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Renaissance Revenge Tragedy

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Tyranny and Catharsis in Jacobean Revenge Plays

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## Introduction

During the Jacobean era in England, theater was perhaps the most popular form of entertainment for the masses. Of the several different kinds of plays available to the English crowds, the most popular by far was the revenge tragedy. These tragedies focused on themes of murder, corruption, and misuse of power within the aristocratic court. Often, the character of the king or ruler himself was a corrupt tyrant. The killing of such a tyrannical ruler was, in fact, often the central conflict of a revenge tragedy.

The popularity and success of Jacobean revenge tragedies is interesting because during this period in time the English were rather paranoid about tyranny. Jacobeans had a wide, sprawling cultural definition of what a tyrant was, combined with growing cultural awareness of Machiavelli’s works and anxiety over the possibility that King James I was, in fact, a tyrant. Unfortunately, they had no way to address these concerns in the real world.

In Renaissance England, the monarch was seen as a divine being: the closest thing to God on Earth. A king's rule was absolute—ordained by God—and therefore, regicide was considered the supreme evil of the time. In fact, King James I actively promoted the idea of the divine right of the king to rule. This means that the Jacobeans had virtually no recourse if their ruler turned out to be a tyrant, which only gave more gravity to their anxiety.

I believe it is because of this cultural obsession with tyranny that revenge tragedy became so popular in Jacobean England. The successful tragedies of the Jacobean era featured tyrannical villains and conflicts born of the machinations of tyrants. However, these plays turned the idea of tyranny on its head by parodying the cultural perceptions of tyranny and reassuring the audience that tyrants always end up punished for their corruption. Because of this, Jacobean revenge plays were a form of catharsis for their audience, providing emotional relief from the constant threat of a corrupt king. Since reassurance and catharsis are preferable to anxiety and paranoia, the Jacobeans rallied around these tragedies, making them the most popular form of entertainment in Renaissance England.

## The Stakes

As I mentioned previously, part of what made the Jacobeans so paranoid about tyranny was the fact that they had no recourse in the event of rule by an actual tyrant. As stated in *Tragedies of Tyrants* by Rebecca Bushnell, “In a Renaissance monarchy . . . tyranny’s threat was magnified by the widely accepted sanctions against resistance and regicide” (Bushnell). However, it is important to explore just how high the stakes of tyranny were in Jacobean England.

According to thought at the time, the king wasn’t just the highest figure in government; he was also the highest figure in the church. The king was a divine agent, a representative of God on Earth. It was God’s will that the king rule (Campbell). So, not only was opposing the king treason, it was also tantamount to opposing the will of God himself (Campbell). To kill a king was the highest of sins, guaranteed to land the perpetrator in the deepest pits of Hell for eternity, as well as possibly dooming the entire nation to divine punishment.

Thus, the very idea of a tyrant would have been horrifying in Renaissance England. Since the king was meant to be God’s agent, having a corrupt ruler meant that either God’s will was being subverted by a wrongful king, or that God’s will *was* to force a corrupt ruler onto the people. And since there was no way to oppose the king, the people would be stuck with a tyrant for as long as he lived, potentially decades. As one might imagine, this would have been an incredibly heavy and oppressive thing to worry about, hence why any kind of catharsis that would provide relief from such anxiety would have been a very welcome comfort to the Jacobeans.

## Definitions of Tyranny

Although many people have a general idea of what tyranny is, the term actually has a great deal of variation in definition. Tyranny may not mean the exact same thing to you as it does to me, and it certainly doesn't mean the same thing as it did to someone living in Renaissance England. Because the definition of tyranny has changed over time and is so broad, I think it is important to try to narrow down some of the characteristics of what the Jacobeans would have considered to be tyranny. Doing so will allow us to see what traits of tyranny the Jacobeans feared, and also examine how these traits are played up or subverted in drama to provide cathartic relief.

