Understanding female psychology in Jacobean drama
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The Jacobean stage became a melting pot for the exploration of much darker themes initially ignored by Elizabethan dramatists. For the purpose of this study I will focus on the type of roles the women of these plays adopted, the way they are treated and ultimately the way they are punished for transgressive behaviour. Primarily I will focus on the female characters of John Webster’s play *The White Devil* [1612] and John Ford’s play *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* [1633]. Both plays are disturbing tragedies that expose societal corruption during the period and how that society ultimately shaped the characterisation of the women in the plays of the era. Vital to my study is an understanding that the world around us is no longer Jacobean and, as my argument develops I urge you to consider that ‘what we may interpret as a feisty heroine, a Jacobean audience may well have seen as something monstrous’ (Simkin 2001, 14).

Throughout much Jacobean drama women are often constructed through absence and silence. I begin this study by drawing on Dympna Callaghan’s argument from her book *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*, Callaghan points out that the presence of women is always haunted by vestiges of vacuity. Woman is marked by a very fundamental absence in the patriarchal scheme: lack of both a phallus and phallic power, a ‘deficiency’ upon which all absences are predicated. (1989, 75)

Callaghan here comments that because women lack the phallus they lack the power that comes with that phallus. Women are seen as insufficient beings in not being men and therefore are often represented through their silence or absence. In Jacobean society, the position of women was irregular, their rights often varied with their marital status but, even within the confines of the domestic space, the position of women was still unclear. Throughout *The White Devil* Webster presents his leading female character, Vittoria, as elusive. Vittoria is absent from the stage for much of the play and often when present on stage she is a mute character. In Act one, Vittoria speaks two short lines, exits the scene and is not heard again until the very end of the act. Furthermore, Webster fashions Vittoria so that her character never develops through soliloquy or speech, she is often thought of merely as a ‘function of the dramatic situation’ (Callaghan 1989, 76). On the rare occasion that Vittoria
breaks her silence, her words are often re-interpreted or re-told by a male character. This is evident in Act one after Vittoria recalls the dream she encountered and Brachiano boldly states ‘sweetly shall I interpret your dream’ (1.2.257-258). As a character she is smothered by the male viewpoint and it is only later on in her trial scene that we see a less mute side to her character.

During her arraignment, Vittoria is accused of being a whore and it is at this point in the play that she gains a voice. In this scene Vittoria exploits the constraints held over women by men. She refuses to be tried in Latin ‘I will not have my accusation clouded/ In a strange tongue’ (3.2.18-19) and begins to ‘personate masculine virtue’ (Callaghan 1989, 76). As Vittoria speaks out in this scene she is damned because she breaks her silence, her bad reputation is her ‘public fault’ (3.2.257). A woman who publicly speaks ultimately becomes a public woman and is guilty of public sexuality; she becomes a whore in this sense. The world of language, both in the play and in Jacobean society at the time, was dominated by the male and the woman who entered that world ultimately crossed accepted boundaries. Vittoria indeed finds her voice in this scene but interestingly she adopts both masculine language and language associated with sex in her defence. Her speech is very powerful in this scene and Vittoria, in seeing her own injustice, accuses the judge of having ‘ravish’d justice’ (3.2.226). Here she defends herself with language that has sexual undertones, the term ‘ravish’d’ implies a smothering of sexual desire. At each point of her interrogation, Vittoria reflects her accusations with a series of quick, intelligent answers:

Sum up my faults I pray, and you shall find
That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,
And a good stomach to a feast, are all,
All the poor crimes that you can charge me with.   (3.2.207-210)

Not only does the trial scene in Webster’s play expose the implications that face women if they challenge their expected silent behaviour; it further explores the idea that female transgression ‘both real and imaginary, is repeatedly and ruthlessly oppressed by the family, state, church and judiciary’ (Loomba 1992, 39).

