We are living in an age in which the ground is shifting and the foundations are shaking,’ Laing declared. When Foucault’s book – challenging as it did the long-held presuppositions of ‘the merciless language of non-madness’ on which modern definitions of insanity were based (p. xi) – was published in Britain in 1967 as part of a series edited by Laing, and with an introduction from anti-psychiatrist David Cooper, it was immediately seized upon in support of this movement. And while the validity of this appropriation has since been questioned, Foucault’s book was indeed ‘entirely sympathetic’ to the movement, from which he did nothing to distance himself. Like Szasz, Foucault looked back to the Renaissance from the perspective of the 1960s and expressed regret that insanity ever was subject to diagnosis and hence exclusion:

What is constitutive is the action that divides madness, and not the science elaborated once this division is made and calm restored. What is originate is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason’s subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point. (pp. xi-xii)

The final paragraph of the book, indeed, seemed positively to encourage the attack on the psychiatric establishment and its categorisations that erupted during the 1960s:

Ruse and new triumph of madness: the world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness, since in its

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struggles and agonies it measures itself by the excess of works like those of Nietzsche, of Van Gogh, of Artaud. And nothing in itself, especially not what it can know of madness, assures the world that it is justified by such works of madness. (p. 289)

What is notable about these transitions and consequent ambivalences in both periods is the fact that although the movements were apparently in opposite directions, the upheavals had many characteristics in common. The nature of the transition, in other words, seems to matter more than its direction in this context: both periods are preoccupied with borderlines between sanity and insanity, scrutinising and disputing them in order either to draw them more firmly or to erase them altogether. This is best illustrated through the respective attitudes of the two periods towards mental institutions. As Foucault documented in 1961, the Renaissance was the period of the rise of exclusion of the insane from the rest of society, of commitment to madhouses such as London’s infamous Bethlehem Hospital, or Bedlam. This was entirely consistent with the more theoretical movement to anatomise madness, hence dissociating it from ‘normality’. As Roy Porter has shown, this movement resulted in a ‘them and us’ estrangement, defining the mad as a race apart.28 The 1960s, of course, saw the rise of ‘care in the community’ which, like the anti-psychiatry movement, ‘did much to break down the old distinction between being totally well (at home) and totally sick (in hospital).’29 The Mental Health Act of 1959, one of the main principles of which was described by Minister of Health Derek Walker-Smith as ‘the reorientation of the mental health services away from institutional care towards

care in the community, had led the way in the anti-institutional movement. In 1961, Minister of Health Enoch Powell announced ‘nothing less than the elimination of by far the greater part of this country’s mental hospitals as they stand today’, his announcement was followed by the publication the following year of the Hospital Plan for England and Wales, and in 1963 by Health and Welfare: the Development of Community Care. By now the policy was well established.

The two movements – towards and away from the custody of the mentally ill in institutions – shared both controversy and decidedly indifferent success. And behind both lay a distinct uneasiness in relation to our responsibilities towards the insane. In particular, both periods were struggling in their own ways with their awareness of the corruption, abuse and neglect that was rife in their institutions. Guilt and confusion were all too familiar, and no real solution was ever found. Edward Geoffrey O’Donoghue, Chaplain to Bethlehem Hospital at the turn of the twentieth century, described in his history of the institution the demand for ‘perpetual vigilance and personal supervision’ by its seventeenth-century governors, quoting from the court books as follows:

Ordered that no officer or servant shall give any blows or ill-language to any of the mad folks on pain of losing his place. (18 July 1646)

Such governors as can, or live near, are entreated to go as often as possible to see how the lunatics are used, and how many officers and servants behave themselves. (16 May 1655)

In other words, overt cruelty towards the mentally ill, however endemic, was no more acceptable to the seventeenth-century authorities than it was to those of the 1960s.

And indeed, while the neglect that led to the rotting of a patient’s foot and the various charges against officers of unnecessary severity towards inmates\textsuperscript{32} may seem extreme by modern standards, the complaints brought against mental institutions in the 1960s were no less shocking. The accusations continued throughout the decade, from Dr Erving Goffman’s book \textit{Asylums} of 1961 to Barbara Robb’s related work of 1967, \textit{Sans Everything: A Case to Answer}. Robb provided well-documented evidence regarding the treatment of geriatric and psychogeriatric patients, including one statement from a Midlands nurse described by Robb as ‘a catalogue of cruelty, callousness, filth and depersonalization such as I have not read since I was reviewing the reports of the Nuremberg trials’\textsuperscript{33} The complaints included overcrowded, insanitary conditions, sadistic punishments, humiliation, violence and malnutrition. In 1965, Mr George Wallace commented on another MP’s comparison of a mental hospital to a prison, admitting that he had never visited the latter – ‘but if a prison is like that it must be a fairly desperate sort of place’\textsuperscript{34} – and by 1968-70, ‘hardly a week passed without newspaper reports of cruelty and ill-treatment at one hospital or other’ (Jones, p. 329). Peter Nichols wryly confirmed these perceptions in \textit{A Day in the Death of Joe Egg} when – in an exchange that finally provokes a burst of outrage about ‘sick jokes\textsuperscript{35} – Joe’s parents undercut their well-meaning friend’s offer to find her a place in an institution. Though they inform Freddie that they have already tried ‘putting her away’, protesting that ‘She was ill in that place’, he persists, suggesting that ‘if she improves, she can join their activities’:

\textsuperscript{32}See Reed, pp. 21-22.
\textsuperscript{34}Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), 5th series, vol. 708 (8-19 March, 1965), p. 1671.
BRI. Activities?
FREDDIE. Painting . . . wheelchair gardening . . . speech therapy.
BRI. Better not tell her that, eh, Mum? She thinks she’s very nicely spoken. One thing she does pride herself on.
SHEILA (to FREDDIE). She wouldn’t go to a special school. Not even if you put some ginger under them. We’ve seen the place she’d go to. No private house. No Palladian asylum with acres of graceful parkland.
BRI. Nor Victorian Gothic even.
SHEILA. Army surplus. Like a transit camp.
BRI. Except they’re not going anywhere. (pp. 70-71)

Sheila and Bri’s complaint that Joe deteriorated under institutional care illustrates an added complexity in the entire issue of insanity and the function of institutions that existed in both the seventeenth and the twentieth century. To what extent did hospitals alleviate the suffering of patients – and to what extent did they exacerbate it? Were institutions in fact part of the illness? This was the speculation of Donald Lupton in his short journalistic book of 1632, London and the Countrey Carbonadoed:

It seems strange that any one shold recover here, the cryings, screechings, roarings, brawlings, shaking of chaines, swearings, frettings, chaffings, are so many, so hideous, so great, that they are more able to drive a man that hath his witts, rather out of them, then to helpe one that never had them, or hath lost them, to finde them againe.36

In 1959, Russell Barton named this phenomenon ‘institutional neurosis’, an illness other than that which brought the patient into the hospital, caused by the institution itself: ‘It is, so to speak, “a mental bed-sore”,’ he wrote.37

In the early seventeenth century and in the 1960s, then, when attitudes towards mental illness were a matter of transition and controversy, madness was an ideal subject for the unsettled and unsettling genre of black farce. Alongside the fear and

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35See Chapter 1, above.
guilt associated with mental institutions, indeed, there existed in both periods an oddly positive view of madness that only served to deepen the ambivalence; while, in the sixteenth century for example, on the one hand the word 'fool . . . remained a term of opprobrium or condescension (with a mercilessly enlarged application), on the other hand, it had become a term of praise and aspiration'.\textsuperscript{38} With its licence to cross boundaries, its dreamlike absurdity, its 'ambiguity: menace and mockery' (Foucault, p. 13), madness was, like black farce itself, perceived in both the Renaissance and the 1960s to be infinitely capable of breaking rules and creating paradoxes. Thus if madness offers psychological liberation to the insane, it may also offer generic freedom to the playwright: freedom to make unorthodox associations, to ignore the constraints of decorum and convention. This attraction to the licence and skewed thinking of an altered state of mind had already been illustrated by 'praisers of folly' such as Erasmus and Rabelais, as Porter notes:

The device of a fictional Quixotic figure gave the author elbow room to play being an alien in his own land, offering a mix of wisdom, wit and lunacy impossible to unravel. (p. 125)

The uncertainty engendered by Erasmus' use of the voice of Folly to praise herself, thus blurring the line between irony and didacticism, combines with the author's own evident delight and perturbation at what emerges from his experiment with the persona, to provide an early foretaste of the Jacobean playwrights' tendency towards generic madness. The imprisoned Duchess of Malfi longs for a kind of mental escape through madness, believing that it can offer a kind of blissful freedom (IV. ii. 25-27);

likewise Erasmus describes what is perceived to be madness as an escape from the earthly confines of the body:

... so long as the mind makes proper use of the organs of the body it is called sane and healthy, but once it begins to break its bonds and tries to win freedom, as if it were planning an escape from prison, men call it insane.39

Burton would later agree with Erasmus’ equation of madness and freedom, and indeed with his quotation from Proverbs 15:21: ‘Folly is a joy to a fool’ (p. 117):

Some thinke fooles and disards live the merriest lives, as Ajax in Sophocles; ... entire Ideots doe best; they are not macerated with cares, tormented with feares, and anxietie, as other men are: ... they are most free, jocund, and merry ... (Anatomy of Melancholy, Vol. II, p. 207)

Ultimately, however, Erasmus appears to have taken fright at the ‘dangerous attractiveness’ of Folly, who is transformed from an irresponsible natural fool with ‘Freshness for a mother, the loveliest of all the nymphs and the gayest too’ into a far safer, didactic Christian ‘fool’ whose voice is almost indistinguishable from Erasmus’ own:

Of necessity, Erasmus found that he had to give Folly too large a degree of independence, and once she had been set free, she showed her author rather more about the human situation than he really wanted to see. ... Erasmus got more than he bargained for.40

The 1960s, too, had its ‘praisers of folly’; Foucault, indeed, has explicitly been named as such (Castel, p. 67). While Foucault tended to express madness in terms of ‘an unrestrained aesthetic of the transgressive sublime’, Cooper explicitly defined it as ‘the wildly charismatic or inspirational area of our experience’.41 The concept of the positive side of madness, indeed, was sufficiently pervasive to find expression in

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1960s popular culture through the anarchic ‘Screaming’ Lord Sutch, and by controversially ‘Nutty, zany and oddball’ television comedy such as Monty Python’s Flying Circus, directly influenced by the famously manic depressive Spike Milligan.42 In The Spirit of Man, Peter Barnes closely echoed Erasmus’ and Burton’s concepts of insane freedom, joy and lack of anxiety:

And there can be no happy glad-man, compared to a madman. For his mind is free of all care. His fits and fancies are above all mischances. And joy is his favourite fare.43

The anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s was accompanied by various explorations of the merits of altered states of consciousness, whether through hypnosis, meditation, psychedelic drugs or psychosis, and in 1969 Charles T. Tart edited a book exploring the ‘positive qualities’ of all these experiences and more.44 Of particular fascination were drug-induced hallucinations, publicly valued by the same anti-psychiatrist – Laing – who introduced the idea of insanity as ‘validly mystical’ (Politics of Experience, p. 108). The ‘journey to new realms of consciousness’45 provided by the psychedelic experience of LSD and other ‘experimental’ drugs was most famously lauded by psychologist Timothy Leary, who repeatedly insisted upon the insight and transcendence achieved through loss of rational control:

The goal of the game is to go beyond the game
You lose your mind
To use your head

41Dominick LaCapra, ‘Foucault, history and madness’, in Still and Velody, p. 84; Cooper, in Foucault, p. viii.
You lose your mind
To use your head\textsuperscript{46}

In a chapter of Tart’s book on “Psychedelic” Experiences in Acute Psychosis, Malcolm B. Bowers and Daniel X. Freedman described some of the ‘positive qualities’ of experiences shared by users of ‘major psychedelic drugs’ (including LSD) and patients in the early stages of psychosis:

They report having stepped beyond the restrictions of their usual state of awareness. Perceptual modes seem heightened and the emotional response evoked is singularly intense. Such experiences are frequently felt to be a kind of breakthrough, words and phrases such as release or new creativity being used to characterize them. Individuals experience feelings of getting to the essence of things – of the external world, of others, and of themselves. On the other hand, there is usually a vague disquieting, progressive sense of dread which may eventually dominate the entire experience. (p. 470)

This may be seen as analogous to Erasmus’ exhilarating yet disturbing experiment with the persona of Folly, which ‘opened his imagination . . . to the complexities in human experience that he normally chose not to acknowledge’ (Fox, p. 91); it is also precisely what is offered by the unruly madness of black farce: a heightened, unfettered, elated experience combined with a vague disquiet or even horror.

Madness, then, is not merely a component of black farce in Jacobean and 1960s drama; it is an expression of the genre itself. Not only is the madman perceived to be unrestrained by boundaries and categories, but his disturbed state of mind also enables him to provide searching insights into an absurd universe. Hence the recurrence of ‘matter and impertinency mix’d’ throughout Jacobean and 1960s plays; again and again an insane character will unexpectedly reach a truth inaccessible to the sane:

\[\text{I perceive that fools are not at all hours foolish,}\]

No more than wisemen wise.\textsuperscript{47}

In the Renaissance, this notion may have derived from the persistence of the medieval concept of ‘the feeble-minded’ as ‘under the special protection of God’:

In the fool God had seemed to create those simple idiots of whom Christ had spoken, and the fool’s affinities to the natural order often appeared to indicate a special affinity with God. This seemed especially so of the fool’s speech which, for all its ignorance, at times managed to pierce through the veils of convention and propriety to the profound simplicity of a Christlike truth. (Kaiser, p. 8)

Hence Erasmus’ belief that the insane may be found ‘foretelling the future, showing a knowledge of languages and literature they had never previously learned, and giving clear indication of something divine’ (p. 129). ‘No doubt, madness has something to do with the strange paths of knowledge,’ observed Foucault of the Renaissance fascination with insanity (p. 25); but as ever the exhilarating face of madness has its counterpart of doom:

What does it presage, this wisdom of fools? Doubtless, since it is a forbidden wisdom, it presages both the reign of Satan and the end of the world; ultimate bliss and supreme punishment; omnipotence on earth and the infernal fall. (p. 22)

The perception displayed by the divinely-inspired madman may be as alarming as that described by Bowers and Freedman in their research into psychedelia and psychosis; and its apocalyptic implications suggest the encroachment of a universal madness: ‘You can’t be a rationalist in an irrational world. It isn’t rational’ (Butler, p. 428). In the 1960s, Laing was the supreme advocate of the insight of the mentally ill, though he too was aware of madness’ double nature:

Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death. (Politics of Experience, p. 110)

Folly and understanding, delight and doom, comedy and horror: the perception achieved through madness is yet another facet of its blackly farcical nature.

Particularly striking in this context are the two madmen of *Women Beware Women* and *The Ruling Class*: ‘the Ward’ and ‘the Earl’ – and the parallels between them are so close that it is worth examining them in some detail. The madness of both characters is lifted into significance by their inheritance of enormous wealth; such fortunes in the hands of the insane are a source of irresistible temptation and overwhelming frustration for the corrupt characters around them. Their lunacy is therefore taken advantage of; both are manipulated into marriage so that others can get their hands on their estates. In the process each is used as a ‘veil’ for his wife’s affair, the Earl is tricked into marriage with his uncle’s mistress, while the Ward marries a woman who is having an affair with her uncle. The assumption that, because they are out of their wits, their sexuality is irrelevant and can be ignored in the pursuit of expediency is proved wrong by both characters; indeed, the misappropriation of their sexuality seems to open a Pandora’s Box of violent and comically terrifying urges and fantasies which are impossible to contain. They are both in any case predisposed towards disturbing forms of play, but when the reality of sex is cynically and carelessly placed within their reach their grotesquerie explodes into misogyny and violence. As soon as the Ward is introduced to Isabella, he begins to speak in terms of hunting: he plans to ‘quickly shoot [his] bolt’ and boasts that he ‘never missed mark yet’ (III. iii. 17, 19); he then immediately requests that Sordido ‘Draw out the catalogue of all the faults of women’ (25-6). From there, having given up the idea of demanding to see her naked for fear that she should require the same of him, the Ward contents himself with an item-by-item examination of what is visible of
the ‘bought and sold and turned and pried into’ Isabella (35), he and his companion breaking her down into her component parts: lips, face, hair, eyes, nose, teeth and gait. This isolation of body parts is of course inherently grotesque, but this quality is intensified by the Ward and Sordido, considering whether her hair is her own, where her eyes might ‘stand’ otherwise than in her head and whether her nose is likely to collapse; these images separate the body parts still further, introducing concepts of substitution, mutation, mutilation and disintegration. In Barnes’ play, the Earl is somewhat slower in developing a destructive sexuality; but when he eventually does so it is all the more powerful. In fact, there is at first something almost innocent about the Earl’s inappropriate sexual outbursts, even during his wedding ceremony:

BISHOP LAMPTON. ‘Wilt thou love her . . .’
EARL OF GURNEY. From the bottom of my soul to the tip of my penis, like the sun in its brightness, the moon in its beauty, the heavens in their emptiness, streams in their gentleness, no breeze stirs that doesn’t bear my love. (p. 57)

Blasphemous this may be, as the Bishop himself exclaims, but its strange, childlike purity is confirmed when the Earl enters the bridal chamber in white pyjamas, wobbling on a unicycle. It is only later, seduced by his uncle’s wife Claire, that the Earl begins to echo and outstrip the Ward’s grotesque dissection of the human body:

Suuuuuuck. GRAHHH. Spinnkk. The flesh lusteth against the spirit, against God. Labia, foreskin, testicles, scrotum.

Orgasm, coitus, copulation, fornication. Gangrened shoulder of sex. If it offends. Tear. Tear. Spill the seed, gut-slime.

If thy eye offends thee pluck it out. You’ll be nicked down to your bloody membrane, Mary.

The development of the Earl’s sexual violence ends, of course, with his impersonation of Jack the Ripper and the murder of both Claire and his own wife, Grace.

The supposedly ‘sane’ characters who abuse the Ward and the Earl because of their insanity, therefore, take on a great deal more than they bargain for. The madmen’s supposedly negligible sexuality turns out to be potent and destructive. Indeed both, to the surprise of their manipulators, succeed in consummating their marriages. Both wives subsequently become pregnant (though neither by their own husbands), and consequently the subjects of further grotesquerie: the Ward recalls that ‘something stirred in her belly the first night I lay with her’ (IV. ii. 100-1), and explains Isabella’s surprisingly ‘small’ singing by the fact that ‘there’s a young chorister in her belly’ (118), while Earl’s perversity takes the more physical form of an extraordinarily vivid ‘couvade’. Isabella touches on the psychosomatic symptoms of husbands when she anticipates that the Ward will breed all their sons in his teeth (i.e., suffer toothache during her pregnancy); the Ward’s protest illustrates his habitually grotesque imagination:

Nay, by my faith,
What serves your belly for? ’twould make my cheeks
Look like blown bagpipes. (III. iii. 128-30)

The Earl exhibits no such outlandish symptoms but waddles heavily, leaning on a shepherd’s crook, and clutches his stomach complaining that ‘Mighty Mouse is roaring’ (Plays: One, p. 67).

The aggressive grotesquerie of the Earl and the Ward arises directly from their characterisation as creatures of paradoxical lunacy and insight. Whereas not one of the ‘sane’ characters suspects that the relationship between Isabella and Hippolito is anything other than a familial bond until they are explicitly told, the Ward senses the
sexual affair before he has even been introduced to her. When it is suggested that the Ward should dance with Isabella he refuses, suggesting that ‘Some other gentleman’ should do it:

WARD. Look, there’s her uncle, a fine-timbered reveller;
Perhaps he knows the manner of her dancing too;
I’ll have him do’t before me. I have sworn, gardiner,
Then I may learn the better.
GUARDIANO. Thou’lt be an ass still.
WARD. Ay, all that ‘uncle’ shall not fool me out:
Pish, I stick closer to myself than so. (III. ii. 184-8)

The perception of Middleton’s fool would later be picked up and amplified by Howard Barker in his version of the play: ‘Middleton says the woman marries a fool and fucks her favourite,’ he commented in his introduction. ‘I say no one is as stupid as they appear.’ The Earl, too, knows more about the plot in which he is a pawn than he lets on, and at times it is impossible to know whether or not he is simply playing along. He is certainly shrewd enough to be able to simulate the special brand of ‘sanity’ which is expected of him (of which, more later) sufficiently convincingly to foil his uncle’s plot to disinherit him. Crucially, both he and the Ward understand enough to be able to take revenge, although in this the erratic nature of the dangerous potential unleashed by their enemies reaches its height. Although the Earl supplants the real villain, his uncle Sir Charles, as head of the family and consigns him to old age and decrepitude, his direct attacks are against the women involved, while the Ward, instructed by his guardian in a trick to kill Hippolito, accidentally kills the guardian himself. And this is what is so disturbing about these two characters: their extraordinary flashes of insight without the reason and common sense to guide them. This is a vision entirely consistent with the anti-psychiatric view, in which the
traditionally wild, staring eyes of the madman are in fact wide open, seeing eyes, capable of taking in and encompassing the contradictions that are so unbearable to the sane, and yet incapable of translating that into rational action:

... the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed.49

The dramatists are breaking rules and creating frenzy in order to delve beyond the superficial; and the madman simultaneously helps them to do so and stands as a symbol of their efforts. ‘Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t.’

The concept of a deeper insight lying within the disturbed mind leads on to a problem regarding the definition of madness: a problem which these playwrights relish. If the mad may in some sense be ‘saner’ than the sane, what implications does that have for those of us who consider ourselves sane – and indeed for those on whose sanity we rely? And who are we to diagnose madness anyway? What is there to say that our version of ‘normality’ is the correct one? Questions like these can revolve dizzily ad infinitum – and their relativistic and even anarchic implications are heavily exploited by the writers of black farce. In the seventeenth century, Robert Burton picked obsessively at definitions of melancholy and madness in a manner that leaves the reader reeling. Though he spends much of his sprawling Anatomy of Melancholy grappling with categories and terminologies, he begins with a startlingly dismissive vagueness, acknowledging the impossibility of objective diagnosis:

Folly, Melancholy, Madnesse, are but one disease, Delirium is a common name to all. ... So that take Melancholy in what sense you will, properly or improperly, in disposition or habit, for pleasure or for paine, dotage, discontent, feare, sorrow, madnesse, for part, or all, truly, or metaphorically, ‘tis all one. ...
And... so corrupt is our Judgement, we esteeme wise and honest men fooles.

(pp. 25-26)

Finally he even admits that he has no sanity of his own to qualify him for his task:

If any man shall aske in the meane time, who I am, that so boldly censure others, _tu nullane habes vitia?_ have I no faults? Yes more then thou hast whatsoever thou art. _Nos numerus sumus_, I confesse it againe, I am as foolish, as mad as any one.

(p. 109)

Later in the seventeenth century, playwright Nathaniel Lee would protest at his consignment to Bedlam by declaring, ‘They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me’; and this awareness of the disturbing subjectivity of psychiatry is a concept central also to 1960s thinking on insanity. It is a subject that fuelled the writings of R.D. Laing, to whom (from the other side of the psychiatric fence) the experience of the mentally ill was no less valid than that of the so-called sane:

If we look at [the patient’s] actions as ‘signs’ of a ‘disease’, we are already imposing our categories of thought on to the patient, in a manner analogous to the way we may regard him as treating us...  (_Divided Self_, p. 33)

‘The sane appear as strange to the mad as the mad to the sane,’ agrees Rance in _What the Butler Saw_, echoing the lines from _The Revenger’s Tragedy_ which Orton had quoted in his epigraph: ‘Surely we’re all mad people and they, / Whom we think are, are not.’

So here we are on boundaries and borders once again: this time between sane and insane, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural. In _The Changeling_, the boundaries are further confused by the association madness in some way with almost every character in the play; when Isabella protests to Lollio of her dwelling in

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50 Quoted in Porter, p. 3.
Alibius’s madhouse, ‘Why, here’s none but fools and madmen,’ the fool replies: ‘Very well: and where will you find any other, if you should go abroad?’52 In addition, the whole concept of reason is thrown in doubt by a string of ideas relating to the validity of appearance versus rationality. Repeating over and over the word ‘judgement’, Beatrice is aware that appearances can be deceptive, and chides Alsemero for his profession of love at first sight (I. i. 71-6), yet uses the same argument of the fallibility of eyesight to justify her instant (and irrational) transfer of feelings from Alonzo to Alsemero: ‘Sure mine eyes were mistaken, / This was the man was meant me . . . ’ (84-5). Aware of her inconsistency, she then rushes to back up those feelings with rational explanations, arriving at the convenient concept of ‘intellectual eyesight’ (II. i. 13-19). In the end, reason is found to be as unreliable as eyesight, and the character who insists upon it most – Beatrice – turns out to be the most inconsistent and self-deluded of all. Like Orton, Middleton and Rowley seem to be saying ‘You can’t be a rationalist in an irrational world. It isn’t rational’ – and the apparently virtuous are no more consistent with their appearance than the apparently sane:

... although the people in Alibius’s institution are indeed fools and madmen, they may in the end strike us as on a profound level less insane than the seemingly “normal” people of Beatrice’s Alicante. (Daalder, p. 7)

Orton shares with Middleton and Rowley this belief that accepted social behaviour and the acts of the perverted and the mad merge and overlap. By the time the amoral Nick comes to ask ‘What is unnatural?’, the question is considered a ‘disturbing’

52 *The Changeling*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt (Manchester: Manchester University Press [Revels], 1977), III. iii. 14-16. The ambiguity and universality of the concept of madness within the world of *The Changeling* has been admirably illustrated by Joost Daalder; it is therefore unnecessary for me to reiterate his arguments here. See ‘Folly and Madness in *The Changeling*,’ *Essays in Criticism* 38 (1988), pp. 1-19.
manifestation of his insanity, as is Prentice’s later claim to be a ‘normal’ man: ‘His belief in normality is quite abnormal’ (Butler, pp. 416, 428). Orton may at times be tempted into easy, Wildean paradoxes regarding madness (‘His behaviour is so ridiculous one might almost suspect him of being sane’ [p. 427]), but if they are trite, they are by no means careless. By the end of it all we may feel, along with Prentice, that we have ‘been too long among the mad to know what sanity is’ (p. 419) – and that is precisely Orton’s intention. This disorientation is exactly that observed by Laing in society as a whole:

In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal.53

Barnes, too, destroys the division between the sane and the insane in order to highlight the grotesqueness of the social norm. The mad Earl of Gurney in The Ruling Class, discussed earlier in terms of his affinities with Middleton’s mad Ward, begins his rehabilitation by shooting first a dove and then a poacher: ‘I was trying to do what’s expected,’ he says. ‘I recall it’s a sign of normalcy in our circle to slaughter anything that moves’ (pp. 82-3). His supposition is confirmed when no one goes to the aid of the injured poacher – on the contrary, Sir Charles races off after him with a gun. The Earl knows that all he has to do to be certified ‘officially sane’ is to display aggressively reactionary beliefs – and does so with success. This is entirely consistent with the concerns of Laing, who believed that ‘The behaviour of the diagnosed patient is part of a much larger network of disturbed behaviour’:

... social adaptation to a dysfunctional society may be very dangerous. The perfectly adjusted bomber pilot may be a greater threat to species survival than the hospitalized schizophrenic deluded that the Bomb is inside him.

(Politics of Experience, pp. 95-96; 99)

Indeed what is interesting about the Earl is the progress of his madness. His illness, diagnosed by the utterly unreliable Dr Herder as paranoid schizophrenia, is inherited from his father, who hanged himself accidentally during a sexual game. At the outset, though, the new Earl’s insanity is quite harmless: although he blasphemously claims to be God and worries his family and neighbours with his unconventional politics and his unnerving sexual fantasies, he is a danger neither to himself nor to others. In being ‘cured’, the Earl merely trades one kind of madness for another – but this time it is simultaneously much more destructive and, ironically, entirely acceptable to society. The Church (represented by Mrs Treadwell and Mrs Piggot-Jones) and the State (represented by the House of Lords) welcome his sadistic philosophy of violence as their own. Typically – and in true Laingian fashion – it is only the madman himself who touches on the truth:

I’m cured, Herr Doktor, M.D., Ph.D. You cured me. I was a pale lovesick straw-in-the-air moon-looney. You changed me into a murderer, is that what you’re saying? (p. 110)

The Earl joins ‘normal’ society by becoming dangerous and violent; it is a bleak vision indeed.

As if to drive home the indefinable nature of madness, those responsible for the care and treatment of the insane are consistently portrayed as least in control. Although in charge of a whole institution of mental patients, Middleton’s Alibius (in The Changeling) ‘is someone whom we should now normally call “paranoid”’ (Daalder, p. 4). Similarly, Orton’s Dr Rance says of the clinic in What the Butler Saw: ‘We’ve no privileged class here. It’s democratic lunacy we practise’ (p. 412; note the word ‘practise’ rather than ‘treat’ or ‘cure’). When Kenneth Halliwell
responded to Orton’s observation on the ‘fashion’ of madness in the theatre and cinema of the time, by pointing out that *What the Butler Saw* was also about madness, Orton replied: ‘Yes, but there isn’t a lunatic in sight – just the doctors and nurses’ (*Diaries*, p. 114). Orton’s point is that he does not need to portray mental patients because the psychiatrists and their relations provide insanity enough. As I have already discussed, some of the best known writers in the field of insanity of both periods – for example, Burton and Laing – were the first to admit that they possessed no more sanity than their patients. The disorienting void left by such confessions is exploited to the full by the chaos-loving playwrights.

In 1961, Thomas Szasz warned of the social power wielded by the psychiatrist, and of the fact that this could distort his scientific opinions. And indeed, the madness of psychiatrists and madhouse-keepers is representative of the degree of real and dangerous insanity (as opposed to the harmless lunacy of the certified insane) exhibited at the highest levels of power and authority within these plays. Burton is cautiously equivocal on this point, but his opinion is clear:

> I know that we thinke farre otherwise, and hold them most part wise men that are in authority, Princes, Magistrates, rich men, they are wise men borne, all Polititians and States-men must needs be so, for who dare speake against them? And on the other, so corrupt is our Judgement, we esteeme wise and honest men fooles.
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(p. 26)

The playwrights show no such restraint. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, power is held by the terrifyingly unstable, lycanthropic Ferdinand and the evil Cardinal whose conscience conjures up visions in his fishponds (V. v. 5-7), while in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* insanity almost seems directly proportional to rank. This vision of lunacy

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and evil in the highest reaches of power is made equally explicit in the 1960s, as emphasised by the title of Barnes' play, *The Ruling Class*. Barnes' alarming point is clear: while it is vitally important that those in power are at least as sane as the rest of us, mental disturbance on their part is tolerated – even lauded:

**EARL OF GURNEY.** Behaviour which would be considered insanity in a tradesman is looked on as mild eccentricity in a lord. I'm allowed a certain lat-i-tude.

(p. 110)

Intriguingly, the hopelessly deluded Master of Lunacy, who is seduced into pronouncing the Earl sane largely on the strength of their both being Old Etonians, shares his not overwhelmingly common name – Truscott – with the anarchic Inspector in charge of the investigation in Orton’s *Loot*. While there is no specific external evidence of a direct influence, the characters share an alarming amount of authority in their unreliable hands, along with a somewhat cavalier approach to insanity. Orton’s Truscott, another representative of the state, gives a decidedly disconcerting reply when he is finally accused of being mad:

Nonsense. I had a check-up only yesterday. Our medical officer assured me that I was quite sane. (p. 274)

As in *The Ruling Class* – and indeed *The Duchess of Malfi* – both Church and State in *What the Butler Saw* are seen as being deranged:

**RANCE.** Your actions today would get the Archbishop of Canterbury declared non-compos.

**PRENTICE.** I’m not the Archbishop of Canterbury.

**RANCE.** That will come at a later stage of your illness. (p. 418)

**PRENTICE.** I have the weapon. You have the choice. What is it to be? Either madness or death?

**RANCE.** Neither of your alternatives would enable me to continue to be employed by Her Majesty’s Government.

**PRENTICE.** That isn’t true. The higher reaches of the civil service are recruited entirely from corpses and madmen. (p. 442)
Orton and Barnes are in agreement on this: the latter claim, of course, is presented literally at the close of *The Ruling Class*, where the House of Lords consists of tiers of cobweb-covered skeletons addressed by the raving Earl.

But while madness clearly doesn’t stop with the certified insane, it also extends way beyond even the crazed and perverted figures of authority, frightening though this is in itself. Cyrus Hoy has stated that the ‘macabre power’ of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* ‘lies in its vision of the world’s insidious madness.’ He is quite right – it is a vision shared by the other writers discussed here – and yet, like *What the Butler Saw*, the play portrays not one diagnosed lunatic. The mood is summed up by Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* when he expounds at length the madness of the world (including – or rather especially – himself):

... all the world is mad, ... it is made like a Fools head (with that Motto *Caput Heleboro dignum*) a crased head, *cavea stultorum*, a Fools paradise, or as *Apollonius*, a common prison of Gulles, Cheaters, Flatterers, &c. & needs to be reformed. ... For indeed who is not a Foole, Melancholy, Mad? – *Qui nil molitur ineptè*, who is not brain-sick? (pp. 24-25)

Lupton, the observer of early seventeenth-century Bedlam, agrees, musing that ‘this House would bee too little, if all that are beside themselves should be put in here’ (p. 75). In the 1960s, Howard P. Rome, psychiatric consultant and former president of the American Psychiatric Association, made the same observation as Burton:

Now, however, ... we appreciate that in a very meaningful sense society can be sick too .... Actually, no less than the entire world is a proper catchment area for present-day psychiatry ...

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This is the natural outcome of the terrifying realisation that 'the sane appear as strange to the mad as the mad to the sane'; that there is no way of knowing whose 'strangeness' is more valid; and that much of the behaviour of the sane is as bizarre as that of the mad. It is also the result of a desperate view of the world, a terror at its chaotic and random nature:

DR HERDER. Your nephew suffers from the delusion that the world we live in is based on the fact that God is love.
CLaire. Can't he see what the world's really like?
DR HERDER. No. But he will when he's cured. (p. 40)

Burton’s picture of the world may not arrive precisely at Dr Herder’s theological conclusion, but with its religious hypocrisy, its horrific massacres, warfare and butchery (‘the earth wallowes in her owne blood’ [p. 47]), its unabashed worship of money and power and its corruption and injustice, it could hardly be more nightmarish. It is an apocalyptic vision, as described in a more general context by Foucault:

it is the tide of madness, its secret invasion, that shows that the world is near its final catastrophe; it is man’s insanity that invokes and makes necessary the world’s end. (p. 17)

And Laing’s hopeless world – a world of corruption and mass destruction, described repeatedly as ‘a world gone mad’ – is almost identical to Burton’s:

Our social realities are so ugly if seen in the light of exiled truth, and beauty is almost no longer possible if it is not a lie.

What is to be done? We who are still half alive, living in the often fibrillating heartland of a senescent capitalism – can we do more than reflect the decay around and within us? Can we do more than sing our sad and bitter songs of disillusion and defeat? (Politics of Experience, p. 11)

All of these writers specifically identify the pessimistic sense of the ubiquity of madness with the contemporary world. To Burton and Orton, there is nothing to do but smile:
Never so much cause of laughter, as now, never so many fooles and mad-men. . . .
For now . . . the whole world plaies the Foole . . . . (p. 37)

When Rance announces to Geraldine that her mind has given way, he reassures her: ‘You’ll find the experience invaluable in your efforts to come to terms with twentieth-century living’ (p. 438). But others were more seriously disturbed: one Londoner writing in 1615, noting that Sir George Hayward had recently gone mad, added that he had never heard of so many people going insane ‘in all my time . . . as I have within these two or three years’; while Laing, in another Burtonian passage entirely consistent with Rance’s prediction, describes with horror a society in which madness is the only option:

In the last fifty years, we human beings have slaughtered by our own hands coming on for one hundred million of our species. We all live under constant threat of our total annihilation. We seem to seek death and destruction as much as life and happiness. We are as driven to kill and be killed as we are to let live and live. Only by the most outrageous violation of ourselves have we achieved our capacity to live in relative adjustment to a civilization apparently driven to its own destruction.

(Politics of Experience, p. 64)

In Funeral Games McCorquodale reports that ‘Recent figures show that the mad will outnumber the sane by the turn of the century’ (p. 347): madness, like the action of Orton’s farces, is accelerating out of control. And when the sane become a minority, what right then will they have to pass judgements on the behaviour of the mad majority? It was hardly necessary for contemporary audiences to go to the theatre to witness madness, Orton said: ‘They only have to look in their mirrors’ (Diaries, p. 114). To Suzanne McCray, Orton’s portrayal of ‘the mentally unhinged’ is merely an addition to his representation of ‘a crippled world where everyone is debilitated, if

57Quoted in Marchette Chute, Ben Jonson of Westminster (London: Four Square, 1962), p. 171. On the apparent increase in the prevalence of mental illness in the early 1600s – ‘the most psychically
Madness

not physically then spiritually.’ Orton ‘mocks those who believe that Freudian psychiatrists can save the insane. The insane are too numerous; and unfortunately, their number includes the psychiatrists’ (p. 43). And, as for the writers of the Absurd who were acutely sensitive to this global madness, the only response to such a world is to laugh:

MCLEAVY. Is the world mad? Tell me it’s not.
TRUSCOTT. I’m not paid to quarrel with accepted facts. (Loot, p. 258)

Madness, then, provides a crucial expression of the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s black farce. Both periods were times of unusual preoccupation with insanity, both on stage and in society as a whole; and contrary to simplistic impressions of the callous and punitive Jacobean era versus the sensitive and squeamish 1960s, both were times of transition, in which cruel and compassionate attitudes coexisted while society grappled with alternative definitions and treatments. The periods shared a focus upon the shifting borderlines between sanity and insanity, experimenting repeatedly with the possibilities of stimulating yet disquieting ventures into the realms of the insane. Accordingly, the playwrights in question exploited the tension between amusement and pity, fascination and revulsion engendered by these transitions and ambivalences, relishing madness’ freakish entertainment value and its unsettling combination of both the farcical and the horrific faces of black farce. The exhilaration of black farce is expressed through the perceived joy and freedom of madness, the licence to break rules and ignore boundaries that the genre itself aspires to, and the startling insights into a chaotic universe. The blackness of black farce’s despair, on the other hand, derives from the awareness of cruelty meted out to the

*disturbed era in European history* – see MacDonald, p. 3; Lynne White, ‘Death and the Devil’, in
suffering insane and from the apocalyptic implications of a universal madness. Of course, the theme of madness importantly highlights some very specific and illuminating parallels between particular texts of the two periods – particularly between the characters of Middleton’s Ward and Barnes’s Earl, and between the madhouses of *The Changeling* and *What the Butler Saw*. Yet while madness is at the core of the black farce link between the two dramas, there are other broad themes which illustrate the relationship just as elegantly. The first of these is the bloody theme of violence.

3 Whose head’s that, then?

VIOLENCE

In 1970 Hannah Arendt, responding to the political upheavals of the 1960s, declared the prevalence of “‘Detachment and equanimity’ in view of ‘unbearable tragedy’ [to] be ‘terrifying’”\(^1\); by 1974, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton had pronounced ‘numbing ... the characteristic psychological problem of our age.’\(^2\) During the 1960s, the development of the mass media had brought the whole range of ‘unbearable tragedies’, from the troubles in Northern Ireland to the war in the Congo, into the front room of many homes – and the scale of horror was simply too vast to be assimilated. Newsreels and photographs of Hiroshima and the Holocaust – still a vivid memory – were superseded by television images of the Vietnam war. Such events, compounded by the threat of total nuclear annihilation, were amongst those diagnosed by Lifton as ‘too large or terrifying to be given meaningful expression through the culture’s available symbols’ – and the result of exposure to them was that ‘man becomes desensitized, numb’ (p. 32). ‘Our senses are being dulled,’ protested a New York Times article of 1966:

What we are given is a hawk’s-eye view of life and death. We have seen so many villages burn, so many soldiers going single file into the jungle, so many wounded being interviewed, so many helicopters taking off on desperate missions, that war is becoming routine and the corrosion of war commonplace. ... Surely we have had some very frank reporting. But frankness, as Katherine Mansfield said, is ‘truth’s ugly and stupid half-sister.’ We need more.\(^3\)

\(^{1}\) On Violence (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1970), p. 64 (paraphrasing Noam Chomsky).


That ‘more’ was the task of the theatre.

Many playwrights and directors of the 1960s were explicitly aware of what Albert Hunt, one of the writers of the collaborative Vietnam play US (1966), called the ‘deadened responses’ of their audiences.\(^4\) It was agreed that theatre spectators had become ‘blind and deaf’; they had fallen into a ‘tranquilized stupor’.\(^5\) The reasons for this were all too apparent; as Peter Brook recognised in 1968, a degree of detachment was in fact essential in order to continue functioning in everyday life in the face of atrocity:

... if everyone could hold in his mind through one single day both the horror of Vietnam and the normal life he is leading, the tension between the two would be intolerable. ('Introduction' to US, p. 10)

It is this need to shut out the horror in order to deal with daily routine that is illustrated in the ‘Auschwitz’ section of Barnes’ Laughter!, where the mundanity is in fact part of the machinery of the Holocaust. Gottleb protests in vain at his Nazi colleagues’ refusal to acknowledge the consequences of their day-to-day business:

If you could see the dead roasted behind Roman numerals I/1 to Roman numeral XXX/185 you’d run chicken-shitless, but you haven’t the imagination. Even if you read of six million dead, your imagination wouldn’t frighten you, because it wouldn’t make you see a single dead man. (Plays: One, p. 402)

But even Gottleb’s vision of the ‘Sanitation Men’ – who ‘rip, slice and gouge with increasing frenzy amid the noise of breaking bones and tearing flesh’ in an attempt ‘to split your mind to the sights, sounds and smells of Auschwitz’ – has no real impact on the Nazi administrators. The scene of horror disappears (‘All gone “phoof”,

nothing disturbing left. It’s a triumph’) and they return to their filing: ‘close the mind’s door, shut out the light there. Concentrate on what’s real, what’s concrete’ (pp. 402-8). Gottleb’s associates – and, by implication, the rest of us – have a remarkably pragmatic ability to filter the images that, were they to reach a deeper consciousness or even conscience, would interfere excessively with their comfortable routine.

What Gottleb’s experience suggests is that violence merely presented on stage is not enough. Even (or perhaps especially) when it is presented with graphic accuracy, audiences will simply observe it, applaud and stroll out of the theatre feeling safe and untouched. In the 1960s, the answer to this challenge was suggested by a glance back at Artaud and his desire for ‘a theater that is not overshadowed by events, . . . and predominates over our unsettled period.’ The production, therefore, was itself to be a form of violence: violence directed against the audience, in an attempt to ‘split their minds’ and wake them from their torpor. ‘We need to be virtually bludgeoned into detachment from our daily lives, our habits and mental laziness, which conceal from us the strangeness of the world,’ Ionesco stated in 1964, later publishing an alternative ending for The Bald Prima Donna in which gendarmes machine-gun the audience from the stage. This was the thinking behind the proliferation of Artaud-influenced performance during the 1960s – most notably the work of Peter Brook, who described his controversial productions of Peter Weiss’s Marat/Sade (1964) and the RSC’s own US (1966) as ‘theatre of confrontation’ (or alternatively ‘theatre of

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disturbance’), a form of drama that must ‘make us lose our balance’. The Marat/Sade adhered closely to Artaud’s dictum that the audience must be ‘shaken and irritated’; everything about Weiss’s play, said Brook, was ‘designed to crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligently what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, then bring him back to his senses again.’ Both the Marat/Sade and US – epitomes of the theatre of confrontation – were indeed received by audiences as acts of violence. When the cast at the close of the harrowing Marat/Sade turned on the spectators, mocking their automatic applause with a hostile slow hand clap (just as at the end of US they would defy the audience by remaining on stage, silently staring them out after the sensational butterfly burning), Brook explained: ‘If we had conventional curtain calls, the audience would emerge relieved, and that’s the last thing we want.’ ‘An Aldwych audience,’ responded critic J. C. Trewin, ‘shocked and battered, never emerged relieved.’

Artaud was not the only model for the theatre of confrontation. Brook and others took further inspiration from the theatre of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which was seen as home to the only other dramatic form that had achieved the desired impact on jaded spirits. The Jacobean playwrights had, after all, apparently been

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working in similar conditions of ‘psychic numbness’ to those of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{11} The spectacle of Renaissance executions and torture had made the sight of bodies hurled, hanged, drawn, decapitated, dismembered, disembowelled and burned ritually familiar; and ‘[s]eldom did the spectators record revulsion’.\textsuperscript{12} Executions ‘on the whole were not considered objectionable’, the public was ‘usually passive’ and, in the case of displays of corpses in the gallows field, even indifferent: ‘Touching [executed corpses] can lead to infamy, but apart from that hardly anyone seems to care’ (Spierenburg, pp. 87, 91-92). As with the horrors of the twentieth century, which ‘always turned out Hollywood when you tried to imagine’ them,\textsuperscript{13} there was some blurring of the line between the spectacle of execution and fictionalised entertainment. Executions were ‘often affairs of excess’, staged within a ‘quasi-dramatic structure’\textsuperscript{14} whereby the ‘extraordinary altitude and height’ of the scaffold/stage signified the enormity of the criminals’ sins, and both audience and participants could be dramatically treated to a ‘full view of the . . . executioner with the halter, hatchet, and knife, whereby they were to be severed, dismembered, and quartered; the fire wherein their bowels were to be burned; the stakes whereon their heads were to be fastened

upon the gallows, and what else belonged to the accomplishment of that tragedy', as a kind of ‘warm-up’ to the main event of gruesome torture and execution.\textsuperscript{15}

While there is no direct evidence that the playwrights living under these conditions in the seventeenth century shared the precise aims of the theatre of confrontation, their techniques were seen by ‘confrontational’ directors and theorists as the source of true impact. Brook described the ‘kick’ of the \textit{Marat/Sade} as simultaneously ‘very Elizabethan and very much of our time’ (\textit{Shifting Point}, p. 47):

\begin{quote}
I think it’s our job today to discover how we can make any contemporary theatre event as bold and dense as an Elizabethan event could be…\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Peter Davison, describing the theatre of confrontation as insulting the audience ‘to the point of disorientation’, compares it with the invectives of Jonson and Marston,\textsuperscript{17} yet it was plays like \textit{Tis Pity She’s a Whore}, with its notoriously bloody final \textit{coup de théâtre}, that continued the excessively violent tradition begun in the Elizabethan theatre which, ‘like the modern “theatre of cruelty”, prided itself on its capacity to shock,’ as J. W. Lever observes.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, as William L. Stull observes in his discussion of what he describes as the ‘Jacobean Theatre of Cruelty’, plays such as \textit{The Revenger’s Tragedy} were also struggling against ‘numbed audience response’ (p. 41). Such horrors as the digging out of Annabella’s heart or the poisoning and trampling of the Duke were apparently licensed by the supposed classical precedent of Seneca; but they went way beyond their predecessor and discarded all of his ‘tact’ in a

\textsuperscript{17}Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 133-34.
‘fundamental release of restraint’, as Eliot memorably argued.\(^{19}\) Whatever the precedent – be it Seneca, Virgil, Lucan, Statius or none of these – the Jacobean needed little excuse to elicit ‘admiration’ or shock from an audience.\(^{20}\) Eliot rightly emphasised the ‘novelty’ of the Elizabethan escalation of horrors; the very fact that the dramatists were constantly searching for new and unexpected forms of violence indicates their desire to smack their audiences in the face with a brutality that is beyond what they anticipated. As Charles Marowitz, director of both \textit{Loot} and \textit{Doctor Faustus} in the 1960s, wrote more recently in the context of adaptations of Shakespeare:

> They [the audience] get what they expect and they expect what they have been led to expect and it is only when they \textit{do not} get what they have been led to expect that they are on the threshold of having an experience.\(^{21}\)

‘Having an experience,’ simple though it may sound, is the elusive end-product that 1960s dramatists and directors were seeking for their weary audiences; and this is what attracted them to the impact of Jacobean drama. It is what Brian Shelton seized upon in his revival of \textit{The Revenger’s Tragedy} in 1965, telling his actors that ‘The audience must be \textit{brow-beaten} and carried along by the sheer \textit{attack} of the playing.’\(^{22}\) Looking back from the perspective of the theatre of the mid-1960s, Shelton was able to identify that ‘astonishment’ and ‘confrontation’ sprang from one and the same desire: the desire for impact, for shaking up indifference and complacency, for ‘having an experience’ rather than merely passing the time.


Violence

Two parallel episodes, though enacted in very different circumstances, may illustrate the extremes that were sought in both periods in order to give the jaded and the detached a jolt. The notorious Lord David Sutch, during performances of his band, the 'Raving Savages', gruesomely literalised the concept of attacking the audience by unexpectedly leaping out of a coffin, running 'rubbery hands' over girls in the front row, spitting 'green gunge' over them and stuffing maggots and worms down their dresses:

At this they would go into hysterics, piss themselves, pass out, or do all three in quick succession.23

Scenes enacted by the band included the decidedly Marlovian dashing out of a monk's brains; a sexual murder in which Sutch (outdoing Ford) apparently dragged out a girl's dripping heart and lungs and licked them; and a decapitation using 'a severed head with guts and bits hanging from it, which I would lean forward and wave in the faces of the girls to make them scream even louder' (p. 31). But the one trick that 'always sent them running for the exits like rabbits' was the hurling of real pigs' hearts, lungs and heads bought from a slaughterhouse into audience (pp. 31-32). The adolescent relish of Sutch's gut-hurling antics betrays a similar ruthless humour to the executioner of a group of traitors in 1586. Though the bodies in this case were real, these executions were enacted within the usual elaborate, 'quasi-dramatic structure' of Tudor punishment, as described earlier by Holinshed (p. 96 above), and continued with hanging, dismemberment, disembowelling, burning of the bowels and heart, decapitation, quartering and imbruing of the trunk in its own blood (Holinshed,

Finally, before the heads of the traitors were taken away to be displayed upon poles, the executioner paused to sprinkle the nearest spectators with the blood in which he had washed his hands: 'but to their great loathing, as not able for their lives to avoid it, such was the throng' (p. 916). Likewise Sutch boasts of his own escapades, 'The halls were always so packed that the girls couldn't get away' (p. 28). In these two gestures, both sets of literally captive spectators, having been lulled into a false sense of safety by their vicarious enjoyment of 'quasi-dramatic' violence, were forced to experience the horror afresh by the breaking of the accepted barrier between 'performance' and audience.

Black farce shares many of the purposes of the theatre of confrontation, which 'aimed to put the incompatible side by side' in order to achieve 'what bullfighters call the moment of truth' (Brook, US, p. 10). Like black humor, black farce is aware of confronting a 'surprise-proof generation', 'stupefied' by the 'excesses of civilization'.24 The startled responses to Peter Nichols' real-life jokes about his disabled daughter were the inspiration for the blackly farcical mode of *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*: 'That's good; that's a reaction,' he thought.25 His delight is indicative of the scarcity of genuine emotional contact with an audience; and the joy in causing outrage - and indeed direct engagement with an affronted audience - was shared also by Henry Livings. When someone walked out of a performance of *The Little Mrs Foster Show* in 1966, saying that it was 'a nightmare' (to which the actor playing Mrs Foster replied 'Exactly sir!'), Livings was delighted:

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24Friedman, p. 22; Knickerbocker, p. 60.
25Interview with the author, London, 4 April 1996.
I’m bound to feel a little proud that I could tell a story of our time in such a way that, in spite of having repellent atrocity and horror daily under our satiated noses, at least one man felt its impact afresh . . . 26

The black farceurs that were Brook’s contemporaries, then, achieved effects to which he could have looked with envy; Artaud, indeed, had specifically sought a theatre which could make its audience cry out. While black farce lacks the earnest polemics of, say, *US*, therefore, it does succeed in creating a confrontation that rivals – or even exceeds – the reaction provoked by pure hostility and aggression. The difference lies in black farce’s exploitation of laughter – the unrestrained laughter that, as in black humor, may relieve the collective ‘psychological anaesthesia’.27

An illustration of the way in which black farce uses laughter to go beyond the theatre of confrontation may be found once again in Barnes’ *Laughter!*. While Gottleb’s raw, straightforward and accurate vision of the horror of Auschwitz fails spectacularly in its aim to bring home the reality of the Nazi regime, the Epilogue works on an altogether more disturbing level. Just when we think it is all over, when we have indulged in our civilised applause and are preparing, like the officials themselves, to go back and get on with our comfortable lives, a voice breaks the theatrical convention and calls to us from the stage. ‘Stop. Don’t leave.’ Suddenly disorientated, our expectations of theatrical limits disturbed, we shuffle awkwardly back to our seats. ‘The best is yet to come. Our final number.’ And on come Bimko and Bieberstein, two hollow-eyed concentration camp victims, to perform a Jewish comedy routine. As the gas hisses, they joke their way to death:

The Campo Foreman kept hitting me with a rubber truncheon yesterday – *hit, hit, hit*. I said, ‘You hitting me for a joke or on purpose?’ ‘On purpose!’ he yelled. *Hit, hit, hit.* ‘Good,’ I said, ‘because such jokes I don’t like.’ (p. 410)

Bieberstein’s gag strikes a dramatic truth here: the fact that if violence is treated comically it can be more dangerous, more powerful – that ‘serious’ violence is easier to ignore, and somehow less painful. The ‘Author’ had attempted, in his prologue, to warn that laughter was itself something of an evasion, ‘a momentary anaesthesia of the heart’, as Henri Bergson put it; yet the ‘Author’ is the ultimate victim of humour, his bitter cynicism repeatedly undermined by its subversive power – a power recognised by the Nazis themselves: ‘Don’t laugh. It’s an offence to make people laugh. Jokes carry penalties’ (p. 395).

In this example, Barnes disrupts two related theatrical boundaries. Firstly, he disrupts the closing boundary of the theatrical event, conventionally demarcated by the end of the curtain call and the rising of the house lights. The curtain call has been described by Bert O. States, in his discussion of the phenomenology of theatre, as ‘a decompression chamber halfway between the depths of art and the thin air of reality’.

Having eased us gently back upwards, then – having granted us the relief that Brook wanted to avoid, and allowed us our first few gasps of fresh air – Barnes plunges us without warning straight back down into the depths; hence our discomfort.

The second boundary disrupted by Barnes is that between horror and farce. Barnes admits to using farce in this way because ‘The juxtaposition of laughter and pain intensifies the pain’, and this is inextricably bound up with the idea of theatrical

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violence as ‘play’, of the line between painful and pain-free violence, and hence between audience involvement and detachment.

As I suggested in Chapter 1, where black farce differs from traditional or non-black farce is in its importing of painful and bloody violence from the realms of horror – and it is this that pulls the rug from under the feet of the spectator. To be shocked by violence is bad enough; to be forced to laugh at the same time is almost an assault in itself. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for instance, the brutality meted out to the Duke by Vindice and Hippolito provides one of the most uproariously alarming scenes of the play – and it is laden with graphic and painful sadism. Ingeniously poisoning the Duke with Gloriana’s skull is not enough for the revengers; while taunting him with exultant puns and rhyming couplets, they cannot resist stamping and trampling on him in the moments between the fatal kiss and the final mental torture. At the same time, the poison quickly eats away the Duke’s teeth: ‘Hadst any left?’ jokes Vindice; ‘I think but few,’ replies Hippolito. ‘Then those that did eat are eaten,’ concludes his brother – the ultimate grotesque reversal, as relished by Hamlet, imagining the dead Polonius at supper, ‘Not where he eats, but where he is eaten’.