During the Renaissance, there were several conceptions about what constituted tyranny. The first was the idea that a tyrant is a ruler that is immoral. This idea was inherited from Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, who defined a tyrant as a ruler who ruled in self-interest, and Plato, who defined a tyrant as a ruler who rules by desire (Greenberg). By this definition, a tyrant is a base individual, a ruler who indulges in material wealth and lust. Greek-style tyrants are cruel beings, kings who indulge in women and order people to suffering and death for their own gain.

Contrasting with this is another definition of tyranny that developed during the Renaissance, which is the idea that a tyrant is a ruler who is legally ineffectual or legally offensive. Under this definition, the king is allowed his desires and vices, because the morals of the king are not of importance. Since the king is appointed by God to rule, his morals cannot be questioned. Instead, what is important is whether or not the king is an effective ruler who creates reasonable laws and abides by them (Greenberg). A tyrant under this definition is a ruler who flaunts the law, breaks it on a whim, steals the property and liberty of his people, and does not govern with a steady hand. A good way to spot this kind of tyrant is when a ruler goes against the proper letter of the law, either for his own personal gain or to show favor to another.

Under this second definition of tyranny, the issue is less about the morals of the king and more about the pragmatic function of the king. This idea of tyranny was very likely influenced by Machiavelli, who stressed the importance of a prince being pragmatic and effective in the realm of the law. To Machiavelli, an effective ruler didn't necessarily be moral as long as he kept the nation running smoothly. Therefore, tyranny is not a differentiation between good and evil, but of legitimacy and illegitimacy.

A third, somewhat less common idea about tyranny was that a tyrant was simply a ruler who obtained the throne illegitimately (Greenberg). This definition is simpler than the first two, but no less important or problematic, because trying to define what constitutes an illegitimate seizure of the throne can be complicated. To some it may mean taking the throne by force, while to others it may simply mean not being a direct descendant of the old ruler. This kind of tyranny is somewhat less common in Jacobean drama, but it is important because illegitimate seizure of the throne is part of what the Jacobeans feared about King James I himself.

While it may seem like these definitions of tyranny are mutually exclusive, all of them were hanging around during the Early Modern period, and all of them were at work in revenge tragedies. Tyrant characters in revenge plays often displayed traits of several or even all of these definitions of tyranny. Therefore, it is important to account for all definitions of tyranny that existed at the time in order to understand what it was that the English feared from their monarchs. It also allows us to look for how these traits get subverted or parodied in order to create a cathartic experience.

## Cathartic Properties of Revenge Tragedies

Using drama to provide catharsis for the audience is an idea that has been around at least since Aristotle made a sole reference to it in his *Poetics*: “Tragedy is an imitation [‘representation’] of an action ... effecting through pity and fear the purgation (catharis)[sic] of such emotions” (Vives). But what is catharsis? According to Merriam-Webster, catharsis is the act or process of releasing a strong emotion (such as pity or fear) especially by expressing it in an art form (*Merriam-Webster*). In other words, art forms, such as literature, painting, or even drama, can provide relief from powerful, often negative emotions. But literary experts have debated the precise meaning and mechanism of catharsis in literature ever since the Renaissance, with some debating that catharsis is a moral motive force, purging the audience of evil passions by showing the results of such passions, while others debate that catharsis is a metaphorical medical treatment, purifying the audience of emotions and eliciting a kind of pleasure (Vives). For this paper, I will be using a broad definition of catharsis as the relief from and purging of anxiety, fear, and any other negative emotion through the experiencing of art. How the process of catharsis occurs varies depending on the art form, but in Jacobean revenge drama, I believe that there are several important key features that mark a cathartic experience.

The first feature is that Jacobean tragedies took the vague, nebulous anxiety of the Jacobeans—their fears about what a tyrant is and what a tyrant does—and gave it shape with tyrannical villains. Jacobean villains often personified many of the traits of a tyrant according to Jacobean thought, which created a concrete example of tyrant.

