

REPRESENTING EVIL: THE 'RESPUBLICA'
TRADITION IN ENGLISH DRAMA,
REFORMATION TO RESTORATION

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The problem of evil exercises the human mind at many levels but at none more so than in literature where the problem of evil is brought to the foreground with a compelling and paradoxical force. To readers of English classical literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and especially of drama, the phenomenon of evil appears to be at the centre of what constitutes "drama" itself. Who can shake off the images of a Richard III confessing to an audience "Now I am determined to prove a villain", an Iago manipulating the noble Moor, a Goneril Regan and Edmund destroying the world of their fathers, a Macbeth sinking deeper and deeper into crime or a Hamlet agonizing over revenge for his father. "Glorious villains", villain-heroes, hero-villains or even heroes caught up in a world of villainy are the stuff of Shakespeare's greatest art. They seem to be there in a formal and structural sense as givens, as postulates, and the drama would not be possible without them.

Shakespearean historical and tragic drama seems to define itself on the presupposition that a dramatic action ends in a death; it focusses on the question of succession or transmission of power, and its process entails an overthrow or subversion of authority. Only gradually does Shakespeare entertain doubts as to what that authority in itself might be. It is not surprising therefore, that the figures of evil occupy such a primary and curiously attractive place in his creative endeavours. They offer points of release from, or challenge to, the dominant authority. The exploration and representing of evil became for Shakespeare the way into the presentation of the human situation at its most profound and dramatic level.

The context of this paper is the historical tradition of the English theatre from mid-sixteenth century to later seventeenth century, focussing on what I will call a "Respublica" tradition in terms of its powerful continuity in form and structure while varying in genre and application. This is my major concern here. I have five plays to treat. But I wish to begin, for a short time, with something strikingly modern and contemporary.

Many filmgoers today will find themselves shocked, or at least challenged, by the representation of evil in Peter Greenaway's latest movie *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. It is in my view a masterpiece of the 1980s. "Of" in the two senses, as belonging to the 1980s and being about the 1980s. The emotional effects of his film are so powerful as to have led to its becoming in many places a *succès de scandale*. In Germany, as Greenaway has commented in a somewhat bemused way, "they seem to have taken it to their heart." He goes on, "There are people throwing coke bottles at the screen and threatening to burn down the cinemas; women are running out into the street to vomit."¹

The issue, of course, lies in Greenaway's representation of evil. The film begins, arbitrarily and gratuitously, with a man being victimised and brutalised in the courtyard to a restaurant by a gang of men belonging to the Thief, Albert Spica (played by Michael Gambon of *The Singing Detective* fame). The man stripped naked is forced to eat dog shit. It is deliberately and unavoidably grotesque. What is more, it is done with such energy and excess as to leave the audience exposed and totally vulnerable to the experience. The film seizes the initiative, it unfixes any moral control in our observing and judging the proceedings. And so the film begins. Inside the restaurant "Le Hollandais" there are three worlds: the cathedral-like Piranesi dimensions of the kitchen presided over by a remarkably cool and professional cook, the French actor Richard Bohringer being finely cast. The restaurant itself, a splendour of baroque reds and blacks with an immense blow-up of the Franz Hals painting of 1616 of the "Banquet of Officers of the St George Civic Guard Company" on its rear wall. This image of classic European bourgeois solidity and solidarity looks down on its modern equivalent (a displacement or perversion), the gang of Albert Spica, night after night, consuming crassly and tastelessly the fine menus. It is the world of New 1980's Money, presumably illicitly won, devouring the riches of the Old Culture. Albert Spica, the Thief, dominates the scene. "He is", as Greenaway says, "a man who is thoroughly despicable in every part of his character. He has no redeeming features, and is consumed by self-interest and greed."² He is for Greenaway the image and role he was looking for to point to the 1980s,

¹ "Peter Greenway interviewed by Brian McFarlane", *Cinema Papers* (March 1990) No.78, p.69.

² *Ibid.*, p.40.

where as he says "Society is beginning to worry entirely about the price of everything and the value of nothing".³

Spica's behaviour in its domineering and destructive manner is nowhere more crass than in his treatment of his wife, played strikingly by the English actress Helen Mirren, who, in her facial appearance at least, has an uncanny resemblance to our present Queen. Her reaction to her husband is to launch herself into a set of sexual experiences with a customer in the restaurant, a solitary book-reading man, played by the Shakespearean actor Alan Howard. Their relationship, both extravagant and at times absurd in its wanton sexuality, is strangely affecting by virtue of its human contrast to the bestiality of the Thief's world. Their love takes place at first in the toilet, the third world of the restaurant, ablaze with white as its emblematic colour. The ending of the film is notorious. The Lover is murdered by the Thief and his gang. The Wife in revenge persuades the Cook to prepare the body as a feast for her husband. At gunpoint he is forced to taste the flesh, and is then shot. Cannibalism — or is it a parody of the eucharist? — is raised as a spectre for the audience to digest. But the overall effect is metaphorical; Greenway's image of the human mouth is central to the film's imaginative wholeness.