*Loot* has a similarly brutally comic kicking scene, the victim like the Duke writhing helpless on the floor. Unlike the trampling of the Duke (and unlike the kicking of Kemp in Orton’s own *Entertaining Mr Sloane*), this violence does not culminate in death, but it is no less painful for all that. Katherine J. Worth, clearly disturbed by the ‘feeling of real pain and fear’ in *Sloane*, mistakenly states in *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* that the violence of the more overtly farcical *Loot* is given comic distance by ‘the

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31 *The Revenger's Tragedy*, III. v. 159-61; *Hamlet*, IV, iii. 20.
jauntiness of the dialogue' and the 'stoical calm' of those on the receiving end, \(^3^2\) in other words, it is entirely consistent with 'non-black' farce. Leaving aside the dubious issue of whether 'stoical calm' on the part of victims of violence really does give comic distance (think of the Duchess of Malfi), it is interesting to note the extract that Worth chooses to illustrate her point:

TRUSCOTT (shouting, knocking HAL to the floor). Under any other political system I'd have you on the floor in tears!
HAL (crying). You've got me on the floor in tears. (p. 235)

What is significant about Worth's quotation is that she omits Orton's stage directions, as well as the following:

TRUSCOTT brings his fist down on the back of HAL's neck. HAL cries out in pain and collapses to the floor rubbing his shoulder.

TRUSCOTT kicks HAL violently. HAL cries out in terror and pain.

[HAL is] desperate, trying to protect himself . . . TRUSCOTT jerks HAL from the floor, beating and kicking and punching him. HAL screams with pain . . . his nose is bleeding. (pp. 235-236)

There is nothing reassuring, insulated or distanced about this; 'stoical calm' on Hal's part is, in the event, extremely hard to find, and any 'jauntiness' comes from the aggressor (it would be the perfect description for Vindice too) rather than the victim.

By not taking Orton's directions seriously, Worth is making the same mistake as did Peter Wood in his disastrous 'Pop Art' premiere of the play:

I was thinking of things like Tom and Jerry cartoons where, no matter how hard they hit the cat over the head, it remains funny because the essential violence has been stylized to the point where it's essentially acceptable. \(^3^3\)

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\(^3^2\) Revolutions in Modern English Drama (London: Bell, 1972), p. 150.

Ironically, in attempting to downplay the violence, Wood destroyed the humour, not realising that the two were interdependent – and the resulting production was 'unfunny, not to say boring.' What Wood later admitted to having been afraid of was the fact that Orton is simultaneously funny and violent – and that the humour does not neutralise the violence any more than the violence destroys the humour, as Braham Murray's subsequent, 'hard-hitting' production showed. And while much of the violence in the plays of both eras is considerably more fanciful than this old-fashioned beating, it is certainly never of the two-dimensional, rubber-bodied, Tom and Jerry kind. In Orton's plays, we see blood 'spurting', 'oozing', 'pouring' and 'streaming'; Reg in Privates on Parade ends up 'covered in blood'; and in the breast of the Man in Kelly's Eye we see 'a pulsing, blood-filled hole'.

This discussion of violence within black farce demonstrates that it is impossible to explore the subject without touching upon the issues of 'realistic' versus 'play' violence, and of involvement versus detachment: Worth writes of 'real pain', while Wood talks of 'stylized' violence. As well as breaking the rules regarding the nature of farcical violence, then, black farce also breaks all the rules of theatrical representation and plays mischievously with the notions of reality and artificiality. This is why, while it is wrong to stylise the violence out of existence, it is certainly an oversimplification to describe it as 'real'. The result with both the ambiguities of farce/horror and of fiction/reality is complex, unsettling and disorienting. By constantly redefining our roles as spectators, these playwrights succeed in intruding

34Deryck Harvey, 'Comedy that brought so few laughs', Cambridge Evening News, 2 February 1965. See also J. H. S. S., Cambridge Review, 6 February 1965.
36Stage directions from The Ruffian on the Stair and What the Butler Saw, pp. 60, 440-41.
into our passivity and confounding our expectations. Ionesco, describing his own version of absurd black farce, illustrates the intimate connection between metadrama and comic aggression:

It was not for me to conceal the devices of the theatre, but rather make them still more evident, deliberately obvious . . . . Everything raised to paroxysm, where the source of comedy lies. A theatre of violence: violently comic, violently dramatic. ('Experience of the Theatre', pp. 24-25)

The writers of black farce have no interest in theatre of fact or documentary theatre. Rather than attempting to compete with reality in all its gore and atrocity, black farce plays tricks with the audience’s involvement in the unexpectedly vivid and graphic violence that invites and repels their laughter. Instead of presenting violence to us straight, it manipulates our responses, complicates them and questions them, leaving us in a state of self-conscious confusion. For instance, when Mrs Prentice appears in *What the Butler Saw*, ‘wild-eyed, her hands smeared with blood’ from the injured policeman, the violence is already spiralling beyond the normal limitations of farce, and our responses are consequently off-balance; but Mrs Prentice’s ‘desperate’ question to Dr Rance, ‘Is this blood real?’, gives a serious metadramatic jolt (p. 439). The blood is clearly not real – but within the context of the play, surely, it is. Mrs Prentice’s question echoes our bewilderment.

The artificiality/reality of stage violence is most interestingly explored in the self-conscious exploitation of violence as entertainment. Like madness, real-life violence was more or less explicitly a source of entertainment in both periods, whether in public executions, bull- or bear-baiting, cock- or dog-fighting, or in the ‘spectator sport’ of the Vietnam war, which was ‘watched on TV until we are no longer

completely sure whether we are seeing our sons and brothers being killed on a newsreel or a few Hollywood actors biting the dust on the Late Late Show. Inevitably, then, all the playwrights concerned are acutely aware that they too are in the business of making entertainment out of violence, and at times they flaunt that awareness through the bluntest of metadramatic techniques such as Ed’s line, ‘This is gratuitous violence,’ in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (p. 146) – techniques that pre-empt our judgement, throwing it back at us and challenging us to re-examine it.

For the Jacobeans, self-conscious theatricality appears most overtly in the use of masques and tableaux as vehicles either for revealing or concealing violence. ‘In time of sports death may steal in securely,’ says Bianca in *Women Beware Women*; ‘Then ’tis least thought on’ (V. ii. 22-23). In *The White Devil*, for example, the murders of Isabella and Camillo are presented to Bracciano as dumb shows, at which he is an approving spectator. Although the Conjurer provides the scenes magically, by means of a charmed night cap, his language is explicitly theatrical, as if he were directing the show:

*Strike louder music from this charmèd ground,*  
*To yield, as fits the act, a tragic sound.*

Isabella’s murderers are sufficiently entertained by their own accomplishment to *depart laughing*, and Bracciano responds applaudingly – *’Twas quaintly done* (38) – appreciating the sheer creativity of the murders. Later in the play, when Lodovico and Gasparo arrive disguised as Capuchins to murder Flamineo and Vittoria, they tell their victims that they ‘have brought [them] a masque’; Flamineo, drawing attention

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to the absurdity of their chosen costumes, captures the combination of violence and entertainment in the image of the masked sword-dance:

A matachin, it seems,
By your drawn swords. Churchmen turned revellers! (V. vi. 169-70)

It is a multiple transgression: while violence and revelling jar with one another, both are inappropriate to the garb of holiness. Flamineo’s characteristic humour highlights the farcical image of carousing monks which merges with the terrifyingly incongruous spectacle of their murderous intent.

The killing masque is employed more literally – and more extravagantly – in Women Beware Women, where an entertainment is staged deliberately in order to provide an opportunity for murder. The masque had originally been prepared for the Duke’s first marriage, but the death of Isabella’s mother had ‘turned the glory of it all to black’ (IV. iii. 204); and in the event the masque is indeed all glory and blackness, spiralling well beyond the intent of its creators and resulting in the deaths of almost all the principal characters of the play. At the first death (that of Isabella) the spectators’ responses, as well as being puzzled, are both ironic and (it would seem from some earlier playing with the word ‘lap’41) unintentionally bawdy:

DUKE. She falls down upon’t;
       What’s the conceit of that?
FABRITIO. As overjoyed, belike.
       Too much prosperity overjoys us all,
       And she has her lapful, it seems, my lord.
DUKE. This swerves a little from the argument, though. (V. ii. 117-23)

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41 WARD. . . . can you catch a ball well?
ISABELLA. I have caught two in my lap at one game.
WARD. What, have you, woman? I must have you learn
       To play at trap too, then y’are full and whole.
ISABELLA. Anything that you please to bring me up to
       I shall take pains to practise. (III. iii. 88-93)
When, after the death of Livia, Guardiano's plot backfires and, Barabas-like, he dies by falling through the trapdoor he had prepared for Hippolito, the audience protests again: 'Why sure, this plot's drawn false, here's no such thing' (129). Guardiano's back-up plan prevails, however, and Hippolito dies magnificently (and appropriately) shot by Cupids. 'Plague of those Cupids!' he cries, while the spectators continue to consult the argument: 'I have lost myself in this quite,' laments the Duke (140, 142). As the confusion develops, the carnage spreads to the audience: yet another plot goes awry when the Duke drinks the poison prepared by Bianca for the Cardinal, and finally Bianca despairs, as well she might, and downs the rest of the poison herself. The bewilderment of the audience-within-the-play is significant, partnering as it does black farce with confusion of response: while mirroring the disorientation that the playwright seeks from his own audience, it further complicates our reactions by providing a comic commentary on the horrific action that is taking place. And this exuberance as the bodies fall is accompanied by a certain respect for the aesthetics of violence, a concept that will be discussed in the next chapter.

If the Jacobean exploit occasions of entertainment for the purposes of violence, then in the 1960s the exact opposite occurs: violence is exploited for the purposes of entertainment. The violence in *The Erpingham Camp*, for example, erupts on a stage during a holiday camp show, emerging 'almost unseen during the escalation of farce that we have laughed at' (Shepherd, p. 92) and developing into the full-scale riot that culminates in the death of Erpingham himself. Though the show involves a screaming competition, one man being induced to imitate an ape and another to strip and dance the can-can, it is only when Chief Redcoat Riley has to deal with a hysterical woman that the participating audience members (having themselves crossed the boundary
between stage and auditorium) judge the show to have crossed the boundary between acceptable entertainment and unacceptable violence: 'Is that your idea of a joke?' protests the woman's husband. 'Ask a woman to scream and then smack her in the mouth?' (p. 297). It isn't, of course, Riley's idea of a joke – his justification is that he was attempting to keep the show within its own self-defined limits (although of course he achieves just the opposite) – but it is, presumably, Orton's. And, presented to us as it is, in a suitably farcical manner – complete with disappearing trousers – it becomes our idea of a joke too. The scene gleefully mixes showbiz trappings with the aggression of the participants, just as Middleton revels in death by Cupids, incense and flaming gold. But it is the question 'Is that your idea of a joke?', posed so significantly on the very point of crossover between comedy and horror, that both marks the precarious mixture of entertainment and violence and explicitly questions our responses to it. This is the dialectic of entertainment examined by Simon Shepherd, who notes that the violence of The Erpingham Camp traps us 'in an ambivalent response, . . . offering us possibilities of choice.' He continues:

We enjoy farce . . . . But the very farce has produced hysteria and pain. Our role and expectations as theatre-goers are investigated. We are caught in a dialectic, between entertainers and entertained, able to side easily with neither, offered not relaxation but necessary choice.42

Livings' The Little Mrs Foster Show is a still more overt examination of violence and mutilation as entertainment. In form, the 'show' of the title, (a theatrical mix of chat show, game show, music hall and drama documentary) is very similar to that of The Erpingham Camp, complete with glamorous assistant, real bingo game with

audience participation and accompanying music, but the self-consciousness of the theatricality goes way beyond anything of Orton's: in the first production,

Each principal character had his or her own intro. music, and acknowledged the audience freely each first entrance. . . . We also had no remorse about playing a fever-heart-beat rhythm while HOOK was struggling with his malaria.

(Foreword, p. 8)

But this time, rather than violence developing out of amusement, pain is the starting point for the entertainment of Mrs Foster. Mrs Foster's traumatic war-time experiences in Africa begin when she discovers the malarial Sergeant Major Hook in the jungle, several days after his leg has been mutilated by a grenade. After nursing Hook and his festering leg for two months, Mrs Foster struggles with him on foot all the way to the British Consulate, where she is only able to obtain a visa by claiming that he has raped her. Hook remains in Africa, imprisoned and punished, until an amnesty allows him access to a doctor; but this only leads to further horrors before he finally makes it back to Britain. Clive meets Mrs Foster when he interviews her for television about her experiences; and his curiosity about 'the real horror as against the horror pic' is the point of departure for the fiction/reality focus of the play (p. 47). Clive is searching for a deeper reality than that portrayed in news reports, yet his route to that reality is through a theatricalisation of the entire experience – a route that is complicated by his desire to exploit Mrs Foster's pain by making it into gaudy entertainment. Our perspective on this enterprise is given further complexity when it transpires that we are its audience; Clive's theatrical reconstruction of the pair's story is in fact the show we are now watching. The distancing effect of witnessing the behind-the-scenes creation of the show, therefore, is interrupted by the fact that even that is part of Mrs Foster's story, and hence all part of the entertainment that we have
paid to see. Another layer of complication is provided by the exploitation of pain as entertainment both directly by Clive and indirectly (and self-consciously) by Livings. When Clive hears about Hook’s disaster in the jungle, for example, he positively salivates:

CLIVE. . . what’s this with the leg? I’m fighting an inferior impulse to hope it’s gorn. . . Would you say a missing leg was sexy? From a theatrical point of view?
CONNIE (considers). No.
CLIVE. Dramatic though. Concede it’d be dramatic. The mutilated hero. I could get him a real fancy artificial one. Not so good you couldn’t tell though.
CONNIE. Quite. He could do that clickety-clickety bit with the knee as he sits down. (pp. 71-2)

Clive’s attitude to the false leg is instructive: what he desires is the grotesque theatrical effect of self-advertising artificiality, something that showily announces its imitation of the real thing. And this is what Livings is exploring throughout. The farce that he creates is combined with some of the most vivid horror ever attempted in the genre, particularly in the comic banter of the ‘Terrified and weeping’ scene of Hook’s decline and desire for death in the jungle and Mrs Foster’s discovery of the ‘stench and slime’ of his decomposing, fly-infested leg (pp. 19-20). The excruciating pain of this scene is the foundation of both the game-show entertainment and the farcical business of Mrs Foster; Clive (or Livings) introduces not only the aforementioned ‘fever-heart-beat-rhythm’ to accompany Hook’s illness, but also a tick-tock countdown to the explosion that destroys his leg, provided by the gorgeous Connie. Farce confronts horror most directly during the amputation, performed incompetently by a comedy doctor who also happens to be drunk. After some witty exchanges and Hook’s music-hall style protest (‘I’m not having it off. It’s the only one I’ve got with the toes that way round’ [p. 67]), the bloodiest and most distressing
scene of all commences, jarring bewilderingly with the game of Bingo and culminating in the most dislocating metadramatic wrench of the show:

DOCTOR. . . . *(He gets his thumb over the artery)*. Think I’ve made a pig’s ear of it. Oh my God. Help. 

. . . *The Bingo machine is started up offstage. . . . The DOCTOR’s hands are filling with blood, and he wipes desperately at his face, smearing himself, as he makes another false dive for the ligature and back again to grip the leg. . . . The DOCTOR struggles tearfully and confusedly to regain his patient.*

. . . CONNIE enters pushing the Bingo machine . . . and the scene acquires a jazzy sparkle.* CONNIE and CLIVE busily set the scene for Bingo. Meanwhile, the DOCTOR shouts hysterically . . .

. . .

CLIVE. All right all right, the scene’s over.

*The DOCTOR stumbles off, wiping his face, clutching the gin bottle and glass.* Not a bad lad, but he goes raving mad if you give him the least bit of acting.

CONNIE. Yes! It’s Lady Luck again. Bingo time!! . . . *(pp. 70-71)*

There was little more disorienting than this on the stage of the 1960s. And interestingly, premiering within a couple of weeks of *US*, the performance of *Mrs Foster* concluded in a manner that was challenging in a similar way to the RSC’s production; while the cast of *US* took an unequivocally serious stance, maintaining a stony stare at the departing audience after the most shocking moment of the performance, the actors in Liverpool followed the climactic stripping of Mrs Foster to reveal Hook’s new artificial leg with what might be seen as the blackly farcical equivalent, similarly acknowledging and challenging the audience, yet in a much more equivocal, and hence arguably more disturbing fashion:

MRS FOSTER. Wave to the people.

. . . *she abandons the ruined dress and takes her place, brave and breathless, by HOOK, to wave to us, as the curtain comes down on their wooden faces. Merry music.* *(p. 100)*

*Mrs Foster*, then, is an exploration of the relationship between violence and entertainment, making use of every form from game to documentary, reportage to
song and dance, farce to horror. Fascinated by the range of modes in which violence may be portrayed, Livings repeatedly attacks the barrier between audience and performance from every angle he can find: dizzying shifts in and out of fiction, confounding expectations, self-conscious questioning, direct address and straight audience participation. As a blackly farcical mode of confrontation, Mrs Foster was undoubtedly successful, as Livings' audience protest anecdote indicates. To one man at least, the play was a 'nightmare'; and author and cast were delighted.

Perversely, then, the intermittent foregrounding of farcical stage violence's artificiality can increase its impact and create a responsive – if edgy – audience. This is way beyond Brechtian alienation; as Davison notes, the problem with the Verfremdungseffekt is that '[t]he tradition of breaking continuity in English drama . . . led to a deeper involvement in what followed the break' (Contemporary Drama, p. 74). This is especially true of black farce; deliberately manipulating audience involvement rather than destroying it altogether, it steps into metadrama only to increase its intensity. Black farce may be more accurately described as a combination of two alternative effects: Victor Shklovsky's 'defamiliarisation' (ostraneniye: literally, 'making strange') and Edward Bond's intimidating 'aggro-effect' (a term coined in deliberate opposition to the 'A-effect' of Brecht). Defamiliarisation was defined by Victor Shklovsky in his essay of 1917, 'Art as Technique', as removing 'objects from the automatism of perception':

... art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar' ... 43

In black farce, this 'defamiliarisation' is combined with the assault of the 'aggro-effect':

In contrast to Brecht, I think it's necessary to disturb an audience emotionally, to involve them emotionally in my plays, so I've had to find ways of making that 'aggro-effect' more complete, which is in a sense to surprise them, to say, 'Here's a baby in a pram – you don't expect these people to stone that baby.' Yet – snap – they do.44

The self-conscious theatricality of blackly farcical violence, then, makes the audience feel violence anew – makes violence violent, to paraphrase Shklovsky. Accordingly Marlowe, like his Jacobean successors, uses his ambiguous and self-conscious stage violence to create 'a kind of hyperreality' (Cunningham, p. 214). Indeed, black farce not only combines these two techniques, but also heightens them both through the additional unexpected dimension of farce, throwing its audience into re-sensitisation and forcing open the senses, as in Gottleb's desire to 'split your minds to the sights, sounds and smells of Auschwitz,' or in Vindice's attack on the Duke:

If he but wink, not brooking the foul object,
Let our other two hands tear up his lids,
And make his eyes, like comets, shine through blood . . .
(The Revenger's Tragedy, III. vi. 202-4)

Confusingly, 'defamiliarisation' has sometimes been used as a translation of Verfremdung (see for example Ronald Speirs, Bertolt Brecht [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987], p. 43). However, defamiliarisation is only one element of Verfremdung (as Speirs' more detailed definition makes clear), and Brecht's exclusively rational defamiliarisation, precluding emotional identification, differs radically from the disturbing defamiliarisation provided by black farce and other genres, as discussed above. Note also that Brecht shared with Bond, and indeed Brook, a preoccupation with 'changing the world' through theatre (Notes to Die Mutter, in Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. and trans. John Willett [New York: Hill and Wang, 1964], p. 57). 44'Edward Bond: From Rationalism to Rhapsody' (interview with Christopher Innes), Canadian Theatre Review, 23 (Summer 1979), p. 113. In contrast to the black farceurs, however (and in common with the theatre of confrontation), Bond emphasises that the 'effrontery' and 'impertinence' of the aggro-effect can only be justified if the playwright has 'something desperately important' to tell his audience.
The multiple theatrical transgressions of defamiliarisation, 'aggro' and farce, then, combine to create a volatile, unsettling and eye-opening presentation of violence, precluding the possibility of complacency or passivity.

The properties of violence - blood, gore, severed body parts and so on - are of course inherently ambiguous in this context. Modern stage techniques made it possible for companies of the 1960s to imitate reality to an enormous degree; but even the Jacobeans were able to achieve surprisingly convincing effects, as Maurice Charney notes:

Animal blood in concealed bladders was used freely, and all of the swordplay and executions were presented with precise, technical details. Actual instruments of torture were sometimes brought on stage, and one of Henslowe's properties was a severed head, which could be made up to resemble a variety of male characters.\(^\text{45}\)

This capacity for visual verisimilitude left playwrights free to play with their audiences' awareness of the properties' artificiality, with Vindice for example even referring to Gloriana's skull as a 'property' that 'shall bear a part / E'en in it own revenge' (III. v. 101-102; italics mine). Frances Teague concludes that Elizabethan and Jacobean properties of violence are inevitably ambiguous:

The horrific nature of such properties will produce a complex audience response: anxiety at the imaginative prospect of violence, relief that it is represented with an object that is false, horror at the prospect of pain that would occur were the property real . . . Consequently, such spectacularly violent properties multiply meaning, both evoking and diminishing horror.\(^\text{46}\)

This ambiguity is pushed and exploited still further by these playwrights in their scenes of black farce, constantly pulling us away from the horror only in order to thrust us back into it with greater effect. The spectator can never settle into a pre-defined role; should we sit back in safe and anonymous detachment, we will inevitably be dragged

\(^{45}\)The Persuasiveness of Violence in Elizabethan Plays', *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 2 (1969), p. 65.
roughly from our hiding place, but if we attempt to collude with the performers in the suspension of our disbelief, we will be mockingly betrayed.

The Jacobeans delighted in this sort of disorientation, employing it not only in the device of the sham death (which will be examined in the next chapter) but also in their ambiguous use of properties such as *the false head* and a false leg in the B-version of *Doctor Faustus*. Benvolio and Martino’s apparent decapitation of Faustus is followed by a gruesome and steadily escalating fantasy by the courtiers about the ingenious mutilations they will perform upon the bisected corpse. It begins with an over-inflated and doubly ironic rhetorical exchange between the revengers (parodically anticipating the form of Faustus’ panegyric to Helen):

FREDERICK. Was this that stern aspect, that awful frown,
   Made the grim monarch of infernal spirits
   Tremble and quake at his commanding charms?
MARTINO. Was this the damned head whose heart conspir’d
   Benvolio’s shame before the Emperor? (XIII. 46-50)

As with Mrs Prentice’s ‘Is this blood real?’ , the answer to these questions is ‘Yes and no.’ But while the audience may be aware that Faustus cannot yet have come to his tragic end, the building momentum of this gleeful fantasy’s imagery, however comic, far overpowers any sense of dramatic irony:

BENVOLIO. First, on his head, in quittance of my wrongs,
   I’ll nail huge forked horns and let them hang
   Within the window where he yok’d me first,
   That all the world may see my just revenge.
MARTINO. What use shall we put his beard to?
BENVOLIO. We’ll sell it to a chimney-sweeper: it will wear out ten birchen brooms,
   I warrant you.
FREDERICK. What shall his eyes do?

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BENVOLIO. We'll put out his eyes, and they shall serve for buttons to his lips to keep his tongue from catching cold.

MARTINO. An excellent policy. And now, sirs, having divided him, what shall the body do? (55-66)

Like Flamineo in Webster's *The White Devil*, Faustus allows his would-be murderers to reach the height of their imaginings — and, of course, allows the audience to become caught up in those imaginings — before leaping to his feet, causing the building tension to erupt into laughter and the smugness of his aggressors to be transformed into terror:

BENVOLIO. Zounds, the devil's alive again!
FREDERICK. Give him his head, for God's sake! (67-68)

The writer was clearly fond of this joke. Only two scenes later, when Faustus sits down, the smile wiped from his face, to rest from the burden of his fatal bargain, an indignant Horse-courser marches in to demand a refund for his trick horse and tugs at Faustus' leg:

Alas, I am undone! what shall I do? I have pulled off his leg. ... I'll outrun him and cast this leg into some ditch or other. (35-39)

Faustus has not, of course, lost his leg, and the incident serves as the source of a great deal of gloating banter and strained wordplay at their next encounter ('he does not stand much upon that', 'I pray remember your curtsy', and so on [XVII. 77, 88]) until he reveals the intact limb.

Curiously, when Faustus' *real* death comes, Marlowe chooses to echo these farcical incidents by displaying Faustus' dismembered body (including, presumably, the false leg used in Scene XV) on stage:

O, help us, heaven! see, here are Faustus' limbs,
All torn asunder by the hand of death. (XX. 6-7)
The devils, as Nigel Alexander observes, ‘laugh last’.\textsuperscript{48} Clearly Faustus’ grotesque fooling with the invulnerability of his body was both presumptuous and dangerous – as, perhaps, was our own amusement by it. As in Mathew Winston’s genre of ‘black humor’, the games played with our involvement here convert ‘our passive participation into an action on the same plane as the deeds we are witnessing’ (‘Humour noir’, p. 277). Once again our attention is turned inwards, our laughter is questioned, and we are made to feel uneasy, foolish, even guilty: this time Faustus will not leap up and claim his lost limbs. It is, as Winston writes of black humor, ‘like laughing at someone who slips on a banana peel and then discovering that it is your crippled grandfather or that he has broken his neck’ (‘Ethics’, p. 279).

The same phenomenon appears in Funeral Games, when Caulfield slices a hand from the corpse of McCorquodale’s murdered wife, Valerie, to provide ‘proof’ that Pringle has killed his wife, Tessa (who is in fact still alive). McCorquodale suggests keeping the hand in a Dundee cake tin (‘Give it back when you’ve finished’ [p. 348]), but it only ends up incriminating McCorquodale himself, first to Tessa and then to a journalist who reports him. The betrayal by the journalist is discovered when Caulfield retrieves the hand for a Christian burial:

\textsc{Caulfield opens the cake tin. He looks in. He takes out a human hand.}
\textsc{Tessa draws a horrified breath.}
\textsc{McCorquodale flinches.}
\textsc{Caulfield lifts out the hand. He breaks off a finger with a sharp crack.} (p. 359)

It is not only McCorquodale and his accessories who are betrayed. We, the audience, have willingly accepted the hand as real within the fiction of the play (in spite of Caulfield and McCorquodale’s attempts to pass it off to Tessa as plastic) and have

\textsuperscript{48}The Performance of Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (London: Oxford University Press,
duly flinched at Caulfield’s cool appropriation of its watch (‘It came off once the wrist was severed. No proper support, see’ [p. 348]). Now, all of a sudden, we are asked to believe that the same hand is now a different, plastic hand cleverly substituted by the reporter. By this time our responses are focused as much upon themselves as upon the murder and the mutilation. In Doctor Faustus, what was false (Faustus’ leg) became real; in Funeral Games, what was real (Val’s hand) becomes false. Quite apart from the violence of the subject matter, the challenging disorientation that this forces upon us is a theatrical confrontation, turning the violent event outwards and testing us with its unpredictability. As Winston concludes:

... just when we take them most seriously, the characters will do something so ridiculous or so outrageous that our identification is broken, the psychological distance between us is increased, and we have to laugh. Your grandfather sits up and sticks his tongue out at you, or the corpse is surrounded by a hundred solicitous bystanders who promptly slip on a hundred banana peels. And the moment we start to laugh again at grandpa, he immediately has a heart attack. (‘Ethics’, p. 279)

The tension between the ‘reality’ of severed heads, hands or legs and their status as theatrical properties is further exploited in black farce by the playful and perverted uses to which the ‘objects’ are put. The fiction/reality ‘game-playing’ that I have described, for example, may be literalised when body parts are used as toys. In The White Devil, Francisco says of Bracciano:

Like the wild Irish I’ll ne’er think thee dead
Till I can play at football with thy head. (IV. i. 137-38)

Orton exhibits a similarly grotesque exuberance when Hal uses his own mother’s teeth, fresh from her corpse, as percussion instruments to illustrate his fantasy of running a brothel:

I’d have a French bird, a Dutch bird, a Belgian bird, an Italian bird –
FAY hands a pair of false teeth across the screen.
– and a bird that spoke fluent Spanish and performed the dances of her native
country to perfection. (He clicks the teeth like castanets.) (p. 227)

Hal’s callously playful detachment – described as ‘terrifying’ even by the monstrous
Inspector Truscott (p. 272) – regarding his mother’s teeth and, later, her eye (itself
mistaken for another toy: a marble) is anticipated by the still more ruthless game-
playing of the Ward in Women Beware Women. Like Hal, the Ward will not let filial
sentimentality stop his fun:

When I am in game, I am furious; came my mother’s eyes in my way, I would not
lose a fair end. No, were she alive, but with one tooth in her head, I should
venture the striking out of that. I think of nobody when I am in play, I am so
earnest.

(I. ii. 99-103)

Whether striking out one’s mother’s eyes and teeth as if they were skittles, or using a
head as a football, teeth as castanets or eyes as marbles, the playwrights of both
seventeenth and twentieth centuries allow their ludic imaginations free reign when it
comes to game-playing with body parts, breaking down the barriers between play and
horror in suitably grotesque form. It is in a similar spirit that in Doctor Faustus a
beard becomes a chimney brush, eyes become buttons and so on; and that Tessa in
Funeral Games suggests that the journalist might want to use Val’s severed hand as a
paperweight. The reality element, too, takes on an extra dimension when one
considers the context of these seemingly fantastic images – for some of the most
outlandish are the closest to truth. Real-life stories of playing football with heads or
skulls, for instance, would still have been familiar to Webster’s audience from the
tradition of playing football at Kingston-upon-Thames on Shrove Tuesday in
commemoration of ‘the kicking about of the head of a defeated Danish chieftain’,
along with tales of the famously gruesome murder of John de Boddeworth in 1321, after which the murderers reputedly 'played football with the victim’s head.' And in the 1960s, the use of hands as paperweights, eyes as marbles and so on had the grim resonance of the 'ornamental household articles' such as lamp shades, gloves, house slippers and hand bags that were made out of the human remains of Holocaust victims and famously used as evidence at Nuremberg in the late 1940s; severed hands may not have been used as paperweights, but severed heads certainly were. The fluctuations between farce and horror, game and earnest here are therefore particularly extreme.

Game playing with severed body parts, then, combining as it does horror and laughter, violence and amusement, is a central image of black farce. Here, man is an absurdly, disturbingly vulnerable figure. He comes apart with alarming ease, and the constituent parts of his physical being are treated entirely without respect. The effect of such insecurity on the psyche is illustrated in Livings' Good Grief!, where a man walks home alone in the dark, preparing to be attacked and vividly imagining his own death. Within his fantasies, George's own aggression emerges, expressing itself as an extreme desire for individualisation: 'Adventure is when you're on your own; I'd like to kill the whole world so't I'd be on my own' (p. 16). The ultimate irony arrives when George is killed as the result of being mistaken for an attacker himself; the only

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49 Frances Peabody Magoun, Jr., History of Football From the Beginnings to 1871 (Bochum-Langendreer: Verlag Heinrich Poppinghaus O. H. G., 1938), pp. 6, 45.
option in a hostile world, it seems, is to get everyone else before they get you.

George’s desire for aggression as a pre-emptive means to self-assertion in the face of the dehumanising potential of violence is amply anticipated in Jacobean drama; George is a would-be Barabas, proclaiming ‘For so I live, perish may all the world,’ or a Lodovico, crowing over the carnage of *The White Devil*: ‘I do glory yet / That I can call this act mine own.’

As the Man with the hole through his chest ambiguously states in Livings’ *Kelly’s Eye*, ‘inside we are scarlet, raw, bloody’ (p. 10); we are all simultaneously vulnerable and potentially violent. The violence, therefore, arises out of powerlessness; like most revengers, Lodovico feels that justice within society has failed him, while George is simply threatened by the dark and menacing world around him. Both are rendered insignificant by their circumstances and are seeking a way to reassert themselves; as Hannah Arendt perceptively stated in 1970, ‘I am inclined to think that much of the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world.’

Dismemberment has a further significance as an essential part of Bakhtin’s ‘grotesque concept of the body’; most importantly, he notes ‘the combination of the dismemberment of the body and of society’ in certain medieval grotesque satires, traceable to ‘the widespread mythical concept of the origin of various social groups from various parts of a god’s body’ (p. 351). Up to the seventeenth century, indeed,

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52 On *Violence*, p. 83. See also Burnet, p. 21.

The subject of violence as self-assertion in the face of a potential loss of identity is discussed more fully in the next chapter.
the ‘functional and commonplace’ analogy used to describe society – and to encourage social cohesion – was that of the human body:

Society, like the human body, is an organism composed of different members. Each member has its own function, prayer, or defence, or merchandise, or tilling the soil.53

By extension, as Huston Diehl has noted, ‘The dismembered body is ... a conventional Renaissance image of the divided state,’ a point illustrated by the image of a shattered statue in Nicolas Reusner’s Emblemata (1581) as a symbol of political discord.54 Significantly, this exact image reappears, not in a work of Jacobean drama, but in Orton’s What the Butler Saw, combined with the transgressive use of a body part as an instrument of death. The statue is not a god but a more contemporary symbol of the state – Winston Churchill – whose penis embeds itself suggestively – and fatally – in the body of Geraldine’s mother, thus exuberantly and economically expressing the explosive breakdown of traditional values. The source of the imagery of dismemberment, then, lies in the despair and exhilaration at social upheavals that were encountered in Chapter 1.

The importance of dismemberment to the genre of black farce is demonstrated by the way in which the horror of the disintegration of the human body is combined with classic comic devices such as mistaken identity or the boisterous stage business of farce. In The Revenger’s Tragedy, all of these come together in a single scene. The whole plot surrounding the Duchess’ odious youngest son has all the mechanics of farce, while the subject matter is deadly serious; and the network of error and deceit regarding the identity of the severed head is as comically complex as that surrounding

the ownership of the severed hand in *Funeral Games*. When Lussurioso walks in on the brothers’ public tears and private laughter over ‘the yet bleeding head’ (III. vi. 35) that they believe to be his, he strikes them with terror in the midst of their celebration, and the switch from rejoicing to cowering is so sudden as to be hilarious. The moment he walks out again they are thrown into comic confusion, and their gloriously patterned rhetorical exchange brings the farce of the severed head to its climax:

AMBITIOSO. Whose head’s that, then?
OFFICER. His whom you left command for,
    Your own brother’s.
AMBITIOSO. Our brother’s? O furies!
SUPERVACUO. Plagues!
AMBITIOSO. Confusions!
SUPERVACUO. Darkness!
AMBITIOSO. Devils!
SUPERVACUO. Fell it out so accursedly?
AMBITIOSO. So damnedly?
SUPERVACUO. Villain, I’ll brain thee with it.

... AMBITIOSO. Did we dissemble?
SUPERVACUO. Did we make our tears women for thee?
AMBITIOSO. Laugh and rejoice for thee?
SUPERVACUO. Bring warrant for thy death?
AMBITIOSO. Mock off thy head? (III. vi. 77-86)

The ‘slow burn’ enacted here is, as Stull observes (neatly alluding both to its farce and its cruelty), ‘worthy of the Marx Brothers in *Monkey Business*, a slapstick comedy that Artaud called “a hymn to anarchy”’ (p. 45). Outrageous farcical business with the severed head is unavoidable; in production, the head most often ends up hurled around the stage as the characters wonder what to do with it. The sight of a dripping head passed from hand to hand is horrifically comic, as is the pass-the-parcel (and, later, tug-of-war) business with Hook’s stinking, decomposing leg in Livings’ *Mrs

Foster, the concern in *Funeral Games* that Val’s hand will be handed round in the mid-afternoon break by Pringle’s short-sighted tea lady, and the passing around of Mrs McLeavy’s eyes and teeth ‘like nuts at Christmas’ in *Loot* (p. 272).

In the context of severed body parts, there occurs an extraordinarily striking parallel between *The Changeling* and *Funeral Games*: one of the many correspondences that demonstrate the close relationship between Jacobean and 1960s black farce. In both plays, a body part (in Middleton and Rowley’s play, a finger; in Orton’s, the entire hand) is chopped from a corpse in order to provide proof of a murder. And in both cases it is second-choice proof; De Flores attempts to pull off Alonzo’s ring ‘to approve the work’, but finds that it is stuck (‘What, so fast on? / Not part in death?’), and so hastily chops at the hand itself: ‘I’ll take a speedy course then, / Finger and all shall off’ (III. ii. 23-5). Caulfield’s wish had been for something a little more ambitious than a ring: he was planning to chop off Val’s head. But like De Flores, he gives up on the more difficult task and in this case settles for a hand. Both corpses are seen as grotesquely, desperately hanging on to what is theirs, even in death. The ring was sent by Alonzo to Beatrice-Joanna ‘somewhat unwillingly’, says De Flores; he was ‘loath to part with’t, for it stuck / As if the flesh and it were both one substance (III. iv. 27, 37-38). Similarly, Caulfield reports back to McCorquodale that he ‘couldn’t get her head off. It must be glued on,’ to which her husband replies: ‘She always was a headstrong woman’ (pp. 347-8). Having presented their employers with the relevant member, both De Flores and Caulfield offer them the piece of jewellery that came along with it (a ring and a watch respectively), then take it for themselves as payment for their work. Calm though they are, their actions cause enormous alarm to others – yet in both cases the horror is demonstrated to be
superficial and ultimately hypocritical. When De Flores offers Alonzo’s finger to Beatrice-Joanna, she already knows that the murder has been committed as she directed, but still her response is ‘Bless me! What hast thou done?’ (29). De Flores replies with impatience: ‘Why, is that more / Than killing the whole man?’ (30). This is indicative of Beatrice-Joanna’s fatal delusion (‘A woman dipp’d in blood, and talk of modesty!’ [126]); later, when accused of being a whore, her response will be: ‘What a horrid sound it hath!’ (V. iii. 31). Tessa is just as concerned as Beatrice-Joanna with outward appearances, and in a similarly warped fashion, it is she who suggests that Pringle should pretend to have murdered her ‘To save face’ (p. 340). Like Beatrice-Joanna, Tessa is horrified by the sight of Val’s hand in the Dundee cake tin, but it only takes the revelation of her friend’s indiscretion with her husband for Tessa to (punningly) reconcile herself entirely to Val’s death: ‘She tempted the Lord. It would be blasphemous to raise a hand in her defence’ (p. 358; italics mine). The ultimate resolution for both sets of conspirators is burial of the offending item; Beatrice-Joanna instructs De Flores to dispose of the finger in this way, while Pringle prepares to give Valerie’s hand a full Christian burial and ‘take the rest of her as read’ (p. 359).

The obvious difference between these remarkably similar incidents lies in the degree of comedy, ranging from the irony of The Changeling to the full-blown farce of Funeral Games. The appearance of fingers and rings in The Changeling, though, links the episode firmly into a specific cluster of sexual imagery that overtly straddles the boundary between tragic and comic. Beatrice-Joanna would, she claims, rather wear De Flores’ ‘pelt tann’d in a pair / Of dancing pumps’ than have him ‘thrust’ his fingers into the ‘sockets’ of her gloves (I. i. 232-4); and the tragic consequences of
her violently sexual denial are set in motion. But almost exactly the same imagery is employed by the lecherous and farcical Lollio, who warns the paranoid Alibius that if his leaves his ring (Isabella) lying around, ‘one or other will be thrusting into’t’ (I. ii. 30-31). This not only makes explicit the undercurrents of Beatrice-Joanna’s speech, but also establishes a blackly farcical context for a chain of imagery that ends with the presentation of a finger and ring to Beatrice-Joanna. The finger rejected, the ring pocketed by the giver, De Flores finally literalises the signified act. Once again, the nature of the imagery complicates our response, bringing the incident still closer to the episode in *Funeral Games* than might at first be apparent.

The violent forcing open of the senses in black farce – and particularly Barnes’ split open mind with its renewed sensitivity – recalls Laing’s image of ‘the cracked mind of the schizophrenic’ that ‘may let in light’.55 And while the madness of black farce reaches for true sanity, the genre’s destructive violence reaches paradoxically for creativity. To Eric Bentley, violence is what allows art to ‘go to the heart of things’:56 a belief that, both inside and outside the theatre, was certainly held by Jacobean in the quest for truth. ‘I’ll all demolish, and seek out truth within you,’ says Alsemero to Beatrice-Joanna, just as Edgar comments in *King Lear*, ‘To know our enemies’ minds we rip their hearts.’57 Elizabeth Hanson has explored how, in the Renaissance, ‘The circumstances of the English resort to torture suggest that it was conceptually allied to the epistemology of discovery.’58 The immediate purpose may have been political

57 *The Changeling*, V. iii. 36; *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen [The Arden Shakespeare], 1972), IV. vi. 257. Lear proclaims earlier ‘let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart’ (III. vi. 74-75).
repression, but the aims of ‘discoverie’, ‘manifestacion’ or ‘boultinge forth of the truth’ expressed in official warrants were more than mere euphemisms; torture was connected with rise of an ‘analytico-referential discourse’ based on belief in the existence of objective truth, ‘external both to the mind that perceives it and to the language that describes it’ (pp. 53-54). Geographical exploration, anatomical dissections and political torture all belonged to this discourse in which ‘the mask is stripped away, making knowledge and sight seem equivalent’ (p. 54). The metaphorical framework behind this political structure is precisely that expressed in the plays, where aggression is used to destroy whatever prevents the audience from truly seeing, and hence ‘having an experience’. The stripping away of masks, indeed, was shared by black farce with Artaud, whose plague-like theatre was aimed at ‘impelling us to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world’s lies, aimlessness, meanness, and even two-facedness’, and with black humor, which endeavoured to peel back disguises.59 In the 1960s, Weiss’s Marat expressed the wish for people to perform the same violation upon themselves, and for the same purpose:

The important thing
is to pull yourself up by your own hair
to turn yourself inside out
and see the whole world with fresh eyes (p. 35)

Neither the Jacobean nor the writers of the 1960s are afraid of acknowledging the positive power of violence; it is yet another contradiction that violence can be used creatively – as a means of connecting (‘A bang on the nose is human contact’ [Funeral Games, p. 329]), or of digging for a deeper reality. This positive capacity

was recognised in an exhibition mounted by the Institute of Contemporary Arts as part of its ‘Season of Violence’ in 1964, a year when violence on stage and off was being hotly debated. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue, ICA Chairman Roland Penrose wrote that in the face of a seemingly unshockable audience, ‘in some cases artists have devised new and violent means of expressing the angst in which we live.’ He continued:

If he burns, slashes, crushes, treads into the earth or blows up his creation, the artist does so in order to convey to us not only his inner turmoil but also his delight in a wilful and sometimes exuberant violation of inertia. In these acts he is prompted by his knowledge that violence is a creative as well as a destructive force. Prometheus, the first to play with fire, may prove to be guilty of our final destruction, but since we are destined to live between two decisive acts of violence – birth and death – it is only by making use of its primeval force that we can find satisfaction.60

Interestingly, one artistic creation of the kind described by Penrose made its way into the theatrical confrontation of US when, in a form of ‘action painting’ (‘one of the most powerful, visual statements made in the play’), the body of an actor representing Vietnam was symbolically painted one colour above the waist, another below, and the paper on which his ‘writhing, tortured’ form made its marks was subsequently torn in two (US, p. 53n.). But what is most significant in Penrose’s account is the word ‘exuberant’. Pure violence may be desperately ineffectual, the ‘helpless resentment’ of the football hooligan; the really powerful mode is to be found in the combination with delight; exuberance; vigorous and boisterous farce. And of course, the ultimate function of all this exuberant violence is communication. As a UNESCO symposium of 1970 pointed out, violence could ‘– frequently nowadays – ... be expressive

60Preface to ‘Study for an exhibition of violence in contemporary art.’ Tate Gallery Archive, ICA records (TGA 955, ref. DM43/2).
rather than aggressive'. Violence, then, is the very point of black farce – its exhilaration and its despair. It is a source of energy and destruction, of laughter and horror, of communication and antagonism. Above all, it is a source of impact.

Because the theme of violence is so crucial to the genre of black farce, then, it is also crucial to a demonstration of the relationship between the Jacobean and 1960s drama that is under discussion. Black farce is a violent genre that arose in two periods when audiences appear to have been particularly unlikely to be receptive to straightforward representations of violence. For this reason, black farce exerts its violence not only on stage, but also towards its audience, confronting spectators through an aggressive transgression not only of generic boundaries but also of boundaries between fiction and reality. In the process, it is a source of both despair and exhilaration; it reveals the destructive nature of humanity and the vulnerability of the human body (and hence society), and yet it is also a force for powerful creativity and impact. Most importantly, the treatment of violence in the plays of the two periods demonstrates powerfully the strength of the relationship between them. The specific affinities between, for example, the kicking scenes in The Revenger's Tragedy and Loot, the games played with body parts throughout most of the plays under discussion (and in particular the remarkable parallels between the episodes surrounding the finger in The Changeling and the hand in Funeral Games), and the violent entertainments in The White Devil, Women Beware Women, The Erpingham Camp and The Little Mrs Foster Show add a particularly solid dimension to the network of correspondences between the occurrences of black farce in the

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seventeenth and twentieth centuries. And all this is without even considering the most fundamental element of much of black farce's dark and exuberant violence: death.
4 This is ending in a funny way isn’t it?

DEATH

‘My soul, like to a ship in a black storm, / Is driven I know not whither,’ declares Webster’s Vittoria at her death, while her brother finds himself ‘in a mist’.1 Livings’ George experiences death as a narrowing tunnel and swirling, diminishing lights.2 These images of blind, disorientated confusion express the deep uncertainty of attitude towards death experienced in both the late Renaissance and the 1960s. As may be inferred from the previous chapter, premature death was all too prevalent in both societies; but in spite of its familiarity, death was a subject surrounded by difficulty, ambivalence and radically conflicting traditions.

In the seventeenth century, violent death was compounded by the devastation of the plague, so that, as Michael Bristol states, ‘Awareness of death and of the precariousness of day-to-day existence is pervasive in every cultural setting in Elizabethan society.’3 The anxiety aroused by this human vulnerability was still further intensified by the coexistence of two powerful but antithetical approaches to death. Though the orthodox stance remained an overwhelmingly Christian one, the scientific questioning of the Renaissance meant that the old certainties of the afterlife could no longer be relied upon; the new ‘slogan of the man of the Renaissance’, memento vivere, was pushing against the Christian emphasis on the life after death –

1The White Devil, V. vi. 248-9, 260. Cf. II Tamburlaine, II. iv. 14: ‘All dazzled with the hellish mists of death’.
Theodore Spencer, in his study of the theme of death in Elizabethan tragedy, summarises the two traditions – often expressed side by side in collections such as Tottel’s Miscellany (1557) and A Hundredth Sundrie Flowers (1573) – as follows:

On the one hand, the present world, the value of the individual and the right to fame are considered increasingly important; on the other, man’s sin, the vanity of worldly life and the imminence of death are to be contemplated with the greatest possible intensity.5

While Christianity had never been able to dispel the human fear of death, it had at least offered comfort and consolation with the prospect of a glorious afterlife for the virtuous. Religion, according to Peter L. Berger in his sociological study of the subject, is an essential part of the meaningful order imposed by man upon the world as a ‘shield against terror’:

In so far as the knowledge of death cannot be avoided in any society, legitimations of the reality of the social world in the face of death are decisive requirements in any society. The importance of religion in such legitimations is obvious. Religion, then, maintains the socially defined reality by legitimating marginal situations in terms of an all-encompassing sacred reality.6

In the late Renaissance, what Chris Shilling describes as the ‘trans-personal meaning structures’ of Christianity that allow the possibility of a ‘good death’ were disintegrating, ‘calling into question and revealing the “innate precariousness” of even the most fundamental assumptions on which our relationships to our bodies and our world are based.’7 The Duchess of Malfi may die with little fear, ‘Knowing to meet such excellent company / In th’other world’ (IV. ii. 208-9), but Bosola knows that she

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is now an exception. By the early seventeenth century, the dying were more likely to cling to their worldly life than to embrace the doubtful hereafter:

Princes' images on their tombs
Do not lie as they were wont, seeming to pray
Up to Heaven: but with their hands under their cheeks,
As if they died of the tooth-ache; they are not carved
With their eyes fix'd upon the stars; but as
Their minds were wholly bent upon the world,
The self-same way they seem to turn their faces. (153-9)

As with madness, then, death becomes a deeply ambivalent subject in the Jacobean period: a subject for devout anticipation, or for worldly fear and horror. The additional anxiety forced upon an already highly-charged subject naturally spills over into black farce at this time. Spencer describes death as the ideal theme for Jacobean tragedy not only because 'It was a literature which was aware of the central emotional problems of human life,' but also because of the relationship between the period's traditions:

A conflict between these two opposing attitudes to life was inevitable, and the result was not only drama in a technical, but also in a deeper, a psychological and sociological sense. (p. ix)

And as Leonard Kurtz describes in his study of the iconography of the danse macabre tradition, the decline of religion and 'a period of extreme stress' naturally give rise to macabre images of death; and by extension, in its equivocally comic/tragic, degrading/transcendent and physical/spiritual dimensions, death is specifically, blackly farcical.

Death – and in particular, violent death – was familiar to 1960s society on an unprecedented scale. The sheer magnitude of the atrocity was unimaginable, so that

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the ‘tunnel’ of death became intensely bewildering and disorientating: ‘Death has become unmanageable,’ wrote psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who wrote extensively on the subject, including studies of Hiroshima and Vietnam, throughout the decade.9

Introducing an essay of Lifton’s on the atomic bomb, Robert Fulton wrote in 1965 about the feelings of denial and ‘closure’, merging into depression and despair, experienced by survivors of mass death, and concluded:

This continuous encounter with death and, equally important, the significant inner encounters so graphically described by Lifton are, of course, not limited to Hiroshima or to Japan, but in varying degrees can be said to be the personal experience of all of us.10

And in addition to the spectacle of genocide, the 1960s were forced to confront a new possibility, posed by the threat of nuclear weapons, as Lifton emphasised in his book, Living and Dying:

Throughout history, man has feared premature death. . . . What is new is the awareness that premature death is possible now, not only for an individual man or woman, but for the entire human race. (p. 22)

Like the late Renaissance, then, 1960s society had to take on board major new factors in its approach to death. And again like the Jacobean period, the 1960s had also to deal with fundamental upheavals in the structure of society’s beliefs. As Lifton recognised, the consequent impact upon attitudes to death – the most inherently traumatic of all ‘life transitions’ – was enormous:

While the holocausts of twentieth-century warfare have rendered death absurd, the dislocations of the modern world had already rendered life’s meaning problematic. . . . When a society’s values and institutions are seriously questioned, life transitions become anxious and traumatic. (pp. 25-26)

But it was the nature of the individual’s contact with death that gave rise to the most fundamental ambivalences and controversies regarding the subject. Lifton claimed that because of the ‘incomprehensibility’ of the ‘massive violence and absurd death’ of the twentieth century and the distancing effect between killer and victim provided by the ‘high technology’ of modern warfare, society was now attempting to evade the reality of death, in a manner analogous to the ‘desensitisation’ described in the previous chapter: ‘We don’t talk about it; we try to conceal, deny, and “bury” it’ (p. 21). By 1974, Lifton recognised that the highly charged subject of death was becoming a common issue for public debate; but at the same time he claimed that it remained a little-understood topic which was, at heart, unacceptable to a society that had had to deal with the vast, dehumanised killing of recent years:

The subject of death is now beginning to receive a great deal of attention; the evidence of this is visible in newsstands, bookstores, sermons, psychiatric concerns, and in ordinary conversation. And yet, death remains not only opaque but offensive . . . . (p. 133)

This paradox – in which death is a subject of both fascination and taboo – had originated in the mid 1950s, as analysed in Geoffrey Gorer’s celebrated essay, ‘The Pornography of Death.’ Gorer located the cause of the distancing effect not in weapons of mass destruction but in improvements in medicine which had removed ‘natural death’ from the experience of many people; but like Lifton, he also noted the simultaneous, unparalleled increase in violent death. Consequently, death had replaced sex as matter for both prudery and exploitative entertainment; it was simultaneously ‘unmentionable’ and an ever-growing element in ‘the fantasies offered to mass audiences – detective stories, thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories,

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science fiction, and eventually horror comics.\textsuperscript{12} More recently, sociologist Tony Walter has attempted to untangle the various contradictions surrounding this puzzling situation:

\begin{quote}
... it is a strange taboo that is proclaimed by every pundit in the land, and when virtually no Sunday is without at least one newspaper discussing death, bereavement, hospices, or funerals.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Amongst the theses that Walter offers in response to this problem is the possibility that the 1960s were a decade of transition, in which the instinctive fear, revulsion and denial provoked by mass atrocity was being countered by an increasing openness about death, encouraged by the movement away from rationality and towards self-expression, by the hospice movement, by the more tangential green and women’s movements – and indeed by writers such as Gorer and Lifton themselves (pp. 297-8).

What all of these overlapping theories have in common, therefore, is the notion of ambivalence: as in the late Renaissance, one set of attitudes was in decline while another, equally powerful set was (re)emerging: distancing, denial and taboo were coexisting (if only for a short time, according to Walter’s thesis) with increasing openness and ‘pornographic’ fascination.

Even this account of the complex and paradoxical attitudes to death wrestled with in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries is, of necessity, drastically simplified; as will become clear, there were still more factors that further complicated the already contradictory and transitional strands of belief running through the two periods. Hence death earns its place in Jacobean and 1960s black farce, using ‘both tragedy and comedy to evoke a world where the ordinary logic of existence is splintered,

\textsuperscript{12}Gorer, pp. 50-51. See also Shilling, p. 190.
\textsuperscript{13}‘Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?’ Sociology, 25 (1991), p. 293.
where pain is greeted by laughter and jokes form the prologue to murder. 'The juxtaposition of comedy with death scenes,' as Michael Bristol notes in his chapter on 'Treating Death as a Laughing Matter,' results in an indecorous 'confusion of generic distinction' (p. 179); a confusion that both mirrors the tangled ambivalences of attitude towards death in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and reflects the apparent impropriety of the intrusion of death, surely the blackest of all themes, into the genre of farce. Even within the plays themselves there is a certain instinctive sense that death is not a force to be taken lightly and is hence irreconcilable with laughter: 'Oh do not jest thy doom,' Lussurioso warns the reckless Junior Brother in The Revenger's Tragedy (I. ii. 49); and his sense of danger is proved right when death has the last laugh on Junior. Though Flamineo in The White Devil himself recognises the ominous potential of laughter ('seas do laugh, show white, when rocks are near' [V. vi. 251]), he too jokes on the very edge of death; and his murderers, like Lussurioso, are disconcerted:

LODOVICO. Dost laugh?
FLAMINEO. Wouldst have me die, as I was born, in whining? (194-5)

Flote in Barnes' Red Noses similarly discomfits his killers with a story of inappropriate laughter (and a reference to the farce of mistaken identity, to which we shall return):

This reminds me of the condemned man who was being taken up the steps of the gallows and suddenly burst out laughing. 'You mustn't do that,' said the executioner, shocked. 'This is a solemn occasion.' 'Sorry,' said the prisoner. 'But I just can't help it. You see you're hanging the wrong man . . . ' (p. 115)

And when he decides to die standing on his head – ‘One must have sport even with death’ – it causes further consternation, a refusal to accept the conjunction of clowning and death:

FIRST GUARD. Your Holiness, we can shoot a man in the back, but not standing on his head. It isn’t natural. (p. 116)

Like painful violence, death is not a ‘natural’ subject for farcical treatment; even the dying have protested at the inappropriacy of Flote’s laughter in the face of death: ‘The final degradation, to face life’s supreme test surrounded by an incompetent clown’ (p. 9). Black farce, then – breaking barriers as ever – makes ‘mirth in funeral’ and ‘sings in grave-making’ with little regard to the incongruous association of death with laughter that troubles Lussurioso, Lodovico and the characters of Red Noses – and, indeed, ‘puzzles’ Hamlet (Bristol, p. 190).