However, these personifications of tyranny, rather than being everything that the Jacobeans feared, were often foolish, inept, ineffectual, and completely incapable of achieving their goals by the end of their stories. Popular Jacobean tyrant characters tended to act in a manner that was at once illogical, ridiculous, and downright insane. These tyrants were not a confirmation of everything the Jacobeans feared. Rather, they were parodies of those fears, walking jokes which made light of the Jacobeans’ anxiety for comic relief.

Jacobean tragedies were also cathartic in that they followed the idea that a tyrant never prospers. According to this principle, God doesn’t allow the success of tyranny, and “Retribution is a matter of time” (Broude). Tyrants are doomed to fail, either punished by God himself or by a hero or revenger inadvertently doing God’s work. In all of the Jacobean tragedies we have studied, the tyrannical villains are always revealed and punished for their crimes.

By creating a pattern where tyrants are doomed to fail and be punished, successful Jacobean tragedies were able to reassure their audience that they have nothing to fear from tyrants. Since tyrants never prosper, any real world tyrants would logically be just as doomed as their dramatic representations. Reassurance like this is comforting, and is a large part of why Jacobean theater was a cathartic experience.

Between the incompetent tyrants and the ridiculousness of the plots, Jacobean tragedies also had one more method of providing cathartic release for the audience: the pure spectacle of violence. Jacobean drama was violent, often incredibly so, and violence is entertaining. Despite what moral quandaries this fact may present, it is a fact that audiences of a broad variety of art forms from a huge variety of cultures all find violence fascinating and entertaining to watch.

In revenge tragedies, violence is played up and sensationalized. Duels, murders, and massacres abound in Renaissance drama. The sheer spectacle of the fighting and the death of Jacobean tragedy ensured that each play was exciting and fun to watch. While showcasing violence in all its spectacular glory does not directly address the issue of tyranny and why it isn’t something to be feared, it does make sure that the audience is entertained. The simple act of creating an exciting, entertaining work of drama puts the issue of tyranny into the context of entertainment. It helps associate the more serious issue of tyranny with positive emotions, which supplements the cathartic work of personification and parody.

All of these factors—parody, comedy, reassurance, and spectacle—are what came together in the most successful Jacobean plays to take the edge off of the cultural anxiety in Jacobean England. It is this catharsis which helped make those plays which succeeded over others so popular.

## Catharsis in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*

*The Revenger’s Tragedy* is a cathartic play primarily because of the sheer incompetence of its villainous tyrant characters. In this play, tyranny is represented by a family of corrupt aristocrats; namely, the Duke and his various sons. The first act opens up on the youngest son of the Duchess on trial for raping the wife of a noble. This is a serious charge, and a valid fear of tyranny. The potential for a tyrant to steal and violate women as he pleases was a real possibility to the Jacobeans. However, the play turns this fear on its head by making the entire scene less of a serious dramatic situation and more of a dark comedy farce.

The Duchess’s son does not defend himself. He glorifies in his crime and mocks the trial. He turns the whole affair into a stunt, which takes away the gravity of the entire situation. While this might seem to prove just how depraved a tyrant he is, it also makes the situation so ridiculous that the audience can’t possibly take it seriously. By ramping up the cruelty and arrogance of the Duchess’s son, the play goes past the realm of possible tyranny and takes refuge in audacity.

However, this ridiculous scene does also set up a more serious problem with tyranny: the Duke suspends the hearing and defers passing judgment on the young rapist. Such a clear violation of the law suggests favor and the potential for a full pardon by the Duke. This is the sort of abuse of power that Jacobeans feared from tyrants, and much more serious.

The Duke’s nepotism, however, is subverted later on in Act III when the Duchess’s other sons, Ambitioso and Supervacuo, accidentally have their youngest brother executed. The scene in which these two young tyrantettes unwittingly have their favored brother beheaded is such a comedy of errors that it relieves any tension that might have been created by the Duke’s violation of the law, providing comedic and cathartic relief to the audience.