On a similar level in Ford’s tragedy, 'Tis Pity She’s a Whore, Annabella crosses social boundaries leading to disastrous results. Vittoria damns herself by publicly speaking out as a
woman, but Annabella damns herself by falling in love with the wrong man, her brother. Both women cross unacceptable boundaries of feminine behaviour, but it is Annabella’s situation that is still as socially indecent today as it was then. However, Ford’s fashioning of Annabella and Giovanni’s relationship goes beyond that of incest. He explores the notion and implications of free choice by presenting the extreme case of brother and sister. Ford gives Annabella freedom of choice, something that was socially unacceptable in Jacobean society. The fact that Annabella embarks on an incestuous relationship in the play is irrelevant, what is important here is that Ford makes an example out of her free will. Fathers had control of their daughters before marriage and their husbands after marriage and therefore, according to Stevie Simkin, ‘women had no right to determine partners for themselves, something that is at the root of many of the tragedies’ (2001, 14). In this case, Annabella, like Vittoria, attempts to transgress out of her expected framework of behaviour by choosing her own suitor, however, in the male dominated world of Jacobean England, women rarely chose their own husbands. Women in fact, were often seen as the possessions of men and their sexuality and virginity are seen as being governed by men.

Both Annabella and Vittoria are seen as objects to the men around them. Initially Vittoria is described by Brachiano in terms of jewels; he says ‘What value is this jewel?’ / I will but change / My jewel for your jewel’ (1.2.220-224). And similarly, in ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, Giovanni describes Annabella’s virginity as a ‘pretty toy’ (2.1.11) after having consummated their relationship minutes before:

I marvel why the chaster of your sex  
Should think this pretty toy called maidenhead  
So strange a loss, when, being lost, ’tis nothing  (2.1.10-12)

According to Ania Loomba the ‘repeated comparisons of women with gold, jewels, money and other easily transferable property express a notion of the unstable nature of wealth and women’ (1992, 68). Here, Giovanni describes Annabella’s loss of virginity as being ‘nothing’, but he does so in order to quash his own anxiety. It was a common notion that the Jacobean society of men became anxious that once a woman lost her chastity, her appetite for sex would never be full; in the extreme case the constantly unfulfilled sexual appetite would lead her into becoming a whore. During her trial scene in The White Devil Vittoria is described by her male judge in these very terms. She is described as a ‘guilty counterfeited
coin’ and that ‘whosoe’er first stamps it brings in trouble’ (3.2.100-101). The judge comments that Vittoria’s loss of virginity, her ‘first stamp’, has brought about her trouble; this idea is further highlighted by Stevie Simkin in the introduction to his collection of essays, Revenge Tragedy. Simkin points out that ‘women’s sexuality, once let off the leash, is seen as potentially catastrophic for the social infrastructure’ (2001, 15).

To explore Jacobean male anxiety over women further I am going to look at the role of Isabella in Webster’s play The White Devil. Throughout the play the audience feels empathy towards her as she is both harshly dismissed by her husband and ultimately murdered by kissing a poisonous picture of him. Webster presents Isabella to his audience with the three ‘cardinal and synonymous feminine virtues’ (Callaghan 1989, 79): chastity, silence and obedience. Brachiano’s brutality and loathing towards her as a character adds to her pathos. The male cruelty that oppresses her as a character and, to borrow Rowland Wymer’s phrase, the ‘painfully ironic corollary manner of her death, enforce the kind of uncomplicated sympathy typical of popular domestic tragedy’ (1995, 43). Her jealous rage in Act Two is out-of-character and certainly shocks the audience as she hysterically breaks her silence and shows us a glimpse of the passionate woman that lies beneath her oppressed appearance. Isabella describes Vittoria in terms of graphic images of a rotting corpse ‘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 anger’ (2.1.245-248). In a similar way to Vittoria in her trial scene, here Isabella adopts the masculine mode of language by objectifying Vittoria in terms of a trophy. Moreover her abusive language uncovers a darker note on Jacobean society and its repression of women. Wymer further comments in his book that many of the non-naturalistic devices of Elizabethan drama, such as the use of disguise, madness or ‘out-of-character’ behaviour, can be analysed as forms of expressionism which are grounded in a view of human nature as violent, unstable and contrarious. (44)