In the seventeenth century, the medieval approach to death survived most vividly in the ‘obsessive theme’ of the memento mori.15 While the true Christian had nothing to fear from death, ordinary mortals needed a constant reminder that they could be taken at the most unpropitious moment and ‘die unclear’ or ‘full of bread’.16 The purpose of the memento mori, then, was an admonitory one, warning of death’s possible imminence and thus focusing the mind on one’s spiritual ‘audit’ (Hamlet, III. iii. 82). In the process, it highlighted the futility of worldly matters; in the visual arts, for example, countering ‘the portrait image with its overtones of human glory with a stern, moralistic, message’ (Strong, p. 38). Yet the memento mori was often far from solemn; in its manifestation in the Dance of Death, for example, the dead laugh,

however ghoulishly, at the living.\textsuperscript{17} By the early seventeenth century, though, the \textit{memento mori} had become so overused as to be itself merely ‘sensational grue or (in many cases) a joke,’\textsuperscript{18} as Death himself complains in Samuel Rowlands’ poem of 1606, \textit{A Terrible Battell betweene the two consumers of the whole World: Time, and Death:}

\begin{quote}
Some make my picture a most common thing,
As if I were continual in their thought,
\textit{A Deaths hed} seale upon a great gold ring,
And round about \textit{Memento Mori} wrought:
Which memory with gold cannot agree,
For he that hates the same best thinks on me.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

With the decline of its spiritual dimension, the laughable side of the \textit{memento mori} increases. And yet there is another inevitable loss: the possibility of hope offered by that spiritual dimension is disastrously weakened – and with this come further horrors. As we shall see, the increasing identification of the body with the self means that the \textit{memento mori} begins to take on a whole new meaning.

The Jacobean ambivalence towards the \textit{memento mori} tradition is illustrated by Vindice’s use of a death’s head in \textit{The Revenger’s Tragedy}. Initially at least, Gloriana’s skull does provide a mocking commentary on the brief material life:

\begin{quote}
Does the silk-worm expend her yellow labours
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute? . . . (III. v. 72-5)
\end{quote}

Vindice encourages his dead mistress to gloat over the physical reality of death and the folly of worldly living, like the grinning skeletons of the \textit{Dance of Death}:

\textsuperscript{17}See Kurtz, p. 1.
Be merry, merry, 
Advance thee, O thou terror to fat folks, 
To have their costly three-piled flesh worn off 
As bare as this... (I. i. 44-47)

As with the gravedigger in Hamlet, ‘Against the perspective of death and burial all human effort is diminished, all the “serious” claims of economic, political or moral systems become the objects of laughter’ (Bristol, p. 190). Yet it soon emerges that Vindice’s admonitions, however valid, are for him merely hollow recitations of medieval commonplaces. Vindice is too obsessed with the artistry of his own elaborate plotting to abandon worldly desires himself, in favour of the contemplation of a ‘good death’. As Phoebe Spinrad notes in her examination of the equivocal use of skulls on the Renaissance stage: in contrast to Hamlet and Dekker’s Hippolito in The Honest Whore, Part I, ‘Vindice neither absorbs the moral into himself nor seeks to reform others; he is intent only on revenge’ (p. 6). And as we shall see, Vindice’s abuse of Gloriana’s supposedly revered remains make his ‘old meditation’ utterly ‘incongruous’ (p. 5).

Vindice is at first the conventional bereaved lover, reminiscing fondly (though with an inevitable hint of cynicism) on the theme of her former beauty. Gloriana’s skull, however, provides a new perspective on his love, making even that seem absurd: ‘I could e’en chide myself / For doting on her beauty’ (III. v. 69-70). His reverence, therefore, diminishes rapidly as he contemplates the irony of her disintegration. And as melancholy turns to exuberant revenge, Vindice pushes that irony to new heights in a grotesque abuse of his mistress’s physical remains. Gloriana was murdered for her virtuous resistance of the Duke’s sexual advances but she is, Vindice claims, beyond danger in death: ‘Thou mayst lie chaste now,’ he reassures her (90). But upon this,
he immediately begins to fantasise about taking her (not ‘it’, for he addresses the skull as her self)\textsuperscript{20} in her role as \textit{memento mori} to locations that threaten her chastity in a manner she would certainly have abhorred when alive:

\begin{quote}
It were fine, methinks,
To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts,
And unclean brothels; sure, 'twould fright the sinner,
And make him a good coward . . . (90-95)
\end{quote}

Still worse, it emerges that Vindice will not be satisfied with fantasy. Gloriana may \textit{not} in fact ‘lie chaste now’, for her vengeful task is to murder the Duke by finally permitting him what she died for prohibiting. In life, the Duke’s wish was to force her; in death, her lover/pander will succeed in doing just that. Now ‘the bony lady’ (121) is a powerless figure of fun; ‘sh’has somewhat a grave look with her’ (137), Vindice punningly warns the Duke when he introduces her disguised form to him as a prostitute. And so — though he dies for it — the Duke does finally get his kiss from Gloriana, now that she can no longer resist. Even her virtuous protection of her own body is now absurd, given the free use that is made of it after death: ‘For that which would seem treason in our lives / Is laughter when we’re dead,’ as the Duke himself has prophetically remarked (I. ii. 7-8). Vindice, therefore, both outrageously extends the admonitory \textit{memento mori} by illustrating how the body may be violated in death, and perverts the tradition by failing to comprehend his own moral.

Further significances of the abuse of the dead emerge in the analysis of Gloriana’s counterpart in Orton’s \textit{Loot}: the pious Mrs McLeavy, also dead at the opening of the play and subject to similar indignities and outrages, including being stripped, stood on

\textsuperscript{20}Vindice’s use of Gloriana’s remains raises numerous issues regarding the blackly farcical treatment of death. On the identification of the corpse with the self, the treatment of the dead as if alive and the relationship between sex and death, see below. Necrophilia will be discussed in the next chapter.
her head and, like Gloriana, made the object of bawdy humour. Though apparently unconnected with the *memento mori* tradition, the treatment of Mrs McLeavy bears some notable similarities with the use of Vindice’s mistress. Hal’s detachment from his mother’s corpse, like Vindice’s from Gloriana’s skull, develops rapidly: he has qualms about taking his dead mother’s clothes off (‘It’s a Freudian nightmare. . . . I can go to Hell for it’ [p. 209]), but a moment later is sitting astride her coffin talking of his favourite brothel. Though Hal’s and Vindice’s attitudes to prostitution apparently differ, it is interesting that they both find themselves irresistibly drawn to talking inappropriately of brothels in the presence of their dead loved ones (Hal does this more than once), both of whom, in life, would clearly have been mortified at the mere mention of such a subject. Furthermore, as in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, we have a suggestion of necrophilia:

**MCLEAVY.** She’s my wife. I can do what I like with her. Anything is legal with a corpse.

**TRUSCOTT.** Indeed it is not. Conjugal rights should stop with the last heartbeat. I thought you knew that.²¹

Now that Mrs McLeavy is dead (with her intestines removed), Hal, like Vindice, finds the idea of her inspiring love ludicrous: ‘Who could have affection for a half-empty woman?’ (p. 263). It is as if the physical changes wrought after death, rather than death itself, throw a retrospective light on life that shows it up in all its laughable futility. The intestines themselves, like the exposed skull of the beautiful Gloriana, are a reminder of the grotesquerie of death; indeed, as if conventional disintegration were not enough, Mrs McLeavy’s insides explode spectacularly, leaving a damp casket to be wiped out with Dennis’s hanky (‘Oh, you’ve gone too far!’ he protests, without a

²¹ *Loot*, pp. 261-2. See also p. 241 (quoted in Chapter 5, below).
trace of irony after all that has gone before [p. 267]), ready for use as a hiding place for the loot.

In a further connection between the two women, both Gloriana and Mrs McLeavy are alternately treated as inanimate objects and as living human beings – and these two conflicting perspectives contribute to the equivocal, unsettling effect of black farce. To take the former perspective first: both Vindice and Hal reduce their loved ones to the status of dehumanised props, to be bundled about, abused and exposed in all their gross physicality. Vindice, indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, even refers to Gloriana’s remains as a ‘property’ (III. v. 101). The comedy of this abuse arises from the transformation of the body into an object, as Bergson’s automaton theory clarifies. In Bergson’s model, laughter is a result of mechanical inelasticity: ‘We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing.’ Bergson does not, of course, stray into the realm of black farce, and therefore steers clear of any direct discussion of corpses, but his emphasis on the physical is instructive:

Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned. . . . No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. 

Interestingly, Bergson offers as an example the description of a man in a funeral speech as ‘virtuous and plump’ (p. 51), thus illustrating how the subject of death arouses expectations of the spiritual, the thwarting of which in a reduction to the physical is obviously comic. As I have shown in Chapter 1, black farce transgresses
Bergson’s definition of the comic in its rejection of the ‘indifference’ and ‘lack of pain’ elements, though Bergson does perhaps gesture towards the possibility of a darker humour in his introduction of a funeral speech. What is clear here is that black farce’s treatment of the dead is a variation on Bergson’s theory, emphasising the physical in the place of the spiritual, and turning the human into a thing at a moment when the most dignified treatment is expected. Accordingly, the focus on the corpse and ‘ridiculous’ death is central to what Mathew Winston defines as grotesque black humor:

Death is the final divorce between body and spirit, the ultimate disjunction in a form that dwells on violent incongruities. Often it is reduced to its physical manifestation, the corpse, which is man become thing; rigor mortis is the reductio ad absurdum of Bergsonian automatism. (p. 283)

It may be objected that as the corpse is no longer animate, Bergson’s automaton theory does not apply; here we have not human as thing but merely thing as thing. Such an objection, however, would require complete denial of the cultural – and, perhaps, instinctive – associations surrounding the corpse. Despite Christianity’s emphasis on the soul, it has never been able to dispel entirely the human desire that the body should demand respect after the soul has departed, as journalist Robert Lynd has pointed out:

Even those Christians who despised the body alive glorified it in death, and a saint’s body that he had kept starved and unclean as beneath contempt was revered after death as something with a divine power to perform miracles.²⁴

Likewise, the memento mori tradition, despite its aim to focus the mind upon the fate of the soul, itself focuses on images of the fate of the corpse – corruption, decay,

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reduction to bare bones – in order to shock its audience into a virtuous life. Furthermore, one of the ultimate punishments offered to Renaissance criminals was the abuse of their corpses: mutilation, impaling of heads, display as carrion. This would be no punishment at all were the corpse truly perceived as merely a thing, ‘as worthless as the husk of a seed that has burst out of darkness into a flower’ (Lynd, p. 254). Rationally, such gestures can do nothing to harm the victim; their impact depends entirely upon an instinctive horror at any mistreatment of the body, dead or alive. Thus it is, states Frederick Parkes Weber in his discussion of pessimism, thanatophobia and posthumous horrors, that the ‘horror of the idea of post-mortem conditions of the body’ creates ‘the respect of human beings for the dead bodies of their fellows and their elaborate funeral and sepulchral customs’.

Underlying the need for respect for the human corpse – and the consequent horror at its abuse – is, as I have already indicated, a fundamental association of the body with the self. Though this association is often imputed to the existentialist reconstructions of, for example, Nietzsche and Sartre (‘I am my body to the extent that I am’), the problematic identification in fact dates back to the decline of Christian belief, when personal significance shifted from the soul to the body. This shift opens the individual to a greater fear of death, caused by what Shilling calls ‘the dread of personal meaninglessness’:

For the individual whose self-identity has become closely connected to their body, death is disturbing partly because it represents an end to value in a world geared towards the accumulation of value. Death represents the ultimate end of the self

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25 See for example Spierenberg, pp. 81ff.
Death

and, once it has been buried or burnt, places severe limits on the body as bearer of value. An individual may struggle to secure selective treatment for their corpse, but their efforts remain ultimately dependent on the actions of others.

(PP. 179, 186)

The consequence of such an association for the memento mori tradition, of course, is that while the image loses its Christian admonitory power (and hence occasions laughter rather than moral correction), it is still a source of horror, but for a new reason: in the dissolution of the body lies the new fear of the dissolution of the self.

The association of the dead body with the living being is confirmed by the way in which the corpse, while treated as a thing, is paradoxically referred to as a living person. The resultant disjunction between the implicit survival of the personality and the body’s extreme lack of autonomy is, once again, an extension of Bergsonian automatism, turning Bergson’s comedy to horrific effect. Orton is particularly fond of this device; and in Loot, the disjunction is particularly apparent. When Mrs McLeavy’s corpse is to be driven away and unceremoniously dumped, it is to be placed in the back of the car because ‘She always was a back seat driver’ (p. 224); after the accident on the way to the funeral, the coffin is to be brought back into the house immediately (‘We mustn’t keep a lady waiting’ [p. 238]):

FAY. Who’d think she’d be back so soon?
MCLEAVY. She could never make up her mind in life. Death hasn’t changed her.

(p. 239)

And finally, unlike the dead Polonius, ‘now most still, most secret and most grave / Who was in life a foolish prating knave’ (Hamlet, III. iv. 194-5), Fay claims that Mrs McLeavy has accused her husband of murder from beyond the grave; to which McLeavy retorts, ‘Complete extinction has done nothing to silence her slanderous tongue’ (p. 252).
According to Manfred Drautd, 'Fay's comment upon Mrs McLeavy's corpse, "Looks as though she might speak" [p. 204], is an instance of Orton's deliberate travesty of the serious use of this technique which we repeatedly encounter in Elizabethan tragedy,' including 'Vindice's passionate but also gruesome speeches to the skull of his once betrothed Gloriana.' In fact, as we have seen, Vindice's treatment of Gloriana as if she were alive is often far from serious: he puns exuberantly on the subject of her bodily corruption, exhorts her to be merry, and incongruously turns her into a prostitute. The humour in both cases is emphatically abusive, so that while the implied survival of the corpse's personality could in theory be interpreted as a kind of triumph over death – thus diminishing its horror value – in effect it actually contributes to Shilling's 'dread of personal meaninglessness'; while emphasising the body's value as self, it simultaneously flaunts the loss of selfhood through death, by allowing others to insult, abuse and even transform the identity of the body.

The most extreme expression of the 'living corpse' device comes with the double murder, where a body is treated as alive to such an extent that it can be killed again. In The Jew of Malta, Barabas and Ithamore comically murder one of the friars:

FRIAR BERNARDINE. What, do you mean to strangle me?
ITHAMORE. Yes, 'cause you use to confess.
BARABAS. Blame not us but the proverb, 'confess and be hanged'.

Pull hard. (IV. i. 144-47)

As soon as the friar is dead, Ithamore props the corpse up against a wall and puts a staff in its hand, to create the illusion that it is alive:

ITHAMORE. . . . excellent, he stands as if he were beggning of bacon.
BARABAS. Who would not think but that this friar lived? (154-56)

Bernardine’s rival evangelist, Friar Jacomo, then appears bang on cue and, infuriated by Bernardine’s silence and apparent unwillingness to move out of his way, strikes him – upon which, Barabas and Ithamore promptly reappear to accuse him of murder and lead him off to the magistrates. Still more perplexingly, in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* Vindice finds himself in a situation where, in his words, ‘I’m hired to kill myself’ (IV. ii. 207); in his disguise as Piato, he has fallen out of favour with Lussurioso, and has now been engaged, in his own person, to murder the fictional servant. Since he and Hippolito already have a body on their hands – that of the Duke – they decide to make use of it by dressing it up as Piato (transformation of identity once again) and re-murdering it in front of Lussurioso. Vindice rejoices irrepressibly in the comic ironies of the situation:

That’s a good lay, for I must kill myself. Brother, that’s I, that sits for me. Do you mark it? And I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder – I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself. I could vary it not so little as thrice over again; ’t has some eight returns, like Michaelmas term. (V. i. 1-10)

Vindice continues to milk the comedy of the situation in a number of chuckling asides, and the stabbing is still more comic than the original murder itself, with echoes of the earlier scene of mistaken identity regarding the severed head:

**VINDICE.** Sa, sa, sa; thump. There he lies.
**LUSSURIOSO.** Nimbly done. Ha! O, villains, murderers,
’Tis the old Duke my father!
**VINDICE.** That’s a jest. (63-5)

The network of mistaken identity – which continues beyond Lussurioso’s realisation of the identity of the corpse – is truly farcical, and the absurdities are exploited to the greatest degree, as in *Loot* when Mrs McLeavy is found stripped and bandaged and Hal is punningly unable to tell a lie:
Once again, the double killing – with the victim dead, then ‘alive’, then dead again –
gestures towards a certain stubborn resilience on the part of the prey, questioning the
finality of death. In this respect it is a variation on the ‘sham death’, discussed below
(p. 163). Yet the re-murdering of a corpse is the ultimate abuse of the dead, the
ultimate exploitation of the body’s lack of autonomy. The mock revival of a dead
body only to murder it a second time is a macabre joke that only serves to reconfirm
the inevitability of death.

The logical conclusion of this extreme loss of autonomy is complete loss of identity
– the ultimate ‘personal meaninglessness’. Again, Jacobean and 1960s black farce
express this change in graphically physical terms. After death the body breaks down
and loses its individuality, creating only stench and slime. Barnes’ Lady Claire ‘lies
stinking . . . turning to slime . . . She’s puss [sic], Doctor, stinking puss, Doctor!’,
while Bracciano is reduced to the status of animal: he will ‘stink / Like a dead fly-
blown dog.’29 Spirit and intellect are lost: ‘look how his brains drop out on’s nose,’
observes Ithamore of the dead Friar Bernardine (The Jew of Malta, IV. i. 177-78).
Like the dismemberment of the body, these images emphasise man’s vulnerability and
insignificance; according to Bristol, the decomposition of the corpse reveals that
‘Identity is a mere surface artifact’, as when the Gravedigger in Hamlet quite
arbitrarily identifies an anonymous skull as belonging to Yorick:

29The Ruling Class, p. 110; The White Devil, V. iii. 166-67.
The old jester is dead, but laughing matter is indestructible; the ‘dead’ mock the ‘living’, by revealing the transience of distinct identity. The contemplation of mortality becomes funny. (p. 192)

In the tradition of Bakhtin and his theory of the carnivalesque self, Bristol throughout stresses the celebratory nature of such transience. In Bakhtin’s model, ‘Death begins nothing decisive, and ends nothing decisive, in the collective and historical world of human life.’30 Bristol’s discussion, however, does not fail to acknowledge that ‘death is fundamentally ambiguous’ (p. 196), and that the emphasis of that ambiguity depends entirely upon one’s perspective. Whereas the communal point of view ‘disrupts’ with laughter ‘the solemnity and fear connected with death by drawing attention to the experience of the body and to the continuity of the collective life’ (p. 180), therefore, from the individual point of view, ‘dissolution of individuality’ (p. 193) is horrific (hence its ‘admonitory’ power [pp. 188, 195]). Black farce presents both points of view simultaneously, hence revealing both its despair and its exhilaration.

As well as articulating the reduction of the self to decomposing garbage, the Jacobean and 1960s images of the decay of the body have further significance. Firstly, they are in line with the medieval rejection of the physical body as part of the related memento mori and de contemptu mundi traditions, probably arising from Ecclesiasticus XXVIII. 6: ‘Remember corruption and death, and keep thyself from sinning.’31 The declining spiritual power of the memento mori, however, gives way to the second significance of the decaying body, as a symbol of a crumbling society and a decaying world. ‘All things come to corruption,’ Gottleb recognises in Barnes’
Death!

Laughter!, ‘our bodies too: corruption’ (p. 380). This symbolism is made more explicit by Thomas Dekker, who links the accession of James I with the arrival of the plague, when London became ‘a vast, silent charnel-house’ and England itself an ailing body, suddenly violated; both living writer and dying country are expressed in terms of the grotesque body when Dekker laments how ‘the bowels of my sick country have been torn.’

Likewise Henry Reynolds, accounting for the decay in poetry in 1633, describes the world as a diseased and dying body:

... the world is decrepit, and, out of its age & doating estate, subject to all the imperfections that are inseparable from that wracke and maime of Nature.... Euen the generall Soule of this great Creature, whereof every one of ours is a seuerall peace, seemes bedrid, as upon her deathbed and neere the time of her dissolution ....; the yeares of her strength are past, and she is now nothing but disease, for the Soules health is no other than meerely the knowledge of the Truth of things.

Orton uses the same convention in his novel Head to Toe, where the world – a giant’s body – has in fact perished, and the corpse is the ultimate corrupt society where optimism is akin to blindness:

The prospect of living on a corpse did not affect many people. Indeed there were those who maintained the giant was not dead. Presented with the rotting flesh and the presence of maggots where once had been pleasant acres, they spoke in terms of temporary phenomena.

... the days passed and the hairs shrivelled up, the skin peeled from the bones and signs of decay began to be all too apparent ...

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31 Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sira (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939).
Like the world of Dekker and Reynolds, Orton’s is sinking into putrefaction: ‘these are grave times, killing times,’ agrees the Earl of Gurney in *The Ruling Class* (p. 117). Not only is man insignificant and vulnerable; he is also part of a society that is itself decaying and breaking down.

An inevitable consequence of this breakdown of the body/self and of society is that the position of the self within society is also lost. The general disintegration of social difference, with ‘Money and unscrupulous skill . . . upsetting traditional stabilities and expectations’, was yet another source of both despair and exhilaration in the early seventeenth century and the 1960s; and its appearance in the realm of death expresses that dichotomy precisely. When Lussurioso is tricked, through the transformation of the Duke’s identity in death, into calling ‘his father slave’, Vindice reacts with glee (*The Revenger’s Tragedy*, V. i. 40); in death, the Duke loses not only his authority as father but also his status as Duke. In *The Erpingham Camp*, Chief Redcoat Riley revels in the death of his tyrannical employer with a mock display of respect and a parody of Erpingham’s own love of petty hierarchy and power (in a further example of the impertinent address to the ‘living corpse’):

Your tie is crooked. I’ll straighten it before I go. (*He straightens ERPINGHAM’s tie.*) I’ll have this as a relic. (*He takes the gardenia from ERPINGHAM’s buttonhole.*) I’ll arrange a Class A (Higher Employee) wreath, sir. I hope that will be all right? (pp. 319-20)

This is the ‘vindictive sense of pleasure and satisfaction . . . in relation to the funerals of the great and powerful’ identified by Bristol (p. 196). As part of the loss of individuality, the dissolution of social differences is celebratory: as Hamlet’s remarks

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on the death of Polonius show, ‘murder “Carnivalizes” social difference and turns a
person into “laughing matter” . . . ; pride, arrogance and authority are all overthrown
by death’ (pp. 188, 195). Yet the dissolution is also part of the traumatic loss of
identity, the ‘the dread of personal meaninglessness’ associated with death. It is akin
to the ridicule of Gloriana and Mrs McLeavy; like their piety and chastity, social
status is now irrelevant and hence no longer elicits respect. Neither mother nor lover,
father nor employer is exempt from the levelling, transformative power of death; and
that fact is the occasion for both laughter and fear.

A final ramification of the themes of loss and transformation of identity is the
inherently comic device of mistaken identity, already encountered in the contrived
mistaking of the dead Duke for the living (and fictional) ‘slave’ Piato in The
Revenger’s Tragedy. Further confirmation of identity as ‘mere surface artifact’ is
achieved through the fact that not only can death result in mistaken identity, but
mistaken identity can also – in true black farce style – result in death, as it does for
Antonio in The Duchess of Malfi, who laments that he only has ‘thy benefit in death, /
To appear myself’ (V. iv. 48-49).36 For Bosola, this is confirmation of man’s
insignificance, as he famously mourns:

We are merely the stars’ tennis-balls, struck and banded
Which way please them . . . . (53-54)

Human identity, Bosola has learned, is as arbitrary and irrelevant as the identity of an
individual tennis ball. Yet while this scene merely edges towards the farcical in its
clumsy night-time mix-up, Nichols uses the same device for full-blown farcical effect

36Kathleen McLuskie and Jennifer Uglow remark in the Plays in Performance edition of The
Duchess of Malfi (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989) that in the Manchester Royal Exchange’s
1980 production, ‘Bob Hoskins gave full vent to the black farce of Bosola’s mistake and the line
[“Antonio?”] raised a laugh which was nonetheless completely under Hoskins’ control’ (p. 195).
in *Privates on Parade* – with added triumph provided by the fact that the victim is hoist with his own petard. Nichols thus reduces the pathos while stepping up the horror, as Reg's plot to murder his rival Steve backfires and he is bayoneted by his own henchmen. The resulting confusion, compounded by a night-time monsoon, is both farcical and horrific:

CHENG comes the other side and calls to LEE. They go off into the jungle.

STEVE. Halt or I – blow my whistle! (Moves after them but falls over REG’s body.) Who’s that? Reg! What’s up? . . . (Touches him, finds wound, looks at his bloody hand.) Christ!

. . .

ERIC comes on, naked but for his boots, but with a gun.

ERIC. What’s the palaver? Swindon, is that you?

STEVE. Love, over here! What you doing bollock-naked?

ERIC. I’ve been standing in the monsoon rain trying to cure my prickly heat.

. . .

STEVE. Take his feet.

ERIC. He’s bleeding. Lord, he’s covered in blood.

STEVE. Stop nattering, for Christ’s sake!

ERIC. I can hardly see with all this rain on my glasses. All right, Chiefy, nil desperandum . . . you’ll be all right. (pp. 160-1)

Steve’s naïve clumsiness, Eric’s incongruous and eccentric nakedness and his inane chatter are accompanied by the pumping blood and dying mutterings of Reg, along with the unwitting irony of Steve’s desperation to save his would-be murderer. Here, Reg is satisfyingly killed in the place of his target, whereas in Webster’s play *Bosola* kills ‘The man I would have sav’d ’bove mine own life’ (V. iv. 52); in both cases the characters’ fatal loss of identity in the darkness foreshadows their permanent loss of identity in the earth.

The deaths of Bergetto in *'Tis Pity She’s a Whore* and George in Livings’ *Good Grief!*, also as a result of mistaken identity in night-time scuffles, are particularly significant in the context of black farce, in that their nature as comic characters makes their deaths jar, causing shock and distress without diminishing their farcical status.
Bergetto dies as a result of Grimaldi’s mistaking him for his rival, Soranzo, and his death is comically and scatologically grotesque:

O help, help! Here’s a stitch fallen in my guts. O for a flesh-tailor quickly!

I am sure I cannot piss forward and backward, and yet I am wet before and behind.

O my belly seethes like a porridge-pot; some cold water, I shall boil over else; my whole body is in a sweat, that you may wring my shirt; feel here – Why, Poggio!

Is all this mine own blood? Nay then, good night with me. . . O! – I am going the wrong way sure, my belly aches so. – O, farewell, Poggio! – O! – O! –

Dies

Such language, as Peter Davison states in his study of the popular tradition in the theatre, ‘strips his death of any shred of dignity. The humour is ridiculously comic, yet this is also a moment of pathos, as Poggio’s grief for him underlines. And underlying the ridiculous comedy is vividly physical horror: in Bergetto’s few, intensely physical lines we have guts, flesh, urine, belly, sweat and blood all gushing and collapsing as he expires.

In Livings’ Good Grief! George, like Bergetto, is simply not a character serious enough for anyone to wish to kill; he too is attacked in the dark as a result of mistaken identity. And as with Bergetto, his language does not shift into a tragic key; his earlier comic ramblings simply become the circling thoughts of a man on the edge of death, the absurdity due to the fact that ‘part of my head’s gone away’:

The end of the tunnel’s getting small, perhaps I’m dying. I wouldn’t mind that. Off the stretch, have a good sleep.

(The MAN pads his hand about the DOUBLE’S chest, looking for his heart. GEORGE is filled with sudden alarm.)

\footnote{37John Ford, *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, ed. Brian Morris (London: A. & C. Black [New Mermaids], 1968), III. vii. 8-12; 18-20; 30-34.}

\footnote{38Popular Appeal in English Drama to 1850 (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 86.}
There’s some damn thing on my chest . . . something ah . . . ah . . . heavy and warm over my damn heart. Ach! Ach! Why can’t I move? Why the hell can’t I move?

Round and round go the lights, whizz and small and smaller and smaller. Wonder if I’ll ever wake up? Hurgh! This is ending in a funny way isn’t it? (pp. 21-2)

George’s final, metadramatic line (surprising and funny in itself) concisely expresses the effect of the death of clowns such as himself and Bergetto; they are funny in both senses of the word: strange and amusing, comic but unsettling. ‘The death of clowns is unexpected,’ writes Davison. ‘They should have at least the licence to jest in drama that they do in a royal court’ (Popular Appeal, p. 85). The death of a visitor from a genre where ‘death is never taken seriously or even considered as a serious threat’ seems somehow unfair, and hence all the more affecting. And in its comic grotesqueness, it is an important example of Jacobean and 1960s black farce.

The device of hoisting characters with their own petards departs a little from the theme of mistaken identity, for its dramatic justice and the directness of its backfire against the would-be perpetrator is somewhat less arbitrary than the random death of a clown caught up in danger that he does not understand. Nevertheless, it belongs firmly within black farce, as the triumphant laughter that arises from the symmetrical rebounding of the villain’s plot is combined with a vivid horror in the death itself, as the death of Reg in Privates on Parade has shown. The Cardinal in The Duchess of Malfi likewise unknowingly sets up his own doom, when he tries to prevent the courtiers from discovering him moving Julia’s body by insisting that they must not come near the place in question, even if he cries out to test them. Accordingly, when Bosola comes to kill him and he screams for help, the Cardinal is ‘threatened by black
comedy’ (Pearson, p. 91) as the courtiers provide a comic commentary upon his murder:

MALATESTE. Listen.
CARDINAL. My dukedom for a rescue!
RODERIGO. Fie upon his counterfeiting.
MALATESTE. Why, 'tis not the Cardinal.
RODERIGO. Yes, yes, 'tis he:
But I'll see him hang'd, ere I'll go down to him.
CARDINAL. Here's a plot upon me; I am assaulted. I am lost,
Unless some rescue!
GRISOLAN. He doth this pretty well:
But it will not serve to laugh me out of mine honour.
CARDINAL. The sword's at my throat!
RODERIGO. You would not bawl so loud then. (V. v. 18-26)

For fear that the Cardinal will mock their broken promise, the courtiers fail to save him and he dies amid two tiers of laughter: the courtiers' amusement at his ingenious 'counterfeiting' and the audience's laughter at the pleasurable irony he has created.

‘He has himself prepared his own trap-door / And greased his easy hinge,’ said John Arden’s Sir Harold Sweetman of Alderman Butterthwaite in the 1964 Workhouse Donkey.⁴⁰ And indeed, in these plays this is more than mere metaphor: the Jew of Malta tumbles into his own boiling cauldron in Marlowe’s ‘savagely comic coup de théâtre’,⁴¹ while in Women Beware Women, Guardiano likewise falls through his own trapdoor when his plot against Hippolito rebounds upon him; the odious Erpingham dies in a similarly appropriate style, falling through the ceiling onto a dancing couple.

These deaths are truly blackly farcical in their equivocal symbolism. Each fall inevitably bears with it not only the exuberant image of a gratifying descent from pride

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and power (a ‘grand splash . . . for our theatrical pleasure’), but also the infernal symbolism of a descent into hell; even Erpingham’s fall is explicitly contrasted with Christ’s ascent into heaven (p. 318). But despite such allusions the emphasis is – as ever – upon the physical rather than the spiritual. In a suitably festive image, Erpingham kills a dancing couple in his fall (‘There’s blood all over the place’ [p. 317]), while Barabas’s pain hovers ambiguously between the body and the soul:

But now begins the extremity of heat
To pinch me with intolerable pangs . . . (The Jew of Malta, V. v. 86-87)

While the cauldron is long acknowledged as providing a doubly appropriate death for Barabas, ‘devil’ and poisoner, it is also, as Erich Segal has pointed out, ‘an ancient comic prop’ which rejuvenated Demos in Aristophanes’ The Knights. This rejuvenating capacity complicates our response to Barabas’s death, particularly in the light of what has gone before:

Given his record for resurrections, we may not even be quite sure, when Barabas finally falls into his own trap, that this is the end for him until he himself finally concedes the point . . .

Once again, death is made ambiguous and the possibility of evasion is raised, only to be discarded in laughter. Death and new life are linked, through the equivocal symbolism of the cauldron and the earlier, ‘temporary’ death.

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43 For a summary of the various allusions provided by the prop, see for example Douglas Cole, Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), p. 129.
45 Jones, p. 95. On the device of the sham death, see below, p. 163.
The dreaded threat to the self being so great in the deaths of both Jacobean and 1960s characters, it is hardly surprising that these characters should make desperate — if ultimately futile — attempts to conquer death. And their most common weapon is laughter, combined with intense self-assertion. According to Bakhtin, laughter has the power to ‘defeat death’ (Rabelais, p. 299), but as we have already seen, this is only true from the communal perspective — a perspective which is utterly surpassed in these plays by the traumatic emphasis upon the individual. More appropriate in this context is Bristol’s statement that ‘low comedy . . . disrupts the solemnity and fear connected with death’ (p. 180; italics mine), without destroying death altogether. Nothing has the power to banish death for the individual, and the agony of that fact is articulated through the characters’ defiant yet ultimately futile attempts at self-assertion through laughter — defiance that, with its subversion of the gravity of death — outstrips even the tragic declaration of the ‘I am Duchess of Malfi still’ kind (IV. ii. 139). The examples of Flamineo and Flote have already been quoted: both characters defy their murderers and disrupt their own death scenes with their laughter. As Jacqueline Pearson acknowledges, Flamineo and Vittoria ‘express their own control through purposive flippancy and laughter’: when Lodovico reminds Flamineo of their last meeting — ‘a meeting which was surrounded by laughter’ — in the line ‘Sirrah you did strike me once’ (V. vi. 190), ‘Flamineo now asserts his control by echoing this self-assertive, self-mocking laughter. Lodovico is nonplussed: “Dost laugh?” (V. vi. 194) he asks’ (p. 79). Nearer his end, Flamineo explicitly asserts the individuality of death:

I do not look
Who went before, nor who shall follow me;
No, at myself I will begin and end . . . (V. vi. 256-57)
The laughter of Flamineo and Flote is what Romeo calls the ‘light’ning before death’, while in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy characters by convention live most fully in the moment of death – a moment of Aristotelian ‘recognition’ – because they are suddenly acutely aware of all that has previously been hidden from them (‘man’s understanding / Is riper at his fall than all his lifetime’ [Women Beware Women, V. ii. 152-53]), the compounding of that moment with laughter is a paradoxical attempt to reject death altogether. For Bracciano in The White Devil, recognition and laughter come together in death; as his eyes are opened in the delirium of his poisoned state to the absurd folly of the court, he dies laughing as if he had ‘swallowed down a pound of saffron’ (V. iii. 198). It is a moment analogous to the Hippocratic death throes described by Bakhtin as ‘a moment of life’; ‘Death from laughter is one of the forms of gay death’ (Rabelais, pp. 359, 408). Yet through their very attempts at self-assertion as *individuals*, these characters by definition remove themselves from the festive, unending ‘cycle of life’ that denies the finality of death. Ultimately, then, all of these characters acknowledge the final victory of death – and the horror of that victory for the individual. At the end, Bracciano’s laughter is not delighted but tortured; as he dies, his murderers taunt him with his loss of all claim to individual human significance, telling him that he will ‘die like a poor rogue’ (thus losing his social status), ‘stink / Like a dead fly-blown dog’ (thus losing both his humanity and bodily identity); ‘And be forgotten / Before thy funeral sermon’ (thus losing his significance within human relationships [V. iii. 166-68]). Flamineo cries ‘O, I am in a mist’ (260); and Flote too, though insisting on standing his ground and
dancing in the face of death, declares ‘It’s hard to die. Only the young talk of that easy leap into death’ (p. 113).

The Bakhtinian ‘moment of life’, then, is just that – a moment – followed by the end. This transience is illustrated most powerfully in the device of the ‘sham death’: a ‘confrontational’ device which manipulates and cheats audience response in a manner similar to that of the stage properties of violence discussed in the previous chapter. Here the playwright deliberately activates the audience’s tragic response, only to thwart it with a moment of uproarious comedy (‘the comic pleasure of the impossible made palpable’) when the death turns out to be a ‘preposterous charade’ – before presenting us with the real death, to which our reactions are inevitably confused.47 This is particularly true, once again, of Flamineo, a blackly farcical character who continually ‘bewilders our responses’48 – but nowhere more so than in his creation of his own sham death, which deceives both the audience and his would-be murderers.

Faustus, Barabas and Flamineo all play out their own deaths in this manner: Faustus as an idle trick, as discussed in the previous chapter; Barabas as a means of escaping punishment in court; and Flamineo as confirmation of his suspicions of Vittoria. Barabas’s pretence is an example of what Bristol calls ‘burlesque resurrection’ (the ‘tactic of sham-death in favor of preserving one’s life’, as in Locrine and 1 Henry IV [p. 180]); and in a sense, so are the other two: Faustus is playing with death in some sort of vain attempt to convince himself of his own power over it, while Flamineo is pre-empting Vittoria’s attack on him in an attempt at self-preservation. According to

Bristol, the burlesque resurrection is 'is a crude schematization of continuity achieved by the temporary evasion of death' – the continuity envisaged by Bakhtin, where 'death brings nothing to an end'.49 Certainly, as Cunningham argues, each of these false deaths 'contributes to our sense of the characters' irrepressible vitality; ... Marlowe's tricksters achieve a mythic status and overflow human boundaries by appearing to overcome death' (p. 217); but the key words in both Bristol and Cunningham's accounts are 'temporary' and 'appearing'. Death, as J. R. Mulryne states, is 'the one inescapable fact in [The White Devil's] chaotic world' (p. 212); and B. J. Layman, also discussing the death of Flamineo, agrees:

... even in his moment of triumph he is outmaneuvered by the revengers, and his act becomes only the dress rehearsal of the real dying which swiftly follows.

(p. 338)

The 'dress rehearsal' analogy is particularly appropriate for, like Marlowe when he scatters the previously false limbs of Faustus around his room after his real death, Webster chooses to complicate our response to Flamineo's death further by deliberately recalling the sham with the line 'I recover like a spent taper for a flash / And instantly go out' (V. vi. 263-64). This is, in fact, the final flash of Flamineo's 'irrepressible vitality'; but Webster insists on questioning that fact right up until the last moment, when finality takes over.

The sham death is not employed so explicitly by the 1960s dramatists, but in A Day in the Death of Joe Egg Nichols obliquely achieves the same effect when Bri tells his wife and friends of the fit that their handicapped daughter had when he was alone with her:

BRI. When the fit was over I propped her in her chair and stood behind her and put a cushion over her mouth and nose and kept them there while I counted a hundred. There was no struggle or anything. It seemed very—peaceful.

The others are watching him, motionless. Pause.

SHEILA. What?...
PAM. God!

BRI. When it was all over I took the cushion away and. . . . I said, 'Nurse, you have seen nothing. We are in this together' . . . I looked up to see the nurse throw off her cape revealing the burly figure of Sergeant Blake, Scotland Yard.

SHEILA (relieved). Honestly, Brian!

BRI. You almost believed me, didn't you?

FREDDIE. No almost. I did. (p. 76)

The situation in *Joe Egg* is considerably more complex than that of any of the Jacobean sham deaths. Bri's story is an experiment; he appears to be gauging his wife's reaction, for he does in fact later attempt to kill Joe — and the implied tragedy in this play is that he fails. 'Irrepressible vitality' or triumph over death are hardly relevant here. But what Bri's speech has in common with the play-acting of Faustus, Barabas and Flamineo is, above all, the deliberate manipulation and frustration of audience response. Like his Jacobean predecessors, Nichols breaks the mood quite brutally, making the revelation of the pretence specifically comic with his incongruous introduction of a detective story parody. And in none of these glorious shams does the laughter come easily or without the inevitable undercurrent of doubt and horror.

Death is a moment of life in a further, still more complex sense in Jacobean and 1960s scenes of black farce. It is, in a way, an extension of the theme of violence as self-assertion discussed in the previous chapter; just as the victims live most intensely at the moment of their death, so too do the perpetrators. This is particularly true of exuberant revengers such as Vindice and Barabas — but most explicitly the Earl of Gurney in Barnes' *The Ruling Class*. The Earl responds to Claire's Faust-like

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entreaty to ‘Stop talking, Jack, and make me immortal with a kiss’ by stabbing her in a horrific parody of the sexual act, yelling: ‘AHHHRRREEEE. I’M ALIVE. ALIVE’ (p. 99), as if to illustrate Artaud’s dictum that ‘being alive always means the death of someone else.’

This was a central concept in the Theatre of Cruelty, as Stephen Barber explains in his study of Artaud:

Just as the current Parisian theatre would have to be destroyed for Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty to emerge, so the term ‘cruelty’ encapsulated the tight rapport between life and death . . . .

Though Artaud was far from sharing the utopian vision of death expressed by Bakhtin in Rabelais and his World, he articulated a similar belief in death as a force of continuity, aiming at a ‘metaphysics of disaster’ in which ‘the beginning would be the end’. ‘[D]estruction is a transforming force,’ he wrote. ‘Life maintains its continuity by means of the transformation of the appearances of being.’ Thus it is that characters like the Earl gain sustenance from death; Lodovico, for example, ‘like the black and melancholic yew tree,’ roots himself ‘in dead men’s graves’ (The White Devil, IV. iii. 120-21), while murder feeds ‘The famine of our vengeance’ (V. vi. 201). Death is, as in the Porter scene in Macbeth as analysed by Bristol, ‘linked . . . to images of the fecundating processes of eating and sexuality that bring forth new life’ (p. 185). It is part of the Bakhtinian theme of ‘death-renewal-fertility’ as expressed in Rabelais’ image of ‘the earth, imbued with the blood of the just, [that] was one year extremely fertile in all fruits’ (Rabelais, p. 317). Once again, then, the

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possibility of continuity is offered: here, the murderer attempts to join the never-ending 'cycle of life' by participating in someone else's death and ecstatically identifying themselves, through their imagery of sex and eating, with the 'other side': 'birth, change, renewal' (Rabelais, pp. 407, 409). Sex, in particular, is the ultimate death-defying gesture, as Leslie Smith's interpretation of Loot's 'exploration of our fears about death' confirms:

In effect, this side of the play joyously asserts life in the presence of death, offers a merry catharsis, cocks a ribald snook at funeral rites and customs . . .  

Yet as ever, this possibility of continuity is countered by the reminder of the inevitability of individual death. Indeed, the association of death with sex and birth can itself be a *memento mori*, reminding not of the continuity of life but of the inevitability of death. Weber lists several sixteenth-century images in which Death strangles a lover while his mistress flees or threateningly approaches a prostrate woman whose lover lies dead on the floor (p. 130). In addition, Weber reprints *memento mori* designs by Barthel Beham in which a baby is juxtaposed with an hourglass and human skulls, reminding us that 'Death borders upon our birth, and our cradle stands in the grave' (p. 131). Thus while in Artaud's and Bakhtin's overlapping models, death gives rise to sustenance and renewal of life, black farce reminds that sex, birth and the other 'fecundating processes' equally give rise to a death that may well be more final than the 'cycle' theory allows. Barnet's routine as he lays out a corpse in Nichols' *The National Health* expresses this precisely, in a grotesque, sexual and scatological reduction of the body to 'thing' that simultaneously asserts life and laughter:
... Now the cotton-wool. Can anyone tell me what I do with that? (Reacts to same woman in the audience.) You’re right, madam, absolutely right. Been making that answer all your life and for the first time it’s accurate, not just vulgar. Yes. We have to close the apertures, the points that might evacuate bodily fluids. Miss one out, they’ll raise Cain in the mortuary. Lug-holes, cake-holes, nose-holes, any other holes, all right madam thank you very much indeed! (More ogling the woman.) What next? Tie the how’s-your-father with a reef-knot. Seriously. You reckon I’m in jest? You’ll all be getting it sooner or later. (p. 157)

Commenting on the music-hall style of Barnet’s performance, Peter Davison reveals how Barnet confirms the inevitability of death:

Barnet’s routine has, like a magician’s patter, covered a vanishing trick, but this time there is no return of the body.55

There could be nothing closer to a modern memento mori, indeed, than the bald truth: ‘You’ll all be getting it sooner or later.’ Davison notes how this, Nichols’ ‘most uncompromising play, [is] a work very much in the tradition of the bitter satires of the Jacobean period in tone, technique and deaths,’ adding that The Revenger’s Tragedy – the play which uses the memento mori tradition more explicitly than most – ‘springs to mind’ (p. 125). Furthermore, the image of the knotted ‘how’s-your-father’ is a quite definite rejection of the ‘fecundating’ possibility of death, like the death of Ophelia which not only foregrounds concern for the individual as opposed to the community, but also, admits Bristol, ‘proscribes marriage and forestalls the possibility of emergent life’ (p. 193).

As if to strengthen their desperate conviction that murder is a source of life, many Jacobean and 1960s villains pour an intense creativity into their acts of death, making a work of art out of destroying another human life. In the previous chapter we discussed the possibility of violence as artistic creativity; here it is literalised in the

form of what Maurice Charney calls ‘esthetic villainy’, endowed with ‘an inventiveness and dramatic energy that go far beyond any minimum requirements.’ Cunningham has discussed the ‘dramatic flair’ of Tamburlaine, Barabas and Lightborn in their stylistic approaches to murder (pp. 215-16), but they are not alone: in The White Devil, for instance, we have a doctor whose repertoire is still more impressive than Lightborn’s:

He will shoot pills into a man’s guts, shall make them have more ventages than a cornet or a lamprey; he will poison a kiss, and was once minded, for his masterpiece, because Ireland breeds no poison, to have prepared a deadly vapour in a Spaniard’s fart that should have poison’d all Dublin. (II. i. 299-304)

‘Esthetic villainy’ is present also when Bracciano approves of the murder of Camillo (‘’Twas quaintly done’ [II. ii. 38]), just as Lodovico, in turn, will later rhapsodise about the array of possible methods for the murder of Bracciano himself (V. i. 69-77).

Lodovico’s desire is for originality and a kind of witty aptness, way beyond mere revenge; and it is shared by Vindice, whose ‘malice’ is applauded for its ‘quaintness’ by Hippolito, and whose self-congratulatory joy in the inventive appropriateness of his murder of the Duke leads to his fatal boast: ‘’twas somewhat witty carried, though we say it. ’Twas we two murdered him’ (The Revenger’s Tragedy, III. v. 109; V. iii. 97-98).

Prominent in the joyous creativity of ‘esthetic villainy’ is the exuberant ‘fantasy of death’, indulged in as the plotters design the perfect murder. But the fantasy of death is far more universal than ‘esthetic villainy’, extending the aestheticism of killing beyond murderers to every possible character type. Bracciano, for example, creates

57Cunningham’s phrase, used in relation to Barabas and Lightborn (p. 215).
death

the following grotesque image - that of a human body shredded and cast into the
orifice of another - not for one of his enemies but for his lover, on discovering that
she has been sent a supposed love letter by Francisco:

Ud’s death, I’ll cut her into atomies
And let th’irregular north-wind sweep her up
And blow her int’ his nostrils. (IV. ii. 42-4)

In reality, this ingenious image is part of what Flamineo calls ‘a little sport’
(IV. ii. 160); by the end of the scene, Bracciano and Vittoria’s disagreement (‘A full
cry for a quarter of an hour’ [161]) is over and they are reconciled again. Still more
incongruous is the way in which the virtuous victim Isabella seizes her opportunity,
provided by the self-sacrificing game she devises, to indulge in this form of sadistic
mental gratification:

To dig the strumpet’s eyes out, let her lie
Some twenty months a-dying, to cut off
Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth,
Preserve her flesh like mummia, for trophies
Of my just anger! (II. i. 246-50)

In the 1960s, Barnes’ characters create their own visualisations in no less loving
detail. Tucker, the subversive malcontent of The Ruling Class, imagines his revenge
on the rich as follows:

I know one percent of the population owns half the property in England. That
vomity ‘one per cent’ needs kosher killing, hung up so the blue blood drains out
slow and easy. Aristocratic carcasses hung up like kosher beef drip-drip-drip.

(p. 107)

Like Isabella’s fantasy murder, Tucker’s is painfully slow, ironically appropriate and
humiliating to the victim. Conversely, the Earl is capable of still more vivid
imaginings in relation to Tucker’s own class, when he is ingratiating himself with the
ladies of the parish:
In the old days the Executioner kept the forelock-touching ranks in order. When he stood on the gallows, stripped to the waist, tight breeches, black hood, you knew God was in his heaven, all's right with the world. The punishment for blaspheming was to be broken on the wheel. First the fibula. (Mimes bringing down an iron bar.) Cr-a-a-ck. Then the tibia, patella and femur. Crack, crack, crack. The corpus, ulna and radius, crack. 'Disconnect dem bones, dem dry bones, Disconnect dem bones dem dry bones. Now hear the word of the Lord.'

*Irresistibly the two women join in.* (p. 94)

This is perhaps the most detailed of the fantasies, right down to the destruction of individual bones – and indeed the most implicitly sexual, in the description of the executioner – but it is also the most comic, developing as it does into a song-and-dance routine that corrupts the words of an innocent song. 'Esthetic villainy' and the fantasy of death, then, are extensions of death as a sustaining and exuberant 'moment of life' for the perpetrator rather than the victim, and arise from the same need: to use and 'control' death in order to assert life. As we have shown, the attempt to manipulate death only serves to confirm death's inevitable finality: the death of others may be a source of temporary vitality – and indeed laughter – for the living, but death also hovers threateningly over every life-giving act.

Death's triumphant place within black farce, then, arises from the uncertainties and conflicting traditions surrounding the subject in the late Renaissance and the 1960s. In the early seventeenth century, the decline of Christian faith and the ambivalence regarding the *memento mori* tradition is combined with the rise of the *memento vivere* ideal and an increasing emphasis upon the individual in death. In the 1960s, the hardening of the taboos surrounding death exists alongside both increasing titillation and increasing honesty about the subject. Consequently, the two periods share a deep ambivalence towards death, combined with an exuberantly horrific emphasis on the body rather than the soul. The paradoxes of death are probed and exploited by the
Death

contradictory genre of Jacobean and 1960s black farce. The corpse – strongly associated with the self – is alternately living and dead, human and 'thing'; farce is created by the body's automaton-like powerlessness, while despair is acknowledged at the loss of personal identity that this implies. The body is reduced to unidentifiable slime; social distinctions are lost; identity shifts and is made arbitrary; and all this is greeted with exhilaration and horror. By extension, the corruption of the body implies the corruption of society; the whole world disintegrates and decays to the sound of horrified laughter. The finality of death is repeatedly questioned, as boundaries between life and death are pushed at and tested. Laughter and self-assertion attempt to defeat death; the apparently dead come back to life; murder becomes an art form in an attempt to salvage some creativity from the destruction of human life. Throughout all this, death and laughter are brought together in the most grotesque and unsettling ways. Black farce is a genre of 'irrepressible vitality', to borrow Cunningham's description of Marlowe's characters, in which life and laughter constantly bubble through the stench and corruption of death. In Bakhtin's Rabelaisian utopia, one might not know whether to laugh or cry when death and life are brought together in this way, but ultimately 'the joy of renewal prevails' (Rabelais, p. 407). In Jacobean and 1960s black farce, no such triumph can be relied upon. Laughter may still be ringing in our ears when the end arrives, but it is met with horror in equal measure.
5  We may get necrophilia too. 
As a sort of bonus.

SEX

If death is a storm, a mist and a whirling tunnel in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, then sex is, in the word of both Webster and a sociologist of the 1960s, a ‘wilderness’.¹ While the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries faced a ‘complex controversy over changing sexual values’, the 1960s saw a development of ‘the marked increase in public concern with sex’ that had emerged at the end of the previous decade.² The dramatisation of this sexual anxiety appeared in the form of comically violent, grotesque and degrading erotic activity that belongs to black farce.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Britain – and, in particular, London – was perceived to indulge in such ‘joie de vivre and such liberal customs’ that it was viewed with some fascination by visitors from the Continent, who noted the amusement that was to be had ‘with eating, drinking, fiddling and the rest’, as well

¹The Duchess of Malfi, on the point of proposing to Antonio, describes herself as ‘going into a wilderness, / Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew / To be my guide’ (I. ii. 278-30). This is interpreted by Laura L. Behling as the ‘“wilderness” of sexual depravity . . . of gender and sexual exchange’ (“S/he scandles our proceedings”: The Anxiety of Alternative Sexualities in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, English Language Notes, 33, no. 4 [June 1996], p. 33).
Sociologist Vance Packard called the contemporary sexual scene – ‘too chaotic and varied to describe just yet as a revolution’ – a ‘sexual wilderness’ in his book of the same name (The Sexual Wilderness [London: Longmans, 1968], p. 17).
as the ‘great liberty’ apparently afforded to women. According to Johannes Fabricius, ‘The new spirit of adventure and conquest’ of the early Renaissance ‘was set against a permissive society which enjoyed a freedom between the sexes not realized since antiquity’:

The bath houses at the end of the 15th century in which men and women bathed naked together are a monument to this sexual freedom of Renaissance man, which was reflected in a widespread promiscuity at all levels of society. Even the clergy participated in these liberal mores, with the popes of the Renaissance giving the lead. (p. 17)

An account of 1606 by Sir John Harington of a court entertainment representing Solomon’s Temple is a vivid illustration of the ‘beastly delights’ indulged in by English nobles. In sheer horror at the abandonment of modesty between the sexes, Harington describes how the ‘Queen of Sheba’ tripped, spilled all her gifts in the lap of the visiting Danish King and fell at his feet (‘though I rather think it was in his face’):

His Majesty then got up and would dance with the Queen of Sheba; but he fell down and humbled himself before her, and was carried to an inner chamber and laid on a bed of state; which was not a little defiled with the presents of the Queen which had been bestowed on his garments; such as wine, cream, jelly, beverage, cakes, spices, and other good matters. The entertainment and show went forward, and most of the presenters went backward, or fell down; wine did so occupy their upper chambers.