The film will be received at one level as scandalous for its overcharged horror and representation of evil. T.S. Eliot, in once defining a similar quality in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and in rightly recognising that we turn away in horror and disgust at evil itself, yet equally rightly observed that Marlowe's play had an artistic quality, a quality that he called "tragic farce". That is to say, a formal dimension in the representation alters the way evil is entertained, and is entertaining, in art. So too with the Greenaway film. The immediate effects are one thing. The structure and form of the film, its underlying and informing intelligence, are another. Above all, it is the sense of this shocking contemporary film as belonging to a tradition, an English and European artistic and cultural tradition, which marks its achievement.

The Cook, the Thief needs to be read metaphorically. It has contemporary application, as noted above, to a wider world than the extravagant and artificial incidents in a restaurant. Greenaway says "The film is a very angry one. The political situation that currently exists in Great Britain under Mrs

³ *Ibid.*, p.38.

Thatcher is one of incredible sense of self-interest and greed."⁴ We might generalise the reference beyond Great Britain to the explosion of entrepreneurial energies all round the world — in Europe, the United States and not least here in Australia. Albert Spica may be a lurid caricature, but one raised to a high point of seriousness in terms of this possibility of human nature rampant in modern society. We recall the American film *Wall Street* and its climactic moment when Michael Douglas exclaims "Greed . . . is good". Greenaway, to make his point, has found a technique of exploding out of caricature and satire into states of pathos and excess, where the audience has no alternative but to experience in its subjectivity the objectivity of his criticism. Yet in doing so Greenaway's originality owes much to tradition.

Film critics have seen resemblances in Greenaway to eighteenth century satirists such as Swift, Sterne and Alexander Pope. But the reference which Greenaway himself provides is to the world of Jacobean theatre and to that part of it which follows on immediately from Shakespeare. I would myself want to compare Greenaway's methods in this film to those of John Webster in *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1616) where an obviously formal and artificial world of evil is constructed largely with a baroque superabundance of word and image, of language-as-excess, a language of horror, together with a lurid supply of events and characters which the English mind of the early seventeenth century fantasised from its sense of the enormities of late Renaissance society and culture in Europe and especially Italy. In the world of Webster's theatre there is a sense of human energies trapped inside old and limiting social, religious and moral conventions. The only way out is to answer the perverse with the perverse. It is a strangely heroic endeavour — particularly with the women Vittoria Corombona and the Duchess of Malfi — this process of answering evil with evil. Greenaway would like to think his film has something of this heroic dimension. Possibly the Wife and her Lover and the Cook (and the boy who sings throughout) suggest this status. But few members of the audience will recognise this endeavour of Greenaway's art, dominated as they are by the initiatives of the Thief's presence and those of the filmmaker's own demands on his audience.

The Franz Hals painting and the possible allusions to Webster and the Jacobeans help us to place the Greenaway film in tradition. But there is a

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.38.

suggestion that the frame of artistic reference is still wider. The title of the film, *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*, carries a medieval quality as if out of Chaucer or Boccaccio or more relevantly out of late medieval Morality plays. Albert Spica resembles no one so much as a composite figure of *The World, The Flesh and The Devil* from *The Castle of Perseverance*, the great English morality play of the early fifteenth century. It is here, and to this last mentioned context of Morality drama, that I wish now to turn, and point to the long tradition of the native English stage from the fourteenth century onwards in its representation of, and sustained habituation to, the experience of evil as both object and subject. The genius of the English stage lies, I believe, in its use of moral comedy of a severe even savage kind, a use that flows back from the Monty Pythons and Goon shows of our time through Dickens, Fielding, Swift, and Ben Jonson to the popular stage traditions of late medieval Morality plays. It is not often realised sufficiently how Shakespeare and Marlowe and the Jacobean who clearly transcended the traditions of moral comedy in tragedies yet presupposed its strengths and ideological constructions. It is, I believe, only possible to read the outstanding and distinctive qualities of Tragedy on the English stage in terms of its prior and more basic commitment to Comedy of a moral and satirical kind. For it is here that the tradition of the English stage finds its staple and ongoing function in society. To reflect and express the anxieties of the day, to expose social limitations and absurdities, and to give the audience confidence and control again over their lives through the playful fantasy and the purging of theatre and art.

I wish to take now what I consider to be a central line of development in the period of English classical drama. I call it the Respublica tradition after the earliest of the five plays to be discussed here, a Morality play called *Respublica*, one where the elements and structure of this tradition are most clearly defined. It is a tradition that allows us to see the widest possible range of references — religious, social, historical, economic and political — all brought into play. But what is remarkable in this tradition as well as its centrality and comprehensiveness is the fact of its formal closedness. The plays I wish to consider all have tight structures, clear premises, logical outcomes, simple groupings of formal characters and moral resolutions. It is as if a persistent myth or basic experience was repeating and re-enacting itself in the course of events from the time of the Reformation in England to the Restoration. We may indeed note the use of terms such as "reformation" and "restoration" with their strong sense of tradition being made new again, even if for quite contrary ends. Literature, and drama, constantly live with

this fact of tradition re-creating itself, repeating itself in almost infinitely variable and relativised ways. The Respublica Tradition to which I wish now to turn presents itself first as allegorical farce, then as tragic farce, historical tragedy, satirical comedy and comedy of manners. It is theocentric to begin with, secular and historical in its heroic modes, capitalist and civic in its later phases. The plays I am concerned with are Nicholas Udall's Morality play *Respublica*, Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*.