In fact, Ambitioso and Supervacuo are such bumbling fools that their entire existence in the play serves as one great parody of Machiavellian tyrants. They scheme, plot, and connive just as a Jacobean would expect any good Machiavellian to. But their sheer incompetence—fighting over who will inherit, having their secret plot to kill Lussurioso seen through by the Duke, failing to save their youngest brother and accidentally having him killed—paints a different picture of a Machiavellian. Rather than being intelligent and manipulative, the brothers become petty, and all of their plans fail.

Meanwhile, the Duke himself experiences almost as much failure as Ambitioso and Supervacuo. While he may begin the play as a threatening tyrant—poisoning Vindice’s lover and seeing through the machinations of Ambitioso and Supervacuo—but by the end of the third act he is tricked into kissing a poisoned skull dressed up in fancy clothes. And no tyrant can maintain any sort of dignified, threatening presence when killed in such an amusing fashion.

All of the villains in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* have features of supposed tyrants: scheming, corruption, stealing of women, and violation of the law. But all of these traits get subverted by the ridiculous, comedic situations and outright failures by all of the tyrants to be effective threats.

However, the catharsis of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* goes beyond parodying the tyrant characters. The spectacle and ridiculousness of the plot itself creates the context of amusement which allows the play to have a cathartic function in the first place.

Violence and death are a spectacle of entertainment in this play. This is apparent from early on when Vindice is seen monologing to the skull of his dead lover. The very idea that someone would keep around a skull for so long, talk to it, love it, and obsess over surpasses the realm of the macabre and enters the realm of the absurd. Later on, it gets even more absurd when Vindice dresses up the same skull as a person and tricks the Duke into kissing it, literally killing the Duke with the poisoned corpse of the woman he himself had poisoned nine years previously.

But the spectacle of death isn’t limited just to Vindice. Antonio gets in on the absurdist action when he puts his own dead wife on display for all of the aristocracy. And finally, at the end of the play, death and violence get ramped up to absolutely ludicrous levels when, not only does Vindice lead a group of conspirators to murder Lussurioso and all of his supporters, but right after they leave, a second group of murderers enters led by Ambitioso and Supervacuo, who then proceed to bicker to such an extent that they all kill themselves.

And then there’s what I like to call the comedy of errors factor. This is when pure comedy is created by mistakes and mix-ups. These sorts of moments can be seen when Lussurioso is tricked into walking in on his father and the Duchess in bed together. Or when Ambitioso and Supervacuo mistakenly have the wrong brother executed. Or when Vindice is hired to kill “Piato,” who is in fact Vindice himself. It is comedic moments like these which let the audience know that yes, this play is meant to have humorous moment, and no, you don’t need to take this entirely seriously.

*The Revenger’s Tragedy* is an example of the perfect cathartic Jacobean tragedy. It has all of the most important aspects necessary to relieve the audience of their fears: parody, levity, and entertaining spectacle.

## Catharsis in *The Duchess of Malfi*

*The Duchess of Malfi* is functionally different from *The Revenger’s Tragedy*: rather than a sordid cast of tyrannical villains and tyrantettes, there are simply two equally-threatening villains. It is also different in that these two tyrants are fundamentally different.

The first tyrant, Ferdinand, has much in common with the Duke and his sons from *The Revenger’s Tragedy*—he’s foolish, impulsive, and ridiculous. He’s a Machiavellian character in that he attempts to have absolute control; specifically, control over the Duchess’s life. But at the same time, the very nature of what he attempts to control—his sister’s marriage and, indeed, her sex life—makes him seem at once socially unaware, foolhardy, and amusingly insensitive.