The tale continues with various episodes of debauchery, including Faith, Hope and Charity becoming incoherent and ending up ‘sick and spewing in the lower hall’ (p. 351). Harington’s tone of disapproval at this ‘lack of good order, discretion and

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4Letter to Mr Secretary Barlow, in Nugae Antiquae: being a miscellaneous collection of original papers in prose and verse, written during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary, Elizabeth, and King James (London: Vernor & Hood, 1804), p. 350.
sobriety’ illustrates how, by the early seventeenth century, doubts about the social acceptability of such unconstrained behaviour between the sexes had grown (p. 352). During the Elizabethan period there was, as Mark Breitenberg notes, a ‘growing perception that sexual behaviour required greater regulation and attention’, illustrated by a significant increase in prosecutions for sexual crimes and a ‘steady stream of bills initiated by parliament that proposed more severe punishment for adultery, fornication and bastardy’.5 One powerful motivating factor behind such restraints was the ‘syphilitic shock’ that had appeared in England at the end of the fifteenth century, just ‘at the moment when the Renaissance was beginning to unfold its petals into full bloom’:

The epidemic proportions of the new plague and the virulence of its effects turned the promiscuous habits of the time into a mortal danger. The bath houses were the first to suffer, and their closure was followed by restrictive measures directed against prostitutes and brothels in all cities of Europe . . . 6

Though the epidemic appears to have been on the wane by the seventeenth century, this association between the sexual act and the horrors of physical corruption engendered by syphilis had become sufficiently closely associated to arouse in people ‘feelings not of spontaneous rapture but of suspicion and guilt about their bodies’:

Syphilis was often transmitted during fornication and adultery – acts surrounded by apprehension in themselves – and this gave it a specific association with sin, although many adulterers or fornicators escaped infection. . . . Some historians have indeed suggested that the rise of Puritanism and diffusion of puritanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were stimulated by the sexual guilt and anxiety which the epidemic had engendered.7

7Richard Davenport-Hines, Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to sex and sexuality in Britain since the Renaissance (London: Collins, 1990), pp. 32-33. See also Fabricius, p. 17.
Because the disease had become attributed to ‘luxuria (voluptuousness),’ the medical profession was in a difficult position with regard to treatment, and consequently felt compelled to offer ‘an excuse for interfering with the natural (or divine) sequence of sin and punishment by pointing to the value of public health’ (Schleiner, p. 502). Some, indeed, appear to have combined the concepts of punishment and cure in their treatment of the disease: ‘In sixteenth-century Paris,’ reports Owsei Temkin in his history of morality and syphilis, ‘syphilitics in the hospitals were scourged and treated by barbarous methods’ (p. 477). The exhilaration of promiscuity observed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, then, was drastically tempered by an increasing dread of the moral and physical consequences of permissiveness. The sexual anxiety aroused by such an awareness led to the extreme ambivalences of ‘attraction and repulsion, commitment and doubt, freedom and bondage, elation and despair’ aroused by the ‘conflict of repression with desire’ described by Charles R. Forker in his discussion of sex and death in Renaissance tragedy.

The joie de vivre of the Jacobean ‘Promiscuous City’ was experienced, too, in the London of the 1960s; as in the seventeenth-century, it was viewed by visitors as something of a ‘Permissive Paradise’¹⁰. Frank Habicht, who chronicled ‘Young London’ in photographs published in 1969, viewed the capital as ‘a twentieth-century Eden that overflows with original sin’:

‘I could not have taken these photographs in any other city in Europe,’ he says.

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Why not? What is it that has suddenly set London apart, made her so exciting, so different from Hamburg or Amsterdam? Habicht’s answer is ‘permissiveness’—no rules. He sees London as the city where you can do what you want, think as you wish, act as the whim takes you. It is the one city in Europe where behaviour is unregimented, where rules and restrictions have been torn off and discarded. It has become a capital of freedom.11

By 1975, sociologist Christie Davies would observe that ‘the pace of change’ since the publication of C. H. and W. M. Whiteley’s The Permissive Morality in 1964 had increased rapidly:

We can see changes occurring at many levels in society which reflect the erosion of traditional values and the growth of a hedonistic and anti-ascetic philosophy.12

The phrase ‘permissive society’—which became so widespread as to amount to something of a cliché—was, as Davies noted, principally associated ‘with the drastic changes in sexual behaviour and attitudes that [most people] believe have taken place in the last ten to twenty years’ (p. 61). And it was this perception that was exploited in scenes such as the entertainment that spirals out of control in Orton’s The Erpingham Camp:

They were running about half-naked spewing up their pork ’n beans. I counted eight pairs of women’s briefs on the stairs. There’ll be some unexpected visits to the Pre-natal clinic after tonight. It would take the pen of our National poet to describe the scene that met my eyes upon entering the Grand Ballroom. My Chief Redcoat was being savagely beaten about the head by a man dressed as a leopard.

(pp. 304-5)

The combination of abandoned and inelegantly ‘spewing’ women with the incongruously costumed participants in an orgiastic episode of debauchery emerging from a frivolous staged performance curiously echoes the real-life events in the court of James I, as described by Harington (above, p. 174). Moreover, although Orton’s

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11 Robert Bruce, ‘Si jeunesse savait . . .’, in Habicht, p. xi.
attitude to his own fictional creation is decidedly more tongue-in-cheek than Harington’s older-generation perspective on the changes wrought since his youth, the ‘morality’ of the twentieth-century playwright – who objected to the ‘stench’ of the ‘old whore society’ and once described himself as a ‘puritan’ – was far from unambiguous.13 Nichols’ Agnes would later give her own jaded retrospective view on the joys of the permissive society in *Passion Play*:

The permissive society. . . . Well, now we see what that’s led to – abortion, violence, the kids on drugs, apathy on one side and a neo-fascist law-and-order reaction on the other. *(Plays: Two, p. 341)*

The ‘permissive’ developments of the 1960s were certainly bewildering. One after the other, in dizzying succession, the legislative barriers regulating sexual activity were broken down: the years of 1967 and 1968 alone witnessed the Family Planning Act (enabling local authorities to support birth control clinics and to make no distinction between married and unmarried women), the legalisation of abortion up to twenty-eight weeks gestation, the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality and the abolition of theatre censorship (encouraging still further what *Time* magazine had described earlier in the decade as ‘a barrage of frankness about sex’).14 As with attitudes to mental illness, then, legislation was moving in the opposite direction from that of the Jacobean period, removing barriers to promiscuity that had been bolstered by James’s parliament; but even so, the backlash against permissive behaviour within society was just as strong as in the seventeenth century. While many embraced the exhilarating

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new freedoms created by this trend towards liberalisation, celebrating ‘Swinging
London’ and abandoning conventional morality in favour of ‘the most frivolous forms
of hedonism’, the more sinister effects of the developments were impossible to ignore
and, as Michael Schofield remarked:

In practice this new tolerance is qualified because most religious leaders and moral
authoritarians still insist that premarital sexual intercourse is only acceptable as a
prelude to marriage.15

Particularly characteristic of the ambivalences of the ‘new morality’ were the
researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson, whose explicitly feminist report of
1966, Human Sexual Response, was dubbed ‘the most controversial bestseller ever
published in America.’16 Masters and Johnson’s research, the first laboratory study of
human beings in sexual action, exploded numerous myths regarding penis size, male
and female orgasm, contraception and so on. Yet for all their radicalism, the work of
Masters and Johnson exhibits, as Paul Robinson argued ten years on from the
publication of Human Sexual Response, a striking tension between ‘clinical, some
would say heartless, subjection of human sexual behaviour to laboratory scrutiny and
manipulation, and on the other hand . . . the repeated insistence on the need for
communication in sexual relationships and the implicit critique of all sexual encounters
devoid of serious emotional content’. Belonging ‘neither to the party of Keats nor to
that of de Sade’, they finally reflected in their ‘almost schizoid’ thought ‘the
unresolved tensions of the modern sexual tradition as a whole’:

14See Linda Grant, Sexing the Millennium: A Political History of the Sexual Revolution (London:
16Observer, quoted in publisher’s blurb, Ruth and Edward Brecher, An Analysis of Human Sexual
Response (London: Panther, rpr. 1968). See Masters and Johnson, Human Sexual Response (Boston:
As moderns, we remain permanently divided between a Romantic past, whose repressions we would gladly rid ourselves of, and a deromanticized future, whose emotional emptiness we fear even while we anticipate its greater freedom. It is precisely in this antithesis of Romantic and anti-Romantic impulses that the distinctly modern element in sexual modernism is to be located.17

The ‘saucy, irreverent’ face of London, then, was countered by ‘the visage of despair and frustration, of loneliness and hopelessness’ that is also visible in the photographs of Habicht (Bruce, p. xii), which range from ecstatic young strippers in lace underwear at the Chelsea Student Carnival and girls in miniskirts defiantly hiked up to display their underwear to a windswept, haunted-looking young couple leaning against a chimney pot, the boy with his head on the girl’s naked, pregnant belly, and a barefoot, destitute young woman loitering amongst the dustbins. ‘This contrast’, commented journalist Robert Bruce in his introduction to the pictures, ‘is very much part of today’s London. . . . Habicht’s juxtapositions of vitality and sad emptiness can be found in real-life too’:

The new freedoms have become a burden in themselves. The relaxation of the old rules and boundaries has left many people feeling insecure, and some of us actually frightened. (pp. xii-xiv. Italics mine.)

Listing consequences of the permissive society – including increases in promiscuity, the illegitimate birth rate, abortion, venereal disease, divorce and shotgun weddings – Bruce concluded that Habicht’s ‘Paradise’ was ‘More like a vision of hell’.18 Indeed, the fear of promiscuity was intensified just as it had been in the seventeenth century by dire warnings that were equivalent to those of the Jacobians. ‘In an age in which hell fire and brimstone have ceased to be effective deterrents against illicit sexual behaviour,’ noted Paul Halmos in 1966, ‘the diagnosis that such behaviour is

“neurotic” or just “sick” will exert greater influence on people who are anxiously trying to be “normal” and “healthy”. And indeed this was a common tactic used by many in authority, from sex educators such as Pauline Perry, who in 1969 described promiscuous sex as ‘a sign of mental illness’, to doctors such as Ambrose King (Senior Physician to the Department of Venereal Diseases at the London Hospital), who stated in 1965, as the climax to a catalogue of warnings that rose from ‘deep anxieties’ through ‘emotional conflicts leading to attacks of depression’ to ‘antisocial behaviour generally’:

The complex and delicate sexual instinct becomes damaged and distorted. Feelings of frustration and inadequacy may lead to still grosser promiscuity, and increasing frustration and depression may ultimately result in mental breakdown. The results of sexual desires stimulated by phantasy may become unpredictable and may even lead to the type of sexual crime which figures so prominently in the newspapers. In addition, the moralists of the 1960s – like those of the Jacobean period – had a perceived rise in venereal disease as a further weapon against promiscuity. While the horrifying statistics may have been inflated by changes in medical practices (‘It is certain that more people who have contracted a venereal disease now go to a clinic whereas in the past many of them went to a family doctor, who may not have reported the disease’), the figures still gave rise to ‘alarm in some quarters, including pronouncements about the moral state of the nation.’ Demands for ostracism of those infected with venereal disease were ‘near-hysterical’, and the condemnation

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'vitriolic', as venereologist R. S. Morton observed of factory workers' responses to rumours that a colleague was infected:

'Lock him up': 'Whip her': 'Lack of moral fibre': 'Dirty bitch': 'Force him to have treatment': 'Sack her'.

The demands for whipping those suffering from venereal disease echo those 'barbarous' treatments of sixteenth-century Paris; and indeed, as Schofield asserted, doctors in the 1960s still faced the same dilemma encountered by their Jacobean counterparts who were concerned about 'interfering with the natural (or divine) sequence of sin and punishment':

In fact more could be done to control this disease than is being done at present, but there is again that outstanding difficulty which I have called the fear of success. Many people, including members of the medical profession, have the feeling that the elimination of the venereal diseases would cause more harm than good, because it would encourage promiscuity. (p. 28)

'V. D.', wrote Christie Davies, 'is simply a symbol of and a surrogate for pollution and degradation. We no longer speak of sex openly as dirty so we get hysterical about V. D. instead' (p. 79).

The 'elation and despair' regarding sexuality that has been detected in the Jacobean period, therefore, had its counterpart in the 'vitality and sad emptiness' of the 1960s. And a crucial facet of this sexual insecurity was that, in both periods, it was invariably projected onto the female. This may be seen as part of a more general 'flight from the feminine' – a phrase that has been used in relation to both eras – occasioned by various factors including economic pressures and a perceived rise in female independence, assertiveness and power. In any case, the focus of sexual anxiety

23Susan Bordo discusses 'the seventeenth-century flight from the feminine' in 'The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought', Signs, 11 (1986), p. 453; although Bordo draws no explicit parallels between the two periods, the phrase is borrowed from Karl Stern, The Flight from Woman (London:
onto the female was certainly a logical concept in the Jacobean period, when women and sexuality were close to synonymous; not only was female sexuality supposed to be riotous and unbridled, but as Karen Newman demonstrates in her discussion of popular anatomies such as Helkiah Crooke’s *Microcosmographica* (1615), the female body, in contrast to the male, was ‘sexed, earthbound, mortal, of nature.’ Furthermore, metaphorical and allegorical understanding of biblical texts meant that women were often directly identified with sensuality; specifically, the female body was ‘constructed by religious doctrine as the “source” of sin.’ The resultant interconnection of femininity and sexual insecurity is well summarised by Mary Beth Rose:

... while celibacy no longer flourished as an idealized mode of behaviour after the Reformation, the distrust of sexual desire and the ideals of maidenly virtue – virginity – and wifely chastity continued to preoccupy the Renaissance imagination of the moral and spiritual life well into the seventeenth century. ... Female entrance into the sexual world, whether by reciprocating male affections or merely remaining the passive object of them, is equivalent to sin, is sin. (pp. 17-18)

The perceived threat posed by female sexual voracity was opposed by various means, including what Breitenberg has observed as an alarming increase in the prosecution of illegitimate births: ‘James’ statute of 1610’, he writes, ‘reveals that bastardy was perceived as the exclusive responsibility of women and a sign of their promiscuity’:

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Every lewd woman which shall have any bastard which may be chargeable to the parish, the justices of the peace shall commit such woman to the house of correction, to be punished and set to work, during the term of one whole year.26

Adulterous wives and scolds were punished by the rough humiliation of the ‘skimmington’, and the accusation of witchcraft provided a convenient pretext for penalising promiscuous women.27 ‘The prevailing ideas of the era [1550-1650],’ writes Susan Bordo in her discussion of ‘the seventeenth-century flight from the feminine’, ‘now appear as obsessed with the untamed power of female generativity and a dedication to bringing it under forceful cultural control’ (p. 453). An extension of this evident ‘fear of losing control of women’s chastity’, as noted by Stephen Orgel, are what Bordo describes as ‘Nightmare fantasies of female power over reproduction and birth [that] run throughout the era’:

There were the witch hunts themselves, which, aided more politely by the gradual male takeover of birthing, virtually purged the healing arts of female midwives. The resulting changes in obstetrics came to identify birth – as Bacon identified nature itself – with the potentiality of disorder and the need for forceful male control.28

In the 1960s, these nightmare fantasies became a reality with the advent of the contraceptive pill. As in the Jacobean period, the blame for the increase in promiscuity was placed emphatically upon women; Dr Ambrose King attributed the rise partly to ‘the emancipation of women’, while in 1976 Michael Schofield still observed that,

Even in this so-called permissive age, the single girl who openly enjoys sex will meet more social disapproval and will be the subject of more gossip than an unmarried man with similar appetites.29

The availability of the contraceptive pill - 'a cultural product as no other pharmaceutical has ever been' and the 'biggest bomb of the twentieth century' - 'liberated women's desires, turning them into sexual beings' and thus compounding this anxiety regarding female sexual appetites.30 Geoffrey Gorer, who conducted detailed research into the attitudes and behaviour of single and married people under the age of forty-five during 1969, was 'rather surprised' by the 'virulence of those who disapprove of the pill because it might lead to promiscuity'.31 'It makes it too easy for single girls to have a sex life,' complained one interviewee (p. 143). Indeed, while from one point of view the Pill was a great relief, taking the burden of responsibility for contraception off men's shoulders and allowing greater sexual licence, from another point of view it unleashed the much-feared power of female sexuality and threatened toemasculate husbands, taking away the control of reproduction that had been so important to men in the Jacobean era. ‘Now there is the pill, women are the sex in charge,’ claimed Mary Quant. ‘They, and only they, can decide to conceive.’32 It was therefore hardly surprising that the media exhibited a 'deep ambivalence towards the Pill' during the mid-1960s, as Linda Grant documents in her history of the 'sexual revolution':

It posited a syndrome by which men were made impotent by the new-found sexual freedom of their wives. A battery of doctors quoted statistics on how the Pill had

30Grant, p. 45; Bruce, p. xiii; Grant, p. 61. The contraceptive pill itself was blamed for the increase in promiscuity by the Chancellor of London University (quoted in Schofield, p. 22).
improved women’s sexual drive and ‘satisfaction’. In response, their husbands, having lost responsibility for birth control, were succumbing to a disease which women had suffered from for centuries, without it being medicalized into a syndrome: lack of self-esteem. . . . A Dallas gynaecologist never prescribed the Pill because he regarded it as castrating the husbands of his patients. (p. 116)

Gorer’s research confirms that many men forbade their wives from taking the contraceptive pill, and that ‘Some of the fears’, like those of the seventeenth century regarding the control of reproduction, were ‘really grotesque’, confusing the pill with thalidomide and claiming that it ‘unbalances nature, making women more aggressive.’ ‘Getting more like men, the women that have the pill,’ commented one respondent (p. 142).

As in the seventeenth century, the general ambivalence regarding sexual matters in the 1960s focused specifically on suspicion of the feminine; and the most prominent arguments between the feminism and the misogyny of the 1960s and early 1970s are closely paralleled in the seventeenth century. Joseph Swetnam’s The Araignment of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women, a ‘vicious, cliché-ridden’ addition to the anti-feminist pamphlet genre, published in 1615 and reprinted ten times by 1634, provoked three furious replies from ostensibly female authors, as well as an anonymous play, Swetnam the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women, in which the eponymous anti-hero, described as ‘That bloudie, cruell, and inhumane wretch, / That slanderous Detractor of our Sex: / That Misoynos, that blasphemous Slaue’, is humiliated and punished.33 The counterpart of Swetnam in the 1960s was Norman Mailer, whose anti-feminist sentiments as expressed in his novels and journalism –

along with those of his immediate predecessor, Henry Miller – were tackled at length by Kate Millett in her *Sexual Politics* of 1971. In her assault on the ‘new frankness’ of contemporary misogynist literature – ‘the primary vehicle of masculine hostility’ and one of the less welcome results of the relaxation of censorship – Millett stated that in the work of Mailer ‘the oppression of women as a group is invoked to provide an emotional model, even a style, for patriarchal warfare’.34 And foremost in her particular complaints illustrating the two writers’ misogyny are two tendencies specifically characteristic of Swetnam: the emphasis upon economic transactions in a sexual context, and a peculiar disgust at female physicality. Swetnam, a Bristol fencing master (a ‘socially precarious’ profession, ‘veering uneasily between gentlemanly pretensions and the suspicion of vagabondage’) who died in debt, revealed his insecurities and played on the ‘fears and prejudices of his audience, the ever-growing urban middle-class of London’ with repeated allusions to economic matters (Butler, pp. ix-x). Women are themselves expensive commodities – ‘jewels’, ‘all precious, yet they are not all of one price’, and ‘a beautiful woman is for the most part costly’ – as well as being extravagant wasters of money:

*Moses describeth a Woman thus: At the first beginning (saith hee) a woman was made to be a helper unto man, & so they are indeed, for she helpeth to spend and consume that which man painefully getteth.*35

Likewise Millett, complaining of the ‘reification’ and ‘chattel status’ of women, noted that Miller, like Swetnam, was, ‘By the ethos of American financial morality, ... a downright “failure” until the age of forty; a writer unable to produce, living a seedy

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outcast existence, jobless and dependent on handouts’ (pp. 54, 298). As a result he too links sex ‘in a curious way with money’:

Of course, Miller is a maverick and a rebel, but much as he hates the money mentality, it is so ingrained in him that he is capable only of replacing it with sex – a transference of acquisitive impulse. By converting the female to commodity, he too can enjoy the esteem of ‘success’. (p. 298)

Miller, like Swetnam, directly refers to women as ‘merchandise’ or ‘commodity’, boasting that during a stay in a Paris hotel ‘I rang for women as you would ring for whiskey and soda’.36 Sex, for Miller, becomes ‘a war of attrition waged on economic grounds’ (Millett, p. 299). And when Swetnam and Miller are not describing women as either economic consumers or commodities, they write in terms of bodily corruption, disease, poison and threat. Even female beauty is suspect, says Swetnam, for it merely conceals monstrousness:

A woman which is faire in shew, is foule in condition: shee is like unto a glowingworme, which is bright in the hedge, and blacke in the hand; in the greenest grasse lyeth hid the greatest Serpents: painted pottes commonly hold deadly poyson: and in the clearest water the ugliest Tode; and the fairest woman hath some filthines in her.

(pp. 12-13)

Women’s hearts, moreover, ‘are blacke, swelling with mischiefe, not much unlike vnto old trees, whose outward leaves are faire and greene, and yet the body rotten’ (p. 31). Miller’s women are described in similar terms of waste and putrefaction – Millett’s long list of his grotesque and abusive descriptions of the female genitalia, for

example, include ‘sink of abomination’ and ‘festering obscene horror’— while Mailer follows his example in associating female sexuality with decomposition and disease.

Both of these matters explored by Swetnam, Miller and Mailer – the commodification of women and sexual anxiety mediated through hostility to the female body – colour the ambivalent genre of black farce in Jacobean and 1960s drama, thus demonstrating how contemporary anxieties about sexuality and gender are both revealed and exploited in the black farce of the two periods. The two concerns are indeed strikingly fused by Middleton and Barnes in *Women Beware Women* and *Laughter!* respectively. The world of Middleton’s play, like that of his comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, is, as Howard Barker notes in his ‘collaboration’ of 1986, ‘a sexual stock exchange’, presenting ‘The body as currency’; here Bianca gets what Simon Shepherd describes as the dehumanising ‘jewel treatment’ – the very image employed by Swetnam – from both Leantio and the Duke, displaying the ‘male economic and sexual hegemony’ that unquestionably operates in the play.

Even before cynicism sets in, Leantio describes his new wife in terms of ‘purchase’, ‘treasure’, ownership and ‘theft’ (I. i. 12-15, 37); she is ‘a most matchless jewel’, ‘a gem . . . Of that great value’ (162, 171-2). Likewise Isabella is ‘tendered’ to the Ward (I. ii. 9), at which she ruefully remarks that ‘Men buy their slaves, but women buy their masters’ (176); later her father will, Swetnam-like, clarify his comment that ‘She’s a dear child to me’ by adding, ‘dear to my purse, I mean’ (III. ii.


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104, 106). Even Hippolito’s incestuous longings are described in terms of financial waste, as ‘spend[ing] of his own stock’ (II. i. 16). The merchandise of Isabella’s body becomes literally ‘bought and sold, and turned and pried into’ (III. iii. 36), as it is examined bit by bit before the transaction takes place: the clownish Ward asks ‘at what end shall I begin now, Sordido?’ (44), before launching into a comic-grotesque dissection of the body that repeatedly conflates the sexual and the economic. Sordido advises always to begin ‘at a woman’s lip’, reassuring the Ward that Isabella’s ‘crabbed face’ will, through a pun on crab apples, save him money on condiments (45-53). The Ward is further gratified at Isabella’s confirmation that her hair is natural – ‘I owe nothing for it’ – as this means that ‘I shall have the less to pay when I have married you’ (66-69). The two clowns then move on to her eyes, her nose (with a few satirical references to venereal disease), her teeth and her feet, looking under her skirt and trying to make her laugh or yawn to reveal any deformities: ‘For I’ll not bate her a tooth, nor take a black one into the bargain’ (80-81). Though the scene is farcical, the anxiety surrounding women’s sexual power is clear throughout; indeed, this kind of examination is exactly what Lyly’s Euphues had advised in his ‘cooling Carde for Philautus and all fond louers’ as a method of mastering that power, revealing women’s true deformities and bringing oneself ‘to detest women bee they neuer so comely’:

. . . wreste all partes of hir bodye to the worste be she neuer so worthye. . . . Searche euery vayne and sinew of their disposition, if she haue no sighte in deskante, desire hir to chaunte it, if no cunning to daunce request hir to trippe it, if no skill in Musicke, profer hir the Lute, if an ill gate, then waite with hir, if rude in speach, talke with hir, if she be gagge toothed, tell hir some merry iest to make hir laughe, if pinke eyed, some dolefull Historye, to cause hir weepe, in the one hir

grinning will shewe hir deformed, in the other hir whininge, like a Pigge halfe rosted.40

As Newman describes, this kind of fragmentation provides ‘a rhetorical disciplining of the female body’:

Anatomization was a strategy for managing femininity and controlling its uses, not only in love poetry or the wedding sermon but in the drama as well. (p. 10)

According to Nancy Vickers, this disciplining derives from Petrarch’s ‘legacy of fragmentation’, in which the fetishised body may provide a ‘neutralization, through descriptive dismemberment, of the threat’ posed by the female.41

Vickers’ comment that ‘We never see in the Rime sparse a complete picture of Laura’ is echoed by Millett’s complaint regarding the work of Miller, where ‘A very occasional pair of “huge teats” or “haunches” are poor and infrequent spare parts for the missing erotic form of woman.’42 And for Miller, as for Middleton, this fragmentation is combined with the commodification of women, as Millett observes:

When reporting on the civilized superiority of French sex, his best proof is its better business method. The whore’s client is ‘permitted to examine and handle merchandise before buying,’ a practice he congratulates as ‘fair and square.’

(p. 298)

Furthermore, Miller’s successor, Norman Mailer, indicates just how aggressive the ‘disciplining’ function of fragmentation can be, in his account of Hollingworth, ‘the evil genius’ of Barbary Shore:

... he named various parts of her body and described what he would do to them, how he would tear this and squeeze that, eat here and spit there, butcher rough and slice fine, slash, macerate, pillage, all in an unrecognizable violence which must have issued between clenched teeth, until his appetite satisfied, I could see him

42 Vickers, p. 266; Millett, p. 299.
squatting beside the carcass, his mouth wiped carefully with the back of his hand. With that, he sighed, as much as to say, 'A good piece of ass, by God.'

Though never reaching the violent extremes expressed by Mailer, Middleton’s farcically abusive fragmentation has clear affinities with the defensive Petrarchan ‘legacy’; and the specifically economic slant shared by Lyly and Miller is taken up by Barnes in *Laughter!*. Here Else, like Isabella, sells herself out of necessity – in this case in return for some scarce supplies – and she too is comically and aggressively broken down into her component parts in her status as merchandise. In their desperate haggling, the emotionless pragmatism of the repulsive Wochner contrasts with Else’s desire for the motions of romance:

ELSE. ‘I’ll come for you tonight.’ Act like a lover if you want to be one. Tell me, ‘the brightness of your cheek outshines the stars, one glance from your eyes outweighs the wisdom of the world.’ Woo me, say something beautiful.

WOCHNER. One jar of Keil salt herrings. Two kilos of real coffee, four fresh eggs. One tin of skimmed milk.

ELSE. The answer’s no. No. No. No.


ELSE (quickly). Three kilos of bacon plus the woollen blanket!

WOCHNER. I had Herr Sauckel’s wife for three kilos of bacon. If I’d thrown in a woollen blanket I’d’ve got Herr Sauckel too. Only promise you won’t talk of love while we make it. I desire you, enjoy you, utilize you. Love doesn’t come into it. (pp. 387-8)

Following this deal Gottleb, the couple’s colleague, immediately begins to appraise Else’s appearance in typically double-edged style: ‘This schnapps must be stronger than I thought. You’re beginning to look attractive, Fräulein, in an elementary sort of way’ (p. 388). He concludes by isolating the ‘elements’ of that attractiveness – a ‘good child-bearing pelvis’, eyes and hair – in a comic-bathetic parody of Else’s desire

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for love-making. In a variation of the Ward’s – and Euphues’ – attempts to reveal their women’s deformities, Gottleb finally parodies the unveiling of Else’s true beauty:

Here, let me show you.

_He takes off her glasses, then removes the comb keeping her bun in place._
Don’t worry, I’ve got very delicate hands . . . Just let it fall out . . .
_ELSE’s hair tumbles down, she shakes it free._
There, there, you see, Fräulein . . . why you look . . .
_She glances up; he shudders._
worse! (p. 389)

If, as Newman, Vickers and others suggest, the fragmentation of the female body is motivated by a sense of fear in the presence of women’s physicality, then this is entirely consistent with what Judith Fetterley in her feminist analysis of Mailer calls ‘the false dreads’ of ‘the mythology of female power and male powerlessness’, characterised by ‘castrating bitches, teethed wombs, murderous females, and delicate erections forever in danger of being destroyed’, and what Newman describes as a fear of ‘the troubling power of a voracious female sexuality’: ‘Shakespeare’s preoccupation with the uncontrollability of women’s sexuality,’ writes Valerie Traub, ‘was not individual to him, but a shared vulnerability of men in his intensely patriarchal and patrilineal culture’.44

Dramatists of the 1960s and the early seventeenth century, then, well aware of the volatile and unsettling nature of the subject of sex in their respective societies, reflected the sexual anxiety that they themselves apparently shared, while knowingly exploiting the doubts and tensions that they sensed around them. ‘Sex is the only way to infuriate them,’ wrote Orton in his diary for 26 March 1967, having been told of ‘the latest way-out group in America – complete sexual licence’: ‘Much more fucking
and they’ll be screaming hysterics in next to no time’ (p. 125). Orton’s response suggests not only the customary aggression towards an audience that accords with the formulation of the related genre of black humor as a form of ‘rape’, but also a characteristic desire to traverse sexual boundaries that goes to the heart of the essentially transgressive genre of black farce, combining the incompatible in its dark laughter. The genre that is itself the result of a union between incompatibles – ‘a kind of literary bastard-work whose generic deformity renders it “in everything illegitimate”’, as Michael Neill describes *The Revenger’s Tragedy* – is naturally drawn to the crossing of cultural limits, whether in necrophilia, incest or rape. Transgressive sexuality lies at the core of ‘a drama that delightedly flaunted its own “mongrel” quality through open defiance of the prescriptions that were thought to shape “a good and legitimate poem”’ (Neill, p. 400). And while at the heart of blackly farcical sex is a profound despair at its terrifying and degrading nature, there is also an equally palpable thrill at the sheer variety of sexual perversity to be explored. Like Neil Rhodes’ Elizabethan grotesque, black farce ‘derives from the unstable coalescence of the contrary images of the flesh: indulged, abused, purged and damned’ (p. 4). Dr Rance speaks for the dramatists of both the seventeenth and twentieth centuries when he shares his plan for his magnum opus, comic and horrific in its darkness and its glorious excess:

The final chapters of my book are knitting together: incest, buggery, outrageous women and strange love-cults catering for depraved appetites. All the fashionable bric-à-brac. A beautiful but neurotic girl has influenced the doctor to sacrifice a

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45Knickerbocker, p. 3.

white virgin to propitiate the dark gods of unreason. ‘When they broke into the evil-smelling den they found her poor body bleeding beneath the obscene and half-erect phallus.’... As a transvestite, fetishist, bi-sexual murderer Dr Prentice displays considerable deviation overlap. We may get necrophilia too. As a sort of bonus. (What the Butler Saw, pp. 427-8)

Black farce, then, takes the darkest sexual transgressions and turns them into laughter.

One of the most powerful sexual taboos both for the Jacobeans and in the 1960s – as for almost all other societies – is incest. The justifications for that taboo have been numerous; as Wayland Young noted in 1965, they include fear of inbreeding, the disapproval of the possibility of mating between the sexually immature, the potential exclusion of devotion to God and the need for surprise in love.47 There is also the theory that the incest taboo is a function of patriarchy. Marc Shell, acknowledging in his study of Measure for Measure the connection between incest and ‘the destruction through murder of a fatherly ruler by filial subjects’, notes that

During the Tudor and Stuart Renaissance, as throughout the history of the West, a ruler was viewed as a father and his people as his children. Thus a child’s beating his father is, according to the Elizabethan Nashe, tantamount to upsetting the natural order: ‘It is no maruaile if euery Alehouse vaunt the table of the world vpside downe, since the child beateth his father.’ By the early seventeenth century the challenge to patriarchy was growing into modern liberalism.48

Yet even the sexual licence of the 1960s did little to weaken this resolute taboo, even with the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss to uncover the structures underpinning the phenomenon. In treatises such as Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté, Lévi-Strauss placed the incest taboo (which he took to be universal) as the corner-stone of society, in that the perpetuation of alliances between men is ensured through the exchange of women as opposed to persistently retaining them within the immediate

family. As Roland Champagne describes, Lévi-Strauss’ theory finally made explicit the alleged patriarchal foundation for the incest taboo:

His studies of kinship . . . revealed subtle networks in our culturally conditioned taboos about appropriate marriage partners and directed us to look for types of exchange and economy that are more widespread (for example, the male trading of women by controlling their choice in marriage partnerships) than they may appear to be once couched in social disguises (the incest taboo).

In spite of this awareness – and an obsessive curiosity, shared by the Jacobians, that repeatedly questioned and picked at the prohibition – the taboo remained as powerful as ever. Young, commenting in 1965 on a Guardian review of a novel dealing with a brother-sister relationship, concluded:

The taboo on the action [of incest] is so strong that the man or woman who commits it is felt to be tainted, as by a mortal disease, is marked out for a death which is tragic, but is deserved. (p. 109)

Recognising the consequent power of the image of incest, therefore, dramatists of the early seventeenth century and the 1960s exploited it to the full, boldly implying the transgression to be utterly commonplace. Vindice specifically locates the ubiquity of incest as a contemporary phenomenon:

Some father dreads not (gone to bed in wine)  
To slide from the mother and cling to the daughter-in-law;  
Some uncles are adulterous with their nieces,  
Brothers with brothers’ wives. O, hour of incest!  
Any kin now, next to the rim o’ th’ sister,  
Is man’s meat in these days . . . (I. iii. 58-63)

As always, Vindice’s language is gloriously palpable; his slippery, sticky verbs are indicative of both a lazy moral stupor and a squalid desperation, and the ‘meat’ metaphor is inescapably carnal and voracious. The image of families sliding randomly

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from one to another in the dark anticipates Edward Bond’s joke in the controversial

_Saved_ of 1965:

PETE. I knew a bloke once reckoned ’e knocked off ’is grannie.
COLIN. Yeh?
PETE. All a mistake.
COLIN. ’Ow’s that?
PETE. There was a power cut at the time an’ –
BARRY. – ’E thought it was ’is sister.51

Orton’s Wilson is just as confident as Vindice of the ubiquity of incest when he

comically confesses his relationship with his brother to Mike in _The Ruffian on the

Stair_:

MIKE. There’s no word in the Irish language for what you were doing.
WILSON. In Lapland they have no word for snow. (p. 50)

The implications of such widespread depravity exist on two levels. First, it is an index

of the prevalence of uncontrollable and utterly abandoned sexual licence. As Putana’s

lively, untroubled encouragement of Giovanni and Annabella reveals, incest ‘is a

manifestation not only of lust but of indiscriminate, hence completely beastly, lust’.52

Your brother’s a man, I hope, and I say still, if a young wench feel the fit upon her,

let her take anybody, father or brother, all is one.

(‘_Tis Pity She’s a Whore_, II. i. 44-6)

Livia in _Women Beware Women_ is just as tolerant as Putana, indicating how easily the

sexually corrupt can come to terms with a taboo; her reaction to Hippolito’s desire for

his niece is one of wry and languid curiosity:

A strange affection, brother, when I think on’t! I wonder how thou cam’st by it. (II. i. 1-2)

Indeed, her condonation is such that, after a speech of somewhat perfunctory disapprobation to Hippolito, she proceeds to offer to procure Isabella for him by deception in order that his incestuous longings may be satisfied. ‘Incest,’ writes Lois E. Bueler in her study of the phenomenon in Renaissance drama, ‘is one of the many corrupt, unnatural, abortive, and doomed sexual transactions of this sexually most mercantile of plays’ (p. 137). Orton’s Dr Rance goes still further than the encouragement offered by either Putana or Livia; he is positively rapturous at the discovery of incest within the Prentice family (as, indeed, are they):

**RANCE** (to PRENTICE, wild with delight). If you are this child’s father my book can be written in good faith – she is the victim of an incestuous assault!

**MRS PRENTICE.** And so am I, doctor! My son has a collection of indecent photographs which prove beyond doubt that he made free with me in the same hotel – indeed in the same linen cupboard where his conception took place.

**RANCE.** Oh, what joy this discovery gives me! (Embracing MRS PRENTICE, GERALDINE and NICK.) Double incest is even more likely to produce a best-seller than murder – and this is as it should be for love must bring greater joy than violence.

*Everyone embraces one another.* (What the Butler Saw, p. 446)

Incest is, conventionally, a taboo that admits no jocularity – ‘tis no time to jest,’ warns Giovanni as he and his sister declare their love for each other (‘*Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, I. ii. 217) – and the laughter that greets it in black farce serves to emphasise its comfortable position within such ‘completely beastly’ societies. Looked at from a second, broader perspective, then, incest is an indication not merely of sexual depravity but of a more generally debauched society – ‘an index of social confusion’. This association arises from ‘one of the earliest and most consistent arguments against incest advanced in Western culture’, deriving, as Shell records, from the Roman notion of ‘*respectus parentelae*, the reverence due to near kin’.
The widespread practice of incest would lead to a radical transformation of the body politic since such sexual liberty would restructure kinship relations by destroying the crucial distinction between generations. (p. 40)

‘In English Renaissance and Jacobean drama,’ Elizabeth Archibald has written more recently, ‘incest and other crimes within the family are the microcosm of a corrupt society, of “something rotten in the state”’. Ford’s Vasques agrees, as soon as he hears of the relationship between Giovanni and Annabella, he immediately attributes it to the contemporary climate of general immorality: ‘To what a height of liberty in damnation hath the devil trained our age’ (‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, IV. iii. 233-34).

This despair associated with incest illuminates two of the horrific adaptations of conventional comic scenarios that occur in both Jacobean and 1960s black farce. Manfred Draudt has perceived that the dramatists of both The Revenger’s Tragedy and What the Butler Saw ‘introduce – or rather parody – the traditional comic device of surprising a couple in the act of making love’ (p. 208). Both introduce a new twist. In the Jacobean play, it is not in fact the expected incestuous lovers who are discovered in the bed but the entirely legitimate married pair of the Duke and the Duchess; for once two characters are in their right and lawful places and so, in a neat comic reversal, the intruders are just as shocked as the victims and their murder plot is thwarted. In What the Butler Saw, Mrs Prentice enters just as her husband is fetching his ‘new contraceptive device’ and instructing Geraldine to ‘Lie on the couch with your hands behind your head and think of the closing chapters of your favourite work of fiction’ (p. 368), so in this case it is Dr Prentice who is thwarted (and thrown into gloriously farcical panic). Lussurioso, in other words, expects incest and discovers

nothing, while Mrs Prentice expects nothing and – when Geraldine turns out to be their daughter – ultimately discovers incest. And in a further intensification of the pattern of incest, both episodes result in the embarrassing and unexpected convergence of parents and child in a highly-charged sexual situation. This is related to what is known in psychoanalysis as the ‘primal scene’, the confusing childhood witnessing of parental intercourse that is said to lead to male anxiety and ambivalence towards sex – the tension between desire and fear that underpins many of the contradictions surrounding blackly farcical sex.\(^5\)

The comic device of mistaken identity is also appropriated for horrific ends by Middleton and Orton; the outcome for the Jacobean play is brutal murder, while the outcome for the later work is double incest. In *The Changeling*, Diaphanta is substituted for Beatrice Joanna in the comic wedding night ‘bed-trick’, in order to conceal from Alsemero the fact that Beatrice Joanna is no longer a virgin. The comedy lies primarily in the zeal of the lusty Diaphanta; she is incredulous that Beatrice Joanna is so afraid of what Diaphanta sees as the ‘joys’ of losing her virginity that she is willing to pay for someone to act as a kind of guinea pig:

> But are you serious still? Would you resign
> Your first night’s pleasure, and give money too? (IV. i. 85-6)

The test that Beatrice Joanna performs on Diaphanta, with its symptoms of gaping, sneezing and laughing, provides further comedy; and Diaphanta’s wish for ‘But one swig more’ at the laughing stage is illustrative of her joyous sensual greed (IV. i. 115). But it is this greed which is her downfall, and which brings the horror to the

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comic device. The trick does not backfire in the anticipated manner of farce; instead of Alsemero discovering that his wife has been replaced in his bed, Diaphanta is so carried away by the joys of the bridal chamber that she has to be forced out by fire and shot dead. A similarly anonymous sexual act results in comic-horrific disaster in *What the Butler Saw*. Dr Prentice raped an unknown chambermaid in the linen cupboard of the Station Hotel during a power cut shortly before his marriage to Mrs Prentice, and it is only at the denouement of the play that it emerges that the chambermaid was in fact Mrs Prentice herself – and that the two young people with whom they have recently had random sexual encounters are their children. Again the surprise is the mirror image of the Jacobean device; Alsemero has intercourse with a stranger believing her to be his wife, while Dr Prentice has intercourse with his wife believing her to be a stranger. This boisterously comical treatment of the highly-charged taboo of incest is inherently blackly farcical, bringing laughter to a deeply transgressive sexual act within the most transgressive of theatrical genres.

The sexual ‘height of liberty’ achieved by the Jacobeans and the 1960s is illustrated not only by the blackly farcical handling of incest but also by a similarly playful treatment of the horror of rape. Rape was another sexual transgression of particular fascination in the early modern period and in the 1960s: it reached ‘a peak of interest’ at the turn of the sixteenth century, while in the twentieth it would achieve a similarly high profile with the publication of Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will* in

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1976. According to Millett, laughter in this context is yet another function of misogyny:

Emotional response to violence against women in patriarchy is often curiously ambivalent; references to wife-beating, for example, invariably produce laughter and some embarrassment. . . .

Hostility is expressed in a number of ways. One is laughter. Misogynist literature, the primary vehicle of masculine hostility, is both an hortatory and comic genre. (pp. 44-45)

To the Junior Brother in The Revenger's Tragedy, accordingly, rape is 'sweet sport, which the world approves' (III. v. 81), while Barnes' Ivan the Terrible and his son rejoice in their games of sexual violence and humiliation in Laughter!.' Oh, how we've pranked 't, two young blades together,' they gloat:

TSAREVITCH (laughing). . . what o’ that Festival o’ St. Servius when you stripped a dozen court ladies bitch-naked and threw five bushel-loads o’ peas at ’em.

IVAN (laughing). Laugh, I thought I’d never dry my breeches. How their plump bubbies bobbed as they crawled round the floor picking 'em up. Oh what women we’ve shared boy, what strumpets, whores, two-roubled hacksters.

(p. 360)

Once again the degradation of women becomes a source of comic entertainment. And the justification for the violence arises from the familiar fear of women's uncontrollable sexual appetite. Rape can easily be taken lightly when women's sexuality is insatiable and chastity is unheard of: 'That woman is all male, whom none can enter' (The Revenger's Tragedy, II. i. 112). When Orton's Erpingham uses the Padre in an attempt to calm the rioting campers, he orders Redcoat Jessie Mason to accompany him in the role of 'a simple virgin – do your best, Mason.' When the woman is sexually assaulted by the crowd, her supposed sexual experience means that the attack is of no consequence:

There is a squeal from MASON and cries of fright.

W. E. HARRISON. They're molesting Mason.
ERPINGHAM. She’s no stranger to it. Virgin was an honorary title. *(The Erpingham Camp, pp. 313, 315)*

Indeed, the insatiability of female sexuality is such that they positively *desire* rape. This was one of Brownmiller’s central concerns; in *Against Our Will* she tackles in some detail precepts such as ‘All women want to be raped’, focusing on still current quips such as ‘You can’t thread a moving needle’ and ‘If you’re going to be raped, you might as well relax and enjoy it.’ This last maxim, said Brownmiller, ‘deliberately makes light of the physical violation of rape, pooh-poohs the insult and discourages resistance’:

The humorous advice that a violent sexual encounter not of your own choosing can be fun if you play along and suspend your own judgements and feelings is predicated on two propositions: (a) the inevitability of male triumph and (b) ‘All women want to be raped.’

The Junior Brother, accordingly, claims that he dies ‘for that which every woman loves’ (*The Revenger’s Tragedy*, III. iv. 82), while Orton’s Fay confirms his opinion that ‘the world approves’ the action, dismissing Hal’s accusation that ‘My mate Dennis has done you’ with the assertion that ‘Young men pepper their conversation with tales of rape. It creates a good impression.’ Hal counters smugly: ‘You never had the blessing of a rape. I was with him at his only ravishment’ (*Loot*, pp. 223-24). A good number of Orton’s women would claim, along with Fletcher’s Chloe, ‘It is impossible to ravish me, / I am so willing.’ When Mrs Prentice tells Dr Rance how Nick (the page-boy who will later turn out to be her son) attempted to rape her in the Station Hotel, the psychiatrist’s response is entirely sympathetic with her own attitude:

RANCE. He didn’t succeed?
MRS PRENTICE. No.
RANCE (shaking his head). The service in these hotels is dreadful.  
(What the Butler Saw, p. 390)

In Barnes’ Red Noses Sister Marguerite, a captured nun, is so desperate to be raped that her aggressors’ comically violent intentions (‘Raping nuns is my habit’ [p. 18]) are utterly dissolved. Flote attempts to use laughter as a weapon against the act (‘If you attack that Bride of Christ, I’ll stand here and make uncouth noises with my mouth’ [p. 20]), but more effective by far is the victim’s willingness. The resultant farcical reversal is the ultimate humiliation: the attacker exerts his power not by raping the woman but by denying her the paradoxically desired rape:

MARGUERITE. I’m supposed to be raped! What of the raping, spindle-shanks? I was promised marauding prickmen. There’ll be atrocities, they said. Rape and ravaging, they said. I want to be first.
BRODIN. I’m not in the raping mood. Raping means taking a woman by force. You’re giving it free. (p. 21)

The misogynistic ambivalence towards violence against women is described by Millett as a tension between laughter and embarrassment. In other words, an awareness of the horror of rape is combined with a kind of triumphant laughter at female humiliation and discipline, as the power of female sexuality is simultaneously acknowledged and defeated. The discomfort and disapproval at the comic treatment of rape articulated in these plays, then, serves only to confirm the patriarchal framework within which the act is committed. Only when rape is contrary to the demands of that framework – when, in the words of Marion Wynne-Davis in her discussion of rape in Titus Andronicus, it ‘threatens the values of the patrilineal society and necessitates a breakdown of its value systems and laws’ – must it be taken

58The Faithful Shepherdess, in The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon, Vol. III,
seriously (p. 133). In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, therefore, Lussurioso warns his stepbrother against jesting with the crime he has committed (I. ii. 49); his concern is less with the fate of the victim than with the disgrace for the Dukedom to which he is heir: 'His violent act,' says the Duke, has 'stained our honours; / Thrown ink upon the forehead of our state' (I. ii. 2-4). In the permissive society of Nichols' *Chez Nous* where little sexual behaviour is beyond consideration, it is Dick's paternal relationship with the victim that dictates his response to the attacker's levity:

LIZ. You slept with Jane?
PHIL. There wasn't much sleeping. As you know, she's a lively girl and the whole incident –
DICK (*moving threateningly*). Do I understand you to be making a joke? Do I? Are you? Are you making a joke –
PHIL (*backing away*). No, I was only –
DICK. – out of raping my fourteen-year-old daughter? (*Plays: Two*, p. 44)

Brownmiller elucidates this male response to rape when she describes a scene in the 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange* in which a woman is raped in front of her husband:

This particular rape scene is indicative of the male approach. Had the rape not been performed before the husband’s eyes there would have been no recognizable expropriation of property, no outrageous impudence from man to man ...  

(pp. 301-2)

While incest may be unacceptable within a patriarchal society because it violates harmonious patterns of female exchange between males (according to the Lévi-Strauss model), therefore, rape becomes intolerable (and hence beyond a joke) when it involves the disturbance of male power or the unsanctioned appropriation of a female who is not considered available. In the blackly farcical presentation of rape, therefore, the inevitable *frisson* of sexual violence and the doubt and dread occasioned

by female sexual voracity and a potential disruption of patriarchy are combined with the laughter of triumph over the abused female body.

Just as black farce makes farcical capital from incest through the comic devices of bed-tricks and mistaken identity, it turns necrophilia into farce by making it accidental and unexpected; as Theodore Spencer notes in his study of death in Elizabethan tragedy, 'It was not an uncommon experience for the would-be ravisher to encounter a cold body instead of a warm one.'\(^{59}\) This is true of the Duke's fatal encounter with Gloriana in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, as discussed in the last chapter; still more farcical — and doubly transgressive — is the mistaking of Borachio's corpse for the living Soquette by Languebeau Snuffe (himself disguised as a ghost) in *The Atheist's Tragedy*:

Verily thou liest in a fine premeditated readiness for the purpose. Come, kiss me, sweet Soquette. — Now purity defend me from the sin of Sodom! — This is a creature of the masculine gender. — Verily the man is blasted. — Yea, cold and stiff! Murder, murder, murder!\(^{60}\)

Orton takes the absurdity further, attributing necrophiliac tendencies to the most innocent character of *Loot* and making farce out of his naivety:

FAY. Mr McLeavy may ask for the coffin to be opened. Formaldehyde and three morticians have increased his wife's allure.
DENNIS. But a corpse is only attractive to another corpse.
HAL. We can't rely on him having heard that.\(^{61}\)

Like Orton, 'Seventeenth-century dramatists were not slow to seize upon the titillating possibilities of necrophilia in their eagerness to equate both depraved and idealistic love with death,' as Charles R. Forker writes in his study of Webster.\(^{62}\)


\(^{61}\) *Loot*, p. 241. See also pp. 261-2 (quoted in Chapter 4, above).
The implications of the conjunction of sex and death were discussed in the previous chapter from the point of view of the blackly farcical tension between the continuity of life and the finality of death. This tension permeates the entire relationship between sex and death; but the other side of that pairing is the profound ambivalence about sex that existed in the two periods in question. Forker has examined in some detail what he calls ‘the love-death nexus’ that ‘amounted to something of a cultural obsession in the early seventeenth century’; the theatrical presentation of the sexual side of that linkage (what might be called ‘the sex-death nexus’) suggests, says Forker, ‘a more than casual interest in what a modern clinician might term psychosexual fear’ (pp. 237, 240). Scenes such as the blackly farcical ‘bed-trick’ death of Diaphanta in The Changeling, Forker remarks, ‘dramatize the deepest kind of sexual and psychological insecurity’:

They portray not only the sadistic forces that threaten love from without; they also hint at some dark component in sexual and romantic involvement that invites disaster. (pp. 240-41)

The union of sex and death often locates the source of the threat in female sexuality, while also providing a mechanism of discipline and defence against that sexuality; as Traub notes of Shakespearean drama, ‘To be a woman ... means to embody a sexuality that often finds its ultimate expression in death’ (p. 25). ‘[B]etwixt their brests is the vale of destruction,’ writes Swetnam. ‘Eagles eat not men till they are dead, but women devour them alive’ (p. 16). With Eve as theological justification, woman is, as Forker puts it, ‘the gateway to death’, as in Donne’s ‘First Anniversary’:

For that first marriage was our funeral:
One woman at one blow, then killed us all,

And singly, one by one, they kill us now.63

Millett and Fetterley also find this true of Mailer, of the hero of *An American Dream*,

Fetterley writes:

> It is women . . . who most clearly and consistently elicit Rojack's sense of himself as marginal, threatened, and given over to death. The voice that speaks to him from the moon and tells him he is already dead is female; and it is this same voice that urges him to give himself up, confess to the murder of Deborah, and die.

(p. 167)

Indeed, in the same novel, the womb of Ruta is a 'tomb', while Mailer's 'Ode to a Lady' makes this figuring of woman as force of death still more abusively explicit:

> Cold and swinish are your crafts
> Mean and nasty, foul your arts
> The spirit of a lover you would never kill
> 'Tis tastier far to deaden him.
> Yes, maggots are your pets
> and garlic your bouquet64

These 'false dreads' of female sexuality can only be neutralised, as with the preemptive fragmentation of the female body, by the ultimate discipline of murder – and this is the facet of the female sex-death nexus most enjoyed by black farce. Vittoria acknowledges the inevitability of this fate for the sexual woman as she dies:

> O my greatest sin lay in my blood.
> Now my blood pays for it. (*The White Devil*, V. vi. 240-1)

The 'aesthetic' appropriacy of this punishment is often made particularly explicit by the staging of a neat simultaneity of the act of sex and the act of murder – an image of sexual execution most economically figured by Miller’s 'quaint trope' of the 'fucking block' on which he places his wife until the 'ax' falls.65 As Wendy Griswold notes, 'The Renaissance convention of orgasm as a little death is taken very literally in

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63Forker, p. 242; *John Donne*, p. 209.
64*An American Dream*, p. 48; *Cannibals and Christians*, p. 175.
revenge tragedy’ (p. 80). Both De Flores and Giovanni, for example, meet death as a result of their sexual transgressions; but it is Beatrice Joanna and Annabella who are apparently murdered in the act of sex, with both lovers taking this opportunity deliberately to deny the revengers the pleasure of murdering the women.66 Most explicit of all is the murder of Claire, the Earl’s first victim in his role as Jack the Ripper in Barnes’ The Ruling Class, where the thrusting, writhing and moaning provide an overt parody of the motions of sex:

Putting his left arm around her waist he pulls her close, forcing her head back with a kiss. Taking out his knife, he flicks it open, and plunges it into her stomach. Bucking and writhing with the great knife thrust, CLAIRE can only let out a muffled cry as the EARL’s mouth is still clamped over hers in a kiss. She writhes, twists and moans under two more powerful stabs. He lets her go.67

Jack the Ripper – along with his successor, the idolised ‘Boston Strangler’ – retained an extraordinary mystique in the 1960s, as Susan Brownmiller noted (pp. 294-96). Brownmiller’s discussion of these ‘heroic rapists’ reveals the same sheer exhilaration that is provided by the ‘esthetic villainy’ of De Flores and Giovanni; they thwart Alsemoro and Soranzo just as the Ripper thwarted and taunted his pursuers; and although they (unlike Barnes’ Earl) cannot ultimately share the achievement of the Ripper that was most impressive (according to Brownmiller) to his admirers – that ‘he got away with it’ (p. 294) – both emerge from the act in utter triumph. Giovanni claims for himself ‘the fame / Of a most glorious executioner’ – ‘this was done with courage’ – while De Flores boasts of having cheated all others out of enjoying Beatrice Joanna, either sexually or as murder victim:

65Millett, p. 301. See Sexus, p. 100.
66Joost Daalder convincingly argues that Beatrice Joanna is murdered during the act of sex in ‘Folly’, p. 17.
I thank life for nothing
But that pleasure: it was so sweet to me
That I have drunk up all, left none behind
For any man to pledge me.68

It is in this sense that, as Forker puts it, ‘the lesson that punishment is inescapable, that sin unwittingly hungers for the retribution that will devour it, takes on egotistical energy and relish. As love slides into lust, humanism gives way to satire’ (p. 242; italics mine). This is an extension of the concept of murder as a defiant ‘moment of life’ for the perpetrator, as discussed in the previous chapter; just as the murderer denies his own vulnerability by attempting to join the never-ending ‘cycle of life’, combining his killing with the death-defying gesture of sex, he also protects himself against threatening female sexuality through the masculine self-assertion of sexual killing. The ‘energy and relish’ of sexual killing derives not only from the exhilarating self-assertion of the act, but also from the more general (and hence less gender-specific) exuberant enjoyment of ‘esthetic villainy’ described in the previous chapter.