The unstable and erratic nature Wymer discusses here, in relation to Isabella in The White Devil, is the way Webster fashions her as a character to expose the Jacobean pre-occupation with the disorderly woman. Webster uses Isabella as an example to show his audience how she is victimised by her society. Although Isabella is a less prominent character within his play, as a sub-plot she serves an extremely vital role in exposing the harsh abuse at the hands
of men that faced many women in Jacobean England. Moreover, her irrational and shocking outburst in Act Two, again mirrors the anxiety of the male over the supposed unstable nature of women during this period and how women could no longer be presented as a ‘stable entity’ (Loomba 1992, 95).

In a similar way to Isabella, Hippolita in 'Tis pity She’s a Whore represents the victimisation of women at the hands of men; her wayward and unladylike behaviour is the result of being cruelly dismissed by her husband. Both Isabella and Hippolita are replaced by other women, again adding to the notion of women being seen as commodities. Isabella is replaced by Vittoria and Hippolita is replaced by Annabella and, because of this, both characters are presented as unstable women. Florio’s remark, moments after Hippolita’s death, ‘Was e’er so vile a creature?’ and Richardetto’s ‘Here’s the end of lust and pride’ (4.1.103-4), further reiterate the injustice women faced during the period. Both male characters believe Hippolita to have been driven to madness by her insatiable appetite for ‘lust’, when in fact she only hopes to avenge the man that disposed of her when he desired to move on to his next female object. In an exploitation of male constraint, Hippolita breaks free of the expected silence of women and says ‘Freely I here remit all interest / I e’er could claim, and give you back your vows’ (4.1.56-7). In dismissing Soranzo’s wedding vows she makes the ultimate break from male power; ironically, however, the cup she drinks from in celebration of her victory contains poison and she ultimately dies. Whether Ford is warning women against such wayward behaviour or simply hinting that society should reassess their own view on women we do not know. Hippolita, however, certainly becomes a type of heroine and an early symbol of feminism and change.

The punishment of Hippolita also signifies that transgressive women throughout this period were seen as objects that needed to be punished, even eradicated. In 'Tis Pity She’s a Whore and The White Devil both Annabella and Vittoria are killed and ultimately silenced forever. However, interestingly, the punishment of both female characters is given a sexual slant. Vittoria is banished to a house of whores and Giovanni declares that ‘this dagger’s point ploughed up / Her fruitful womb’ (5.4.31-32) after violently stabbing Annabella and his unborn, incestuous child to death. Giovanni is the embodiment of male anxiety over women; in the final scene of Ford’s play he emerges carrying the sword topped with the heart of his lover/sister to display to the world his final form of control over her. The powerful image of the knife plunged into the centre of the heart is the ultimate symbol of male possession over
women; and, moreover, as Molly Easo Smith argues in her essay ‘The Theatre and the Scaffold: Death as spectacle in The Spanish Tragedy’ (in Simkin 2001), stage plays functioned, in the same way as public executions, as entertainments in Jacobean England and thus ‘they intersect with the state’s pre-occupation with the display of its power’ (Simkin 2001, 16). In this sense then, these women, Annabella and Vittoria, are presented as exemplars of both the state’s power over the people and of male power over women during the period. Ultimately, the plays of this era attempt to reach beyond the simple defence of women and, to conclude my study, I urge you to consider that the representation of women within such Jacobean plays went beyond that of exposing injustices. To Ford, Webster, and their contemporaries ‘gender becomes … the metaphor … for a series of relationships between authority and its “others”’ (Loomba in Simkin 2001, 64).

References


Works Consulted