And as anybody might have predicted, Ferdinand’s attempts to control the Duchess’s life utterly fail. No sooner does he attempt to keep her from marrying again does she secretly marry Antonio and immediately conceive a child. In fact, this is just the first in a series of incidents that prove Ferdinand’s complete ineffectualness as a villain. When Ferdinand discovers the Duchess’s pregnancy, for example, he resolves to discover the Duchess’s lover. Yet the very next scene shows that not only has he failed to do so, the Duchess has since had two more children. Later on, when Ferdinand has the Duchess imprisoned and wants to make her suffer, the Duchess remains completely defiant, refusing to give Ferdinand the satisfaction of seeing her pain and welcoming her death.

Not only is Ferdinand impotent as a villain, he is also easy to trick, being fooled into believing that the Duchess remains unmarried, and then being fooled into believing the Duchess’s lie about Antonio being false with her accounts. And by the end of the play, Ferdinand becomes a complete chew toy for the plot, being driven completely insane. His madness, lycanthropia, is not only unthreatening, it is utterly ridiculous, causing Ferdinand to rave and attack his own shadow. The end result of all of this is to take Ferdinand, a personification of tyrannical cruelty and manipulation, and turn him into a joke for the audience to make fun of.

The Cardinal, on the other hand, is much more serious and threatening than his insane brother. He is much more effective as a villain, managing to take hold of the Duchess’s property and banish her from Ancona, as well as killing his mistress, Julia, to keep her silent. He also comes across as much more level-headed than Ferdinand and much more effective in his cruelty.

However, despite being a more serious tyrant, the Cardinal is still defeated. He ends up just as dead as Ferdinand, slayed by Bosola. In fact, given that it is largely due to the Cardinal’s cruel treatment that Bosola resolves to kill his former master, it can be said that it is the Cardinal’s very nature which eventually causes his death. By making the Cardinal’s downfall a result of his own doing, *The Duchess of Malfi* carries a message of reassurance to the audience that tyrants are destined to be done in by the very cruelty and callousness that defines them.

Now, it could be argued that *The Duchess of Malfi* isn’t quite as cathartic a play as *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. Indeed, it seems to lack the important quality of having the entertainment of spectacle. Violence in this play is not spectacular; it’s threatening and functions to drive the more depressing aspects of the plot. The most violent moments are the torture and execution of the Duchess and her servants, Bosola’s mistaken killing of Antonio, and the final confrontation at the end when Bosola, Ferdinand, and Bosola all kill each other. These scenes aren’t exactly spectacular or fun; instead, they’re depressing.

However, *The Duchess of Malfi* does have some aspects of a comedy of errors. The Duchess, for example, not only defies her brothers, she has more children every time they look away. There’s also the hilarity surrounding the birth of her first child, what with her labor being induced by an apricot, and Antonio then having to deal with various servants making a fuss over stolen jewels and utensils while worrying about his wife’s ordeal. These moments might not be quite as potentially comedic as some in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, but they do provide some comic relief in an otherwise much more bleak play.

## Drawing Conclusions

Reassurance is something that most people like to have, especially when they’re being reassured that something they have horrible, daunting fears about isn’t coming true. The Jacobeans, therefore, would have been desperate for any kind of reassurance that they were not and could not be ruled by a tyrant. The most popular revenge tragedies not only reassured them that tyranny could never survive, they turned tyranny into something that the Jacobeans could make fun of. Turning a legitimate fear into a joke is a great way to feel catharsis.

In fact, it’s likely that the most popular plays of the Jacobean era gained much of their popularity and acclaim precisely because the Jacobeans enjoyed the cathartic release they got from those plays. In nature only the fittest creatures survive, and the same could be said of theatre. The plays which the Jacobeans derived the most pleasure and the most value from—the plays which were the most cathartic—could be seen as the “fittest” plays which succeeded over those which were not as cathartic, establishing their popularity over other works of drama. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi* succeeded over other plays of the era because they were able to let the Jacobean audience have a laugh about tyrants, all while reassuring them that their own King James could not be a tyrant simply because tyrants never succeed.

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