Once again, the revenge is designed with an exquisite attention to its appropriacy, appealing to ‘the taste for baroque horror’ recognised by Forker in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In an impressive collection of ‘necroerotic action’ in both literary and journalistic writing, Forker includes the following:

As early as 1598 one ‘L. B.’ published a lurid pamphlet about Henry Robson, a fisherman of Rye, who murdered his wife by introducing ground glass mixed with ratsbane ‘into her priuie parts’ during intercourse.69

This fashion for ‘the juicier forms of perversity’ was shared in the 1960s by Mailer, who repeatedly creates images of retributive death by sex; during intercourse with

68’Tis Pity She’s a Whore, V. vi. 33-34; 67; The Changeling, V. iii. 168-71.
Ruta, for example, Rojack fires ‘one hot streak of fierce bright murder’ into her (American Dream, p. 57). The sheer delight of the aptness of death during sex is particularly appreciated by the Jacobean, who have, as Alsemero and Soranzo show in their desire to ‘post’ their victims ‘to hell in the very act of [their] damnation’, the added attraction of the possibility of eternal suffering for victims taken in the act of lust – the very danger warned of by the memento mori.70 Spurio displays his appreciation of both the design and the prospect of hell when he plots to take advantage of the ‘sweet occasion’ of Lussurioso’s proposed secret assignation:

I’ll disinherit you in as short time
As I was when I was begot in haste;
I’ll damn you at your pleasure – precious deed!
After your lust, O, ’twill be fine to bleed. (II. ii. 125-9)

Of course, Spurio’s plot is slightly more complex than the direct punishment of, say, Vittoria’s adultery. While treasuring the ‘preciousness’ of the deed (as Bracciano delights in the ‘quaintness’ of the murder of Camillo in The White Devil) and anticipating the infernal fate of his hated brother, Spurio makes it clear that he is using Lussurioso’s act of lust as an opportunity to avenge a quite separate act – that committed by their father in begetting him. His murder of Lussurioso will, he plans, be as brief and brutal as his illegitimate conception, when ‘damnation met / The sin of feasts, drunken adultery’ (I. iii. 188-9). The introduction of their father’s damnable sexual act (already avenged through Spurio’s relationship with the Duchess) into a murder to be committed during a repetition of just such an act by his son, succeeds in binding sex and death together in a complex aesthetic pattern of adultery, incest, revenge and murder – a pattern that is further strengthened through episodes such as

70 Tis Pity She’s a Whore, V. iv. 32-33. See also The Changeling, V. iii. 119-20.
the Duke’s death by a kiss from a poisoned skull and Lussurioso’s converse plan (like Spurio’s, also foiled) to kill his bastard brother in the act of having sex with the Duchess (‘O, ’twill be glorious / To kill ’em doubled, when they’re heaped’ [II. iii. 3-4]).

The Jacobean era and the 1960s, then, shared a somewhat ‘schizophrenic’ attitude to sex that combined an apparently joyous appetite for the ‘paradise’ of free and abandoned promiscuity with deep doubts and dreads regarding the consequences of such behaviour. Venereal disease, illegitimacy and other social disruptions were perceived to be on the rise, and the clampdown on over-indulgence verged on hysteria. Sexual anxiety was frequently focused on women, whose supposedly overwhelming sexuality and control over reproduction were feared as a source of disorder and domination. The consequent misogyny that was prevalent in both periods is expressed in black farce through the mocking commodification and fragmentation of women, the farcical abuse – both verbal and physical – of the female body, and the grotesque representation of female sexuality. This focus of sexual insecurity on antagonism towards the female means that the laughter of blackly farcical sex is primarily hostile, appearing in the ‘energy and relish’ of sexual killing, the derision of female physicality and the delighted trivialising of sexual violence. Black farce’s laughter is also provoked by some of the most powerful sexual taboos, including incest, necrophilia and rape. The farcical presentation of such taboos simultaneously ‘assaults’ and disturbs the audience and creates a vision of a society writhing in corrupt and dangerous lusts. Black farce both reflects and exploits sexual insecurities, using the most extreme sexual transgressions to titillate and disturb its audience while simultaneously expressing its own generically transgressive,
"mongrel" quality'. The theme of sex therefore joins the pattern of ambivalence, of exhilaration and despair, that is intrinsic to Jacobean and 1960s black farce.
Black farce re-emerged on the stage of the 1960s in more ways than one. Not only did this ‘Jacobean’ genre reappear in new work by contemporary playwrights; it also resurfaced in its original form, as Jacobean revivals – many of them neglected since their original productions – were suddenly mounted in unprecedented numbers. Directors and playgoers, in other words, were simultaneously attracted in significant proportions both to the work of Orton, Barnes, Nichols and Livings and to the plays of Marlowe, Webster, Middleton and Ford. This section is therefore concerned with establishing two things: firstly, whether there was any special directorial approach to these Jacobean plays in the 1960s (in particular, whether the generic interpretation of the plays on stage bore any relationship to the new work being produced concurrently); and secondly, what reasons were given for the choice of these particular plays at this particular moment and what contemporary resonances were detected by directors and observers.

The evidence for these approaches, interpretations, choices and views comes mainly from contemporary articles and reviews of both premieres and revivals in newspapers, magazines and journals. Other material includes personal interviews and correspondence with directors, designers, critics and playwrights; biographies; theatre histories; theatre programmes and other archive resources. As will become clear, the amount of material available varies dramatically from production to production; while
Royal Shakespeare Company productions were covered by almost every publication in the country, some short runs by provincial repertory companies received virtually no press attention whatsoever.

That there was a significant upsurge of Jacobean revivals during the 1960s is beyond dispute. Wendy Griswold, for example, has established that the number of productions of city comedies and revenge tragedies in 1960s London exceeded that of any decade since the 1660s, and this is confirmed as a nation-wide phenomenon in the invaluable checklist compiled by Lisa Cronin (see Table 1, Figure 1 below, pp. 217, 218).1 Moreover, the group of Jacobean plays under discussion – mostly defined by Griswold as ‘revenge tragedies’ – was significantly overrepresented amongst the Renaissance revivals of this period. In other words, this was not simply a generalised Renaissance revival, but a revival focusing specifically on the Jacobean plays featuring the genre I have defined as black farce. All over the country these plays were gaining a popularity which most of them had never enjoyed since their first performances.

Because the rather imprecise phrase ‘Renaissance revival’ is bound to bring to mind the work of Charles Lamb, William Poel and George Rylands, it is worth mentioning here that the upsurge of the 1960s was, in contrast to previous, more scholarly movements, a genuine theatrical revival in the fullest sense. The contrast with Lamb and Poel has been thoroughly argued by Ejner J. Jensen, who demonstrated in 1978 that the nineteenth-century ‘revival’ was ‘a critical and scholarly development unrelated to theatrical values and uninterested in finding a

place for these neglected playwrights on the contemporary stage'; the nineteenth century was in fact 'at times avowedly inhospitable to the Elizabethan dramatists'.

Poel's revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was, by contrast, 'insistently centred on the stage', but his productions, 'most often given in out-of-the-way halls for a day or two . . . could not receive great popular favor', and his antiquarian emphasis on authentic Elizabethan methods of presentation created 'an insurmountable wall between past and present . . . . Drama produced under such conditions and directed to such ends might more plausibly be said to be restored than to be revived' (pp. 222-4). What is unique about the 1960s revival, said Jensen, is that its 'indispensable center . . . has been the deep kinship we have felt with the great playwrights of this period and with their vision of the world' (p. 233). This will become abundantly clear over the following pages. And quite apart from these more qualitative differences, the sheer number of revivals of the plays in question during the 1960s was simply and unequivocally greater than it had ever been before.

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University of Warwick, 1987). I have followed Cronin's definition of 'professional', although this differs occasionally from Griswold.

Table 1: British professional Jacobean revivals 1900-1969 (by decade)

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Fig. 1. British professional Jacobean revivals 1900-1969 (by decade)

Data source: Lisa Cronin, A Checklist of Professional Productions on the British Stage since 1880 of plays by Tudor and Early Stuart Dramatists (excluding Shakespeare) (Warwick: Renaissance Drama Newsletter Supplement 7, University of Warwick, 1987).
The first Jacobean revival set the tone for the decade in that it was the first of many to open to controversy and consternation. That it would be a subject for public discussion was inevitable, chosen as it was by Peter Hall, the young new Director of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-on-Avon, for a historic occasion: the opening of the Aldwych Theatre as the London home of the Royal Shakespeare Company. While the annual Shakespeare seasons continued at Stratford, the West End venue was opened as a year-round forum for new writing alongside ‘non-Shakespearian classics’. The production, directed by Donald McWhinnie, had a week’s little-noted run at Stratford at the end of November 1960, then transferred to the Aldwych with a flourish in mid-December.

*The Duchess* was considered by many as inappropriate for this grand event; it was described as a ‘strange’, ‘inauspicious’, ‘ferocious, almost wilful’ choice – a ‘shock start’. The reason for the shock was the horrific nature of the play: the *Daily Sketch* justified its surprise by calling the play ‘just about the most ferocious and bloody in the English language,’ while the headline in *Reynolds* exclaimed somewhat indignantly: ‘What a grisly way to start your Group, Peter.’

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Yet in retrospect – and in comparison with what was to follow – the adventurousness of Hall’s choice seems largely cosmetic. Generically speaking, The Duchess of Malfi is the least challenging of all the Jacobean plays under consideration, with the least overt comedy alongside its horrors. And although still relatively unknown (‘Who was, or is, Webster?’ would be the response even of the educated public, suggested Philip Hope-Wallace in the Guardian⁴), the play had gained a certain respectability due to its last professional performance, directed by George Rylands and starring John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft, fifteen years earlier. Furthermore, a solid connection with that successful production was ensured by the reappearance of Dame Peggy in the title role. The production, as we shall see, was not in fact as outrageous or as horrific as it might have been. Nonetheless, the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production undoubtedly raised the profile of Jacobean tragedy, provoked some interesting discussions of genre and provided some momentum for future revivals with a degree more courageousness.

Director Donald McWhinnie was ‘the latest recruit to the doughty assembly of university directors who have sprung up since the war.’ His background was in BBC radio, where he had ‘managed to preserve an oasis of new drama and experimental production in a wilderness of Dodie Smith revivals and Galsworthy adaptations.’⁵ Alongside these new works, including commissions from Beckett, Pinter and Adamov, he had also directed a radio version of The Duchess of Malfi. Though he had gained acclaim for his recent stage production of Pinter’s The Caretaker, McWhinnie’s theatrical experience was limited and he remained a director for whom drama lived primarily in the ear. A cerebral, ‘rather donnish’ figure, McWhinnie shared with the

⁵‘In the Picture: Donald McWhinnie’, Observer, 18 December 1960.
new administration a ‘primary concern’ for the quality of the verse speaking – which was almost universally praised. In this McWhinnie had much in common with his predecessor William Poel, for whom ‘a play was primarily a thing heard.’

But there is more to Webster than flawless recitation, and with McWhinnie’s exclusive concentration on the word something appears to have been lost. As Don Chapman reported in a piece entitled ‘Horrors of Webster are toned down,’ the production was ‘deliberately muted in tone’, never rising to the potential ‘orchestrated frenzy’ of ‘a company of lost souls riding the devil’s hearse to hell.’ He concluded his review by addressing the Duchess’s own question to the director: ‘Prithee, why dost thou wrap thy poisoned pills in sugar?’ Caryl Brahms agreed – ‘The production lacked liveliness. It needed to be somehow ruffled’ – suggesting that the ‘neatness’ of the production was not enough to make up for ‘what to my mind should be one great splurge of passion and colour and squalor, of splendour and misery and madness.’

Dame Peggy, though highly praised for her performance, was too restrained for Webster. ‘She has the part beautifully under control but because she does not radiate the hot sensuality of the young widow there seems insufficient cause for the bloodbath,’ wrote Felix Barker in the Evening News. Likewise, Derek Godfrey’s

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8Oxford Mail, 1 December 1960. See also Punch, 28 December 1960.
Antonio was widely agreed to be ‘perhaps a trifle too restrained for such a bellowing play’; ‘too subdued and incommunicative, oversubtle perhaps.’

McWhinnie’s inhibition of Webster was at its most obvious in his minimisation of the horrors of the play. T. C. Worsley in the Financial Times, noting McWhinnie’s almost exclusive preoccupation with ‘allowing the text to make itself felt,’ suggested that ‘this text does call for rather more mechanical ingenuity than Mr McWhinnie gives it. The horrors of the dead hand and the madmen sent in to torture the Duchess are not here as horrible as they should be.’ The Times agreed – ‘The tortures . . . are perhaps more decorative than convincing’ – but excused this on the grounds of technical difficulty.

That McWhinnie was perhaps justified in minimising the horror for an audience of 1960 is illustrated by the response of those members of the press who were less familiar with the play. There were, for a start, those quoted earlier, who found The Duchess of Malfi a shocking and inappropriate choice for the launch of Hall’s ‘Group’. In addition, there were those who felt compelled to warn potential spectators that the play was ‘a difficult-to-stomach piece’; the Oxford Times, for example, qualified its recommendation of the play with the caution: ‘I am assuming that, knowing the period of the play, intending auditors will have strong stomachs and nerves.’ Norman Phelps of the Liverpool Daily Post even went as far as the exaggerated claim that the grisly mood of Webster’s play made “‘Titus Andronicus” by comparison almost a pleasant Sunday afternoon.’

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In spite of McWhinnie’s cautious handling, therefore, there was no small degree of interest in the horrors of Webster’s piece. A reason for this interest is suggested by the number of allusions, in discussions of the degree of horror in the piece, to contemporary forms, whether in film, television, drama or even recent events. References to modern horror films were rife, and the ‘X-rated’ tag soon became a cliché. The most common specific reference was to the films of the Hammer production company, known for its increasingly gory and sexual low-budget horror films. But was The Duchess more or less extreme than its celluloid counterparts? Those who did not simply equate the two tended to agree that Webster’s play went beyond the bounds of the contemporary cinema. The Daily Herald’s David Nathan claimed that the play ‘makes the average horror film seem like the kind of farce for which the Aldwych was once famous,’ and Caryl Brahms, who had missed the horror film I was a Teenage Werewolf, doubted that ‘it was much more horrific than John Webster’s melodrama of the renaissance.’ Others, aware of the ‘numbing’ effect described in Chapter 3, believed that the production was bound to suffer from ‘the plain failure of the horrors to horrify us’ – the episodes of torture ‘have small theatrical effect now’ – and offered other areas of contemporary life as evidence that Webster would be tame by comparison. Television, for example, ‘exists to correct the view that Webster piles on too many horrors for a modern audience’, while in society as a whole,

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'the horrors on which the 20th century has been bred really make the odd stabbing or strangulation in the 15th seem like small talk for the tea hour.'

Ultimately it is impossible to quantify the relative degree of horror in Jacobean tragedy and 1960s culture. The most significant aspects of these differences are that the two were seen as so close, and that it was legitimate to discuss *The Duchess of Malfi* in terms of contemporary popular entertainment. This is a foretaste of the discussion of Jacobean plays in terms of new modes of playwriting; the modern playwrights under discussion were yet to make their débuts, but in the meantime their 'classic' predecessor could not be contained behind the reverential academic veil of literature and history, in spite of McWhinnie's tentative handling. Instead Webster was tossed straight in amongst the Hammer Horror and the Western and altogether treated as if he were very much alive. Indeed, even McWhinnie himself recognised that *The Duchess of Malfi* is one of the first modern plays' ('Working on Webster'). This gives added significance to the fact that Webster's play had been chosen for the opening of a theatre envisaged as a meeting-point for old and new, where they could coexist in a proximity from which both would benefit – and indeed in the choice of a director whose work so obviously straddled the two. Furthermore, amongst that programme of new writing, later in the decade and beyond would be featured the work of Livings, Barnes and Nichols.

Whatever its relationship to contemporary entertainment, the presentation of horrific violence was perceived to provide the primary interest for a modern audience. Events of the twentieth century – and in particular the horrors of the Second World

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War – made the play appear acutely topical. The *Times*, quoting George Bernard Shaw’s dismissal of Webster as ‘Tussaud laureate’, suggested,

> It may be because we have lived close to violent events that it is easier for us than for audiences of the nineties to enter sympathetically into a powerful poetic mind obsessed with violent lives that come to their crises in violent deaths.

The *Tablet*’s Robert Speaight soberingly agreed: ‘To a rationalist critic like Bernard Shaw *The Duchess of Malfi* seemed a lurid absurdity; today it no longer looks so improbable.’\(^{21}\) McWhinnie himself added to the denial of Webster’s reputation as a ‘waxwork sensationalist’ by claiming that Webster’s ‘characters live closer to the shadow of the concentration camp and the hydrogen bomb than to that of the romantic poniard in their attack on life, their encounter with death’ (‘Working on Webster’).

Amongst the critics who picked up on this sense of a relationship with recent events from the production, one or two went as far as to make specific reference to the Holocaust. For H. A. L. Craig it clarified the justification of the play’s violence:

> The greatest poetry in Webster arises at the moments of greatest pain and degradation at heart-stop. Man may go to the soap-factories at Auschwitz but he will not go like a drugged beast. . . . There is a purpose in the horror and to mute it is to bowdlerise.

Kenneth Tynan, returning to the notion of Webster as a playwright very much at home in the twentieth century, suggested that he would have been inspired by recent horrors:

> His muse drew nourishment from Bedlam, and might, a few centuries later, have done the same from Belsen.

Webster belonged in the 1960s, then, because of his preoccupation with extreme violence, and because of the disillusionment that was the result of this preoccupation. To McWhinnie, the playwright’s cynicism was ‘the clue to his modernity’: ‘Webster looked unromantically, unsentimentally at the human race, and he didn’t often like

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\(^{21}\) *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Tablet*, 23 December 1960.
what he saw’ (‘Working with Webster’). Indeed, the new writers were noted for just this quality of unsentimentality; in the next couple of years, for example, critics would be commenting on Livings’ aim at the ‘anti-romantic view’ in *Nil Carborundum* and his striking refusal ‘to let pathos seep in’ to his portrait of *Big Soft Nellie*.\(^{22}\) Comments such as these, highlighting the relationship between Jacobean playwrights and modern sensibilities, were to multiply as the decade and its revivals continued, confirming the explanations for the recurrence of black farce in the 1960s that have been explored in the preceding chapters.

The critics’ preoccupation with the horrors of the play is further illustrated in their choice of generic terms. Labels such as black farce were not yet in common currency, and although the term ‘melodrama’ was occasionally used fairly dismissively in the context of exaggeration of style and implausibility of plot, critics tended to come up with labels such as ‘horror-piece’, ‘hodge-podge of horrors’ and ‘Jacobean shocker’.\(^{23}\) Few describing the *production* used terms defining the mixed nature of the play’s genre, but McWhinnie was certainly aware of its presence in the *play*. For him, this was where its modernity lay; it was ‘a cynical, brutal, realistic, savagely funny play in which there is a poetic obsession with the basic facts of life and death’ – a description that would be echoed when the ‘savage farces’ of Livings, the ‘wilful cynicism’ and ‘brutal compassion’ of Nichols and the ‘highly cynical’, ‘brutal farces’ of Orton, with their ‘merciless emphasis on the physical’, appeared on the scene.\(^{24}\)

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McWhinnie never discussed the apparent fear of that savage humour which was evident in his cautious handling of the play, it is perhaps implicit in his acknowledgement that this was a style for which 'there isn’t a precedent' ('Working on Webster'). He felt that he was approaching something new; by the time the play reached the stage, he had backed off from the modernity of genre to the extent that it was barely recognisable.

What then of the comedy of The Duchess of Malfi? As I have stated, the play does not contain the most outrageous farce of the genre, nor does comedy appear consistently throughout the play, but it certainly exhibits a broad streak of grotesque humour, often at the most unexpected moments. The venue of the production was particularly significant in this respect. Since the restoration of the theatre following the First World War, the Aldwych had been known largely as the home of light farce – so how did the audience view the arrival of The Duchess of Malfi on a stage for so long associated with dropped trousers and belly laughs? With a degree of incongruity, it seems. Milton Shulman’s response was typical:

If Peter Hall had deliberately set out to obliterate any association between his Stratford-on-Avon Company – now housed at the Aldwych – and the Aldwych farces, he could not have selected a more appropriate play than the Duchess of Malfi for his opening presentation.

This Elizabethan tragedy by John Webster is a heaping dose of undiluted horror unrelieved by the slightest tincture of light relief.25

But one or two more subtle voices paused to delve a little beyond this superficial contrast. The Birmingham Post seemed almost to check itself in the middle of a comparison that was heading in the same direction as Shulman’s:

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It is a long way from Aldwych farce to Webster’s bloodbath – except perhaps for the last scene of “The Duchess,” where half of the play’s 10 murders occur within a few minutes, and you need a heart of stone (as Oscar Wilde said of Little Nell’s death) not to laugh.\textsuperscript{26}

The \textit{Scotsman} was still more critical of the comic side of Webster’s play, though as part of a glowing review:

Having claimed that the Aldwych was being rescued from red-flannel farce in order to stage a continuous repertory of distinguished dramatists other than Shakespeare himself, the Memorial company might have been expected to kick off with a play neither on the brink of farce nor on the verge of bad Shakespeare.\textsuperscript{27}

The interesting common element in these two reviews is the unquestioned assumption that the presence of laughter in such a tragedy is necessarily unintentional – and, indeed, undesirable. This assumption was shared by the majority of critics, who referred to the potential for the ‘misplaced laugh’, ‘half-stifled giggles’, ‘titters’ and ‘sniggers’.\textsuperscript{28} Many clearly felt that laughter was out of place within the play’s genre: ‘Surprisingly, there [was] some laughter at tragedy last night,’ reported the \textit{Coventry Evening Telegraph} with no further explanation, assuming that the conjunction of laughter and tragedy was grounds enough for surprise.\textsuperscript{29} The \textit{Solihull and Warwick News} was almost apologetic in its mention of comedy amongst the horror:

The scene where the Duchess is left with (as she thinks) the hand of her dead husband and is then shown his body, her persecution by madmen and finally her dreadful murder are all likely to long remain in the mind. So too, are some of the (dare I say it?) lighter moments.\textsuperscript{30}

Those who found something peculiarly modern in the combination of horror and comedy viewed this as an anachronism – and therefore undesirable. Philip Hope-

\textsuperscript{26}W. H. W., ‘Stratford’s welcome to London’, \textit{Birmingham Mail}, 16 December 1960.
Wallace lamented the fact that the episode with the severed hand no longer terrified a modern audience:

In our time when murder and madness are the stuff of light fiction and ‘sick’ practical jokes abound for this festive season, the notion of an incestuous prince trying to frighten his sister to death by making her think she has kissed her lover’s severed hand has the air of a horror comic.31

Clearly there is a distinction to be made here. There is a difference between complex, disturbing laughter at, say, the masque of madmen, and derisive, unsympathetic titters at the deaths of principal characters. The former is the result of black farce and, in the case of the madmen, deliberately intensifies the subsequent horror of the Duchess’s death. The latter is unintended and unwelcome, ridiculing the performance, the actors, the text. And most of the laughter, it has to be said, belonged to this category. To a great extent this was diagnosed as being due to the ‘sheer magnitude’ and ‘comic regularity’ of the ‘multiplicity of horrors’ within the play: the ‘piling up of horro[r]s is nowadays tedious and even comic.’ 32 More importantly, however, the distinction was not made either by the critics or by McWhinnie himself; virtually all comedy was consigned to the category of the unintentional and undesirable. Most critics agreed that it was in the avoidance of laughter that the greatest challenge to the director lay.33 Like the horror, therefore, the comedy of The Duchess of Malfi was feared by McWhinnie – and the limited success that he had in quelling amusement was almost universally praised.34 McWhinnie even made alterations to the performance at the Aldwych in response to reactions at Stratford. Whereas at Stratford the ‘madder moments’ of Eric Porter’s Ferdinand ‘inevitably

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tend[ed] towards the farcical' (Oxford Mail), at the Aldwych Porter was entirely in control of the audience: 'look how he could silence the house when at a dangerous moment, as body piles on body, they are verging on a titter' (Financial Times). A more general change was noted by Gardner:

Incidentally, the final blood-bath is now played at a superb pace, leaving no time for the hysterical giggles we suffered at Stratford.

There was only one dissenting voice, which looked forward to the less restrained productions of the future. Felix Barker, coining a perceptive adjective, identified McWhinnie’s dampening of the comedy with his evasion of the horrors, in his complaint that this production was altogether too controlled:

I know the dangers, but on the whole Donald McWhinnie’s titter-fearing production needed more fire and perhaps even a little property gore.

(Evening News. Italics mine)

The first Jacobean revival of the decade, then, is of interest largely for its position on the borderline between the past and future. The 1960s had barely begun, Jacobean revivals were still rare on the professional stage and the genre of black farce had yet to make its presence felt. As a result McWhinnie appears to have been – to borrow the words of Peter Wood regarding his own unsuccessful premiere of Joe Orton’s Loot – 'kind of afraid of the play'.35 Like Wood, therefore, he opted for formality rather than confronting the uncomfortable genre of the play head-on. Indeed, instead of exploiting either the horror or the comedy of the play, McWhinnie attempted to play down both, in a manner typical of the more cautious approach of earlier generations. Early in the century, directors had tended to be ‘shy of the horrors’ of The Duchess of Malfi,36 smoothing them out with restraint and stylisation. McWhinnie, though more accepting

34See for example Stratford-upon-Avon Herald; Universe; Daily Express; Oxford Mail.
35Quoted in Lahr, Prick Up Your Ears, p. 241.
of the horror than his conservative predecessors, to a large extent continued this tradition through his reverence for the text. While there are definite affinities with the antiquarian, poetry-orientated work of William Poel, however, there are also strong hints of what was to come, particularly in the discussion of the play in contemporary terms. It is clear from McWhinnie's *Plays and Players* article that even he had seen the play, in its cynicism and its savage humour, as a peculiarly 'modern' piece from the start; although his production was too inhibited to exploit this awareness fully, the seed was certainly there. McWhinnie was the first to venture into this territory in the new decade, and much more work was to be done; as Worsley predicted, 'as we get used to playing these Jacobean plays (and to watching them) we shall see more incisive productions than this one.'

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1961
21 February: The Changeling
Tony Richardson, Royal Court

Two months into the run of The Duchess of Malfi at the Aldwych, Webster was joined in London by his colleagues Middleton and Rowley. On 21 February 1961, the English Stage Company revived The Changeling – not performed professionally in its original form since the seventeenth century – directed by Tony Richardson at the Royal Court, ‘the most persistently seminal, significantly productive and stubbornly controversial place in the British – perhaps in the Western – theatre’, and ‘the breeding place of new playwrights, new subject matter and new attitudes’.1 The groundbreaking company, which during the previous year had ‘provoked more healthy controversy than the work of any other London management’, resulting in ‘steadily improving attendances’, had been founded in 1956 as a ‘writers’ theatre’ with the mission of presenting new plays by young and experimental dramatists – most notably John Osborne, whose Look Back in Anger premiered at its first season.2 The company would go on to present the premieres of plays by Livings, Orton and Barnes;3 indeed, only two years after this revival, they would stage Livings’ remarkably Middletonian Kelly’s Eye. Livings’ play centres on the relationship between Anna, a young, virginal, middle-class woman, and Kelly, a scarred, ugly, menacing vagrant. The incongruity and ambiguity of their attraction for one another parallels the relationship between

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Beatrice Joanna and De Flores; Anna is apparently excited by Kelly’s capacity for murder, and her exploration of Kelly’s world of darkness and violence is as fascinated and wilfully naïve as Beatrice Joanna’s venture into evil. The brutal and hypocritical society depicted by Livings is precisely the world of *The Changeling*; whether this was recognised by the Company or not, their choice of the two plays within as many years illustrates how attractive were the playwrights’ themes – of cynicism, violence and perverse sexuality – whether in age-old revivals or in the freshest work of the newest writers.

It is fortunate that Richardson recorded what lay behind his decision to stage this long-neglected work, for his reasons confirm this strong sense of a relationship between the Jacobean writing and the new work with which the Company was so firmly associated. ‘The reason why I was so keen to revive this Middleton play,’ he told *Plays and Players*, ‘is that I feel it is tremendously in tune with the contemporary theatre audience.’ He continued:

> Of course, there are fashions in taste for all sorts of classics. There was a time, for instance, at the end of the ’thirties, when Donne became an immensely important and fashionable poet, and his vogue brought back all the other Metaphysicals. All minor classics exert a special appeal at certain times, and then go out of fashion as suddenly as they came in because they correspond to something in the taste of a particular audience. I think there is possibly a vogue for Middleton now in this very way.4

Richardson went on to explain what he believed the ‘something’ that connected Middleton with a modern audience to be:

> There is, first, the extraordinary existentialism of the theme of *The Changeling*, the idea that you are solely and wholly responsible for your own actions. . . . Secondly, Middleton shows an understanding of a certain kind of sexual violence, an almost Strindbergian love-hatred relationship . . . . And thirdly, there is a curious and ironic mixture of styles within the play, of abrupt switches from farce to thriller, from

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thriller to tragedy which to me is very much in tone with contemporary attitudes to writing and in the other arts . . . .

As well as existentialism, then, sexual violence and the mixture of farce with the genres of tragedy and thriller were what attracted Richardson to the play — and specifically because both theme and genre were shared by current theatrical works. In production, the madhouse scenes demonstrated this tension in generic form, creating an ‘an uncomfortable spectacle’ at which neither laughter nor pity seemed quite possible (Stage). Three decades later, in his memoirs, Richardson still reflects how ‘astonishingly contemporary’ The Changeling was at the time. Indeed, he was so convinced of the modernity of the play’s themes — ‘of sex, not desire; of murder, and paying the price’ — that in the early 1970s he persuaded Sam Shepard to write the script for a film called The Bodyguard (which was never produced), translating them ‘to today’s jet-set world’. 5

In accordance with Richardson’s view of the play, the script of The Changeling was tackled in terms of the present, as if it were a new work. The director encouraged the actors to make use of their own modern experiences:

During rehearsal we even used details of contemporary life to help us to understand the play. Our aim in this was to enable the actors to relate the play to their own lives, not to regard it as a remote and holy classic. We were determined to present The Changeling, not as some musty exhibition [in] a dramatic National Gallery, but as a play that is as vibrantly alive today as it was when Middleton and Rowley wrote it. (‘Why We Revived The Changeling’)

A number of critics shared Richardson’s sense of the play’s contemporaneity. W. A. Darlington of the Daily Telegraph, in particular, wondered why the play had been ‘on the shelf for two and a half centuries’, venturing a suggestion which drew a link of

disillusionment through the play’s last audience from the world of Middleton and Rowley to the present day:

The best answer that occurs to me is that a play whose central figure is a beautiful young girl who is driven by love to become ‘a cruel murderer’ (her own description) goes too strongly against the romantic tradition to be tolerable; and between the disillusioned people of the Restoration and our disillusioned selves there stretches a long period in which romance reigned supreme.6

Richardson felt that ‘the whole play worked beautifully’, and indeed the production was well received and listed by the Arts Council as one of the highlights of the theatre’s ‘adventurous and provocative’ year.7 The Changeling had ‘at last been revived’, announced Plays and Players, ‘and its greatness demonstrated’.

The public appetite having been ‘whetted’ by The Duchess of Malfi and The Changeling8 (both of which were still running), the final addition to the early cluster of Jacobean revivals in London came with a single performance of Webster’s other best-known work, The White Devil (5 March, dir. Peter Ellis, Old Vic). ‘Waterloo Road is now also in the Jacobean bloodbath business,’ observed the Guardian’s Philip Hope-Wallace.9 Like McWhinnie’s Duchess, this production was part of a much-lauded new venture: to open the doors of the Old Vic on Sunday evenings in order to give young, inexperienced members of the Vic-Wells Association a chance to try their hands at directing and acting in more prominent roles than they would normally be allowed to take on. And in another similarity to the Aldwych programme, the new scheme

8 Peter Roberts, Plays and Players, April 1961.
(modelled on similar projects at the Royal Court and Stratford East) was intended to provide an outlet for interesting revivals alongside promising new works.\textsuperscript{10}

The choice of \textit{The White Devil} to launch this venture was widely welcomed, and caused some excitement – ‘the stir was in the Old Vic again’ – mainly because it gave its audience the rare opportunity to see both of Webster’s major works in close succession.\textsuperscript{11} The play was however viewed as an extremely challenging one for such a young company; and having taken on the direction of the piece and the role of Bracciano while concurrently playing Benvolio in Franco Zeffirelli’s \textit{Romeo and Juliet} and a walk-on part in \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}, Ellis’s production was excusably unadventurous.\textsuperscript{12} As in McWhinnie’s production, therefore, ‘There was no attempt to emphasise the horrific aspects of the play’, and the focus was on the verse, which without the presence of an Ashcroft or an Adrian ‘was not notably good’.\textsuperscript{13} The comic elements of the play, too (considerably more prominent than in \textit{The Duchess of Malfi}), were restricted to the level of cynical irony; Brian Spink as Flamineo could, said \textit{Theatre World}, ‘have made a little more of the sardonic humour and relish of evil.’\textsuperscript{14}

Ellis’s somewhat wary production was a disappointment to T. C. Worsley, who showed signs of itching for a new approach:

Surely these are the occasions when the young might take the chance of a little licence, and experiment a bit? (\textit{Financial Times})


\textsuperscript{14}See also Shorter, \textit{Daily Telegraph}.\textsuperscript{15}
But the momentum was building: despite the fact that tickets were limited to members of the Vic-Wells Association (a condition imposed on Sunday productions), the performance was a sell-out and interest had clearly been kindled.15 ‘[W]e want many more of these revivals,’ wrote J. C. Trewin.16

21 August: Doctor Faustus
Michael Benthall, Assembly Hall, Edinburgh / Old Vic

The next relevant Renaissance revival of 1961 was also mounted by the Old Vic, this time performed by its main company, initially at the Edinburgh Festival in August then transferring the following month to launch the new season in London. Like The Duchess of Malfi, Doctor Faustus was one of the relatively familiar Renaissance plays; it had had several performances, in one form or another, before this revival, although there had been no professional productions since a tour by the Compass Players in 1950. The director was Michael Benthall, who in 1947 had produced the last professional revival of The White Devil prior to the Vic-Wells production,17 and who was best known for his five-year presentation of the Shakespeare First Folio in the 1950s.

At last a little of the shyness of previous generations was beginning to be shed. This was by no means a production of moderation and half measures; instead, it ran ‘to excess at every conceivable point’.18 Doctor Faustus arguably presents many more challenges of genre to a director than either The White Devil or The Duchess of Malfi, with the low comedy of the central scenes often seen as jarringly at odds with the high

15See ‘Old Vic Plays on Sundays’, Daily Telegraph; Guardian.
tragedy that encloses them: in the words of Philip Hope-Wallace, ‘there are troughs in the middle deep enough to sink a timid production.’19 But this did not faze Michael Benthall, who exploited the two genres to the hilt and allowed them to mix more fearlessly than any of his predecessors.

Much of the horror of *Doctor Faustus* is a great deal less straightforward than the violence and gore of many Jacobean tragedies, relying as it does on a now obsolete fear of devils and damnation. ‘Four hundred years ago people sitting in theatres were ready to believe in magic and were scared stiff of the Devil,’ wrote Peter Lewis in the *Daily Mail*. ‘Can such things possibly chill the spine of people sitting in theatres in 1961?’20 The critics were agreed on the difficulty of the enterprise, but divided as to its success. Those who felt that Benthall ‘badly needed modern symbols of horror’, though, were in the minority.21 On the whole it was felt that various aspects of the production – particularly the ‘dramatic visual effects of costume, scenery and lighting’22 – combined to reproduce something close to the fear that must have been elicited by the first presentations:

John Lambert’s music and the aspect of wonder with which Paul Daneman invested Faustus as his first conjurings took effect contrived to fill the venerable hall with a sense that all the devils in Hell had possessed it.23

‘[F]or all our modernism,’ wrote Edward Ashton in the *Scottish Daily Mail*, ‘it is impossible to repress a shudder of horror and pity as the screaming Faustus is borne away by devils to his eternal damnation.’24 Michael Annals’ costumes, in particular, were ‘real and alarming inventions’:

\[\text{\[Guardian, 23 August 1961.}\]
\[\text{\[Faustus is so crude but so attractive\], Daily Mail, 15 September 1961.}\]
\[\text{\[Felix Barker, ‘Mephisto is Robbed of Ancient Fears’, Evening News (London), 15 September 1961.}\]
\[\text{\[See also ‘Dr. Faustus Does Not Seem So Wicked Now’, Kensington News, 6 October 1961.}\]
\[\text{\[Michael Dale, ‘The Devil is the hindmost’, People, 17 September 1961.}\]
\[\text{\[Charles Graves, “Doctor Faustus” Still Has Meaning’, Scotsman, 23 August 1961.}\]
\[\text{\[Horror not so out of date\], Scottish Daily Mail, 22 August 1961.}\]
Envy (a white, flayed, near-skeleton figure, flapping with nerves and sinews) and Sloth (a mollusc-like mixture of walrus and ant-eater) will not, once seen, be lightly forgotten.  

The production, ‘charged with surprising menace, . . . chill[ed] the blood’ and was received as ‘an ominous, brooding play that hovers over an audience like the outstretched wings of a giant vulture’. T. C. Worsley of the *Financial Times* concluded that ‘the stage pictures are always exciting and often disturbing’, and the elicitation of infernal fear was indeed an astonishing success:

> The smell of sulphur that seeps up from the lower world is more than literal. The atmosphere is sulphurous, too, especially in the earlier scenes when Mephistopheles transpires in a crimson flash, or Lucifer, flanked by his devils’ troop, flares out at us in flaming red. The world below the world invades our imaginations with an unnerving conviction even in these days of disbelief.

Like the horror, the farce of *Doctor Faustus* is potentially problematic for a director. The ‘drivelling triviality’ of the uses to which Faustus puts his dearly-bought power is almost inevitably anticlimactic: ‘To a modern audience, this is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of Dr. Faustus’ (*Evening Standard*). Instead of attempting to smooth the glaringly uneven play into some kind of unity, however, Benthall went as wholeheartedly – and spectacularly – for the farce as he did for the horror. And rather than disrupt the tone of the play with a sense of anticlimax, this gave rise to ‘little or no discontinuity’: ‘What usually strikes us as puerile in its silliness,’ wrote Anthony Cookman in the *Tatler*, ‘this time stirs a genuine sense of comedy.’ J. C. Trewin reported that Benthall managed the central scenes ‘helter-skelter, and the various comings and goings in every aisle, with a sense of fun, a great

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26Richard Findlater, ‘Doctor Faustus’, *Financial Times*, 15 September 1961; Milton Shulman, ‘Dr. Faustus should be a bigger man than this . . .’, *Evening Standard*, 15 September 1961. See also *Daily Mail*.
deal of spirited invention, and some tricks that would make him an honorary member of any magic circle.\(^{29}\) Jack Piler of the *Daily Herald* clearly delighted in the boisterousness of the comic scenes, as he reported with delicious physicality in a piece headed ‘This devil is good for a laugh’:

What a glorious romp is this rich dollop of 16th-century morality – when it gets down from the pulpit and smacks its lips in sheer lusty fun.

... Indeed, farce has never dealt so rumbustious a frolic as the scene in Rome when sold-to-the-devil Dr. Faustus assumes invisibility and plays havoc with a Papal audience.\(^{30}\)

In the scene to which Piler refers, Faustus exhibited ‘a violent bravado’; and the result was that, although a minority of critics sniffed at a ‘naive dependence on flash and bang pantomime effects’, W. A. Darlington of the *Daily Telegraph* reported that ‘the Vatican scenes, for the first time that I can remember, both earned and received a round of applause’.\(^{31}\)

Michael Benthall’s *Doctor Faustus*, then, was one of the first revivals of the decade to relish rather than minimise both farce and horror. In this it was, as Vesna Pistotnik has pointed out, an ‘innovatory’ reading:

With its treatment of the middle section as an integral part of the play’s overall design, and with its recognition of the humour, this revival anticipated the new directions in Marlowe criticism which became prominent in the mid nineteen-sixties. ... Its mixture of style – exaggerated grotesque with recognizable traces of naturalism – of tone – *comic and serious* – and, in particular its dynamic use of a three-levelled stage, were the features taken up by the latter revivals.

(\(pp. 238-9. \) Italics mine.)

While Benthall may not quite have created from *Doctor Faustus* the ‘coherent whole’ desired by Bernard Levin, he did allow the darkest horror and the most rollicking

\(^{29}\) *Doctor Faustus*, Birmingham Post, 22 August 1961. See also Guardian.

\(^{30}\) *Daily Herald*, 15 September 1961.

comedy to seep into one another in a manner that brought out the black farce of the play, ‘giving an integrity to the violent contrasts of gravity and farce’.\textsuperscript{32} The mode of ‘joy and delight’ suggested in Faustus’ conjuring scenes ‘always showed its cruel side’:

The presentation of the devils, for example, combined revulsion and terror of their threatening behaviour with an obvious naivety in their outward appearance. They seemed \textit{simultaneously} funny and horrific. (Pistotnik, pp. 236-7. Italics mine.)

‘Even in the play’s lighter moments, there is always a hint of darkness,’ wrote the \textit{Kensington News}. And the imagery of Jack Piler’s conclusion, with its comic pain, encapsulates black farce precisely:

The broad humour of Marlowe’s day may bruise. But how it prodded off the belly laughs! \textit{(Daily Herald)}

\textbf{29 August: 'Tis Pity She's a Whore}

\textbf{David Thompson, Mermaid}

When \textit{'Tis Pity She's a Whore} appeared at the Mermaid Theatre in London in August 1961, it was only the second major production of the play in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{33} The critics, therefore, though strikingly divided as to the success of the Mermaid production, were grateful for the chance to see this work, tending to agree that it was at least ‘worth while going to see . . . for its curiosity value.’\textsuperscript{34} As the revival of interest in bloody Jacobean plays gained momentum, the rediscovery of Ford was perhaps inevitable. J. C. Trewin remarked approvingly on the increasing accessibility of rarely-performed works in London, noting that in four nights at the theatre since his return from the Edinburgh Festival, three of the plays had been by Marlowe (\textit{Doctor


\textsuperscript{32}Levin, ‘All smoke, but no poetic fire’, \textit{Daily Express}, 15 September 1961; \textit{Stage}.

\textsuperscript{33}The last major production was Donald Wolfit’s revival twenty years earlier; the only other professional public performance of the twentieth century was in Nottingham in 1955.
Faustus, now at the Old Vic), Shakespeare (King John) and Ford – and he had not yet even reached the West End.35

The play was directed by David Thompson, using a text adapted ‘(i.e. cut)’ by the Mermaid’s founder, Bernard Miles – ‘injudiciously’ so, in the view of most critics.36 As a result of both the cutting and the direction, the emphasis of Thompson’s production was (in direct contrast to McWhinnie’s Duchess) firmly on action – performed with ‘gusto’ – rather than poetry.37 ‘[T]he Mermaid company goes at it with a will and a vigour that make few concessions to Ford’s occasional bouts of dark lyricism,’ commented Eric Shorter in the Daily Telegraph, and Kenneth Tynan agreed:

Throughout the evening, Ford the poet is fitfully visible; but what one remembers is Ford the crime reporter, hysterically versifying mayhem.38

Certainly there was no balking at the horror, and Ford emerged from the production ‘bloody and unbowed’.39 The realism of the death scenes, ‘no symptom spared’, was especially noted, with the death of Hippolita (Barbara Barnett) repeatedly singled out for comment.40 To many, it was stunningly horrific, ‘the most chilling’ of the fatalities: ‘when she died, horribly poisoned, neither actors nor audience, on the first night,

38‘Corruption of the Poet’, Observer, 3 September 1961. See also Eric Keown, Punch, 6 September 1961.
breathed for seconds'. To others it was ludicrous, reminiscent of Jonathan Miller's spoof in *Beyond the Fringe*:

Hippolita dies so noisily that one is tempted, borrowing a phrase from "The Broken Heart", to bellow: "Hold your chops, nightmare!"

Here we return to the question of unintentional comedy — 'The risk . . . that we shall find it cheerful when we shouldn't' — of which Thompson was clearly aware. In general, it was something that he 'notably avoid[ed]' through a selective restraint and a strong pace, 'with a sound sense of balance between the truly felt and the merely violent'. The final scene is illustrative of his approach: rather than have Giovanni brandish Annabella's heart on his dagger, he ('wisely' and 'graciously' in the view of the critics) opted to have him hold it in his 'incarnadined' left hand — yet 'still beating if our eyes did not deceive us'. This delicate combination of control and excess appears — most of the time — to have had the desired impact. And this avoidance of derisive laughter did not destroy the comedy of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore altogether, but succeeded in conveying 'Ford's swift alternation of groundling comedy and balcony tragedy' (*Sunday Telegraph*).

When Philip Hope-Wallace had previously reviewed Ford's play, the *Guardian*'s sub-editors had censored the full title, printing only 'Tis Pity...'. This time, with the title printed in full, the critic mused on how times had changed:

... we have moved into another epoch in which for instance the nudity or near nudity of the actress playing Lady Chatterley is front-page news. There must be playgoers today as surely as there were in 1624 who regret any change: possibly they thought that John Ford really went too far in this piece in his attempt to whet the jaded palate of the sensation-loving public with his theme of incest and butchery.

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41 *Sunday Times*. See also *Times*.
42 *Observer*. See also *Illustrated London News*.
45 *Sunday Times*; *Sunday Telegraph*. 
The lurid drama of Ford, in other words, was very much at home on the stage of 1961.

Certain critics, indeed, used the production as an argument against those who believed there was something new about the current wave of violence and sexual freedom on stage:

John Ford’s bloody but invigorating Jacobean melodrama is recommended as a refresher course to all those dainty playgoers who still believe that the British Theatre’s proudest tradition is one of niceness (or ‘good clean entertainment’, or ‘harmless family fun’), now in the process of being debauched by dirty-minded playwrights and critics.46

As with other revivals, the production was compared to an ‘X certificate’ or ‘second-feature horror film’, but there was no need to turn to the cinema for contemporary analogues; the overall consensus was that John Ford was a playwright for the theatre of the 1960s:

The theme, of course, is nothing out of the way these modern times – no London audience that knows its Royal Court and half of its Shaftesbury Avenue would find much difficulty in obeying the injunction of Vasques . . . to ‘think upon incest and cuckoldry’, or Giovanni’s . . . to ‘work serious thought on baleful plots’.47

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46 Daily Mail. See also Oxford Mail.
47 Times, Observer, Birmingham Post.
1962
4 July: Women Beware Women
Anthony Page, Arts Theatre

1962 brought only one Jacobean revival from my selection, but since Women Beware Women had not been performed on the professional stage since its original seventeenth-century production, it was a particularly significant one. The revival was directed by Anthony Page at the Arts Theatre in London during the Royal Shakespeare Company's six-month tenancy of that theatre, consisting of a major season devoted to experimental work; once again a virtually unknown Jacobean work was dusted off in the company of the newest in 1960s writing. The Arts Theatre had always been known for its innovation and in the preceding decade had been a breeding ground for the Theatre of the Absurd: a promising setting for Middleton's unperformed and unsettling tragedy.1 The RSC's 'infinitely rewarding' programme, which had so far presented 'three exciting new plays and this wonder of the neglected past', consisted of Giles Cooper's Everything in the Garden, Henry Livings' Nil Carborundum, Maxim Gorki's The Lower Depths, David Rudkin's Afore Night Come, Women Beware Women, Boris Van's The Empire Builders and Fred Watson's Infanticide in the House of Fred Ginger.2

Livings' Nil Carborundum was directed by Anthony Page only three months before his production of Women Beware Women; the plays even shared a cast member, Nicol Williamson, who played S.A.C. Albert Meakin and Leantio (and would go on, a year later, to play the title role in Livings' Kelly's Eye). Nil Carborundum is a 'wild, malicious', 'serious farce' examining the ludicrous futility of military activity through

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2Mervyn Jones, 'Probing in dark places', Tribune, 13 July 1962. See also Addenbrooke, pp. 280-81.
the presentation of a mock war in an army barracks, and many of the characteristics described by critics would be noted also in Middleton’s work: in particular, the playwright’s apparent cynicism (‘His view of life seems to be not only pessimistic and disillusioned – nobody can blame him for that – but disheartened’) and the play’s ‘changes of tone and mood’. Livings even had a marginalised, subversive malcontent:

There is the character of the C.O. (played with splendid attack by Mr. Graham Crowden), who is written and acted as comic, but with strangely disturbing undertones, for he is one of the last war’s forgotten men, taking refuge from the futility and absurdity of peacetime Service life in bitter amusement and the sardonic observation of conventions he cannot respect. (Times)

*Nil Carborundum* is an early work, and not the blackest of Livings’ black farces, but it certainly has the characteristic spirit of exhilarating cynicism that is shared by both Cooper and Middleton, and which therefore informed a large proportion of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Arts Theatre season – a season that also included the ‘brutal and thoroughly terrifying ritual murder’ of a tramp (including the severing and impaling of his head) in the ‘fearsome witches-sabbath’ of David Rudkin’s *Afore Night Come.*

In a further link between Page’s productions of Livings’ and Middleton’s plays, *Nil Carborundum* was likened the popular television farce series *The Army Game,* and when Page came to direct *Women Beware Women* he boldly cast comedian Bernard Bresslaw – best known for his role as *The Army Game’s* Private ‘Popeye’ Popplewell (of the catchphrase ‘I only arsked’) – in the part of the Ward. Like Benthall with *Doctor Faustus,* Page was well aware of the comic dimension to *Women Beware

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5‘Comic Sanity in the Service’, *Times,* 13 April 1962. This characteristic was also noted of *The Little Mrs Foster Show:* Doreen Tanner, ‘New format, but the old qualities are preserved’, *Liverpool Post,* 9 November 1966.
Women and was determined to enjoy it. The casting of Bresslaw was a surprise to many, and was remarked upon in almost every review. To some, the actor was simply a fish out of water, an inappropriately vulgar and modern intrusion in a classic work; but once the critics had got over their sense of dislocation, most recognised that Bresslaw hit just the right Middletonian note. True to the spirit of black farce (and in a manner strongly reminiscent of Livings’ grotesque victim-heroes), Bresslaw was ‘an obscene abomination’, ‘terrifyingly moronic’, ‘disturbingly comic and menacing as a stooge among plotters’. ‘Disturbingly comic’ was of course the description of Livings’ C.O. in Nil Carborundum (p. 246 above); Eh?, too, as well as Nichols’ Joe Egg, would later be described in exactly the same terms.

While certain critics found the comedy too uncomfortable to accept (precisely the desired effect of black farce), Bresslaw’s performance, rather than deviating from the spirit of the production, was very much in tune with the overall grotesquerie. The comedy was unerringly dark, and disturbingly mingled with tragedy and horror:

It begins as a cynical comedy and ends, in a comic litter of corpses, as a tragedy pointing the moral of its title.

David Nathan, like many critics, emphasised the mixed nature of the genre:

A right bloody play, a thundering stunning mixture of melodrama and murder, passion and lust, innocence corrupted, vice punished, threaded with a dark, sinister humour.

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8See for example Graham Samuel, Western Mail, 8 July 1962.
9See for example D. H., ‘Thrust and Beauty in First Performance for 300 Years’, Bristol Evening Post, 5 July 1962.
The *Kensington Post* recognised the genre as a ‘characteristically Jacobean blend of tragedy with bawdy humour’, while the chess game was singled out by the *Northern Echo* as ‘a form of sinister high comedy’. To Alan Brien in the *Sunday Telegraph* the production was truly grotesque: ‘a skull in a wig, a dance of death, a pageant written with a poison pen.’ And lest the second of these phrases might seem to place the production firmly in the Middle Ages, it is worth noting that in 1969 Nichols’ *The National Health* would be described by several critics precisely as a ‘dance of death’, too.

Page’s production was just as horrific as it was comic: ‘Not for the squeamish,’ declared the *Daily Mail*, foreshadowing identical warnings (in one case from the theatre itself) to audiences of *The Duchess of Malfi*, *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, *The National Health* and *The Finest Family in the Land*. Its effects were exactly the confrontational ones that contemporary writers were aiming for:

The players are deadly accurate in their attempts to hit the audience between the eyes, and the after-effects are bewitching, bothering, and bewildering.

Indeed, the play was produced just as the RSC was beginning to develop its controversial ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ experiment, which was to lead to the ‘Dirty Plays’ uproar of 1964. Peter Hall would then state that his intention in the experiment was ‘to examine some aspects of man’s deep instinctive lusts, even if this took us into the

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realms of horror', and that, alongside some of the contemporary works of the Arts Theatre season, Women Beware Women had 'aided this investigation'.

The impact of the play was such that, in anticipation of the 1964 controversy, it prompted one reader of the New Daily to complain to the Editor. The correspondent's objection, significantly, is that a play of the seventeenth century would contribute to the moral decay of the twentieth:

As it is proveably true that the mind grows like what it feeds upon, why, when our country is already suffering from moral degradation, are these apparently deliberate attempts further to corrupt the public permitted?

This kind of complaint was to become a familiar response to new plays as the decade went on; so much so that it would be satirised by Orton in his hoax letters to editors under the pseudonym of Edna Welthorpe.

Black farce was now beginning to emerge on the modern stage; Henry Livings had already had two plays produced in addition to the one mounted by Page on the same stage only three months earlier. And critics, alongside the continuing references to television and X-certificate films, were beginning to notice the similarity between Jacobean and contemporary playwriting:

The play, which it seems has not previously been produced since the seventeenth century, is certainly powerful enough to have deserved another airing. It is also, in its collection of assorted and rather cynical sexual relationships, oddly reminiscent of some of the Second Elizabethan plays we have been watching recently!

Cynicism and unusual sexual relationships, as we have seen, are indeed characteristics which the drama of the two periods share; and this developing sense of

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19 Quoted in Addenbrooke, p. 122.
21 'The Edna Welthorpe Letters' are reprinted in The Orton Diaries, pp. 271-89.
23 W. H., 'Elizabeth I Play is Revived', Middlesex County Times, 14 July 1962. See also Financial Times.
the relationship between Jacobean and 1960s drama was coupled with a perception of Middleton’s acute ‘modernity’ at this time. ‘Thomas Middleton (1570-1627) is apparently the one of the old playwrights who is nearest akin to the contemporary spirit,’ wrote T. C. Worsley (*Financial Times*). Robert Muller described the playwright as ‘Stunningly deploying an almost modern approach to psychology’; ‘The characters, and this is rare even in Shakespeare, seem absolutely alive to us today,’ wrote Clive Barnes. Like the critic who compared First and Second Elizabethan plays in terms of cynicism, Alan Brien felt that it was Middleton’s ‘accent of mesmerised self-loathing’ that ‘speaks to us across the centuries'; Brien and many other viewers of 1960s Jacobean revivals clearly ‘peered into the mirror of revenge tragedy and saw their own worried faces.’ At times there was some confusion as to whether the illusion of modernity came direct from Middleton, or was deliberately heightened by Page’s production. Page was undoubtedly aware of the significance of the play to modern audiences, and chose to emphasise this through performances – such as Bresslaw’s – that did not treat the play as a classical museum piece. Bamber Gascoigne captured this sense of escape from scholarly reverence when he claimed that ‘revival is far too weak a word for the bursting vitality of what we saw’; Clive Barnes agreed, saying that Page had paid Middleton the compliment ‘of producing the play as if it had been written yesterday.’ The play was not a dead work coaxed back into life but a piece that lived and breathed of its own accord, as if for the first time. Irving Wardle, seven years on, would recall that ‘What gave the Arts Theatre version its peculiar force was a realism that made it seem a modern play.’ This was certainly

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24 *Daily Mail; Plays and Players.*
26 'Half-Cockpit’, *Spectator, 20 July 1962; Plays and Players.*
27 'Middleton revival after seven years', *Times, 4 July 1969.*
Renaissance Revivals
1962

appreciated at the time, too. Nicol Williamson’s performance as Leantio, in particular, imbued ‘with an authentic, modern flavour’, was singled out as making ‘the rhetoric of his speeches ring true and newly-coined’, while Pauline Jameson’s much-praised Livia was ‘a magnificent and modern creation’.

The reappearance of Middleton’s play on the professional stage after an absence of three centuries, then, was (with the exception of a *Birmingham Mail* headline: ‘Once in 300 years – and it’s enough’) widely welcomed. To the *Daily Mail*’s Robert Muller the ‘exhilarating production’ was ‘the surprise of the year . . . a revelation’. Indeed, the success of the production was such that it was used by many critics as evidence that the Company deserved funding to allow it to extend its residency at the Arts and to ‘ensure that Peter Hall may continue these adventurous journeys of discovery.’

Indeed, the play was so well received that there was some puzzlement as to why it had taken so long to re-emerge. The *Times* ventured that some ‘squeamishness of taste’ had till now been the obstacle, adding a suggestion that ‘a revival of vitality in English drama has made this the moment to put things right.’ The *Bristol Evening Post* likewise asserted that its neglect would be a great surprise to most people, and ‘can only be explained by the national inertia which makes us reach for Shakespeare whenever we feel like a classical shot in the arm.’ But the days of inertia were over. There had been a striking increase in Jacobean revivals over the past few months, and critics were beginning to notice. As well as the many productions of the previous year, there was the brand new addition of the Chichester Festival Theatre, opened only a day before the first performance of Page’s revival. Sir Laurence Olivier had chosen as his


launching production Beaumont and Fletcher’s farce *The Chances* (also unperformed since the seventeenth century), closely followed by ‘yet another Jacobean bloodbath’, Ford’s *The Broken Heart* (*Daily Mail*). Neither appealed, it must be noted, as much as the grotesquerie of *Women Beware Women* (the RSC ‘succeeded as gloriously as Laurence Olivier had failed dismally,’ said Clive Barnes), perhaps because they did not quite contain the combination of genres which gave Middleton’s play its contemporary appeal, as noted by one critic:

... the present theatre public in London is fast discovering a taste for Jacobean tragedy, with its characteristic blend of pitiless bawdy and involved sense of corruption and evil.\(^{31}\)

But whatever the relative merits of the concurrent productions, this new spate of Jacobean revivals was widely welcomed (‘My education in the classics grows apace,’ enthused Caryl Brahms\(^{32}\)), and critics revealed that their interest had been stirred. For ‘Prompter’, Page’s production was proof not only that the RSC’s tenancy of the Arts had been ‘exceptionally fruitful’, but also ‘that lesser known plays can be unearthed with profit’ (*Western Independent*), while Eric Gillett of the *Yorkshire Post*, finding *Women Beware Women* ‘a 17th century piece well worth reviving’, reminded both Hall and Olivier that ‘there are many more plays written by the great Elizabethan dramatists waiting to be brought back to the stage’.

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\(^{30}\) *Daily Mail*. See also *Times*, *Tribune*, *Sunday Telegraph*; ‘National Theatre’, *Observer*, 8 July 1962.


1964

10 March: The Jew of Malta
Peter Cheeseman, Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent

The critics were to have something of a wait for the continuation of the Renaissance revivals boom. But after a lull in 1963, the Marlowe quatercentenary arrived. And despite the fact that he had been ‘tactless’ enough to be born in the same year as Shakespeare (by whom he was ‘undoubtedly . . . somewhat overshadowed’) there were several celebrations of Marlowe’s birthday around the country. Most significantly, the theatres in question largely shunned Marlowe’s better known and more familiar plays in favour of a bizarre, virtually unperformed work, which they interpreted in a very distinctive manner.²

‘The first tiny toot on the Marlovian trumpet’ (Observer) in 1964 was The Jew of Malta (17 February, dir. Donald Bain, Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury), staged, appropriately enough, in Marlowe’s home city of Canterbury, at the theatre which bears his name. This semi-professional production was staged mainly in order ‘to mark the occasion’ (Pistotnik, p. 129), and its emphasis was light and celebratory, with the teenage Jane Asher (who played Abigail) reassuring audiences in advance that it ‘should be a lot of fun.’³ ‘[P]layed more bitterly, and letting the humour find its own level’ remarked the Times, ‘this could have been a dangerous evening.’⁴

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²Apart from the productions discussed here, the only other quatercentenary revivals were a production of Edward II at the Phoenix Theatre, Leicester (30 April, transferring to the New Arts in London on 1 July) and Dido, Queen of Carthage at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton (18 June).
A ‘dangerous evening’ materialised only a month later, directed at the two-year-old Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent by co-founder and Director Peter Cheeseman.\(^5\)

The proximity in time of Cheeseman’s *Jew of Malta* to the Canterbury production indicates that the two choices must have occurred independently, though by the time his production opened Cheeseman was aware both of the previous version and of preparations for the next – Clifford Williams’ major Royal Shakespeare revival. The groundbreaking Stoke staging was very much a forerunner of Williams’ production, and a powerful example of the instinctive selection of a Jacobean play for a theatre in which black farce was rapidly taking hold. *The Jew of Malta* was an adventurous step beyond the bounds of the conventional repertoire of a provincial theatre; as the *Times* recognised, it would have been very tempting for the likes of Cheeseman to play it safe:

In this Shakespeare quatercentenary it takes a bold repertory company indeed to recall that Marlowe, too, was born 400 years ago. It is, after all, so much easier to deploy a company (and a local audience) on the dearly beloved villainies of a Shylock or a Richard Crookback than to embark on the unfamiliar evil-doings of Marlowe’s Barabas.\(^6\)

Cheeseman, then, must have had a strong reason to take such a risk. Of course the Marlowe anniversary played its part; but like Williams, Cheeseman does not list this as a factor amongst his reasons for selecting the play. Instead his motivation was based almost entirely on *generic* considerations. ‘The quatercentenary has drawn our attention to the play,’ he wrote in a pamphlet published to accompany the production, ‘but the real reason for our revival of interest in it seems to be our present impatience

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with neat distinctions between comedy and tragedy, and our deliberate exploration of areas where both meet.\(^7\)

Cheeseman may have been departing from the norms of a provincial ‘rep’ by picking on an obscure and difficult Elizabethan work, but he was in fact being utterly true to the spirit of 1960s theatre, attracted as he was by ‘the vivid theatricality, and indeed some of the crudities, of these non-Shakespearian plays, at a time when theatre was becoming more theatrical and less naturalistic.’\(^8\) According to James L. Smith’s extensive research, published in 1968, Cheeseman’s was the first ever revival of *The Jew of Malta* ‘to unite the complex moods of the play into some satisfactory whole’, opting neither for the solemnly tragic portrayal by Edmund Kean in 1818 nor entirely for the delightfully farcical and satirical productions of 1922 and 1954 respectively (p. 14). Pistotnik’s description of the final moments of the production illustrates Cheeseman’s approach of generically ‘dashing ... the audience’s expectation’ by switching abruptly between horror, farce and anticlimax:

This ending note of ‘a marvellous sneer’ ... resulted from a well balanced mixture of serious and comic – Barabas’ rushed exit accompanied by his dying words, spoken in an exaggerated, farcical tone, and followed by an ominous bang of a gong and a precarious moment of silence – all these build up the expectation of a resolution coming with a figure, or an event, very much different from Ferneze and his closing speech. (p. 135)

It was almost half a century since T. S. Eliot had unearthed the presence of farce in *The Jew of Malta*,\(^9\) but never before had such a reading been translated to the stage. Cheeseman’s interpretation, shared (quite independently, it seems) by Williams, was based on ‘the realisation that Marlowe’s method of juxtaposing tragedy and comedy,

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\(^7\) *The Jew of Malta*, in Andor Gomme and Peter Cheeseman, *Christopher Marlowe and The Jew of Malta* (‘Victoria Theatre Pamphlet No.1, published for the production of *The Jew of Malta* 10 to 28 March 1964’).  
\(^8\) Letter to the author, 3 June 1996.  
violence and humour, implied not primarily farce or satire but rather the *pantomime noir* of Orton or Giles Cooper’, as Smith stated only four years after the production (p. 14).

Smith’s interesting analogy has since been reiterated and extended. In 1990, Rima Hakim wrote that ‘The theatre of 1964 was widely coloured by Orton’s spirit and, indirectly, directors of *The Jew of Malta* seem to have been influenced by Orton’s innovatory principles’, and in 1994 James R. Siemon singled out Orton’s *Loot* as an example of the ‘contemporary dramatic analogues’ drawn on by both Cheeseman and Williams. Though the identification of these analogues is apt, the concept of specific influence that appears to have arisen out of a widely shared awareness of some striking parallels is highly questionable. The difficulty of identifying direct influence will be addressed at the end of this chapter, but the comments of Smith and, more specifically, Hakim and Siemon illustrate how common it is to make false assumptions out of the intriguing affinities between old and new. Their mistake is particularly glaring because *Loot* did not receive its premiere until almost a year after Cheeseman’s revival of *The Jew of Malta*; indeed, Orton was utterly unknown at this point and his first ever staged work, *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, was presented between the Stoke and RSC Jews. It is therefore impossible that either Cheeseman or Williams was drawing on the analogue of *Loot* in his production. In theory, it is conceivable that Williams was influenced by *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, but as the first blackly farcical reading of *The Jew of Malta* had already appeared before *Sloane*, it seems equally likely that all three occurred independently. Had Smith and the others reversed the direction of influence and advanced the hypothesis that Orton – or at least the director of the first successful
production of *Loot* – took some inspiration from Williams' *Jew*, that would certainly
have been more plausible. Orton's well-read partner and one-time collaborator,
Kenneth Halliwell, who provided much of Orton’s literary education, had once taken
‘Marlowe’ as a stage name, and biographer John Lahr apparently sees the manner of
Halliwell’s subsequent murder of Orton, ‘with a frenzied brutality typical of that
Elizabethan playwright’s blood-lust’, as indicative of the hold Marlowe had over his
mind (Prick Up Your Ears, p. 2). Braham Murray, moreover, director of *Loot* in
1966, has since described the play, albeit vaguely, as ‘terribly Marlowe’ (quoted in
Lahr, p. 254). We are of course still in the realms of speculation; but the link between
*Loot* and *The Jew of Malta* persists. A Royal Shakespeare Company revival of
Marlowe’s play in 1987, directed by Barry Kyle, picked up retrospectively on the
relationship between the two dramatists at length in a two-page section of the
programme, headed “‘Loot’, or "The Jew of Malta’”.11 Pointing out the near-
simultaneity of Orton’s first West End success and Clifford Williams’ London revival
of *The Jew of Malta*, the note went on to list the ‘no doubt fortuitous’ parallels
between the lives of the two playwrights (homosexuality, imprisonment, enjoyment of
notoriety, violent early death having written some half-dozen plays) before exploring in
some detail the links between their works. As well as numerous echoes of content and
theme, the programme noted that both writers ‘recognised the close kinship between
the tragic and the ludicrous’:

Marlowe and Orton are concerned with a more purposeful kind of farce than *Johan
Johan* or, for that matter, *No Sex Please We’re British*, but one which recognises
the capacity of the form for tackling taboo subjects – not, here, down-at-heel
husbands cuckolded by supposedly celibate priests, or respectable families

11Programme, Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-on-Avon.
threatened by a flood of pornography (though taboos are threatened, even at that level), but the moral and spiritual emptiness of the universe. *King Lear* and *Endgame* deal with that in terms of tragedy, not least because their authors found the prospect insupportable, and tragic catharsis a necessary crutch. *The Jew of Malta* and *Loot* deal in terms of farce, I suspect, because their authors found the prospect both terrifying and fearfully attractive.

Orton also shared, of course, what Pistotnik describes as Cheeseman's aim of 'dashing ... the audience's expectation'. 'One must shake the audience out of its expectation,' he said in 1966. 'They need not so much shocking, as surprising out of their rut.'

This generic trend was, as Cheeseman explained at the time, the very reason why he chose to revive *The Jew of Malta* at this uniquely receptive moment:

H. S. Bennett, who edited *The Jew of Malta* in 1931 imagines the effort an audience then would have to make to come to terms with its extravagance – 'the wholesale slaughter of nunneries is too much for our modern finicky stomachs.' He cannot see the play but as a 'misdirected masterpiece' and a tragedy gone wrong. And he cannot understand T. S. Eliot's perceptive observation (in 1919) that *The Jew of Malta* is a 'farce of the old English humour, the terribly serious, even savage comic humour which spent its last breath in the decadent genius of Dickens.' But this is just the kind of humour we can now encompass, the humour of the *sick joke*, and the *black comedy*. Its mood is extravagant. There is violence in the atmosphere, in the subject matter, and in the very switchback motion from tragedy to comedy within the joke itself. Poisoning a whole nunnery with a doped rice pudding is just such a gag. ('*The Jew of Malta*. Italics mine.)

It seems clear, therefore, that Cheeseman's production contributed to the growing momentum of black farce in the British theatre, rather than simply following it. (Orton's *Ruffian on the Stair* and *Loot* would be described as sick and black comedy respectively two years later.) And he was correct in his prediction that the genre of the play would appeal to a modern audience; critics agreed that the play seemed arrestingly appropriate to modern conceptions of humour, and alluded to the forms most closely related to black farce in their descriptions:

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... now that the most talked-of joke is the sick joke and the most discussed theatre is a Theatre of Cruelty, *The Jew of Malta* would seem to be due to return to favour. What joke could be more sick than the one from Marlowe’s Friar whose greatest regret for the dead nun in his arms is that she died a virgin? And what theatre could be more cruel than Barabas’s slaughter of daughter, daughter’s lovers and a whole convent of sisters as a matter for mirth?

The success of Mr Cheeseman’s production lies precisely in his appreciation of the delicate, cruel sickliness of Marlowe’s humour. *(Times)*

Benedict Nightingale in the *Guardian* viewed the production as ‘a bloody farce’ — a description that he would later re-use in his review of *The Little Mrs Foster Show*¹⁴ — and the peculiar modernity of the genre was relished by all. With its in-the-round setting, the production provoked laughter ‘with and not at Marlowe’ — ‘Throw a modern audience in among the gory horrors of the plot and they will accept its sick humour’ — yet the comedy was not imposed but was recognised to have come direct from the sixteenth century to the twentieth.¹⁵

Cheeseman’s entire account of his approach to the play illustrates his conception of Marlowe’s work as firmly rooted in the 1960s. Describing the rehearsal process, he recalled his instant agreement with actor Bernard Gallagher (who would later play Orton’s egotistical and power-crazed Erpingham) about the portrayal of Barabas:

Barabas begins as a cynical self-seeking businessman of intense energy and considerable pride. ... He rapidly develops into the kind of half crazy gangster whose image is a commonplace one in cinema and of whose reality we are well aware.

In his first speech, Barabas celebrates his commercial success with an attitude quite familiar to readers of *The Financial Times*. But in giving justification for Barabas’ actions the next scene is our greatest ally. I cannot believe that the Elizabethan audience can have applauded the actions of Ferneze and his Christian knights in a scene that reminds one of nothing so much as National Socialism.

*(‘The Jew of Malta’)*

Big business, gangsters, Nazism: the parallels trip effortlessly off Cheeseman’s tongue, and one senses that, for him, every moment of this blackly farcical play struck an

instant and uncontrived chord. Cheeseman’s approach – and especially his easy and enthusiastic acceptance of the ‘modernity’ of the piece – anticipates that of Brian Shelton to the unperformed *Revenger’s Tragedy* the following year. In the meantime, Cheeseman’s faith in his bold choice proved entirely justified, as the audience response confirmed – suggesting that ‘a revival of the play is as welcome as it is overdue’ (*Times*).

24 April: *Doctor Faustus*
Antony Tuckey, Castle Theatre, Farnham

In the midst of the celebratory trio of *Jews* came the only professional quatercentenary production of the more familiar *Doctor Faustus*, produced in repertory with *Macbeth* as part of a joint ‘Shakespeare-Marlowe Festival’ at the tiny Castle Theatre in Farnham, Surrey. Shakespeare’s play was directed by the Artistic Director of the Farnham Repertory Company, Joan Knight; Marlowe’s by Assistant Director Antony Tuckey.

An increased Arts Council subsidy to the theatre enabled Knight ‘to insert the occasional “prestige” attraction among the more conventional fare’ at a time when, according to the play’s designer Colin Winslow, ‘Reps were just doing the standard Agatha Christies all the time’; yet even this ‘bold’ new administration proceeded with some caution in the staging of Marlowe’s play. The caution was not, however, expressed in terms of evasion of the mixed genre of the piece; instead, Knight was the first of several directors to partner a play by a contemporary of Shakespeare with one by the bard himself; and her device of staging the two on the same set would later be followed by Clifford Williams, Brian Shelton and Trevor Nunn over the next few years.
Shakespeare acted as a kind of insurance policy for these experimental interpretations, the implied relationship with the works of his peers serving as justification for their revival.

While unaware of being part of any kind of ‘movement’, the play’s young designer had certainly picked up on the beginnings of ‘a revival of interest in Jacobean drama’, having seen Richardson’s Changeling at the Royal Court three years before: ‘These were things one had read as a student but never imagined one would see on stage,’ he remembers. Winslow was shortly to become a fan of Joe Orton, and states that ‘In retrospect the connection [of the Renaissance revival] with 1960s black comedy seems clear’ (Interview).

Certainly Tuckey’s interpretation of Doctor Faustus was conceived in the spirit of black comedy and without any qualms at what Winslow terms ‘the silly pantomime element’:

... in the theatre it worked a treat, the constant switching between extreme silliness and the meatier bits ..., particularly at the end, where we had the clowns coming on after it had reached the depths of tragedy.

The Farnham Herald, in its detailed review, dwelt largely on this curious mixed genre, agreeing that the comedy and farce coexisted entirely effectively with the tragedy and horror in Tuckey’s production, and acknowledging the novelty of this approach:

‘The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus’, to give Christopher Marlowe’s play its full title, is going to surprise playgoers who have not seen this rarely-performed play before, and it is probably safe to say, those who have seen it previously. Tragedy there is no denying, but it is leavened with, to the unsuspecting, a surprising amount of comedy. After all, how many would think that they were going to see the Pope throw a custard pie at a cardinal – and score a hit!’

17Farnham Herald, 1 May 1964.
Though the critic was correct in his suspicion that this ‘piece of slapstick is an insertion of the Castle Theatre’s invention’, the custard pie business was accompanied by other equally startling effects specified by the author; Winslow recalls that ‘we followed Marlowe’s directions and attached fireworks to the costumes with bulldog clips, which worked marvellously.’ The farcical episode was the climax of what the Farnham Herald pronounced to be ‘one of the funniest scenes performed at the theatre for some time’; yet the reviewer concluded that ‘in the end the play fully justifies the title of “tragedy”.’ David Burke was a ‘splendidly sardonic’ Mephistopheles, simultaneously exploiting both farce and horror with his ‘delightful sense of humour’ and the conviction ‘that hell is no place, but a state of mind and that he is possessed of it.’ The appearance of the Seven Deadly Sins was ‘horrifying’, in ‘contrast [with] the comedy of Ray Lonnen ... as the servant who turns into an ape, and Bob Harris into a dog.’ Though surprised by the play’s mixed genre, therefore, the reviewer praised Tuckey for ‘making entertainment’ from the combination of ‘tragedy and comedy’, and Farnham audiences, it seems, agreed; the quatercentenary festival was ‘overwhelmingly successful’, with several sell-out nights.\(^{18}\)

**1 October: The Jew of Malta**
Clifford Williams, Aldwych Theatre

The Marlowe quatercentenary reached its climax in October, when a full-scale West End production of *The Jew of Malta*, ‘probably the most expensive revival since Heywood’s’ (Smith, p. 5), was mounted by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych, directed by Clifford Williams. (The play was later almost entirely recast and presented at Stratford-on-Avon in April 1965.) Once again, as at the Aldwych in 1960

and at the Victoria Theatre only the previous year, a Renaissance play appeared in a novel context. It was another bold step – 'quite a departure' for the Company – and Williams recalls that 'there was a lot of eyebrow-raising: “Why are they doing a Marlowe at Stratford-upon-Avon? It’s supposed to be Shakespeare.”' By this time the production had proved its worth in London, and it was eased into place by presenting it in tandem with the Shakespearean work which it is said to have inspired – *The Merchant of Venice* – and with which it shared a designer, composer and leading actor. Nevertheless, it was clear that non-Shakespearean Renaissance revivals were defiantly extending their territory. Not only were programmes, such as those of the Aldwych and the Old Vic, being specifically designed to give them a platform, but room was also being made for them in existing spaces, such as provincial repertories and the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, normally reserved for other types of drama. An active desire for these plays was developing, and theatres were going out of their way to accommodate them. And as Williams’ revival shows, the theatre by which they were so heartily welcomed was a theatre in which they were emphatically at home.

*The Jew of Malta* was produced at the Aldwych as part of what became known as the ‘Dirty Plays’ season, which developed out of the 1963-64 ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ series organised by Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz at the LAMDA studio theatre. The LAMDA experiments had consisted almost entirely of new work, but even there the connection with the Renaissance was noted, with the brochure stressing that Artaud had found confirmation of his ideas ‘above all in the Elizabethan theatre.’ The Aldwych season included Rudkin’s controversial *Afore Night Come* (previously

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20See Beauman, pp. 272-77.

presented at the Arts Theatre alongside *Women Beware Women*) and the notoriously provocative *Marat/Sade*, and displayed the RSC’s ‘new radicalism’, developed ‘in marked contrast’ to the ‘notably safe’ work of the new National Theatre (Beauman, pp. 272-3). By now – following *The Devils* in 1961 and *The Representative* in 1963 – the RSC was no stranger to wranglings with the Lord Chamberlain, but the Cruelty-influenced 1964 season led to clashes with both the Censor and the public, dividing the critics and even the RSC Executive Council. Looking back from the early 1970s, Gareth Lloyd Evans saw Peter Hall’s attitude with regard to challenging and potentially offensive work as an ‘opportunist’ response to growing permissiveness – a movement ‘towards breaking down conventions’ of which the RSC was ‘very much in the forefront’. More specifically, *Spectator* critic Hilary Spurling recalls both contemporary work and the new interpretations of Jacobean plays as part of this movement to test boundaries and extend into more dangerous territory:

I think the theatre had become a kind of battle line ... and that’s why I found it so exciting. Because the Jacobean plays belonged to the same tradition you could use them ... as a sort of conduit, as a way of saying life is much more complicated, is much filthier, much more violent and much crueler and much more frightening than the normal run of plays that had been put on.

As the Dirty Plays hysteria spread, it extended to targets beyond the RSC – including Orton, who was, Marowitz recalls, responsible for some of the ‘major apoplexies’ suffered by impresario Prince Littler and his ‘moral vigilantes’, and who would later be described as exploiting with ‘relish the theatre’s new permissiveness’; and it was Littler’s supporters who would barrack Sir Ralph Richardson on the opening night of *What the Butler Saw*. The row reached its peak, however, about a month prior to the

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22 Interview with Addenbrooke, pp. 78-9.
23 Interview with the author, London, 6 April 1996.
opening of *The Jew of Malta*; and Marlowe’s play fitted ‘perfectly’ into the controversial season.\(^{25}\)

Even so, as in Canterbury and Stoke, the ‘venturesome’ choice of *The Jew of Malta* was greeted with some surprise – variously expressed as disappointment or delight.\(^{26}\)

In this context is worth reiterating that Bain, Cheeseman and Hall/Williams clearly picked out the same unfamiliar, unexpected play entirely independently; Bain’s and Cheeseman’s revivals were too close to each other chronologically (and probably too far from each other geographically) for one to have instigated the other, while the RSC, with a typical ignorance of provincial productions, showed no awareness of its precursors in either its 1964 or its 1965 programme, stating that the play had ‘had only one recorded production in London this century, and that was a single performance by the Phoenix Society 42 years ago.’\(^{27}\)

So why should they all have hit upon this little-known, long-despised piece almost simultaneously?\(^{28}\) The answer, which coincides precisely with the reasons given by Cheeseman, comes from the declared programming policy of RSC as stated in all programmes during 1964 and 1965: ‘to express plays in terms of immediacy for a modern audience and to make the production of Shakespeare, “... an experience that reverberates with the thoughts and feelings of today”’ (Addenbrooke, p. 66). Without doubt, this policy also applied to the Company’s few non-Shakespearean revivals. One of Peter Hall’s greatest skills was in ‘sensing the mood of his own time’ (Beauman, p. 282); it was an ability he brought to


\(^{27}\) 1964 programme, Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-on-Avon; 1965 programme, courtesy of the director. Compare Nunn’s ignorance of Shelton’s revival of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, below.
bear on all of his own Shakespeare productions, and it was deplored as often as it was applauded. Here is his own account of his strategy, as reported in the Stratford Herald on 4 March 1966:

Shakespeare is our main task, but we cannot keep his plays alive unless we are truly in the market-place of Now. We must be expert in the past, but alive to the present. . . . The theatre must question everything and disturb its audience. . . . At this theatre you will not get comprehensive lists of the world’s classics: you will get classics that are relevant to now, and also modern works.29

As far as Hall was concerned, then, there could only be one reason for reaching for The Jew of Malta in preference to Marlowe’s other, more favoured works: its appropriateness in the theatre of 1964. In fact, this is the only convincing reason behind the otherwise unlikely coincidence of three unrelated theatres coming up with the same obscure script, in preference to well known works (and, indeed, to other equally obscure ones), within months of each other. And it is a reason confirmed by the director’s approach to the play and its subsequent reception.

Clifford Williams was a director experienced in both ‘classical’ and ‘commercial’ ends of the theatre spectrum who would later go on to direct Kenneth Tynan’s notorious revue Oh, Calcutta! (which included a pornographic sketch by Orton and which, significantly, Williams took ‘very seriously’30) and Nichols’ Loot-influenced black comedy, Born in the Gardens. His attitude to The Jew of Malta was simple: ‘it was a new play as far as I was concerned.’31 He had very little knowledge of Marlowe – ‘other than what one picks up through vibrations’ – and he came to the play ‘as if it had just arrived through the letterbox.’ That Williams felt able to tackle a sixteenth-century work in this manner may be remarkable enough; but even more extraordinary

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29 Quoted in Addenbrooke, p. 66. Italics mine.
is the way in which this manifested itself in the production. This is illustrated most strikingly (and most entertainingly) in a review by Hugh Leonard in *Plays and Players*. The entire review, entitled ‘A New Name?’, playfully assumes Marlowe to be ‘a new playwright’, confessing that the critic was almost ‘hoaxed into believing that *The Jew of Malta* is close on four hundred years old’:

Almost, but not quite; for there is ample evidence to show that Mr Marlowe (is this a pseudonym?), in spite of his use of blank verse and archaisms, belongs squarely in the middle of the 1960s. . . . He uses the wildest *black farce* to mount an attack upon both the Establishment and religion in general, and cunningly pretends to be writing about Malta in the sixteenth century.32

He continued by stressing that the emphatically modern genre of black farce – which would of course be used to describe, for example, Orton’s *Loot*33 – actually belonged to the play, and was not imposed by the director:

Just for fun I have tried to imagine *The Jew of Malta* as a genuine example of Elizabethan drama, but the notion is too far-fetched to hold water for an instant. The whole play shrieks of the contemporary, and it sends up the stage conventions of the 16th century with a degree of sophistication which simply did not exist in Shakespearean times. It may, of course, be argued that the sending-up was done, not by Mr Marlowe, but by the Aldwych company, and that the play is so bad as to be unintentionally funny. . . . But if *The Jew of Malta* was intended as a serious melodrama, then it is preposterous that it could have survived for four centuries. Ergo it is a *comedie noire*. Ergo it is a modern play.

From this it should be clear that it is the *genre* of the play – black farce – more than anything else, which leads Leonard to his tongue-in-cheek conviction that Marlowe is a dramatist of the 1960s. Black farce is a new genre; the play was obviously written that way; so it must be a new play. This sense of modernity of genre was shared by Williams, who stated in 1965, when comparing *The Jew of Malta* with its companion production, that ‘Marlowe is perhaps more tuned to present day attitudes with his

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invitation to us to laugh at the desperate wickedness of the world— the precise combination of despair and exhilaration upon which the genre of black farce is based.

Leonard was not alone in actually making use of the term ‘black farce’ to describe Marlowe’s play;35 indeed, the Times hailed the dramatist as a ‘master practitioner’ of the genre, while Plays and Players credited him as its creator.36 In response to contemporary productions of both old and new work, critics’ vocabularies were expanding to encompass this apparently novel mix of genres. Terms closely related to black farce abounded in descriptions of The Jew of Malta: as well as Leonard’s own ‘comedie noire’, the increasingly common Anglicisation ‘black comedy’ was used repeatedly, alongside its colloquial counterpart, the ‘sick joke’.37 While these ‘black’ and ‘sick’ genres were the most commonly named, many critics found less familiar compounds, or formed their own: amongst the most frequent were savage farce or humour, horror comic, serious or tragic farce and pantomime noir.38 Less literary definitions included sinister humour, macabre absurdity and even ‘romping bloodbath’.39 What all of these descriptions have in common is their acknowledgement of the co-existence of both comedy and horror; and what many of them also share is a sense of newness, of attempting to re-evaluate a work for which more traditional

34Quoted in Frank Cox, ‘Two Jews At Stratford’, Plays and Players, May 1965, p. 11.
expressions are no longer adequate, and which is better described in terms more often applied to contemporary writing. Many of these terms had in fact already appeared in reviews of new work: savage farce and humour of Eh? and A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, for example, serious farce of Nil Carborundum, and macabre comedy of Entertaining Mr Sloane.40

Even one of the few critics who resisted new coinages described the play in terms that interestingly straddle the black farce of both Jacobean and 1960s writers. John Gross of the Jewish Chronicle found the play to be a ‘fine hotch-potch’,41 a term which looks both forward to Livings’ Eh? and The Little Mrs Foster Show, also described in those terms four weeks and two years later respectively,42 and back to Joseph Hall’s neoclassical objections to the intrusion of comedy into the tragic drama of his late Elizabethan contemporaries:

A goodly hoch-poch: when vile Russettings,
Are match’t with monarchs, & with mighty kings.
A goodly grace to sober Tragike Muse,
When each base clown, his clumsie fist doth bruise,
And show his teeth in double rotten-row,
For laughter at his selfe-resembled show.43

True to the genre of black farce, Williams’ production – ‘a rare and spicy dish which tickles the ribs and at the same time burns tender stomachs’ – provided a disturbing experience for many audience members, who (like those at The National

41Jewish Chronicle, 9 October 1964. The term ‘hodge-podge’ was also used by W. A. Darlington of the Daily Telegraph (quoted above, p. 226) to describe McWhinnie’s Duchess of Malfi in 1960.
42Eric Gillett, ‘Farce with Boiler on Stage’, Yorkshire Post, 30 October 1964; The Stage, 17 November 1966.
Health who found themselves ‘half in tears and half slain with laughter’) never quite knew ‘whether to laugh or cry’:

There is high comedy at the moments of tragedy, and one has the uncomfortable feeling that farce is only just round the corner.44

It is a discomfort that even the cast had shared when approaching the play for the first time, as Williams remembers:

There was a lot of shaking of heads. I think we were all very disturbed by the Marlowe experience. It was a very young company, very lacking in prejudices, but I think scared stiff by the oddity, the patchwork nature of the play. We were more concerned about surviving day by day and finding out how to make a particular section work, and then how the upcoming section would somehow connect with it, than with any other thoughts. (Interview)

‘Disturbing’ and ‘uncomfortable’ were becoming familiar words in the vocabulary of the critic of contemporary plays; in particular, the work of Joe Orton.45 And this moment-by-moment approach to the play, unconcerned with any concepts of unity or balance, meant that the company played both extremes of the genre to the full: the production ‘plumb[ed] the full horror and sardonic humour of the piece’ – just the qualities that critics found so startling in A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, a few years later.46 The play was ‘presented with no punches pulled as a kind of Elizabethan horror study’ – so much so that one critic was utterly repelled, finding the play ‘putrid’ and ‘nasty’, rather like some of Orton’s reviewers – including W. A. Darlington of the Daily Telegraph who, after a performance of Entertaining Mr Sloane, felt ‘as if snakes had been writhing round [his] feet’ (a description with which Orton’s various

newspaper-corresponding *noms de plume* had endless fun). Indeed, David Addenbrooke specifically includes *The Jew of Malta* when he states that ‘nearly every play staged by the RSC during 1964 was, in some way, influenced by “cruelty”: there was cruelty, mental and/or physical; violence and/or implied [sic]; and “vulgarity”, both Elizabethan and modern.’ One result of this was the ‘Dirty Plays’ controversy:

Another result was a year of productions which virtually compelled audiences to leave the theatre with their senses and intelligence jolted and disturbed as never before. (p. 138)

At the same time, the production was a ‘rollicking’, ‘rip-roaring’, ‘knockabout’, ‘uproarious’ farce – ‘the funniest farce in town,’ indeed. And this was what caught the critics off-guard. Never before had they seen the play in this light; Williams’ interpretation was a revelation. ‘HUMOUR IN KIT MARLOWE NOW PROVEN’ announced one headline, as if declaring a major scoop.

W. A. Darlington was old enough to recall the Phoenix Society production of 1922, and remembered it as ‘a desperately solemn affair.’ ‘Imagine my astonishment last night, then,’ he continued, ‘when Clifford Williams gave it a grim sardonic humour, much appreciated by the

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audience.\textsuperscript{50} E. Vickery found himself doing ‘a mental somersault’,\textsuperscript{51} while Milton Shulman’s review, headed ‘Surprise! Roars of delight for the villain’, recorded a similar wonderment:

\ldots when the Jew’s daughter dies in the arms of a monk crying: ‘I die a Christian!’; the monk replies: ‘And a virgin, too. That grieves me most.’ Collapse of Aldwych audience! (Evening Standard)

Irving Wardle would later describe the ‘side-splitting success’ of the production as ‘the pioneer demonstration of how funny these gory old plays can be.’\textsuperscript{52} Stanley Wells agrees:

The great achievement of this production was to hit upon a mode of performance which released the play’s latent energies in a manner that seems never to have happened before.\textsuperscript{53}

Alongside the surprise at the hilarity provoked by the horrors of The Jew of Malta and at the consequent ‘modernity’ of the genre came, inevitably, the question of whether the effects came from Marlowe himself or were directorial impertinences. Some critics remained convinced that the Phoenix Society’s interpretation had been the more valid one, and viewed Williams’ version as a kind of burlesque or ‘send-up’ that betrayed the text.\textsuperscript{54} Darlington described the production as a ‘sardonic perversion’ of Marlowe’s work, assuming that the comic elements were introduced in order to make the play ‘palatable to a modern audience’.\textsuperscript{55} Many described the cast as ‘playing

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{50}] C. W. R., Bromley and Kentish Times, 9 October 1964.
\item[\textsuperscript{51}] Villainies with Grim Humour’, Daily Telegraph, 2 October 1964.
\item[\textsuperscript{52}] New Daily, 6 October 1964; Recorder, 17 October 1964.
\item[\textsuperscript{53}] Coping with the Jacobean’s, Times, 6 December 1969. Italics mine.
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\end{footnotesize}
Marlowe for laughs’, though there was disagreement as to the success or validity of the approach.\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, very few critics were able to voice their outrage without conceding that the show was extremely entertaining; the mixed feelings of the \textit{Stage’s} R. B. Marriott are typical:

The play has not been seen in London for forty years; in a sense you might say it is hardly being seen now. That is, not as a grandly serious piece, for Mr Williams apparently chose to allow it to make light of itself wittily, imaginatively, freely.\textsuperscript{57}

Others were still more cautious, tending to hedge their bets. Graham Samuel initially vacillated in a \textit{Western Mail} piece headed ‘Not Marlowe’s Jew’, but eventually came down on the side of a revaluation of Marlowe:

No doubt Marlowe is turning in his grave while all his darkly conceived villainy rocks the house with mirth, but . . . this turns out to be an interesting, often fascinating \textit{Jew of Malta}, though perhaps not precisely the \textit{Jew of Malta} Marlowe wrote.

The conclusion is inescapable: either this is not the tribute Marlowe deserves on the quatercentenary he shares with Shakespeare or Marlowe was not quite the playwright we were taught he was.

I suspect the latter . . . \textsuperscript{58}

The conclusion arrived at by Samuel was shared by a number of other critics, though the \textit{Times} reviewer took even longer to make up his mind; when the original production opened, he entertained some doubts as to whether an Elizabethan playwright could possibly have intended the ‘sick’ response elicited at the Aldwych. Surely this was a modern imposition? But no:

\ldots as the evening wears on, there is no doubt that the effects are Marlowe’s own. The greatest master of excess in British drama, he here uses it for comedy, and its effects on last night’s audience had to be heard to be believed.

‘Brother, all the nuns are dead’ (laughter);


\textsuperscript{58}\textit{Western Mail}. See also \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 2 October 1964; \textit{Socialist Leader}; \textit{Queen}.
'Let's bury them' (prolonged laughter).59

Finally, at the Stratford version the following spring, the critic was convinced that Marlowe really was ‘a master practitioner of black farce’ (‘Jews of Marlowe and Shakespeare’). Peter Roberts of Plays and Players, also describing Marlowe as ‘the creator of black farce’, was more dogmatic, defending Williams’ interpretation by describing the commonly-held view of the production as ‘a freak success in which the public has unaccountably enjoyed a send-up production of a great and mighty play’ as ‘a total misconception of The Jew of Malta’ (‘After the Histories’). It was ‘one of the great merits of Williams’ production’ that he was able to recognise the true genre of Marlowe’s work, as well as its ‘staggering modernity’, wrote Roberts. Mervyn Jones of Tribune, too, was convinced that the comedy was far from anachronistic:

This production has been criticised for lacking proper gravity, for bidding us enjoy horrors at which we might well be appalled. The truth is, I think, that Marlowe himself lacked the power to be shocked, the sense of pity. . . . For my money, then, the Aldwych production achieves just the right zest and energy, adding spectacular stage effects that Marlowe . . . would have cheered.60

The Northern Echo and Shields Gazette likewise concluded that ‘the author would probably only turn in his grave because his sides were aching with laughter.’61

Hugh Leonard was typical, too, in finding much in common between The Jew of Malta and contemporary playwriting; the production was in fact ‘valid contemporary theatre’.62 The Universe critic, describing the production as ‘tragic, comic, farcical, very irreverent and sometimes extremely funny,’ suggested that it might well have been produced by ‘A 16th century “Crazy Gang”’; an allusion to the troupe of knockabout,

60Tribune, 9 October 1964.
61See also G. B. F., ‘Marlowe would have loved this “Jew”’, Northampton Chronicle & Echo, 23 April 1965.
satirical farceurs that had also been made in relation to *Nil Carborundum* (‘a kind of Crazy Gang concentration camp’) and would later be made regarding *Loot* (‘I could imagine it played by the Crazy Gang’). There were also the usual references to horror films (and even a suggestion that Marlowe would have made a great Hollywood scriptwriter), as well as several allusions to James Bond — in particular to *Goldfinger*, currently popular at the cinema. Here in Marlowe’s play, as in Fleming’s novel and the film based upon it, were the ‘grand-scale lust for loot and power’, the seemingly indestructible villain — the ‘prototype of the jumbo-sized Bond adversaries’ — the callous attitude to women and the sense of ‘unreal excitement and horror’. Most importantly, there was the fascination with ingenious violence — a connection made in the *New Statesman* and also noted by Gamini Salgado in his volume of *Three Jacobean Tragedies*, published around the same time as Williams’ production, in which he compared the Jacobean’s ‘interest in the sheer mechanics of mayhem’ with Bond’s ‘elaborately appointed travelling case.’ The antics of 007, while not exactly farcical, were certainly blackly comic, and would find their way more overtly into both a Jacobean revival and a new work in the next couple of years. Trevor Nunn, as will be shown later, explicitly drew Bond into his revival of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* in 1966, for specific reasons including those stated above, while Fleming’s novels are ironically used by Orton’s Erpingham as part of his effort ‘to defy the forces of Anarchy with all that is best in twentieth-century civilisation’ (p. 308). In the light of John F. Kennedy’s announcement earlier in the decade that he was a fan of Ian Fleming’s books, this line takes on additional satirical weight; John Fraser, in his study

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of violence in the arts, suggests that Kennedy’s admission marked the beginning of the end of censorship: ‘And then the Bond movies clinched matters by making nasty violences fun, in a rather campy way.’

The Jew of Malta was indeed one of Peter Hall’s ‘classics that are relevant to now’. Williams saw the play as ‘an acute examination of the principles underlying the operation of religion, finance and power’, and believed that the ‘contemporary parallels here are enormous’; later he would state that The Jew of Malta and The Merchant of Venice ‘show a similar concern with the awful fragmentation of society which, if anything, is worse today than ever before.’ This sense of firm connection to the present undoubtedly displayed itself in the production, and James L. Smith later concluded that The Jew of Malta had never before seemed so appropriate:

Kean distorted the play to make Barabas into a Romantic and tragic hero, and for the Phoenix Society in the brittle twenties it remained nothing but a quaint though meaningless archaism. . . . It is, in fact, difficult to resist the suggestion that Marlowe’s play was more at home at the Aldwych in 1964 than at any London theatre since Henslowe’s day. (pp. 22-3)

The Middlesex Independent, indeed, in a piece headed ‘16th Century Farce is Still Up-to-Date’, implied that Marlowe was almost more contemporary than the contemporary itself, finding the play ‘still fresh enough to make the work of most modern playwrights look silly’:

Barabas . . . is the type of ‘anti-hero’ as recognisable in the 20th Century as he must have been in the 16th.
‘The Jew of Malta’ has mock morality as cynical as any offered today.

This sense of cynicism and ‘mock morality’ in the two periods was clearly felt by Williams, too; in the 1965 programme, passages from Machiavelli’s The Prince (1513) and Kenneth Allsop’s The Bootleggers (1961), detailing the ‘romantic rightness’ of

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'ruthlessness and aggression' within 'the competitive system at its most ferocious extreme', were placed together. Like The Duchess of Malfi in 1960, the production also brought to mind the Holocaust;\(^69\) whether in terms of atmosphere or specific events, the 1960s were extraordinarily hospitable to this drama, in illuminating and unsettling ways. Added to the play’s surprisingly contemporary genre and its appropriacy within the RSC’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’/‘Dirty Plays’ programme, this powerful notion of ‘relevance to now’, of Marlowe’s ‘staggering modernity’, contributed to the production’s ‘roaring success’, greeted with ‘rapturous ovations’.\(^70\)


\(^{69}\) See for example J. G., Stratford-upon-Avon Herald; Gross, Jewish Chronicle.

\(^{70}\) Roberts, ‘After the Histories’; Birmingham Mail; Wolverhampton Express & Star. See also Catholic Herald; Nottingham Guardian Journal.
1965

14 July: The Revenger’s Tragedy
Brian Shelton, Pitlochry Festival Theatre

After a student/professional collaboration on The White Devil (8 June, dir. Terry Palmer, Hertford College Dramatic Society, Oxford) in the early summer of ’65, which faced the same charges of ‘facetiousness’ in the name of making the play ‘palatable to a modern audience’ that had been levelled at Williams’ Jew of Malta,¹ the first ever professional revival of The Revenger’s Tragedy since the seventeenth century was staged at the Pitlochry Festival Theatre, directed by Brian Shelton. Like The Changeling, here was another play that had lain unnoticed for three and a half centuries; Shelton himself recalls that in 1965 the play was unknown to the general public and not even in print in the United Kingdom.² It was a chance reading of the Scotsman while he was Director of Productions at Pitlochry that brought The Revenger’s Tragedy to Shelton’s attention. On 10 October 1964 (just over a week after the acclaimed opening of Williams’ Jew of Malta), an article headed ‘Farcical Jacobean Tragedy’ caught his eye; it was a review of Irving Ribner’s new edition of The Atheist’s Tragedy, in which Martin Seymour-Smith contrasted that ‘puzzling play’ with another work then attributed to Cyril Tourneur, The Revenger’s Tragedy, ‘acknowledged to be one of the finest of English tragedies outside Shakespeare (although no one can agree whether it is tragedy or farce or a mixture of the two)’.³ Seymour-Smith went on to define the play as ‘a tragic farce, a form that Tourneur alone has managed in English.’

²Interview with the author, Edinburgh, 18 April 1995.
³‘Farcical Jacobean Tragedy’, Scotsman, 10 October 1964.
Shelton was, he recalls, intrigued. He obtained an American edition of the play, and found that his reaction was identical to Seymour-Smith's: he saw it as 'a farcical tragedy or tragic farce', and as such acutely appropriate to the theatre of the mid 1960s (Interview). But Shelton was aware that, like *The Jew of Malta* prior to the productions by Cheeseman and Williams,⁴ 'The play was not very highly regarded at the time by those who knew it; it was seen as a failed tragedy.' And indeed, Allardyce Nicoll, editor of the 1930 *Works of Cyril Tourneur* (who would, in 1968, express his ambivalence about the 'New Wave' of blackly farcical plays which he recognised as having their 'nearest parallel' in the drama of the early seventeenth century⁵), strongly warned him against attempting to put such a thing on the stage. However, it was not long before Shelton heard about the edition of the play that Professor Reginald Foakes was preparing. Shelton contacted Foakes, who confirmed his reaction to the play and offered him both encouragement and the notes for his edition.

At that time, the Pitlochry Festival Theatre, known primarily 'as a purveyor of light romantic fare', had been tentatively widening its April-to-October repertoires beyond 'comfortable middle-of-the-road plays' for some years.⁶ But *The Revenger's Tragedy* was by far its biggest leap, and the boldness of the choice is stressed by George Bruce in the theatre's history:

Kenneth Ireland [Festival Director and Secretary] said: 'When we started our blood and lust plays we did it the opposite way from a normal theatre – *The Revenger's Tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi, Hamlet.*' This is indeed true. But what 'normal theatre' would present such a sequence of 'blood and lust' plays, least of all a summer theatre? Of the three, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is the least attractive. Had it been written today it would have been put into the category of Theatre of Alienation . . . . In any case, this 'Tale of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts' – to quote from *Hamlet* – is not the most endearing fare for holiday visitors . . . . The

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⁴See Cheeseman on *The Jew of Malta* as 'a tragedy gone wrong' (quoted above, p. 258).
risk of putting on a play 360 years old, unknown to the great majority, remains. This was one of the most creditable risks any theatre ever took, a risk which could not be expected of a theatre in Pitlochry’s situation. (p. 33)

Bruce is right; the only repertory companies so far to have taken comparable steps were the Marlowe and Victoria Theatres, both of which had had the Marlowe quatercentenary as justification for their respective leaps into the dark with *The Jew of Malta*. But Pitlochry had neither an anniversary nor any local connection with the playwright as an ‘excuse’ to present this, the most unsettling of Jacobean black farces, to its genteel holidaymakers. Nor did the director opt, as Dr Ireland points out, to break its audience in gently. There was no need to; Shelton recognised that black farce was the genre of the day, and had the confidence that his audience could be persuaded to enjoy the play as such. Sensing what was in the air, he knew that what had worked for Williams in London could work for him in the hills of Perthshire.

Some of the prejudices regarding *The Revenger’s Tragedy* may well have arisen from as simple a cause as its title. Its self-classification as tragedy (as well as its antiquity) aroused expectations of gravity and decorum which the play itself could not sustain. ‘The most curious aspect to a modern audience will be the amount of comedy in a play which proclaims itself a tragedy,’ predicted Shelton prior to rehearsals.7

Frank Marcus commented on this phenomenon in relation to *Loot* in 1967:

> Who decides what is funny? Certainly not the audience: they are pre-conditioned by the critics and by the description of the play on their programme. The same scene would be differently received by an audience, depending on whether it was labelled ‘comedy’ or ‘tragedy’.8

Wells confirms this claim when he recalls an actor in Clifford Williams’ *Jew of Malta* commenting that ‘if the word “tragedy” [in the Prologue] was not spoken with an

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Renaissance Revivals
1965

ironic inflection, it took half an hour to coax the audience into the right mood for the play’ (p. 126). Shelton’s first hurdle, though, was in overcoming this pre-conditioning in his cast, who had been hit by the script ‘with a dull thud’ (Interview). Shelton therefore issued them with six pages of pre-rehearsal notes entitled ‘A Preface to The Revenger’s Tragedy’ in which he reassured them about the title, describing it as ‘something of a misnomer’:

The term ‘tragedy’ suggests a profundity, but the text is often light-hearted and the ironical comments which the characters make on the action only draw attention to the absurdity of the plot’s convulsions. (p. 1)

Shelton’s detailed ‘Preface’ in fact dealt at some length with the question of the play’s genre, making clear its relationship with the drama of the present: “‘black comedy’ has a long ancestry,’ he wrote (p. 2). His joy in the mixed nature of this ‘flamboyant and sensational piece’ was obvious:

[It] is a flamboyant and sensational piece which changes constantly – pungent, moralistic, melodramatic, comic, allegorical, violent, poetic, bawdy, tragic, absurd, ironic – the moods tumble over each other, blend and alternate in exuberant profusion. Each element is contrasted against the others; it is this equivocal interplay, expressed in perfectly matched coruscating verse, which makes the play so surprising. (p. 2)

He was particularly keen that the boisterous spirit of black farce should be expressed in the production; by no means was he looking for the kind of respectful, text-oriented interpretation that had appeared in some of the earlier Jacobean revivals of the decade:

One must be faithful to the author, and present the play which he wrote, but this does not necessarily mean adopting a quasi-reverential approach; indeed, I believe that such a course would be disastrous. (p. 3)

Instead he wished to convey a ‘hectic excitement, a perverse and over-ripe vitality on the edge of decay.’ In particular, he wanted to translate the ‘tremendous force and pace in the text’ into ‘physical action’; indeed his instructions on this matter seem to owe much to the Theatre of Cruelty:
The audience must be brow-beaten and carried along by the sheer attack of the playing. The play is frankly sensational, and requires flamboyant and expansive acting, athletic acting. We accept the physical presence of the audience as easily as does a music-hall comic – we play the show at them at point-blank range. (p. 4)

The physicality was to manifest itself both in the blackness of ‘sensuality’ and ‘brutalism’ and in the ‘comedy, irony and satire’, which ‘must be pointed to wherever possible.’ This confrontational approach, expressed through all forms of physical expression, was shared by contemporary playwrights who, as we saw in Chapter 3, used their particular brand of farce as a form of attack.

Shelton also provided his actors with an outline of the historical background to the play, concluding that ‘it was an age of anxiety, decadence and disillusion’ (p. 3). As well as giving a sense of the ‘zeitgeist which created the mood of English drama between 1597 and 1610’, this explained the presence of Vindice, ‘the Malcontent (whom we now call the Angry Young Man) pouring abuse on contemporary social disorders’ (p. 1). Consequently, Shelton had enough confidence that the play would strike a chord with his audience to decide against modern dress in the production. ‘There was no need to push the parallels,’ he says; parallels that included ‘grasping after money, insecurities, sexual insecurities, a feeling of corruption in government, inflation . . . ’ (Interview). And Michael Scott’s retrospective praise of the production implies that the chord was indeed struck:

Quite correctly Mr Shelton had recognized within this Jacobean tragedy elements of decadence, horror and black farce acutely appropriate to a twentieth-century audience that shared with its predecessor uncertainties about the role and purpose of mankind, its societies and institutions.  

General though these terms may be, they hint at some of the substance behind Shelton’s instinctive attraction to the play that began – and was expressed –

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specifically in terms of genre, with ‘insecurity’ and ‘uncertainty’ as the recurring themes.

Shelton succeeded in his aim of presenting the play in terms of black farce, and he believes that the audience’s growing familiarity with the genre facilitated the production’s success.\(^\text{10}\) To William Kemp of *Theatre World*, the production was a ‘tragi-farce’ full of ‘black humour’:

Wit, frankness, savage irony, horror, the over-riding clamour of lust, fuse in a production which enhances Pitlochry’s reputation for the presentation of the odd and unique.\(^\text{11}\)

One scene described by Shelton and by Dr Lois Potter, a member of the audience consulted by Wells, exemplifies his approach. When the Officer entered with the ‘yet bleeding head’ of the Junior Brother, the practicalities were solved by inserting a sponge saturated with blood into its neck, so that it dripped noisily onto the stage.

And although the ensuing farcical scene of mistaken identity (III. vi) ‘was given its full value as comedy, nevertheless the actor succeeded in chilling the audience on the line “I see now there’s nothing sure in mortality but mortality’” (Wells, p. 118, n. 17).

When the victim’s brothers made their exits at the end of the scene, the Officer was left with the head. He looked around, not knowing what to do with it, and finally stuck it with a shrug on one of the spikes that lined the sides of the set. As the polystyrene in the head made what Shelton describes as ‘a scrunching sound’, the auditorium lights snapped up. The co-existence of farce and gruesome horror, of laughter and ‘chill’ in this scene, the one overlapping with the other, is black farce precisely; in contrast with the ideas of Donald McWhinnie which had evaporated in rehearsal in 1960, Shelton’s

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conception of a blackly farcical production was accepted wholeheartedly by his cast and led to another successful Jacobean revival.

All reviewers were impressed by the 'zest' and 'virility' of Shelton's production and taken aback by its freshness. Tourneur, said Christopher Small of the Glasgow Herald, had been 'brought again to most vigorous and surprising life, capable of holding the stage in his own right.' Both Small and Ronald Mavor of the Scotsman praised the balance of farce and horror in the production, more or less dismissing academic disagreements as to the precise generic classification of the play. Mavor concluded that 'I cannot myself believe that Tourneur was not a witty man' and that 'the play is not mocked.' The farcical murder of the Duke with the poisoned skull was 'remarkably strong and effective, however ludicrous', while at the same time the author's 'bitter cynicism' was 'still chilling'. Small, who also appreciated the curious mixture of genres in the production, touched on the relationship of this mix with the writing of the present:

Merely as an antiquarian curiosity, the revival was praiseworthy, but it proves in the event to be much more. How 'modern' Tourneur is, the points of difference and resemblance between his Tragedy of Blood and contemporary essays in cruelty, horror, or 'black farce,' may all be argued at length . . . .

But the important fact for Small was the surprising fact that the long-neglected Revenger's Tragedy 'lived' so vigorously on the contemporary stage. Shelton had conducted an experiment in theatrical cryonics that was doubly surprising in its success: not only did the thawed dramatic corpse come to life without so much as blinking at its new surroundings, but it found itself instantly at home three and a half centuries out of its own time. A significant event in theatrical history had been witnessed in the Perthshire hills.

2 December: *Doctor Faustus*
Charles Marowitz, Close Theatre, Glasgow

The final revival of the year – and the first of a trio of *Faustuses* – was directed by Charles Marowitz in December at Glasgow’s recently opened Close Theatre Club, the studio space of the Citizens Theatre. Both theatre and director had reputations that aroused expectations of controversy: the Close, exempt from censorship under its status as a private club, was known during its eight-year lifetime as a theatre that made waves, while Marowitz was one of the most provocative directors of the decade.\(^\text{13}\)

Marowitz was at this time best known for his work with Peter Brook, including *King Lear* (1962) and the RSC Theatre of Cruelty season in 1964 of which Williams’ *Jew of Malta* was a part. *Hamlet*, the first of Marowitz’s ‘collage’ versions of Shakespeare, had received its premiere in Berlin earlier in the year, and would reach London six months later. He had also helped stage ‘the never-to-be-forgotten Happening’ featuring a naked woman at the International Drama Conference in Edinburgh two years earlier, thus contributing to his notoriety as a director who was out to shock.\(^\text{14}\) Marowitz, heavily influenced by Jan Kott (the English translation of whose *Shakespeare our Contemporary* was published in the same year), attracted much controversy with his radical adaptations of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. His defence of his approach in 1978, during the furore surrounding Peter Barnes’

\(^{\text{12}}\)See also Scotsman.
adaptation of Jonson’s *The Devil is an Ass*, represents the view that he was already displaying on the stage of the 1960s:

Not only need one not be faithful to the original text. One can, using a classical work, apply all the techniques that modern art has provided to the artists, which, for instance, involves distortion. There is no reason in the world why one cannot distort a classical work.15

Alongside his preoccupation with Renaissance drama, Marowitz was also attracted to certain contemporary dramatists. Only four months after *Doctor Faustus*, he went on to direct Orton’s *Loot*, and he would later direct Barnes’ *Leonardo’s Last Supper, Noonday Demons* and *Laughter!*. This combination of interests was undoubtedly no accident, and meant that he habitually made connections between Renaissance drama and the present. When he agreed to stage *Doctor Faustus* at the Close, therefore, ‘rumours soon began to circulate’.16

Like his version of *Hamlet*, Marowitz’s *Doctor Faustus* was a free adaptation of the texts (both the 1604 and the 1616 editions), plus excerpts from the *Faustbuch* and *Tamburlaine* (contrary to Christopher Small’s impression that this was ‘Marlowe, pretty well as we knew him’).17 And despite the Close’s immunity from the censorship laws, Marowitz’s production succeeded in arousing so much hostility within the theatre itself that it was almost cancelled outright. The ‘absurd and quite needless hubbub’ was over Marowitz’s decision to depict Sloth, one of the Seven Deadly Sins conjured up for Faustus’ entertainment, as a caricature of the Queen (with other sins to be represented by various heads of state).18 Since Marowitz refused to cut the Seven Deadly Sins down to six (‘Marlowe would come back from the grave to haunt me if I

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18*Financial Times*. See also Allen Wright, ‘Slur On Queen Halts Play’, *Scotsman*, 2 December 1965.
did anything so sinful' [Burnt Bridges, p. 75]), Michael Goldberg, chairman of the Citizens committee, went on stage on the opening night to announce the show’s cancellation. Marowitz then ‘stuck his head through the window of the lighting box and yelled vituperatively at the patriotic dissenters’, and there followed a ‘disorderly debate’ involving, as well as the committee, ‘large sections of the audience [who] began to join in, with applause, interjection, and even hisses’.19 It was an event which undoubtedly delighted Marowitz, being something of a ‘happening’ in itself.

In defence of his interpretation of the scene, Marowitz explained, somewhat bafflingly, ‘that he was attempting to make “Faustus” relevant to the nuclear age.’20 Without ever making it clear where the Queen fitted in to all this, he later expanded on his rationale, writing a dialogue in hell between Faustus and nuclear physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer as an Induction to the Gothenburg production.21 He was, he has written, ‘loosely identifying’ Faustus with Oppenheimer, as indeed he implied at the time, concluding that ‘Marlowe’s play grew out of an age like our own, when the world was being vigorously explored in order to be conquered.’22 It was a concern that was powerfully topical, and which would return to the stage the following year in the Living Theatre’s production of Heinar Kipphardt’s In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Marowitz also appealed to his perceived rights as director. ‘Almost any liberty can be taken with an old play [if] it makes it more meaningful to a modern audience,’ he claimed (‘Slur’). On the other hand, he insisted that ‘“It’s the text by Christopher Marlowe that’s being censored tonight, not Charles Marowitz.”’ The scene involving

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19Coveney, p. 60; ‘Slur’; Christopher Small, ‘Row in Theatre as Play is Banned: Producer “Offensive” to Queen’, Glasgow Herald, 2 December 1965.
the Queen had grown out of Marlowe’s text; it was an attempt to give contemporary relevance to a satirical scene." Here Marowitz was attempting to have it both ways; he wanted both the freedom to ‘distort’ or ‘rape’ Marlowe’s work (his own terms)\textsuperscript{23} and the protection of that distortion through an appeal to authenticity. But what is interesting about Marowitz’s decision is that he should have felt it necessary to make such radical alterations in order to increase the play’s meaning to an audience of the 1960s. Of course, \textit{Doctor Faustus} is the least obviously ‘relevant’ play of the group under consideration; it had already been acknowledged in 1961 that the waning of religious belief – and in particular, a vision of heaven and hell – was in danger of weakening the play’s power over a modern audience. In the end, though, it was widely agreed that the atmosphere of fear could be recreated to a surprising extent by a convincing production such as Benthall’s. And in any case, the introduction of the Queen, Stalin and company could contribute nothing to the comprehensibility of this most remote element of the play; while it might add a veneer of accessibility, any ‘meaning’ it evoked would be quite irrelevant to Faustus’ fate. Marowitz’s approach to \textit{Doctor Faustus} was quite the opposite of Shelton’s approach to \textit{The Revenger’s Tragedy}; far from feeling ‘no need to push the parallels’, the irrepressible Marowitz (with lower expectations of his audience, perhaps) decided to introduce a few of his own. Still, this, of course, was Marowitz’s way, and he would continue successfully with the same approach to countless Elizabethan and Jacobean works for decades to come.

In the end, Marowitz’s \textit{Doctor Faustus} went ahead, ‘24 hours and ten minutes late’. In the meantime, Marowitz and Goldberg had arrived at a ‘curious compromise’,

\textsuperscript{21}See \textit{The Marowitz Hamlet}. . ., pp. 102-8.
\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Burnt Bridges}, p. 74; ‘Rape of Faust’.
whereby the Queen’s tiara was replaced by Britannia’s helmet – but the caricatured voice and mask remained, making it obvious whom the Sin had been intended to represent. As a director of Orton, Marowitz would no doubt have noted the parallel when, just over three years later, a similarly absurd compromise was forced on the director of What the Butler Saw – particularly since, during rehearsals for Loot early in 1966, Orton had kept telling Marowitz about his current writing project: ‘the one with Winnie’s cock in the sweet tin’ (Burnt Bridges, p. 103). Once again in this case, the pressure came from within the theatre and not from the Lord Chamberlain, who by 1969 had lost his powers as Dramatic Censor: on the insistence of Sir Ralph Richardson, the final scene was altered so that the cigar, rather than the phallus, was discovered as the one remaining fragment of Sir Winston Churchill’s shattered statue.

The irreverent view of authority that Marowitz brought to the scene of the Seven Deadly Sins, then, was acutely contemporary; but instead of drawing that view out of Marlowe’s text (where it exists in abundance), Marowitz chose to graft it on in a place where it never quite took root.

According to Allen Wright of the Scotsman, Marowitz’s heavy-handed and, at worst, gimmicky attempts to create a relationship between the play and the present were not altogether successful. Marowitz may have been aware of some significant points of connection between the two, but instead of drawing them out he concentrated more on the easy response of spurious anachronisms:

Marowitz had indicated that this was a Faustus for the nuclear age and had pointed to a parallel between his necromancy and scientific research for military purposes.

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23 See for example Marks (quoted above, p. 286); ‘Rape of Faust’.
But the ultimate weapon which seemed to hover in the background was not so much a hydrogen bomb as a juke box.

The ‘flash-back’ technique he employed set the style of the production, which subordinated the poetry to slick stage effects. Even the galloping of the steeds of Hell had to be reproduced on a loudspeaker, and one passage resembled a dance from ‘West Side Story’. (‘Not A Bomb’)

The impersonations of the heads of state were, as might have been expected, ‘amusing in an irrelevant way’, and the production as a whole was an ‘unbalanced’ affair in which ‘the lively clowning of Bernard Hopkins was more impressive than the diabolical aspirations of Faustus’. In his attempt to increase the ‘relevance’ of the play, in other words, Marowitz had neglected the very aspect that a modern audience would be apt to find least meaningful – its horror – and, in the process, tipped the entire play over into triviality, with the balance of black farce lost entirely.

In its favour, it must be said that Marowitz’s Doctor Faustus was bold, irreverent, up-to-date and original. And as such, it can be credited as the forerunner of Philip Prowse’s ‘great string of Elizabethan and Jacobean productions’ of ‘X-certificate carnality and instant contemporary appeal’ at the Citizens during the 1970s (Coveney, p. 79). It was, as Pistotnik has pointed out, ‘a revival which more than any other of the play’s productions took account of theatrical and social circumstances of the nineteen-sixties’ (p. 245). But although the production attracted an enormous amount of public interest to Marlowe’s play, it does not do much to illuminate the relationship between Renaissance drama and the new black farces that were now appearing in theatres across the country. Following Doctor Faustus, however (with which he admits to having been dissatisfied), Marowitz went on to direct a production of The White Devil in Germany that was so gloriously blackly farcical that it resulted in the ‘only other opening that can compete with Glasgow’ (Burnt Bridges, p. 79). After a three-minute strangulation scene (at the end of which Bracciano unexpectedly
resuscitated – a comic device borrowed from Webster himself) and some impossibly gory stabbings involving concealed, blood-filled condoms that spurted ‘as if an artery had been hit, splattering the assassin and ghoulishly soiling the victim’, the audience erupted into ‘a wave of audible nausea’, followed by booing, catcalling and a bombardment of programmes, orange rinds and chocolate boxes (p. 80). ‘The Wiesbaden audience had expected lofty tragedy [and] were unprepared for sick comedy,’ recalls Marowitz with relish. He took his bow and ‘beat a hasty retreat, giggling demonically.’ Black farce, he had discovered, could be still more explosive than political satire.
1966

26 July: The Changeling
Frank Evans, Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre

It was to be some time before Marlowe’s play was once again presented in blackly farcical style. 1966 began with two revivals of Doctor Faustus, the first of which (14 February, dir. Neville Coghill, Oxford Playhouse), though part of theatre legend, is of little interest in this context. Due to the circumstances of the production – a fund-raising gala in which Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor took a break from their lucrative careers to appear with a student cast – Marlowe’s play was obscured in a wave of media and public hysteria that focused on the colourful lives of the famous couple: ‘This is one of the theatrical occasions on which everything seems to matter but the play,’ remarked the Times.¹ In addition, the ‘nervous solemnity’ of the students, combined with Coghill’s reluctance to provide any direction for the Burtons, precluded any significant directorial interpretation.² Perhaps the most meaningful conclusion in this context is that drawn by Ronald Bryden in the New Statesman, who clearly felt that Coghill’s unimaginative and spiritless approach was inadequate for the mid-1960s, and suggested instead a more appropriate interpretation for the times:

Probably the way to play it is the way the RSC presented The Jew of Malta, more horror-comic than tragedy . . . .

Williams’ production had had its impact, and with Orton, Livings and Barnes now firmly established on the British stage, black farce was fast becoming the only truly successful mode for a 1960s revival of one of these Renaissance ‘classics’.3

The grand event at Oxford was followed three months later by yet another Doctor Faustus (25 May, dir. André Van Gyseghem, Nottingham Playhouse). The director shared with Marowitz the combination of a sense of the play’s ‘still relevant theme’4 with a desire to bolster that relevance through gimmicks and special effects,5 and the result was something repeatedly described as ‘pantomime’,6 neither plumbing the depths of horror and tragedy nor venturing into the realms of farce. The farce, indeed, was well-nigh destroyed by Van Gyseghem’s cutting of the text; clearly troubled by the ‘two disparate styles’ of ‘this teasing, baffling play’, he ‘tautened it up’ by ridding the play of as much as possible of its middle scenes.7 The theatre of the 1960s would have to wait a couple more years for the re-emergence of black farce in a production of the play more spectacular than any of this cluster of Faustuses.


7Programme, Nottingham Playhouse archive; ‘Marlowe’s purified’.
The second and final production of The Changeling in the decade was directed by Frank Evans at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre in London. The date and venue are significant: the play opened on 26 July 1966, only two months before the same theatre presented Charles Marowitz's successful production of Orton’s Loot. These two managerial decisions can hardly have been coincidental, even if the connection was not a conscious one. Any audience seeing Loot for the first time that September could not have failed to be reminded by the constant presence of a corpse, its entanglement in a whole array of unusual sexual practices and its missing eye, of the horrors of the dead Alonzo’s severed finger and the cynical exchange of sexual favours on the very same stage only weeks before. Beatrice Joanna’s unconscious hypocrisy could easily, with only a slight change of inflection, have come from the mouth of her fellow-murderer and sexual manipulator, Nurse Fay, the woman whose ultimate concern was to ‘keep up appearances’, and who practised serial murder because euthanasia was against her religion:

BEATRICE JOANNA. Thy language is so bold and vicious,
I cannot see which way I can forgive it
With any modesty.

DEFLORES. Push! You forget yourself!
A woman dipp’d in blood, and talk of modesty! (III. iv. 123-6)

In addition, both productions were described by critics as ‘theatre of cruelty’. At the very least, the decision to stage these two plays in such close proximity indicates that both works were considered suitable to the audience of the ‘sort of Off-West End’ Cochrane Theatre in 1966. Certainly there could hardly have been a more

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9Marowitz, quoted in Lahr, Prick Up Your Ears, p. 260.
appropriate time and place for a director, fresh from his production of *Doctor Faustus* in Glasgow, to tackle Orton’s till then largely unpopular play.

While it was something of an exaggeration for the *New Statesman’s* D. A. N. Jones to suggest that *The Changeling* was ‘beginning to seem like an old friend, almost’, it was widely appreciated that Middleton’s ‘theatre of cruelty [was] gradually becoming familiar.’\(^{10}\) The reason for the re-emergence of ‘Shakespeare’s underperformed contemporaries’ was indicated in Philip Hope-Wallace’s observation of Middleton – ‘How up to date he seems’ – and by Jones in terms of ‘current theatre practice’:

... the brute facts about past ages are faced with untwinkling, bloodshot eye, with quite positive enthusiasm for the glamour of pain ... The long-despised sub-plot [of *The Changeling*] (if it is ‘sub’: it gave this double-barrelled piece its title) has come to be well-liked. Whips and madmen are, once again, to the taste of the time.

Jones’s highlighting of violence and madness reflected both the emphasis of the production and its strongest relationship with contemporary drama. He was not alone in describing the production as ‘theatre of cruelty’, and an account in *Plays and Players* indicates that this definition came from the presence of grotesquerie, aggression, bestiality, insanity and assault upon the audience:

Caged, chattering lunatics provided the permanent background to the Oxford Stage Company’s striking production of *The Changeling*. Locked in the vast scaffolding of Ian Knight’s asylum-set, the madmen of Middleton and Rowley’s sub-plot, screeched, sulked and poured scorn upon themselves and the audience. ...

Frank Evans’ actors performed with contemporary fury and growling coarseness. ... ‘Fools have always so much wit as to claim their kindred,’ reflected Lollio, keeper of the madhouse. His asylum delighted in claiming its brethren from the aristocracy.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Peter Ansorge, *Plays and Players*, October 1966.
The dividing line between madness and sanity was an overtly contemporary concern, as was seen in Chapter 2. It was also, of course, the subject of the recent RSC ‘Cruelty’ production, the Marat/Sade, with which The Changeling was favourably compared by a number of critics. It was no doubt for this reason – in addition to their inherent ‘shock value’ – that the lunatics were allowed to dominate Evans’s production. The result was an evening of ‘pace’ and ‘relish’, and a production widely enjoyed as a ‘splendid old Jacobean horror comedy’ (Guardian).

27 September: The Duchess of Malfi
Colin George, Sheffield Playhouse

As a provincial repertory production, the Sheffield Playhouse revival of The Duchess of Malfi, directed by Colin George, inevitably attracted a good deal less attention than its Royal Shakespeare Company predecessor. However, a scattering of reviews reveals that, in the bolder climate of 1966, George certainly had none of the fear of excess exhibited by McWhinnie, despite the fact that this was ‘an essentially new medium for the company’. In contrast to the restraint of the RSC’s actors, the Sheffield Playhouse ‘blasted their way through’ the play with ‘some meaty, full-blooded performances’, ‘bringing home to the audience the true horror of the play.’ The Stage described the production as belonging to the ‘Theatre of Blood’:

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15Timothy Brown, ‘Breaking through the Webster barrier’, Morning Telegraph (Sheffield), 28 September 1966; Barnsley Chronicle and South Yorkshire News; Dennis Foster, Rotherham and South Yorkshire Advertiser, 1 October 1966.
‘The Duchess of Malfi’ [is] directed by Colin George with a vivid sense of the spell which sheer terror can cast. His stage is virtually drenched with blood to shift a rusty bolt and open a door on scenes of sombre and poignant intensity.16

There was, then, perhaps more cause for the outrage voiced by the sensitive critic of the South Yorkshire Times than for the shock of McWhinnie’s critics. In another Edna Welthorpe-like reaction, ‘B. W. L.’ referred in his piece to ‘X’ certificate films, but went as far as to suggest that a similar classification should be placed on Webster’s work:

It is indeed ludicrous that cinema films have to be graded according to their type to protect the young when in fact any young person can go along to the theatre and see such horrific plays.17

This was a response more usual in relation to new plays than to three hundred-year-old ones; indeed, four years later, Lincoln Theatre Royal did in fact take the action suggested by B. W. L., in response to a storm of controversy – including an attack from a local clergyman and a visit from the police – involving Arden’s Live Like Pigs and Livings’ Finest Family in the Land, on which it placed its own ‘X’ certificate.18

B. W. L.’s disapproval, then, went far beyond anything voiced by the reviewers of McWhinnie’s more restrained production, and is no doubt indicative of George’s more lurid interpretation. But a review in the Barnsley Chronicle implies that B. W. L. may have been somewhat behind the times. ‘Dramatis’, the Chronicle’s theatre critic, began his report by conjecturing that, ‘a dozen or so years ago, audiences might well have walked out on The Duchess of Malfi, or laughed it from the stage. But at

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16Stage, 13 October 1966. See also Christopher Dodd, Guardian, 28 September 1966.
17South Yorkshire Times, 1 October 1966.
the Sheffield Playhouse on Tuesday they did neither.' For Dramatis, this was symptomatic of the times:

Tuesday’s large audience sat spellbound throughout the greater part of three hours of John Webster’s extravagances, crudities and grotesqueries, and this does indicate a marked change in the temper of theatre audiences during the last half-generation.

As Dramatis pointed out, alongside the increasing diet of horror to be consumed on the large and small screen, audiences were becoming more accustomed to spectacles of violence and gore on stage, both in revivals and in new writing. The director, too, viewed the play in terms of contemporary work; to him it was peculiarly modern not only because of its horrors but also because of its desperate vision:

The play is contemporary to us in feeling. It is shot through with the disillusionment and cynicism of our more searing writers . . . The horrors of the Duchess’s torture and death are indeed ‘Theatre of Cruelty’, and relevant to a world that has learnt to live with the hydrogen bomb and the concentration camp . . . 19

As in responses to the 1960 revival, the Holocaust and other recent horrors are invoked as touchstones which make the play meaningful to a modern audience.

The programme’s reference to the Theatre of Cruelty (picked up with agreement by a couple of critics20) points towards the general tendency of those generically classifying the play in relation to George’s production – a tendency that had much in common with critical responses to Evans’s Changeling only a couple of months earlier. A step in the direction of black farce was made by Timothy Brown in the Morning Telegraph, who defined the play not only as ‘revenge tragedy’ but also as ‘Jacobean horror comic’. Brown appears to have seen this genre as problematic, referring to the play as always having been ‘an intractable lump which directors

19Programme, Sheffield Central Library.
preferred to go round.’ The grotesqueries so feared by McWhinnie, however, came off successfully without any elimination of their comic potential:

The dumb show is an arrestingly solemn religious ritual, which turns into an acid mockery. The madmen are simply characters from the play parodying their own bestiality.

Although George did not succeed in avoiding the unintended laughter at the final pile-up of corpses, his approach to the play was altogether more willing to embrace wholeheartedly both comedy and horror.

5 October: The Revenger’s Tragedy
Trevor Nunn, Stratford-on-Avon

There was, says Stanley Wells, ‘a distinct upsurge of interest in The Revenger’s Tragedy in the mid-1960s.’ And sure enough, only a year after the first revival since the seventeenth century came a major Royal Shakespeare Company production, directed by Trevor Nunn. The situation duplicated the RSC’s Jew of Malta revival of 1964 in that the Company was entirely unaware of the previous production, only this time the ‘coincidence’ was even more remarkable: not only had there been no other professional revivals whatsoever in the intervening centuries, but there was no anniversary to increase the odds of two productions occurring within fifteen months of each other three hundred and fifty years on.

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20 Rotherham and South Yorkshire Advertiser, Stage.
21 See Barnsley Chronicle and South Yorkshire News.
23 Nunn’s production ‘was announced in September [1966] as the play’s “first professional staging for nearly 300 years”, a claim that had to be hastily amended to allow for the Pitlochry Festival performances of the previous year’ (Wells, p. 108).
Trevor Nunn, a twenty-six-year-old Cambridge graduate who would later go on to be Artistic Director of the RSC, had only been with the Company for a year when he asked to be allowed to direct *The Revenger's Tragedy* as his first independent production. Hall's agreement was a highly characteristic gamble: not only had Nunn's work up to this point 'consisted of a chain of such disasters that he lived in daily expectation of dismissal', but the production came at a time when the Company had 'its back to the wall':

Economic crisis had frozen the company's subsidy, costs had risen and in the circumstances it seemed pure folly to revive a Jacobean curiosity unseen on a professional stage for three centuries.24

In spite of all this, Hall had sufficient faith in Nunn – and the play – to allow it to go ahead. And, true to form, he built in a security measure: just as *The Jew of Malta* had been coupled with *The Merchant of Venice* when it moved to Stratford-on-Avon, with publicity statements giving 'what seemed like a defensive justification for playing Marlowe at Stratford', *The Revenger's Tragedy* was introduced into a repertory that included Hall's own *Hamlet*, with which the links were similarly stressed (Wells, p. 108). Indeed, partly for economy's sake but also 'as a further link between the two plays', the productions shared a set.25 Hall's policy was once again justified when the production was so successful that, after its originally-planned eight performances in October 1966 and a further nine the following May, it was given a full London revival at the Aldwych in November 1969: thirty-one performances, including a gala in the presence of Princess Margaret.

25Programme (1966), courtesy of Professor Ian Donaldson.
Renaissance Revivals
1966

Nunn’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* was a successor of Clifford Williams’ *Jew of Malta* in more respects than this cautious pairing with a trusty Shakespeare. Here, too, was a revolutionary new interpretation of a strange and neglected play – and in much the same manner, as Ronald Bryden noted:

Two seasons ago the RSC gave startling new life to Marlowe’s ‘Jew of Malta’ by playing it as macabre farce, a kind of Elizabethan horror-comic. Trevor Nunn’s production of Tourneur’s (or was it Middleton’s?) darkling welter of incest, rape and regicide is clearly a companion effort. (*Observer*, 9 October 1966)

During the run of the production, Professor George Hunter of Warwick University gave an illustrated talk on the RSC season that confirmed this view of Williams’ *Jew of Malta* as a specifically generic predecessor of Nunn’s *Revenger’s Tragedy*:

In the line of ‘savage farce’ or ‘black comedy’, said the professor, the production of ‘The Jew of Malta’ was a preparation for this play.26

In retrospect, Stanley Wells had ‘no doubt that the company’s liberation of a play with an ostensibly tragic framework from the irrelevant and stifling associations of romantic tragedy was a major factor in preparing the ground for its production of Tourneur’s play’ (p. 107). But, as Irving Wardle stated, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* was ‘far more than a pendant to *The Jew of Malta*.’27

As with most of the blackly farcical Renaissance revivals so far in the decade, the RSC’s choice of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* surprised and intrigued most observers. ‘He was a bold man that first swallowed an oyster,’ wrote Hilary Spurling in the *Spectator*, quoting Swift. ‘And, after three hundred years of hesitation, it was a bold and brilliantly justified company that put on *The Revenger’s Tragedy* at Stratford last

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week.28 So how had Nunn come to pick on this neglected piece at that particular moment? Like Shelton the year before, Nunn was attracted by the play’s striking appropriateness at that time:

It seemed to me a play that was extraordinarily about aspects of our own world . . . where the relationship between sex, violence and money was becoming increasingly popular, and expressed through all sorts of things — spy novels — James Bond. . . . I was also fascinated by a society which reviled this development, but could [not] stop talking about it. . . . What fascinated me about the Revenger — about the character Vindice — was that he was totally schizophrenic; a completely modern study. He was somebody utterly dedicated to the destruction of this world, and he was — at the same time — totally fascinated by it.29

Dominant in Nunn’s account is this notion of decadent ambivalence, paradox or even schizophrenia — the coexistence of revilement and fascination that is echoed in the mixed genre of black farce. There was, of course, ‘no acting tradition’ for the play, as J. C. Trewin noted; and combined with Nunn’s free, instinctive rehearsal style and the fact that many of the cast were either new to the RSC or lesser-known members of the Company, the result was a ‘revolutionary’ production:

In terms of acting, design and staging it marked a significant break with what had become, by 1966, the accepted RSC approach. . . . The Revenger’s Tragedy was flamboyantly theatrical, anti-naturalistic — the pitch of the glittering performances central to it was not down, but up. . . . A radically different approach to staging a classic play had been found.30

And, as we shall see, Nunn’s independent and intuitive approach not only revolutionised the RSC style; it also caused a major re-evaluation of that classic play itself, revealing it ‘not as the uneven second-rank tragedy most scholars considered it, but a masterpiece in a genre of its own’ (Observer, 30 November 1969).

Unlike Shelton, Nunn found it necessary to make quite extensive alterations to the script of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. This job was given to John Barton, Nunn’s fellow Associate Director of the RSC, who used as his starting point the text in Gámini Salgādo’s *Three Jacobean Tragedies*, published the previous year. Stanley Wells describes the alterations at some length in his essay on Nunn’s revival (pp. 110-15), and there is no need for me to duplicate his work; some of Barton’s changes, however, are highly significant within this context and require some examination.

Many of the cuts, rearrangements and (most boldly) additions were made in pursuit of clarity for a modern audience or in order to smooth out technical difficulties; others were requested by actors during rehearsals (Wells, p. 111). The inserts were composed by Barton himself, already experienced in writing pastiche Shakespeare for the RSC’s *Wars of the Roses* (1963), and were derived from hints in the text and from lines in *The Atheist’s Tragedy*.31 Whatever the primary reason for their introduction however, many of the alterations – both textual and theatrical – served to increase and explore the violence of the original, aligning it still more closely with the RSC’s Theatre of Cruelty work. The Duchess ‘exultantly slapped Lussurioso’s face’ on being assured that he would be executed; Lussurioso in turn spat in his stepmother’s face and threw her to the ground amidst the brothers’ laughter when she was banished from court (one of the interpolated sections); and the scene in which Lussurioso seeks to engage ‘Piato’ was set in a torture chamber, with ‘bleeding bodies hanging on the walls like sides of beef’ and the verse ‘punctuated by shrieks every time Lussurioso

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31 The additions are reproduced in full in Wells, pp. 128-33.
presses a lever.\textsuperscript{32} In Act III, scene v, an extra speech was given to Hippolito in which he dwelt on his disapproval of and attraction to the ‘violent joy’ of revenge, amplifying the ambivalence which Nunn had sensed throughout the play:

\begin{quote}
\ldots I like't, and like it not.
This vengeance is a law prompted by nature,
Promulgate by our blood, which when we broach it
Makes that blood thrill, as now my brother’s doth.
Sure, ’tis a violent joy, and I suspect it;
Nay, I must doubt myself, for mine own veins
Joy too, i’th very moment of suspect. (Quoted in Wells, p. 129)
\end{quote}

Other alterations deepened the violent sexuality of the play. The production began with ‘a mimed episode portraying a masque dance, and culminating in a stylized rape’ (Wells, p, 110) – the rape of Antonio’s wife by the Junior Brother. This ‘brutal’ scene was praised by Hilary Spurling as ‘a ceremony as barbaric as it is beautiful to look at, performed in silence by a ring of courtiers whose staring faces, wildly plucked and whitened, proclaim them cold, deft, practised panders to their master’.\textsuperscript{33} And while the episode had an obvious elucidatory function in the scenes to follow, it also established the stylish yet violent sexual cruelty that was to dominate the production.

Barton’s fourth textual insert expanded the graveyard assignation between Spurio and the Duchess which the Duke is forced to witness in his dying moments. Not only did the added dialogue increase ‘the sexual innuendo of the original’, as Wells notes (p. 112); it also intensified the association of sex with cruelty, death and damnation that was discussed in Chapters 4 and 5:

\begin{quote}
SPURIO. \ldots all meet i’ the shrine
   Where torches kiss, thus, i’ the fiery circle.
DUCHESS. \ldots
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{33}‘Rare silver’, \textit{Spectator}, 6 December 1969.
Here is a vault for vaulting.

SPURIO. 'Tis e'en so;
Court-panders whisper oft of such a quaintness,
And swear that here where great men end, most grave,
Others begin, or were begun, in dancing.

...I muse where my dad got me:
My thoughts being deadly, sure I think it was
In some such place of death. Could I once find it,
In vengeance on my sire I'd slake you there
On that vile slab where I was seminar'd.

DUCHESS. Think not on him.

SPURIO. Why, it adds sweets to sweetness:
Sharp'st spices make the feast more cruel-great.
And lust's not lust till it be sauced with hate. (Quoted in Wells, pp. 129-30)

The scene was played 'as a kind of walking torch dance, with much erotic suggestiveness in their movements and their manipulation of the torches as they raised them above their heads and mingled their flames' (Wells, p. 119). This dance no doubt recalled the more violent opening masque, and looked forward to the closing dance of death:

For the climactic dance of revengers the director devised a mime of skull-masked figures dancing metronomically to the insistent rhythm of an off-stage drum. They bore swords which they raised above their heads and clashed together in the dance .... Finally they leapt on to the table, killing their carousing victims, who themselves wore skull-masks, with downward stabs. (Wells, p. 121)

This murderous celebration, with its merging of joy and despair, eroticism and violence, brought the production full circle and drew together both the themes and the genre of the play, as Beauman recalls:

[The production's] progress was like that of a highly formal elaborate dance of death (an impression heightened by Guy Woolfenden's brilliant, eerily rhythmic music for the production), and it ended with an actual dance of death, a skull-masked saraband in which the abrupt demise of some twelve characters skirted the ridiculous and acquired a dreamlike, sickening compulsion, the death-throes of a diseased society. (p. 291)
Christopher Morley's much-praised designs, too, intensified this impression of a glittering, doom-filled society, and encapsulated the play's ambivalent tone. They were essentially very simple: entirely monochromatic, with a bright silver circle painted on a black stage, black and silver costumes, white faces. Many critics noted the supreme appropriacy of the designs to the themes of the play – decadence, 'corrupt elegance', 'bloodless and bored extravagance', 'whey-faced cruelty ... thin-lipped lust' and death – and, indeed, to its genre: 'a black play gleaming with silver wit'. The only 'relief to the eye' from the tones of black and silver came from the characters' spilt blood, of which there was enough 'to turn the Avon red'.

It will be clear by now that Nunn's production was far from evading any of the horrors of *The Revenger's Tragedy*; indeed, it went so far as to add 'one or two gratuitous horrors of its own', as has already been observed. Many critics described the production as 'macabre', with other more imaginative descriptions including 'chop-licking, black and biting' and 'menacingly cold and shiversome'. There were also the usual allusions to horror or X-certificate films, with the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* even specifically linking the play through 'common strands' of 'lust, vice.

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and bloodshed’ with a new film, The Liquidator, that appeared almost simultaneously. The obvious theatrical precedent came from the Theatre of Cruelty, as noted by Harold Hobson who, drawing a link with the Marat/Sade, suggested that the production might possibly lead one to complain that the RSC ‘takes a suspicious delight in evil for its own sake’.

Gareth Lloyd Evans, in both 1966 and 1967, connected the production with the ‘Dirty Play’ controversy that had grown out of the RSC’s ‘Cruelty’ experiments, vehemently defending it against reformers who labelled the production as “dirty,” “sexy,” “immoral,” “disgusting.” Peter Lewis of the Daily Mail agreed, finding that he could not ‘keep up the pose of Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells all night.’

This is not to say that the horrors of the piece did not have power. According to various critics, the production made ‘a coldly fascinating spectacle with some real frissons of horror’; it was ‘a sustained and terrifying ritual’ that retained its ‘power to thrill and shock [the audience] almost to the end’. Others warned that it was not family entertainment, and ‘definitely not a play for the squeamish with its emphasis on practically every crime in the sexual calendar, committed with cynicism and brutality, and punished by cunningly contrived murder.’ The production was apt to provoke powerful responses of the type sought by the Theatre of Cruelty; while the

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46 Citizen; Daily Express.
critic of the *Glasgow Herald* described audiences as being left 'punch-drunk with its pullulating culture-growth of lust, greed, and envy', Frank Marcus felt able to 'guarantee that it will produce nightmares.' Amongst those with strong reactions to the show was the critic of the *Leamington Spa Courier* who, in a piece headed 'A SICKENING EXHUMATION', described the play as a 'scrofulous corpse' at which, like John Barber at *The National Health*, 'one wants to vomit.'

Equally prominent in the production was the other face of black farce. Ian Richardson was an acclaimed Vindice, ‘addressing some of his lines to the audience with the confiding glance that characterises the best playing in French farce’; his style ranged ‘from a cool, mocking cynicism to a sort of rollicking farce.’ The ‘blunt comedy’ of Norman Rodway, ‘clowning grotesquely in the role of the duke’s bastard’, was much appreciated, particularly his ‘three-word epitaph’ on the discovery of the Duke’s corpse: ‘Old dad dead?’ (V. i. 116). Most farcical of all were Terrence Hardiman and John Kane as Ambitioso and Supervacuo, ‘played respectively as a tall, mincing figure with earrings and high heels, and as a squat, dumpy, cowardly boaster’, and described variously as ‘the Ugly Sisters’, ‘Laurel and Hardy in ruffs’ and ‘an evil-minded Tweedledum and Tweedledee’.

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The critics who had read the play were amazed by its transformation on the stage, but were divided into those who felt the farce to be intended by the author and those who felt it must have been imposed – or at least exaggerated – by the director.\(^\text{53}\) The latter group was by far the larger; as with so many of the previous Jacobean revivals, critics found it hard to accept that the farce was not an anachronism in this horrific context. Because black farce and even Hilary Spurling’s ‘gallows humour’ (a phrase also used to describe \textit{Loot} the previous week\(^\text{54}\)) were believed to be strictly modern genres, there were the usual claims that the play was burlesqued, satirised, parodied, sent up, camped up, played for laughs.\(^\text{55}\) And to be fair, on at least one occasion they were right; after ‘Old dad dead?’, the line that seems to have provoked the biggest laugh was the Duchess’s ‘I do not like the morning’ – one of Barton’s insertions – spat out at the audience by a ‘hangover-eyed’ Brenda Bruce (\textit{Evening News}, 6 October 1966). But in general, as Wells concludes, Barton’s additions ‘do not . . . add to [the play’s] comedy or increase the element of self-parody that Tourneur himself allows to his characters’ (p. 126). And as he points out, the objection of the \textit{Punch} critic to the ‘improper’ laugh raised by the Duchess’s line ‘appears to refer simply to the way the line was delivered, not to its inauthenticity’ (p. 120); the confusion as to what did and what did not originate from the author was vast, and

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ultimately stemmed from a recognition of the genre portrayed by Nunn’s production as a modern one — and hence a certain mistrust of its appearance in a work of the seventeenth century.

The relationship between horror and farce in the production, then, was widely acknowledged to amount to a contemporary genre: black, savage or macabre farce, black or macabre comedy, black humour, sick or savage jokes. All of these terms were being liberally applied to contemporary work. A minority of critics acknowledged that this effect was ‘surely as it must have been originally intended’, and in spite of those who objected to ‘improper’ laughter in what they had expected to be a solemn tragedy, many agreed that the company had created exactly the right mix of horror and farce, in ‘an awe-inspiring feat of mood-balancing’. Editor of the text Reginald Foakes described this as ‘the strength of the production’:

The company did marvellously well to achieve the balance so that they could shift from one mood to another very rapidly.

58Coventry Evening Telegraph, 6 October 1966; New Statesman, 14 October 1966; Scotsman.
Ian Richardson was credited with much of this achievement for, as the *Glasgow Herald* stated, ‘It is in [Vindice’s] character that the curious co-existence of comedy with the wallowing depths of tragedy is most manifest.’ The Duke and Duchess’s sons, though predominantly farcical, were also tinged disturbingly with the horrific. The measure of the performances of Hardiman and Kane was ‘that they remained entirely evil while being completely comic’; they were ‘a pair of effeminates of deadly serious stupidity with pantomime overtones’.

But the fact then that in this stupidity they are blandly scheming real murder makes the laughter they arouse simultaneously a relief and yet interestingly-uneasy... 

Alan Howard as Lussurioso, too, gave ‘a fine suggestion of the sinister lurking coldly beneath a foppish appearance’, combining ‘a limpid sensuality’ with ‘a half-crazy petulance which gives [the character] the quality of a dangerous child’. The effect of the black farce was precisely the kind of unsettling discomfort or ‘uneasiness’ that was intended (*Stage*, 4 December 1969). B. A. Young of the *Financial Times*, looking for a more ‘consistent’ style, complained that ‘the serious passages are sometimes spoilt by a suspicion that at any moment Mr Richardson will reveal that he has been working up to a laugh all along’ — a feeling shared by Milton Shulman of the *Evening Standard*, who was equally conscious of the ‘uncertain laughter’. Many shared the ‘general uncertainty as to whether we should be laughing or not’; Peter Lewis didn’t know ‘whether to gasp or laugh or do both simultaneously’. The Company self-consciously confirmed that this was their intention by reprinting a

63 *Glasgow Herald*, 8 October 1966. See also *Warwick Advertiser*.
selection of conflicting opinions regarding the 1966 production in the programme of
1967 under the heading ‘TO LAUGH OR NOT TO LAUGH’. The effect would
have been familiar to those who had also been present at Shelton’s version and
Williams’ Jew of Malta, as with those earlier revivals, it took some time for the
spectators to begin to allow themselves to laugh, ‘after a reverend first half-hour’
(Evening News, 6 October 1966). It would also have been experienced by those who
had seen Eh?, where ‘the air [was] full of uneasy laughter’, and the still-running Loot,
where the audience suspected that their laughter was ‘reprehensible’; it was still to be
experienced by audiences of A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, The Little Mrs Foster
Show and The National Health. In fact, Charles Marowitz, director of Loot, recalls
precisely the same effect at Orton’s play as that described by the Evening News in
relation to The Revenger’s Tragedy:

It was as if Act One had been a crash course on Orton’s style of comedy and in Act
Two the audience passed with flying colours. (Burnt Bridges, p. 104)

In other words, a Jacobean work and an entirely new work were simultaneously
having an identical and very specific effect on audiences who were both unnerved and,
after a time, amused by the volatile mixtures of black farce.

It is hardly surprising, then, given these theatrical developments, that critics should
have recognised the genre of The Revenger’s Tragedy as peculiarly appropriate to the
1960s. The Yorkshire Post described the mixed genre of the play as ‘the mode which
speaks most comprehensively to our time’, while the Evesham Journal found it ‘a

67New Statesman, 14 October 1966; Daily Mail, 6 October 1966.
68Programme (1967), Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-on-Avon. See also ‘The Revenger’,
Sunday Mercury, 7 May 1967.
69David Nathan, ‘A Boiler, An Idiot And . . . So What?’, Sun, 30 October 1964; Philip Hope-
Wallace, Guardian, 28 September 1966; Cordelia Oliver, Guardian, 11 May 1967; Emrys Bryson,
dark chamber of a play torch-lit by blazing impudent humour’, and as such the most likely of all the RSC’s non-Shakespearean revivals ‘to appeal to contemporary taste.’ J. W. Lever later explored how ‘in the evoking of a contemporary response’ through what he calls the ‘black farce’ of Nunn’s interpretation, ‘new insights are gained’:

The nihilism of our own age, sprung of a sense of helplessness in a world controlled by huge aggregations of power, has its affinities to folk attitudes in other times. In the theatre, before a present-day audience, The Revenger’s Tragedy, with its discrepancies of tone, its mingling of indignation and farce, frustration and contempt, triteness and grotesquery, takes on coherence and point. It is likely that the response at its first performance was not dissimilar. The spectacle of the court, caricatured, degenerate, pullulating with intrigue, would mirror the secret attitude of people down the ages towards the powers that be, recognizing in them qualities at once horrific, fascinating, and funny; an attitude which, out of a conviction of helplessness resembling our own, of necessity tempers hatred with laughter. Even Vindice’s moral ambivalence may have established a rapport with the Jacobean audience, as it does with audiences today.

(pp. 32-3)

Of course, much of this – the nihilism, the decadence, the ambivalence shared by the two periods – echoes Nunn’s reasons for staging the play at this time, revealing that what he had initially sensed in the play did in fact come through in the final production. David Addenbrooke agrees, stating that ‘The Revenger’s Tragedy was to some extent a savage comment on the hypocrisy of our own society’ (p. 108). This note of disillusionment as a touchstone for a modern audience was emphasised in the programme, which reproduced an extract from L. C. Knights’ account of seventeenth-century melancholy in Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson (1937) and Shelton’s equation of the Malcontent with the Angry Young Man, backed up by a collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century views of The Revenger’s Tragedy offering references to ‘a cynical, plague-fretted spirit’ and ‘disgust [at] the disintegration of a

whole social order.' And the contemporary comment was not missed by observers of the time. Gareth Lloyd Evans was particularly perceptive in this regard:

Gradually we are becoming aware that our society has passed into a state of acute unrest. Our inability to absorb the influences of science and technology, our nostalgia for lost empire, have produced a bewildered weakness in our moral and spiritual life and, at the same time, emphasised a natural human cupidity. Among the many results of this frightening combination are a near-collapse of organised religious faith, a dismissal of the idea of God, a reduction of morality to a matter of personal whim, and an abrogation of social responsibility.

There is an ugly word – decadence – for this, and among its more particular manifestations are violence, sexual licence and a kind of sick tragi-comedy attitude towards life...

The period following the death of Elizabeth the First exhibits similar characteristics, and these are strongly reflected in much of the drama from 1601 to 1620. (Stratford-upon-Avon Herald, 13 October 1966)

Evans continued by defending the production against the label of 'dirty play' and accusations of send-up, inconsistency or dramatic fracturing, stating: 'This was the way of that world, and some may think it is the way of ours.'

The cynical sex and violence picked up by Evans were once again emphasised by both director and critics through connections with James Bond. They were what made the production, for a modern audience, 'almost as sinisterly persuasive as must have been the original':

Tourneur's moral hatred and detestation of the divided and violent society of his time, is the driving force of the play, and watching it one is led inevitably to comparisons with the violence of our own age.

For Hilary Spurling, noting in 1969 the current, unprecedented popularity of Webster, Middleton and Tourneur, it was the generic treatment of violence that was so modern: she partly explained the 'rise of the last two after their long eclipse' by 'the

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70See Nunn, quoted by Addenbrooke (above, p. 302); Revenger's Tragedy programme; Daily Express; Daily Mail, 6 October 1966; Glasgow Herald, 8 October 1966; Jewish Chronicle, 14 October 1966; Coventry Evening Telegraph, 28 November 1969; 'A Haunting Experience: And it puts James Bond to Shame', Leamington Spa Courier, 12 May 1967
combination of violence with . . . grisly humour, even gaiety’ – and again, this description echoed those of *Loot* in the previous week’s papers.\(^{72}\) This particular approach to violence bound the play still more strongly to the RSC’s policy of the time; Peter Hall, while the Vietnam play *US* was running concurrently with *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, felt strongly that the RSC must have an attitude to ‘the pain and horror of the disease of violence which is creeping over the West’.\(^{73}\) And indeed many critics lamented the fact that ‘if degeneracy in court, double-dealing, violence, were a commonplace of the Jacobean scene (thinly disguised as Italian) the depths to which humanity can sink should scarcely surprise moderns’; Peter Lewis, in a review that echoed descriptions of *Eh?*, *Joe Egg* and *The Erpingham Camp* in its nightmare metaphor, returned to the preoccupation with Vietnam, grimly noting on 28 November 1969 that, ‘In the week of Pinkville, this pitiless night-spectre comes to us across a silence of 350 years’:

> . . . though the Jacobeans loved horror for its entertainment value, they also knew how real it could be. So do we. It is a play for our times as well.’\(^{74}\)

Others drew parallels with the recent past; David Nathan of the *Sun* praised the cast ‘for as fine a display of villainy as ever seen outside the concentration camps of reality’, while Benedict Nightingale observed the inevitability of black farce in dealing with such a subject:

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\(^{73}\) Peter Hall points to – International influence of English plays*, *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 21 October 1966.

\(^{74}\) *Leamington Spa Courier*, 12 May 1967; Lewis, *Daily Mail*. Several hundred civilians were massacred by American soldiers in the Vietnamese village of Son My (Pinkville); see Richard Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My (Pinkville)* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1970). For the nightmare metaphor in reviews of new plays, see John Holmstrom, ‘New Aldwych
Nunn has to look no further for justification than to observed life and received history. . . . We live in a world where evil takes quixotic forms and great power may be assumed by objectively ludicrous people. And so it is in Nunn’s production. He shows us a state that’s been taken over by its Osrics . . .

The sexual themes of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* received as much attention as the violence. ‘By 1969,’ Wells notes, ‘the phrase “permissive society” had entered our jargon, and is several times invoked’ in accounts of the production; Martin Esslin, for example, perceived a relationship with the particularly modern dilemma that was discussed in Chapter 5:

For while these Jacobean horror plays . . . do visibly revel in sadistic sex fantasies and horrors, they are also very much of their time in that clearly they are also pointing an accusing finger at a permissive society, that they are in fact an expression of a deep puritanical disgust with sex, the flesh and mortality itself. The insight which *The Revenger’s Tragedy* in this brilliant production gives us is thus an insight into our own time, the battle between the permissive society and the Mrs Whitehouses of this world; and what it shows is that in fact both are two sides of the same coin.76

What all the observers repeatedly return to is the notion of ambivalence – of theme and of genre – that Nunn had first picked out as acutely contemporary when deciding to stage the play. It was this that succeeded in ‘bringing alive’ this centuries-old piece (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 1966). For D. A. N. Jones, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* was supremely at home in the theatre of the 1960s for this very reason. Noting the current taste of theatrical managements for Jacobean drama, Jones cited Middleton’s preface to *The Roaring Girl* regarding the correspondence of fashions in plays to ‘alterations in apparel’:

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True enough, our most distinguished, exhilarating productions are in line with our ... modishness, sleek, ambiguous and heartless, with double plots and double-entendre, a general uncertainty whether we should be laughing or not.

(New Statesman, 14 October 1966)

*The Revenger's Tragedy*, then, was 'not a distant whisper from a dusty shelf' but, in yet another paradox, 'fiercely alive in its dance of death'.77 Nunn’s production spanned the final three years of the decade, from the Dirty Plays to the collapse of censorship – the years in which Barnes, Livings, Nichols and Orton made their names in the British theatre. And it lived and breathed in the theatre of the late 1960s quite simply because it belonged there.

Across the Thames, *The Revenger's Tragedy* was joined, only six days after its opening in Stratford-on-Avon, by the year’s second revival of *The Duchess of Malfi* (11 October, dir. Ann Stutfield, Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury). The production, directed by the resident producer at the Marlowe Theatre, had only five performances in repertory with *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *Tamburlaine*, and went largely unreported. It did however make a convert of the local critic, who had not been looking forward to the show but who admitted his mistake, assuring his readers that ""The Duchess" is captivating, enthralling and highly entertaining."78

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1967

5 July: The Duchess of Malfi
dir. Brian Shelton, Pitlochry Festival Theatre

The Duchess's final appearance came at the end of a mid-decade cluster, and was selected by the Pitlochry director who had had such success with the first professional revival of The Revenger's Tragedy, now described as 'a reconnaissance raid . . . into the Tragedy of Blood.'¹ In the time between the two productions there had been no other 'tragedies' on the Pitlochry stage – 'where charm and amusement reside for most of the time' – but Shelton had already proved that the Festival Theatre audience could take what he describes as the 'spikiness' of these Jacobean playwrights, and he decided that it was time for another Jacobean revival.² Like Nunn with his own Revenger's Tragedy, Shelton had to economise and use more or less the same set he had used two years earlier – but again it could do no harm to connect the play in audiences' minds with a production that had proved so successful. Even so, in the view of the Glasgow Herald's Christopher Small, this was still 'a venture as hazardous as ambitious'.

As with The Revenger's Tragedy, Shelton's approach to Webster's play was to take it 'straight', 'without straining after novelty of interpretation or – some minor cuts apart – tampering with the text' (Glasgow Herald). And although both Small and the Scotsman's Allen Wright agreed that there were moments where the production's 'ferocity [was] slightly subdued', the result was 'a full-scale assault, with all the weapons of the genre [of the Tragedy of Blood], horror, carnage, and pathos'.³

¹Christopher Small, 'A great tragedy well done', Glasgow Herald, 6 July 1967.
³Scotsman; Glasgow Herald.
Indeed, the impact of the production appears to have built up gradually towards the ‘nightmare heart of the play’, deploying ‘Webster’s forces of terror, irony and pity with restraint but mounting and eventually overwhelming effect’ (Glasgow Herald).

Both critics singled out the blackly farcical dance of madmen as the most compelling scene of the production. While Wright described it as ‘disturbing’, Small elaborated further:

The masque of madmen – Webster’s most bizarre device of horror, tottering perilously on the verge of the ludicrous – is neither shirked nor muffled, but is on the contrary absolutely hair-raising, a grotesque round-dance of white and muffled figures whose self-absorption makes the plight of the two sane victims almost unbearably poignant . . .

Once again, horror and farce had invaded the charming Pitlochry ‘tent’ with success: ‘it has triumphantly come off’, concluded Small. And for Wright, the play had the same immediacy in 1967 as that recorded by critics of The Revenger’s Tragedy the year before:

The violence and moral confusion of our time has heightened the significance of these plays, with their startling portrayals of cruelty and cunning.
After a quiet year in 1967 the bloodbath business plunged on, beginning with Scotland’s second Jacobean revival in the space of just over six months: a production of *Women Beware Women*, directed by Gordon McDougall, Artistic Director of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh.

Although the Traverse, only five years old in 1968, was known primarily as a breeding ground for new writing, McDougall was ‘excited by the idea of using [the theatre] as a forum for re-examining classic texts, as well as a nursery for new talent.’

At the same time, he was ‘a serious young radical, strongly receptive to changes in the air’, who certainly succeeded in sustaining ‘the old spark of Traverse radicalism and controversy’ (pp. 38-39). By the time *Women Beware Women* was produced, the Traverse had ‘reached the height of its notoriety in Edinburgh’, with recent productions including the Paul Foster plays *Balls* and *Futz* (which earned the Scottish *Daily Express* headline, ‘Filth on the Fringe’) and, only three weeks before Middleton’s play, the extremely scandalous *Mass in F*, ‘in which a young girl sat on stage stripped to the waist and recounted her sexual history, to the accompaniment of superfluously horrible goings-on on the floor around her’ (pp. 39-40). *Women Beware Women* appeared, therefore, amidst a storm of controversy, threats of closure and the withdrawal of the theatre’s grant by the Edinburgh Corporation. McDougall’s focus was primarily upon ‘contemporary issues’; so much so that, as well as producing specifically topical plays, he compiled ‘late-night documentary
pieces on subjects like *The Vietnam Hearings* (December 1966) and *The Denning Report on the Profumo Affair* (January 1967)' (p. 40). *Women Beware Women* was produced as part of a series of acutely contemporary productions by McDougall himself, including *Waiting for Godot* (‘which the cast . . . researched by spending a whole day in the Grassmarket with the down-and-outs’), Ranald Graham’s ‘quasi-documentary’ *Aberfan* and David Wright’s ‘frighteningly prescient’ *Would You Look at Them Smashing All the Lovely Windows* (p. 41). It was followed in June by a revival of Orton’s *Ruffian on the Stair*.

All this should be sufficient to illustrate the fact that Middleton’s play was, entirely appropriately, mounted in the midst of grotesquerie, sexual licence and topical concerns, at the theatre that ‘was a powerful focus for respectable Edinburgh’s fantasies and fears about the new “permissive” age’ (p. 40). The background was strongly reminiscent of the ‘Dirty Plays’ controversy into which Williams’s *Jew of Malta* was launched in 1964, and similar also to the context of Page’s 1961 revival. McDougall’s *Women Beware Women* unfortunately received little press coverage, but it seems clear from the general programming policy of the cutting-edge Traverse that it was seen as a play with powerful contemporary relevance. Reviews were enthusiastic: it was a ‘stirring production, the most elaborate affair to have been mounted at the Traverse’, 2 with ‘many effective emotional revelations’ and ‘a sombrerly convincing air of realism regardless of time and place.’ 3

Before Edinburgh’s second revival of the year – and only a fortnight after the first night of McDougall’s production – another revival of *Women Beware Women*

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(5 March, dir. Antony Carrick, Queen’s Theatre, Hornchurch) appeared and was reviewed by Peter Roberts of Plays and Players who (showing no awareness of the Scottish production) judged that the ‘revival of interest in Jacobean drama that was gathering momentum’ at Anthony Page’s 1962 revival had ‘petered out’. The ‘rediscovery of the Jacobians’ of which Page’s production had formed a part had, wrote Roberts, ‘reached its apotheosis in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of The Revenger’s Tragedy’. Nunn’s Revenger’s Tragedy was clearly on Carrick’s mind, too, as the programme notes explicitly drew on those for the RSC production, making the same connections with James Bond’s fascinating corruption, decadence and sexual licence. And as with The Revenger’s Tragedy, it took some time for the audience to warm to the production; they bore it ‘at first with fortitude and then with delight and enthusiasm’:

Which only goes to show that the great plays which survive don’t have to be played down or apologised for to reach out beyond the hothouse of the cultural élite. (Plays and Players)

Such plays, it was clear by now, needed little help in order to ‘reach out’ to their audience. And contrary to Roberts’ view, the interest of the 1960s theatre in Jacobean drama was not over by any means, as we shall see.

1 May: The White Devil
Richard Eyre, Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

The decade’s first full-scale production of The White Devil was directed by Richard Eyre, who had been appointed Associate Producer of the Royal Lyceum Theatre at

5Programme, Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch archive.
around the same time that Gordon McDougall had arrived at the Traverse. Eyre’s approach was similar to that of Richardson with *The Changeling*, Page with *Women Beware Women*, Williams with *The Jew of Malta* and Nunn with *The Revenger’s Tragedy*: ‘Because it was so rarely performed one was able to approach it fresh, as a new play.’ The result, part of a season of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama at the newly thriving Lyceum, was notable primarily for its sense of ‘relevance to our own times’. This was of course one of Eyre’s reasons for staging it:

It seemed incredibly timely, because of a highly appropriate amorality . . . . One can certainly talk in terms of a zeitgeist – it had a very definite resonance – in choosing the play I was responding to the morality of the time. . . . It’s got an accessible moral scheme and a feeling that the world is comprehensible to a modern sensibility – unlike Shakespeare’s cosmos, which is much more difficult to get hold of. (Interview)

Eyre was attracted to ‘that mordant wit of Flamineo’s’ for the same reason:

It’s shockingly amoral – as in the scene with his mother. It’s a nihilistic attitude that’s appalling but attractive.

The ‘chaos’ of the Jacobean world was explored in the production’s programme notes, and confirmed this sense of relationship with the present:

The world of ‘*The White Devil*’ is without any absolutes, moral or political, except expediency and self-concern; where the worth of a man is measured by his power, and his power achieved by money and ruthless ambition. To be honest is seen to be foolish or dangerous, and to be virtuous is to be judged a failure. No one remains untainted by decay. . . .

‘*The White Devil*’ presents a society that is uncompromisingly acquisitive, brutal and inhumane; a society, in short, all too uncomfortably like our own.8

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7Allen Wright, ‘Savagery and delicacy in lustful play’, *Scotsman*, 2 May 1968. On the rise of the Lyceum in the late 1960s, see McMillan, p. 38.
8Programme, Glasgow University Library.
Amorality, cynicism, nihilism and decay, then, were the dominant themes; and they were abundantly apparent in the production. Through them the sense of modernity was sensed, too, by the critic of the *Glasgow Herald*:

The play in fact is a brilliant exposition of the view, sometimes thought to be wondrously avant-garde, that good and evil are one and defy definition. Through these revivals, the discovery was being made that nothing – not the equation of good and evil, nor the genre of black farce, nor any of the other elements that reappeared on the stage of the 1960s – was truly avant-garde.

### 27 June: *Doctor Faustus*

Clifford Williams, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon

Following his pioneering 1964-65 success with *The Jew of Malta*, Clifford Williams returned to Marlowe in 1968 to present *Doctor Faustus* at Stratford, and subsequently on a month-long tour to North America. The programme noted that this was a continuation of ‘the RSC’s policy of occasionally introducing plays by Shakespeare’s contemporaries into the Stratford repertoire’, as established by *The Jew and The Revenger’s Tragedy*. There were of course numerous links with Williams’ *Jew*, to which the production was described as ‘a companion piece’: Eric Porter, who had doubled as Barabas and Shylock in 1965, played Faustus, there were similar scenes of ‘broad anti-clerical farce’, and as a whole the production revealed Marlowe’s work as ‘more fun than a barrelful of Hammer horror epics.’

With its medieval trappings, *Doctor Faustus* would never be seen as quite as ‘modern’ as some of the more firmly Jacobean plays under discussion; but both the

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10 Programme, courtesy of the director.
themes and the genre of the play did strike a chord in the late 1960s. As for Marowitz and Van Gyseghem, the terror and exhilaration of the quest for knowledge and the testing of the limits of freedom were supremely topical. Peter Fryer wrote in the programme:

Yes, our souls are our own. Yet if we ‘sell’ them, for whatever purpose, are we not sacrificing the essential ingredient of freedom – self-determination? Are we not in fact choosing bondage? This is one of the questions Marlowe leaves in our mind, and it is one of supreme relevance to twentieth-century man. . . .

Some would argue that this is the choice made by some criminals, politicians, germ warfare scientists. . . .

Some critics agreed: ‘In an age when we are disturbed by the limits and tethers of our own freedom,’ wrote Milton Shulman for example, ‘Faust’s pact with the Devil seems a very apt parable of the contemporary condition.’¹² For Philip French of the New Statesman, it was the very contradictions of Marlowe’s work that made it so expressive of contemporary existence: ‘the artist who conscientiously approaches the Faust legend,’ he wrote, ‘is both grappling with the complexity of modern life and as doomed to frustration as Faust himself.’¹³

Like Richardson’s 1961 Changeling, allegedly noted more for Beatrice Joanna’s impressive cleavage than for ‘the flights of Middleton’s poetry’, Williams’ Faustus was groundbreaking for an apparently less artistic reason than his Jew of Malta: it featured what was claimed to be ‘the dubious distinction of having the first actress to walk naked across an English stage.’¹⁴ The unclothed Helen of Troy (Maggie Wright, a former Bluebell girl) was naturally the subject of widespread publicity and

controversy for the future director of *Oh, Calcutta!*;\(^\text{15}\) and indeed, with the imminent cessation of the Lord Chamberlain’s powers as censor (finally abolished in September, three months after *Doctor Faustus* opened), this was a watershed year for on-stage nudity, presented as an act of defiance and limit-testing.\(^\text{16}\) The RSC was no stranger to nudity, having presented a naked Glenda Jackson, as part of a ‘gibe’ at the Lord Chamberlain, bathing on stage in one of the censor-free club performances of the 1963-4 LAMDA ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ experiments, a moment at which ‘a new tension came into the evening because the unexpected now might have no bounds’.\(^\text{17}\) The nude Helen of Troy, therefore – like Marowitz’s slothful Queen in his 1965 production of the same play – placed *Doctor Faustus* at the cutting edge of contemporary theatre, and was described by Gareth Lloyd Evans as Stratford’s ‘most explicit committal to the era of permissiveness’ (*Shakespeare Survey*, p. 141). It was an extension not only of the Company’s own experimental work, but also of the wider movement of new work (including the Living Theatre’s notorious *Paradise Now* – ‘an epic of audience assault’ – which led to the arrest of the actors for indecent exposure [Hanson, p. 153]) towards assaulting and outraging audiences into a response, as


discussed in Chapter 3. Gillian Hanson points out in her study of nudity and sex in
cinema and theatre that plays dating from before Sir Robert Walpole’s Stage
Licensing Act of 1737 were uniquely immune from censorship, and thus ‘could be
flaunted under the censor’s nose with impunity’ (p. 161). Indeed, she continues, the
‘most powerful sexual imagery’ on stage in the 1960s was to be found not in new
work but ‘in those pre-1737 shockers’ that included Nunn’s Revenger’s Tragedy and
Frank Dunlop’s White Devil of 1969 (p. 166).

Maggie Wright’s sensational appearance was consistent with the general ‘stress on
the visual’ in Williams’ production, the credit for which was due to the Algerian
designer, Abd’Elkader Farrah: ‘the inventive genius who made the play live’ and ‘the
real star of the show’.18 Even the genre of the piece was expressed as much through
the designs as through the performances. The stage was peopled with characters from
the world of Artaud, ‘Marat-Sade figures afflicted with ague, nervous tics and
malformations and capable of all the shrieks that ever filled the rooms of Bedlam’,
who would ‘spit, hiss, scream and attack our eyes’.19 The designs were a Cruelty-like
assault on the senses (of which the nude was a part), ‘dazzling to the eye and
shattering to the ear’, and leaving ‘the eyes blinking, the ears ringing, and the heart
beating faster.’20 The atmosphere of doom was established by the set, ‘black, gold
and predominantly blood-red, the devil’s colour’:

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which is Genius’, Liverpool Post, 28 June 1968; Irving Wardle, ‘Faustus of thrills and spectacle’,
Times, 28 June 1968. See also Shakespeare Survey, p. 141; Shulman, Evening Standard.
19 W. T., ‘Faustus and his box of tricks’, Nottingham Evening Post, 28 June 1968; Gareth Lloyd
Evans, Guardian, 28 June 1968.
20 Watford Evening Echo; R. S., ‘Faustus goes to hell in magnificent style’, Coventry Evening
Telegraph, 28 June 1968.
The unfolding story of a lust for power that corrupts and destroys itself seems to take place in a dark Tudor tomb half lit by candles.

The entire staging . . . seems to fill the whole theatre as the fire and light, the glittering dark and cavernous Unknown stir one's mind and emotions.21

‘Hell was never murkier’, with the vision of the damned consisting of ‘sagging breasts and long wisps of straggling grey hair, a general atmosphere of suppurating sores, bloated stomachs and crippled limbs horribly askew.’22 The result was ‘deliciously terrifying’.23 And the horror reached its climax in the final moments ‘with a stunning theatrical coup’, reintroducing a variation of the ‘false death’ employed earlier in the comic scenes of the play, and thus amplifying the conflation of tragedy and farce initiated by the playwright in his final repetition of the earlier image of dismemberment.24

Faustus finished his final speech grovelling in abject terror on the ground. The clock finished striking. Nothing happened. After a long moment Faustus raised his head and looked round the totally empty stage. He started to laugh. As he reached the hysteria of relief, the back wall of the stage gave way and fell forward in sections revealing an ominous red glow and a set of spikes like the dragon’s teeth of the Siegfried Line. The denizens of hell emerged with a kind of slow continuous shuffle until Faustus was surrounded by a circle of these skeletal figures – including the seven deadly sins. He was then seized and carried shrieking through the teeth of hell mouth which closed leaving the wall of Faustus’s study again intact. The actors and the director had thus achieved a notable modern stage effect which was entirely in keeping with the spirit of the text they were interpreting.25

Porter’s performance, of course, played its part in the impact created by the final scenes, and it was almost unanimously praised. But here too the emphasis was on the

21 Cambridge News; Guardian; Stage.
22 Liverpool Post; Mary Holland, Queen, 17 July 1968.
23 Liverpool Post. See also Stage; J. C. Trewin, ‘On the Speaking of Dr Faustus’, Birmingham Post, 6 July 1968.
physical: his dying apostrophe was spoken ‘with a quietly fervent passion’, but with
‘desperation in every twist of the body, in every tortured breath’; ‘his final writhings
on the stage,’ said Ronald Bryden, ‘raise the hair prickling on your neck.’

Farrah’s devils were his pièce de résistance, ‘a fantastic order of creation,
deformed by an evolutionary process gone berserk, with great grotesque grasping
arms, pendulant breasts, engorged bellies’ (Stratford-upon-Avon Herald). When
appearing as the ‘thoroughly repellent’, ‘nightmarish’ and ‘horrifying’ Deadly Sins,
they were ‘equipped with skeleton masks and sprouting grotesquely elongated limbs’,
in a ‘charnel-house fairground’. These were ‘pot-bellied, emaciated, skull-faced
obscenities, each one rich in horror’, and succeeded in seeming ‘authentic creatures of
the sulphurous pit.’ Again they evoked a Theatre of Cruelty style response, so that
(as with Marowitz’s German production of The White Devil) ‘one could almost sense
a wave of revulsion sweep through the audience’ (Coventry Evening Telegraph).
And yet these ‘bewildering’ creatures, with their ‘[b]odies, limbs and faces grossly
mis-shapen’, were at times capable of becoming ‘unexpectedly funny in caricature’
(Cambridge News); true to the nature of black farce, even in the depths of the most
horrific visions there was unsettling comedy.

The reverse was true of the ‘jokey magic’ of the central scenes (Queen). Usually
criticised as a trivial disruption of the tone of the play, these scenes lost none of their

26 J. C. Trewin, Birmingham Post, 28 June 1968; Observer. See also Financial Times; Coventry
Evening Telegraph; ‘Flamboyance and subtlety frame a noble Faustus’, Stratford-upon-Avon Herald,
27 Liverpool Post; Evening Standard; Times; Peter Roberts, ‘Whores and Cuckolds’, Plays and
Players, October 1968; Guardian; Financial Times; Observer; Rosemary Say, ‘Faustus for Laughs’,
Sunday Telegraph, 30 June 1968; New Statesman; Evening Standard.
28 Sun; Times.
farcical exuberance, yet succeeded in creating a tinge of darkness that maintained the audience's awareness of the tragic momentum:

A pleasure of the Stratford-upon-Avon revival is to see how Clifford Williams has treated the valley between the crests. How Faustus, for once, seems to enjoy his tricks as a mischievous Antichrist – the grave papal procession capers, the grave singers hiccup – and how the spirits move with a dark silvery grace, and even the episode of the pregnant duchess and the grapes has its strange overtones. (Illustrated London News)

The trickery was of course brilliantly staged, ranging from a ‘Tommy Cooper supper scene for the Pope’ to ‘fire-flashing grape pips from the mouth of Mephistophilis’, and the slapstick was fully exploited – to the extent that Williams was (as ever) described by one or two critics as ‘always looking for the laughs that are either there or can be relevantly invented.’ Yet just as there was comedy in the horrific Deadly Sins, the ‘satisfyingly schoolboyish’ conjuring tricks were devised ‘so that an evil lurking in the “comedy” has a particularly awesome effect; there was a sense of “uneasiness” which at times erupted into horror:

At one moment the Pope is about to eat a pudding when a hand emerges from it and points sardonically at him. Horrible!

The comic scenes, according to Evans, were ‘brilliantly controlled and realized’:

These did not attempt comic relief (for which Marlowe’s text is not conspicuously well equipped) but underlined the dangerous absurdity of playing with the devil’s fire. (Shakespeare Survey, p. 141)

Pistotnik, describing these capers, concludes:

Such threatening tricks might have been reminders of the diabolical presence in an apparently relaxed world of entertaining magic. . .

Instead of being just impressive visual embellishments, the grape-pips which exploded, or a hand in the Pope’s dish, were portent of a sinister and destructive world gradually encroaching upon Faustus. (pp. 266, 270)

29 ‘Memorable Mr Porter’, Sunday Mercury, 30 June 1968; Birmingham Mail. See also Sunday Telegraph.
30 Queen; Stage; Financial Times.
And despite his ‘whimsical enjoyment’ of Faustus’ farcical antics, Mephistophilis awaited his companion’s end with a humour that was ‘mordant’ and ‘bitter’. When that end finally came, ‘the horror of the last moments’ was not lessened ‘a jot’ by the preceding foolery (Observer).

What this amounted to, then, was a production of the gaudiest, most grotesque kind; a continuation of the blackly farcical genre revealed in Williams’ Jew of Malta, but this time expressed overwhelmingly through the visual, physical aspects of the production. Porter’s performance was of course consistent with this conception, ‘capturing both the profundity of Faustus’s deal and his boyish impetuosity, yet retaining the capacity to tilt almost any moment to laughter’. Williams had once again demonstrated his ‘natural instinct on when to chill and when to divert’, bringing out ‘a masterful mixture of tragedy and humour’ from the text. By imbuing the farcical scenes with a sense of horror and the horrific visions with a tinge of farce, Williams enabled the play to stand up ‘with a quality of integrity it isn’t often seen to possess’ (Financial Times).

The surge of blackly farcical Jacobean revivals appeared to have reached a flamboyant peak. Williams’ revival was followed anticlimactically in November by a muted production of ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore (26 November, dir. John David, Little Theatre, Bristol), performed by the Bristol Old Vic Company. David did recognise that the spectacularly restless, questioning spirit of Ford’s play and its sense

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32Cambridge News. See also Worcester Evening News; Spectator.
33Spectator; Coventry Evening Telegraph. See also Guardian.
of terror at the prospect of a widespread moral collapse belonged to the ambivalent 1960s:

The Seventeenth Century society in which the play is set was a society capable of great greed and great evil. The vigour of the Elizabethan age had given place to disillusionment, and the Renaissance had questioned conventional beliefs about religion and morality without offering anything to take their place. The kind of scepticism that Machiavelli inspired is not so dissimilar to the recent 'Is God Dead?' controversy.34

However, he appears not to have succeeded in communicating much of this vision of contemporary disillusionment to his audience. The two critics who reviewed the production, at least, were singularly unimpressed. Though the production was 'an orgy of violence' the fight scenes were, to the *Evening Post*'s John Coe, 'some of the weakest I have seen in the Elizabethan theatre', and both critics agreed that the speaking was 'muted'.35 The play, said Peter Rodford of the *Western Daily Press*, needed 'a production which can give stronger, more compelling voice to its passions and degenerate sensuality'; on the evidence of the current production of Ford's play, he concluded, 'tis pity it wasn't buried with him.'

34Programme, Bristol Reference Library.
35John Coe, 'Play is orgy of violence', *Evening Post*, 27 November 1968; Peter Rodford, 'Tis pity this was revived', *Western Daily Press*, 27 November 1968.
In 1969, the first of two *White Devils* (30 April, dir. John Russell Brown, *Everyman Theatre, Liverpool*) was directed by John Russell Brown, an academic Webster expert who had edited the Revels edition of the play in 1960, and of *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1964, and who would go on to write a book on contemporary theatre in 1968. What little evidence on the production that survives is contradictory. Gillian Reynolds of the *Guardian* was generally scathing, while an approving notice in the *Liverpool Echo* described the production as ‘a minor revelation’. Brown himself recalls that it was performed by a young company to a predominantly young audience; the theatre was ‘hardworking and adventurous’ and its work was ‘bold, witty, outgoing.’ The production, says Brown, was ‘very alive and, at its best, dangerous.’

On 3 July 1969, the Royal Shakespeare Company returned to one of its earliest Jacobean choices of the decade: *Women Beware Women*. It was directed at Stratford-on-Avon by Terry Hands, who would later go on to direct black farces by Barnes and Nichols, and who is well aware of Barnes, at least, as ‘our resident Jacobean’; *The Ruling Class*, in particular, which had premiered in Nottingham in

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3 Letter to the author, 16 May 1996.
4 The Bewitched (1974); Poppy (1982); Red Noses (1985).
5 Letter to the author, 4 July 1996.
November 1968 and transferred to London just over four months before the opening of *Women Beware Women*, was later singled out by Hands as 'a Jacobean play'.

Trevor Nunn, director of the 1966 *Revenger's Tragedy*, had succeeded Peter Hall as Artistic Director of the RSC the previous year, and in the 'new regime' Hands recalls that he and Nunn 'both wished to balance Shakespeare's agrarian humanism with Jacobean city cynicism.' This is what brought Hands to *Women Beware Women*, in the 1960s, 'Jacobean cynicism was darkly attractive':

> With James – almost overnight – everything seems to change – costume, character, attitude. Suddenly England is a city – London – the largest in Europe. City life dominates. His court is parasitic, his sexual tastes breed a line of women in the plays who begin as whores, or become them, or are treated as such. Great writing gives way to journalism, irony to cynicism, optimism to pessimism. (Letter)

The contemporary relevance of this development of cynicism and misogyny (as examined in Chapter 5) was drawn out in the programme; an extensive recent quotation from A. C. H. Smith, discussing the way in which the 'instrumental and contractual' nature of 'the ideal type of sexual relationship', as illustrated by 'skin magazines like *Playboy*', illuminated the current culture:

> Women are the most desirable consumption objects: the object of all other objects . . . Getting and spending is the game . . . women and money can both be used, and used up.

The materialistic cynicism of *Women Beware Women*, therefore, formed the 'cardinal nerve' of Hands' production, which conducted its audience 'to the heart of a marsh-lit society'. And to the critics it was as familiarly modern as Hands had felt it to be; Livia's worldliness, for example, 'often delivered to the audience with the

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7Programme, Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-on-Avon.
knowingness of one experienced person to another’, was ‘instantly recognisable’ to
the 1969 audience.9 And B. A. Young of the Financial Times, aware of his
commentary as part of a development throughout the 1960s, specifically concurred
with the parallel implied by the Smith extract:

It’s becoming almost a convention to find 20th-century attitudes reflected in the
work of the 16th and 17th centuries; but to-day’s manners and morals are so
clearly duplicated in this play by Thomas Middleton that I can’t resist doing it once
more. The permissive sexual code that Middleton depicts in his story of
Renaissance Florence, extending throughout every stratum of society, the cynical
making and breaking of sexual contracts under the thin disguise of love, even the
Church’s haste to approve anything it can in order to keep in with the fashion – all
this is so easily recognisable in our own time . . . 10

The situations of the play were, according to Hands, ‘easily paralleled in our own
time’; and the critics agreed, finding the production ‘in many ways astonishingly
modern in feeling’.11

In retrospect, Anthony Page’s 1962 production of Women Beware Women can be
seen as one of the earliest ‘black farce’ productions of a Jacobean tragedy, in the
build-up to Williams’ revelatory Jew of Malta. The ‘discovery’ of the play as black
farce – with all its attendant critical excitement – had already been made, therefore,
and Hands was unlikely to retread the path forged in the Peter Hall era. ‘We know,
from the Royal Shakespeare revival at the Arts in 1962,’ wrote J. C. Trewin in 1969,
‘how Middleton can take the modern stage’ (Illustrated London News).

Instead of diving straight for the boisterous horror of the piece, therefore, Hands’
approach was to make a more considered examination of its cerebral dimension,

10Financial Times, 4 July 1969
11Letter, Guardian. See also J. C. Trewin, Lady, 17 July 1969.
searching 'for every glimpse of psychology.' Every character was presented with a degree of sympathy, and while many critics felt that this was an incongruous misinterpretation, others believed that it created an entirely appropriate air of self-delusion and hypocrisy:

... the irony of Middleton's play is emphasised all the time in this production by the fact that appearances remain so gracious while intentions grow ever more corrupt.

This 'keeping up with the Joneses plot', as the *Nottingham Evening Post* called it, is comparable with the atmosphere of Orton's plays, where suburban gentility, with its obsession with respectability and religion, coexists happily and unblushingly with the most horrific sexual and violent crimes. But the price that Hands seems to have paid for this increase in subtlety was a loss of energy and impact in a 'languid' and 'sometimes intractably static' production that lacked 'spine'. Even Hands himself concedes that the playing of the final act 'as a chess-game in keeping with Middleton's intentions' was 'too intellectual'; this device, along with the cool focus on the characters' psyches, left the audience ill-prepared for Middleton's excessively flamboyant and decidedly un-psychological ending. Played on a small, crowded, raised platform, this was almost unanimously agreed – by admirers and detractors alike – to be a confused, unsuccessful and 'unhappy climax' (*Stage*).

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15W. T., 'This play has love, plots – the lot', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 4 July 1969.
17Letter to the author, 4 July 1996.
Unlike those directors who avoided black farce by emphasising one side of the genre at the expense of the other (and particularly by playing down or even cutting the farcical elements), Hands was not afraid of the mixed nature of the play; his interest simply lay elsewhere. So the comedy remained, and was particularly apparent in the scene where Bianca is seduced while Livia (Elizabeth Spriggs) – 'silky, shrewd and blackly self-aware' – distracts her mother-in-law with a game of chess: beginning 'in superb comedy', the scene 'moved to the kind of insidious menace of which Middleton is a master.'

Although there was a vast decrease in comment on the play's genre compared with 1962, therefore, those who did remark on it did still use terms like 'tragic farce' or 'tragic-ironic'.

'T]t has its own compelling dramatic power,' said the *Oxford Times*, 'as though something of the black comedy of our day has been grafted on to a medieval Morality play.' To Barry Norman the comedy was certainly black, serving only to underline 'the sense of implacable doom hanging over all the characters'.

Hands' production of *Women Beware Women*, then, is a significant end-of-decade production, of particular interest since it can be compared with the production of the play by the same company early in the 1960s. What emerges from this comparison is that while black farce was a revelation and a primary focus in the 1962 production, by 1969 it had become sufficiently commonplace to be incorporated, almost without comment, as a minor element in a production whose major interest lay elsewhere. No

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longer were critics arguing over whether the grotesquerie was the author’s or the director’s; no longer did they ask whether the play’s modernity was genuine or imposed. Black farce was by now firmly established on the stage in both premieres and revivals, and by 1969 the one was more or less accepted as the closely-related successor of the other.

28 October: *Doctor Faustus*
Ann Stutfield, Newcastle Playhouse

Ann Stutfield directed her second Renaissance revival of the decade in October 1969: this time *Doctor Faustus* at the Newcastle Playhouse. Little information survives, but it seems clear that Stutfield’s psychedelic production, with its multi-coloured visual effects and Pink Floyd soundtrack, was emphatically a product of the late 1960s, interpreting Faustus’ rebellion as an attempt ‘to destroy by ridicule the Church, the State.’

22 Stutfield describes her approach to Faustus as follows:

... although basically a renaissance man, he had his equivalent today – 1969 – amongst those who wanted to experiment with drugs, explore alternative techniques, experience all the possibilities of physical life on this earth, and also to explore the universe as yet unknown – to land on the moon, etc.

In her modern interpretation of Faustus’ explorations and experimentations, Stutfield illustrated the link of despair and exhilaration between the two periods that was noted in Chapter 1 and – with respect to drugs – Chapter 2. Arising from Faustus’ pursuits there was a ‘great wealth of comic action’, including, unusually, the scene in which Faustus is apparently decapitated; but at the same time this episode and the scene of Faustus’ comic dismemberment ‘acquired a symbolic significance of moments of fear

22 Stutfield, quoted in Pistotnik, p. 272.
experienced by a drug addict’ (Pistotnik, p. 273). The validity of this approach would later be confirmed by Nigel Alexander in his British Academy lecture of 1971, arguing for the theatrical importance of the play’s farcical scenes as an intensification of rather than a distraction from its darkness and suspense – though independently, it seems, as he shows no awareness of Stutfield’s production:

The play dramatizes a man battling unsuccessfully to turn his natural desires and predispositions into creative form – the vision of the Bacchanal – but being in the end destroyed by an addictive force he has failed to comprehend or control. It is not surprising that he should suffer from the same horror and deep despair experienced by drinkers, gamblers, drug addicts, and other compulsive neurotics who are destroyed by the very habit that helps them to bear an otherwise intolerable existence. (p. 18)

In terms of contemporary allusions, Stutfield’s production was perhaps the most radical of the 1960s Renaissance revivals, rivalled only by Marowitz’s politically-inclined interpretation of the same play. It is of course understandable that Doctor Faustus should be the one play to occasion such overt ‘updating’; although it shares generic features with other plays considered here, its medievalism and obsolete moral absolutes could pose a challenge to the modern director wishing to make his work ‘accessible’. At the same time, Stutfield’s attraction to Marlowe’s play reveals not only her awareness of its surprisingly contemporary themes but also her sensitivity to the way in which the comic episodes of the play contribute to a pervading tone of black farce.

13 November: The White Devil
Frank Dunlop, Old Vic

The final Jacobean revival of the decade was a National Theatre production of The White Devil at the Old Vic, featuring Edward Woodward as Flamineo, Derek Godfrey
as Bracciano and Geraldine McEwan as Vittoria. While McEwan had created the role of Fay in Orton’s *Loot*, Godfrey’s most recent major appearance had been as the 14th Earl of Gurney in the premiere of Barnes’ *The Ruling Class*, which had transferred from Nottingham to London in February of the same year. To Ronald Bryden, Godfrey’s performance as Bracciano brought to mind his recent portrayal of the Earl; and his death, ‘mad and whimpering’, was to Bryden certainly as powerful as his final scenes in Barnes’ play. The director was Frank Dunlop, the newly-appointed Administrative Director of the company, an ambitious young man looking to create a ‘bright, colourful, young and energetic [theatre], popular rather than stately or formal.’

Visually at least, the 1960s were to go out in grand style. Like Abd’Elkader Farrah in Williams’ *Doctor Faustus*, the most talked-of member of Dunlop’s team was designer Piero Gherardi, whose inventions included a huge, ‘grossly magnified’ wall dominating the set and grotesquely reducing the grand and courtly human world of the play to the level of what critics variously described as hooded snakes, blood-gutted flies, death’s-head moths and other reptiles and insects. This was indeed the intention of the director and designer, and the ‘lavishly elegant’ costumes further evoked the association that was taken as an allusion to the corrupt and myopic nature of contemporary life:

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Individual members of the audience must decide which shrunken persona fits them best, and how much or how little they have in common with the various parasites that actually live in the crevices. After all, can we claim so much deeper perspective on life than Webster’s characters, stuck in their tiny ecology?27

The emphasis throughout Dunlop’s production was overwhelmingly sexual, with the intertwined violence a close second; the characters were ‘hot lascivious insects, copulating and stinging each other to death during their tiny life span’ (Times, 6 December 1969). The director did not consider the production to be sexually explicit, but his intensely ‘suggestive’ approach’ had a powerful effect on some (Guy, p. 52). Nightingale, to Dunlop’s surprise, interpreted the deaths of Vittoria and Flamineo respectively as murder by cunnilingus and fellatio, even though ‘the actors’ relative positions make such things a technical impossibility.’28 But the murders were certainly sexual; Lodovico was portrayed as ‘a sexual sadist’, and his vow to ‘make Italian cutworks in their guts’ was picked up when, as Dunlop explained, ‘the daggers penetrate and are then twisted round and round in the gut until the victim dies’ (Guy, p. 52). Vittoria’s death seemed specifically sexual, taking the form of ‘a masochistic orgasm, gasping and shuddering on her killer’s lance’ (Observer). This was entirely consistent with Dunlop’s overall illustration of Webster’s ‘conception of human nature as (mostly) either lecherous or prurient’ (New Statesman). There were ‘strong hints of incestuous attraction between Flamineo and Vittoria’; but in Nightingale’s view, John Moffatt’s Cardinal went too far:

... he lingers over words like ‘whore’ and ‘Gomorrah’, and, fascinated, frustrated, can scarcely control his wandering hands. Earlier he has fingered Bracciano’s little son with poorly concealed longing. Now he jerks abruptly and repeatedly towards Vittoria’s breasts, galvanised by their electricity. Later still, he’s elected Pope,

28New Statesman; Guy, p. 52.
dons a tall, cream, conical hat and manages to look like an erect penis, thus externalising what’s been barely covert all along. *(New Statesman)*

While Nightingale was perhaps once again letting his imagination run away with him in the last of these images, it is clear that, as Helen Dawson observed, *The White Devil* is not for the puritan director, and Frank Dunlop has released the flood gates with enthusiasm* *(Plays and Players)*. The sexuality of the piece permeated everything, especially the violence. Even the much-praised mimed murders of Isabella and Camillo were enacted with a ‘grisly, erotic languor’, and the sheer extent of violence in the production caused Shulman to reflect on a very modern obsession:

In an age like ours preoccupied with the consequences of violence, it is almost reassuring to see John Webster’s *The White Devil* at the National Theatre.

Compared with the torture, horror, brutality, callousness of these Elizabethan characters, the activities of the Kray brothers or the Mafia are as innocuous as a Brownies’ bonfire party.29

The sexuality, horror and ‘steaming emotions’ of the piece, then, were approached with ‘obvious relish’ by Dunlop and his team: ‘Anyone planning a Christmas outing with the kiddies to a grand old English classic had best stick to “Toad of Toad Hall”,’ warned Bryden.30 But Dunlop and Gherardi were also credited with revealing the same ‘element of sardonic, high-camp comedy’ in *The White Devil* as Clifford Williams had ‘brought out finely’ in *The Jew of Malta* in 1965 *(Observer)*. Irving Wardle, (mis)quoting Francisco’s line, ‘My tragedy must have some idle mirth in’t, / Else it will never pass’, contrasted Dunlop’s production with Benthall’s rather mirthless production of 1947:

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29 *New Statesman*, *Evening Standard*.
30 *Evening Standard*, *Observer*. 
Frank Dunlop . . . has taken the Duke’s advice in this National Theatre production which removes Webster from the shadows and presents him in glaring sunshine.  

Particularly comic was Flamineo’s sham death – “I am not wounded! . . . It was a plot!” he whoops in sardonic triumph’ – and the cast appear to have had the laughter well under control: ‘Frank Dunlop, like Nunn, has decided to stress the comedy where it exists,’ recorded Sheridan Morley:

but it is some measure of the success of his production that a line like: ‘The helmet – it was poisoned’ can go by without so much as a titter from the audience. The production envelops us in its Gothic barbarity and stuns us into a suspension of disbelief, which survives even one of the longest death scenes ever attempted.

By the end of November 1969, the English stage was simultaneously offering three large-scale Renaissance revivals: as well as Dunlop’s White Devil, Women Beware Women was still running at Stratford-on-Avon and Nunn’s Revenger’s Tragedy was revived at the Aldwych three years on. As Hilary Spurling pointed out, ‘It must be three hundred and fifty years or so since English audiences could last take their pick of Webster, Middleton and Tourneur’. In Sheridan Morley’s view, Revenger’s and The White Devil – ‘revivals of two long-neglected and surprisingly similar minor English classics’ – were the ‘most exciting productions of the past month’, offering ‘some of the best all-round entertainment currently available in London’ (Tatler).

Irving Wardle saw this cluster of revivals as the culmination of the decade’s fascination with Elizabethan and Jacobean drama:

British spectators generally feel no need to find moral justification for what they enjoy: the concept of ‘entertainment’ takes care of that problem. But in the case of the Jacobean dramatists moral qualms do arise. Their work is so remote from

31’No terror, no pity and no mortality’, Times, 14 November 1969. (Wardle quoted the line as ‘My tragedy must have some element of mirth in it, else it will never pass.’ Cf. The White Devil, IV, i. 119-20.)
32Plays and Players, Tatler, January 1970. See also Times, 14 November 1969.
33Spectator, 6 December 1969.
common humanity, so barbarous, and at the same time so magnificently written, that it divides people into friends and enemies who either value it simply for the poetry or despise it simply as a seventeenth-century equivalent of the horror film.

In the past few years the British theatre has begun to find ways of bringing these viewpoints into common focus . . . Jacobean drama has been wired up to the modern circuit of social criticism and black farce. (Times, 6 December 1969)
Renaissance Revivals

This analysis of the decade's Renaissance revivals demonstrates a number of facts. First, there is a remarkable consistency to the reasons given by directors for their choice of what were mostly unfamiliar and, in some cases, unperformed plays. The reasons can be divided into two broad categories, often coexisting in directors' minds: topicality of content and appropriacy of genre. Again and again directors speak of cynicism and disillusionment, madness and hysteria, violence and aggression, sexual perversity and permissiveness as the elements within the plays that attracted them, and that seemed strikingly appropriate both on the stage and within the society of the 1960s. And as for the genre that seemed so overwhelmingly appropriate in the 1960s theatre, it was given many names, but almost always fits my definition of black farce: a full-blooded, powerfully physical exploitation of both farce and horror. That this was a new approach to these plays is clear from the reviews, describing such interpretations variously as innovative revelations and as impertinent perversions. Many descriptions of Jacobean revivals are closely echoed in the reviews of Orton, Barnes, Nichols and Livings, and several critics show an explicit awareness of the apparent modernity of the genre. Strengthening this impression of a firm and 'reciprocally illuminating' relationship (Jensen, p. 230) between the Jacobean and contemporary productions in the 1960s is the fact that these revivals and premieres were frequently mounted alongside each other, as in the Royal Court's productions of The Changeling and Kelly's Eye; Nil Carborundum and Women Beware Women in the RSC's experimental Arts Theatre season; and most strikingly, The Changeling and Loot within only two months of each other at the Jeanetta Cochrane, with director Charles Marowitz providing a further link between the Orton's play and the Jacobean.
Of course, the interpretation of the Jacobean plays in question as black farce did not begin suddenly in 1960 and continue consistently throughout the decade; nor was the development of this approach a linear one. There was a minority of productions—notably Bain's *Jew of Malta*, Coghill’s and Van Gyseghem’s *Doctor Faustus* and David’s *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*—that seemed, for various reasons discussed above, to belong more to an earlier, more romantic and reverential, text-centred tradition than to the excesses of the 1960s. These few productions stand out as clear and inevitable exceptions to the development from McWhinnie’s restrained *Duchess of Malfi* of 1960 to Dunlop’s flamboyant *White Devil* of 1969, with Williams’ 1964 *Jew of Malta* as the central breakthrough. They serve also as reminders of the earlier view of the plays in question, demonstrating that in addition to their previous unpopularity, there had been a tendency to play down the very qualities that were now so wholeheartedly embraced. The black farce approach, in other words, was not the only possible approach; it was the particular choice of a particular decade.

As well as the fact that some theatres were placing blackly farcical contemporary plays alongside the new black farce interpretations of Jacobean plays in their programmes, there was the more general tendency for companies to lift the seventeenth-century works out of their status as ‘classics’ and present them as new, experimental pieces—which in a sense many of them were, having been strangers to the stage for three and a half centuries. A large number of the revivals were presented by companies as part of ventures, such as the Royal Court, the Close, the Traverse and the RSC’s Arts Theatre and ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ seasons, specifically dedicated to groundbreaking new talent. Others were produced as part of entirely new enterprises such as the arrival of the RSC in London and the launch of the Old Vic’s Sunday
evening scheme, or – as the momentum increased – changes in policy were made specifically to accommodate them, as with the production of Marlowe at Shakespeare’s Stratford and of various Jacobean ‘bloodbaths’ at the generally more sedate reps of Stoke, Farnham, Pitlochry and Sheffield. Certain companies – such as the RSC at the Aldwych and the Old Vic on Sundays – deliberately designed programmes as meeting-points for old and new drama, which brought them fruitfully into contact with one another. An adjunct of this was the approach of directors like Richardson, Page, Williams, Nunn and Eyre to the Jacobean plays as if they were new work: added to their production at the vanguard of the most innovative and experimental contemporary theatre, it was inevitable that a style of presentation should emerge that had so much in common with their closest modern analogue.

The exact relationship between the new work and the revivals is of course difficult to establish. Perhaps Peter Davison’s phrase, ‘cross-fertilisation’, is the most accurate (Contemporary Drama, p. 106); any direct influences appear to have worked both ways, while the possibilities for indirect influence were infinite. Because contemporary writers of black farce inevitably coloured the 1960s theatrical scene, the commonest deduction is that directors of Jacobean revivals were inspired by them; and yet there is perhaps more evidence of a reverse influence. Although it is difficult to locate any hard facts in support of any direct Jacobean impact upon Livings, the possibility of Orton’s assimilation of Jacobean drama has already been discussed above. In addition, Orton’s use of a quotation from The Revenger’s Tragedy as the epigraph to What the Butler Saw – the play in which his ‘conscious awareness of the
literary tradition’ is most evident — not only proves some knowledge of the Jacobean play (first revived while Orton was writing his), but also suggests some indebtedness to it. Manfred Draudt, who argues that there is indeed ample evidence textual for a direct influence in *What the Butler Saw*, also notes that the play is reminiscent of *The Changeling* (p. 207), which Orton at least probably read; certainly there is a record of his buying a copy in response to director Peter Gill’s suggestion that he should use its subplot in a play of his own. Nichols, whose career as a playwright followed a career as an actor, remembers seeing Nunn’s *Revenger’s Tragedy*, and although he never took part in any of the Jacobean plays under discussion, his roles in plays by Jonson and Shakespeare enhanced his knowledge of Jacobean drama: ‘The work I did as an actor rubbed off on the work I do as a writer,’ he explains. Barnes, of course, who also remembers Nunn’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* and other revivals, freely acknowledges the Jacobean influence on his work, as would be expected from someone who has adapted a large number of Jacobean plays for stage and radio:

Jacobean drama did have an influence on my work, in terms of the mixture of tragedy and farce, in that the switch from one to the other within a scene was actually — I wouldn’t say copied, but certainly influenced by Middleton and others. So those are the obvious technical influences, and I suppose in a vaguer way, the whole ambience and atmosphere of a typical Jacobean black comedy very much influenced me in those days and it’s obvious in the work actually: the extremes of tragedy and the extremes of farce and comedy link.

And yet Barnes’ recollections illustrate just how difficult it is even for the playwright himself to locate the precise relationship between his own work and that of his predecessors:

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2 The Orton Diaries, p. 144.
3 Interview with the author, London, 4 April 1996.
I can’t remember, but I have a feeling that my own playwriting and my interest in Jacobean drama began simultaneously. My real interest and deeper knowledge of Jacobean black farce came after I’d started writing; I came across Jacobean plays that embody black farce a lot more strongly than the ones I’d previously been aware of.

When John Russell Brown, editor of The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi in 1960 and 1964 respectively and director of The White Devil in 1969, looked back in 1984, it seemed clear that the Jacobean revivals had influenced the new writing. Barnes’ Ruling Class and Orton’s What the Butler Saw, in particular, are seen by Brown as ‘dependent to some degree on the vibrancy of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as it was produced in Britain by the same companies that staged the work of the newest generation of playwrights’:

... productions by Bill Gaskill of Middleton and by Trevor Nunn of Tourneur’s The Revenger’s Tragedy were acclaimed on all sides and have had a sustained influence. ... [Contemporary writers] have imitated the sharp, imagistic, and passionate writing of the Jacobeans (very different from the spare, deliberate objectivity of Brecht), their direct address to the audience, varied and violent action, and conflicts of style between high and low, pathetic and ribald, bawdy and ceremonial.5

Whatever its nature, the direction and directness of the influence is surely less important than the fact that two groups of plays, separated by three hundred and fifty years, came together on the stage of the 1960s and succeeded in appealing to directors and audiences in a strikingly similar way.

‘Literary revivals,’ writes Ejner J. Jensen, ‘are most often the product of a variety of causes’. And while we have discussed factors such as the ‘rediscovery of an abandoned or neglected form, the emergence of a particular complex of social or political factors, a nation’s or a region’s concern with certain moral or ethical issues,

[and] a sort of Jungian demand for the one literary kind that answers a collectively felt need’ (p. 211), there are one or two other determinants that could be argued to lie behind the decade’s Renaissance revival. The first is the increased provision of government subsidies to many of the theatres in question during the 1960s. This gave certain theatre companies – the RSC in particular – the freedom to conduct experiments such as reviving unperformed plays, as well as taking risks on new talent, as was noted in the case of the Castle Theatre, Farnham. Indeed, in 1963 the Arts Council was prompted by ‘[f]our particularly interesting rare revivals’, including Richardson’s Changeling and Page’s Women Beware Women, to introduce an extension to its New Drama scheme, offering ‘limited guarantees against loss for the professional production of certain plays that are now rarely if ever produced’. However, as a single factor this is far from providing a sufficient explanation for the sudden explosion of Jacobean revivals – of all the neglected works of all the preceding centuries that could have been chosen – in the 1960s. In the first place, that explosion was already well under way in 1963; the Arts Council was responding to what was by then an obvious revival, not initiating it. And in spite of the Arts Council’s efforts, some of the most significant revivals were produced in times of extreme financial hardship, as when Page mounted Women Beware Women on a production budget of ‘obvious fragility’, when Nunn took a risk on The Revenger’s Tragedy in the face of frozen subsidy, or when Dunlop directed The White Devil at the end of the Old Vic’s

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5See Arts Council’s Annual Reports.
most 'disastrous year'. And in fact many of the productions were highly commercial, in that they attracted large audiences and brought in a significant amount of revenue; so much so that two of them – Williams' *Jew of Malta* and Nunn’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* – were given second runs.

A second, more significant possible contributing factor behind the Renaissance revival comes from the universities. The 1960s saw a 'doughty assembly of university directors who [had] sprung up since the war' establishing itself in the new 'director's theatre', the most famous examples of whom were Peter Hall and John Barton. Directors such as Nunn, Hands and Dunlop were graduates in English Literature, and many had studied Jacobean plays as part of their degrees, while academic directors Coghill and Brown continued to straddle the two spheres. This 'increase of formal, advanced education among theatre people' reflected, said Stanley Wells, 'a lowering of the barrier between the academic world and that of the professional theatre and suggests a strong influence of the older universities on that theatre'. Hall, indeed, described to the members of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Club in 1966 how important it was to RSC to 'keep up to date with scholarship'. Other directors had close relationships with academics: as well as the association of the RSC with the Institute for Shakespeare Studies in Stratford-on-Avon, Shelton (as discussed above) closely consulted both Allardyce Nicoll and Reginald Foakes in preparation for his

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8Carl Foreman, 'Final Reflections', *New Statesman*, 13 July 1962; Benedict Nightingale, ‘Gaudy Monster’, *New Statesman*, 21 November 1969. Other particularly low-budget productions were Ellis's *White Devil*, Shelton’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* and *Duchess of Malfi*; Tuckey’s *Faustus*.


Revelger’s Tragedy, while Marowitz’s relationship with Jan Kott has persisted into the 1990s. There were student productions – especially by the Cambridge Amateur Dramatic Club, Marlowe Society and Oxford University Dramatic Society – of many of the Jacobean plays in question prior to their professional revivals in the 1960s; according to Wells, ‘Both Oxford and Cambridge have so well developed a tradition of amateur theatricals that they have served virtually as academies of the higher dramatic art – or at any rate of the art of the higher drama’ (pp. 6-7). And in semi-professional university productions such as Palmer’s White Devil and Coghill’s Faustus, the two worlds once again overlapped.

The academic world of course had always taken an interest in Jacobean drama, particularly in its relationship with Shakespeare; and important advances in the understanding of the plays had been made by, for example, Rupert Brooke and Una Ellis-Fermor earlier in the century. But academic interest, like the theatrical, expanded from the mid-twentieth century onwards, ‘in an amazing fashion’:

Historical criticism, theater research, textual scholarship, the new criticism – all the varieties of scholarly and critical activity that have flourished both in and out of our universities – have come together to enable us to see the Elizabethan drama in a richer and more comprehensive way. These developments have provided favorable conditions for the Elizabethan Revival of the last three decades [1950s-1970s], a revival that has brought Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists into our cultural life with force and meaning. (Jensen, p. 224)

The most direct interface between academic work and the theatre, however, comes not through criticism but through edited texts; in this function the academic is ‘indispensable’ to the theatre (Wells, p. 17). And as with the boom in theatrical revivals, there was a highly significant increase in the publication of editions of the

plays in question, both in single volumes and collections, in the 1960s (see Table 2, Figure 2 below, pp. 359, 360); indeed, by 1964 the production of texts was described in *The Year's Work in English Studies* as 'the major activity' in the field of later Elizabethan and early Stuart drama. Many of these formed part of series such as the Revels, New Mermaids and Regents, all specially created in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the specific aim of producing modern editions of non-Shakespearian Renaissance texts. Part of the reason for this was the expansion of universities in the late 1950s, creating an increased market for the texts as well as a large number of young academics able to take on the work of filling the need for satisfactory editions. But at least part of the intended readership came not from within the universities but from the theatre itself, as Clifford Leech, Founding Editor of the Revels Plays, made clear in his preface:

... the series will be inadequately performing its task if it proves acceptable only to readers. The special needs of actors and producers will be borne in mind, particularly in the comments on staging and stage-history.

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14 The Revels Plays were launched in 1958; The Regents Renaissance Drama Series in 1963; The New Mermaids in 1964.

15 Elizabeth Brennan, editor of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1964) and *The White Devil* (1966) for the New Mermaids series, recalls that during her research at the Shakespeare Institute in the 1950s, 'the need for properly edited texts was patently obvious' (letter to the author, 14 July 1996); Richard W. Van Fossen remembers that there was 'no satisfactory edition [of *The Jew of Malta*] for students' when he came to edit it in 1965 (letter, 9 January 1996); and Cyrus Hoy, General Editor of the Regents Renaissance Drama Series from 1961, recalls that 'Everyone teaching a course in non-Shakespearian drama at that time grumbled at the limited number of plays available in texts that students could use' (letter, 15 February 1996). See also Arthur Brown, 'Later Elizabethan and Early Stuart Drama', *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 39 (1958), p. 142. In this account I am also indebted to correspondence and interviews with John Russell Brown, Roma Gill, T. W. Craik, Reginald Foakes, James R. Siemon, Anthony Trott, Brian Gibbons, George Walton Williams, Charles Barber, Andor Gomme and F. David Hoeniger.

The plays in the series, Leech would later state in his revised preface, ‘deserve and indeed demand performance’; his colleague and successor F. David Hoeniger confirms that Leech actually wished to inspire revivals through the production of texts:

Leech chose the name Revels Plays because he kept the stage in mind, and expressed the hope that the editions would serve not only readers but also directors and actors. All or most of the plays chosen for the series, he felt, deserve revivals in our time, even if in practice this cannot be always expected of the large commercial theatres.

Further encouragement was given by editors such as John Russell Brown, who commented in his 1960 Revels edition of The White Devil, ‘Clearly, the audience for Webster is growing once more; it may not be long before another professional production can be attempted’ (as he himself went on to do in 1969).

Academics, then, were just as aware as directors of these plays’ appropriateness in the theatre of the 1960s, constantly stating that they were ‘startlingly modern’, or at least ‘a good deal more than historically curious’. Like the theatrical directors, they seemed to be moving away from a concentration on the works as ‘poetry’ towards their value as scripts for the stage. And many editors shared with the directors the sense that the plays had a particular resonance in this decade. Brian Morris, for example, argued for the ‘contemporary importance’ of ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore in his introduction to the 1968 New Mermaids edition, concluding:

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18Letter to the author, 10 April 1996.
It raises poignant social questions for our age, and it may help us to exorcize them with truth.\(^{21}\)

Still more significantly, there was a strong awareness amongst academics that it was the genre of the play that made it so ripe for revival, as Anthony Trott, editor of the 1966 Macmillan edition of The White Devil, recalls:

\[\ldots\] the changes in theatrical taste and expectation that the new contemporary drama had brought about made Jacobean drama more generally acceptable than it would have been fifteen years before.\(^{22}\)

Brian Gibbons, in the introduction to his 1967 New Mermaids edition of The Revenger's Tragedy, was more specific, relating the play to the recent development of contemporary sick humour or black farce. To Gibbons, the theatrical neglect of the play prior to 1966 was ‘difficult to understand’:

for the play’s vitality is frenetic, sustained by the tension induced within it by the contrasting techniques and moods of tragedy, satiric comedy and farce. Jacobean jesting with faith and death should be more comprehensible to us, now, for we have learned the art of jesting with nuclear holocaust for theme.\(^{23}\)

Looking back, Reginald Foakes, editor of the 1966 Revels Revenger’s Tragedy, agrees:

The euphoria of the years after the war gave way to a mood of cynicism, even despair, with the revelations about the holocaust and Hiroshima, the cold war and arms build-up; the development of the hydrogen bomb, etc. The world clock was at two minutes to midnight in the 60s. The only response to horror is to laugh \(^{24}\)

For Cyrus Hoy, who was writing his book, The Hyacinth Room, about the relationship between comedy, tragedy and tragicomedy, while working with the first editions of the Regents series, it was partly the genre of the plays that moved him to

\(^{21}\)Introduction to 'Tis Pity She’s a Whore (London: Ernest Benn [New Mermaids], 1968), pp. ix, xxvi.

\(^{22}\)Letter to the author, 26 October 1996.

\(^{23}\)Introduction to The Revenger’s Tragedy (London: Ernest Benn [New Mermaids], 1967), p. xxx.

\(^{24}\)Letter to the author, 28 December 1995.
take on the editorship in 1961. His account encompasses both historical and literary background in relation to academia and the theatre and gives a detailed impression of what lay behind the production of series such as Regents:

I wanted to help students of literature form a more accurate sense of dramatic genres and their relationships. . . . Comedy they assumed was always light-hearted and funny; tragedy should be serious and sad and morally edifying. Of tragicomedy they had practically no conception, and the notion of 'black' or 'dark' comedy, or of tragic burlesque or tragic satire, was completely foreign to most of them . . . and yet they were increasingly finding themselves in the presence of it in the new fiction, the theatre, and film . . . and when novelists and dramatists and especially film makers turned to the military (especially after Viet Nam), we had a contemporary version of the exuberant mayhem that presides over the finales of Webster's or Middleton's Cardinals, or a Vendice or a Livia is running the show. . . . When all this begins to be subjects for TV and motion pictures, it is as if we were witnessing some Jacobean play-within-a-play. . . . Events in public life . . . increasingly seem to take on the aspects of black farce.

. . . all of us involved with the Regents edition clearly saw a connection between a new tonality ('tragicomic', 'tragic farce', 'black comedy' - we used all these terms, perhaps too inter-changeably) in contemporary drama and fiction, and the peculiarly satiric and ironic quality of Jacobean drama; and we were aware (increasingly) of the prominence of this quality in contemporary political and social life. (Letter)

As with the relationship between the Jacobean revivals and the contemporary work, it is difficult to generalise about how the theatre and academia interacted with one another. 'One would like to think that the academic interest reflected or stimulated the theatrical,' says George Walton Williams (editor of The Changeling, New Mermaids 1967), and at the very least the affordable new editions can be said to have raised the profile of the plays in question; Shelton, for one, was prompted to revive The Revenger's Tragedy by a review of Ribner's new edition of The Atheist's Tragedy. But the influence appears to have worked both ways; Foakes claims that 'I learned more from seeing [Nunn's production of The Revenger's Tragedy] than I ever had from reading it', while Brennan admits to choosing The Duchess of Malfi as her
first assignment ‘not least because I’d seen the 1960 RSC production.’
Once again the most significant aspect of this relationship is the fact that it reveals how important these Jacobean plays became in the 1960s, and how clearly that importance was related to the peculiar genre of black farce.

Jensen cites four major factors in the development of the Renaissance revival of the 1960s: the increase of academic interest; ‘the gradual dissolution . . . of a whole complex of Victorian attitudes that kept such playwrights as Jonson and Ford off the nineteenth-century stage on the grounds of taste and morality’; ‘the displacement of a romantic view of art by a view of art that we call modern . . . , including structural forms that [are] multiple and diverse, forms that [can] contain a mixture of attitudes and tones’; and the fact that the modern theatre and the cinema ‘have conditioned us as spectators in the theater to “read” the way we must do if we are to understand the structure and meaning of the most rewarding Elizabethan plays’ (pp. 224-6). All of these factors – and in particular, those which illuminate the relationship between the Elizabethan/Jacobean plays and those of the 1960s in terms of genre – have been explored here.

The stated objective of this thesis was to achieve what Ejner J. Jensen called ‘reciprocal illumination’ of the Jacobean and 1960s plays under discussion. This illumination has been provided by black farce, the genre which reappeared so emphatically on the stage of the 1960s both in new writing and revivals of long-forgotten Jacobean plays. In demonstrating the black-farce relationship between the

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26Interview with the author, Stratford-upon-Avon, 26 July 1996; letter to the author.
Renaissance Revivals

Jacobean and 1960s plays, I have examined the broad themes through which the genre expresses itself most strongly – madness, violence, death and sex – and this in turn has led to a broader analysis of the extra-literary perceptions that lay behind black farce in the two periods. These perceptions – confirmed by contemporary explanations of the 1960s Renaissance revival – can be crudely summarised in terms of what Ronald Bryden described as ‘bitter delight’ at ‘things falling apart’ (p. 186): a combination of exhilaration and despair at bewilderingly rapid social change and the dismantling of established structures and codes. This is the ‘uncertainty [that] is reflected in the development of more flexible art forms’ in the two periods (Boni, p. 214). 1960s playwrights appear to have reached for the genre of black farce, in other words, for reasons similar to those of the Jacobean dramatists. And although only occasionally is a direct awareness of their literary predecessors apparent, many of the blackly farcical scenes created by the 1960s writers echo those of the Jacobeans in remarkable detail. Though a certain affinity between certain Jacobean and 1960s dramatic works has long been sensed, therefore, it is to be hoped that this thesis has gone some way towards defining and demonstrating that relationship in full – thus enhancing our understanding of the drama of both periods.
Table 2. Editions of Jacobean plays published in the UK (by decade).

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Includes plays published in collections; new editions. Excludes reprints.

Fig. 2. Editions published in the UK (by decade).

- 'Tis Pity She's a Whore
- The Changeling
- Women Beware Women
- Atheist's Tragedy
- The Revenger's Tragedy
- The Duchess of Malfi
- The White Devil
- Doctor Faustus
- The Jew of Malta

Decade

No. of editions

1900s 1910s 1920s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s
Fig. 3. UK productions and editions (by decade)
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