The Respublica Tradition concerns itself with a recognition of evil in society and an emerging threat to social order. When Richard III or Marlowe's Barabbas or Jonson's *Volpone* step out on stage in their powerful opening monologues to disclose — even to flaunt — their moral natures, the audience is immediately confronted with a challenge. Morally and objectively the characters are immediately placed. "Good morning to the day," *Volpone* exclaims, "and next my gold." The moral definition of his world is clear and explicit. But what is equally remarkable is the way this tradition of Respublica plays possesses the resources for transforming moral object into dramatic subject. The technique of doing so could bear close analysis and comparison among the several plays in this tradition. The opening monologues of the Vice (a villain-hero) allows him to define himself on his own terms, to outface the audience and pre-empt their judgment by his daring confession. Subsequently in the play he becomes a kind of Master of Ceremonies, a surrogate author, even his own audience, a chorus presence detailing the entrances and exits of the other characters and his own.

The major lines of this tradition's internal self-structuring essentially present these Vice-like (or villain-hero) characters forming a compact with accomplices to usurp the State or commonwealth. The State is represented by Dame Respublica, a weeping widow figure in the Morality play; and one who is clearly continued in Shakespeare's *Richard III* with the three Queens of England as they sit on the ground lamenting what Richard has done to the land and to their families. This female role, while passive here, is central to the moral scheme of things; although by the time of the Restoration, and as Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) shows, the women figures are capable of being themselves transformed in their roles and functions. There they become active participants in the change of moral values in their society.

The process of usurpation is resisted in the Mortality play solely by the figure of a country rustic, People, but ineffectually. An appeal to a transcendental or outside form of help is needed. When help comes in the Morality play, it comes as a divine visitation, and the usurpers are punished and rejected from the commonwealth. The pattern is simple and clear but open to variations in its development. It is a crime and punishment pattern, powerfully objectified yet subtly subjectified by essentially formal means. Ends are separated off from means. The audience finds itself caught up in a world of means and in a process of being entertained by the theatrically self-conscious and amoral artistry of a Richard or a Volpone.

The Respublica plays proceed in state of suspended irony, the audience knowing what will be or should be the outcome yet able to experience an apparently evil experience as if their own through the achievement of the art. It can be seen as an ingeniously negative way whereby a society entertains, and eventually purges, its own fears of change. Yet, even more paradoxically, the audience is absorbing a new life style in watching these entrepreneurs of the new life style rise and fall. It is a peculiar way, so to speak, of backing one's way into the future. Richard's and Barabbas' Machiavellianism may be punished, but the wider result of these plays is that politics becomes dominant in the long run of English society. Volpone's avarice, too, may be exposed, but Jonson's play at the beginning of the seventeenth century signals or confirms the rise of capitalism. Horner's libertinism is put in its place, but in 1675 this "Machiavel in love" is in effect opening a new chapter of English sexual history. The ritual repeats itself. Art in this Respublica tradition acts as a kind of dynamic negative ideology, a doubly negative theology. If God cannot be known, at least the Devil can.

Nicholas Udall's Morality play *Respublica* was written in 1553, and is recorded as having only one appearance at the court of Queen Mary by a company of child actors. It was presented as a farce, satirising the Protestant take-over of England under the reign of Edward VI. There is considerable irony in these facts and circumstances, and not the least in my taking it as a prototype of later and more famous plays. The main irony however lies in the way, as a play, it universalises its concerns through abstract and allegorical personifications in its characters. For not only was it a polemic in political and religious terms, thereby subverting in its intent its own universal reference, but history itself within the short space of Mary's five year reign was to see the context of Catholic rule in England overturned. The

theology and ideology became contradicted by events; and what was presented as a satirical and ironical farce against history was itself to become an object of historical irony.

Yet in spite of the ironies of history *Respublica* remains a remarkable dramatic structure. It is a long play — all the Respublica plays are long plays — but very simple in its development. The Vice (or villain-protagonist) is called Avarice. He confesses his nature to the audience in the opening monologue, then decides, because his name is unacceptable, to change the name to Policy in order to win favour with Dame Respublica, who in her distress at the state of the commonwealth is looking for help to run the nation. This shift in roles from Avarice to Policy — from ends to means — is central to the Respublica tradition.

The use of this name "Policy" is a fascinating indication of social change in mid-sixteenth century English history. In Udall's play Policy is first understood in a good sense to mean something like our modern "social planning", or to put it in more contemporary terms "economic rationalism". By the end of the play Policy has become the Machiavellianism, in the sinister sense of manipulation, which the English stage (and especially Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*) was to present in melodramatic and demonic terms.

Avarice and his companions take over the kingdom and devastate it for their own ends. The People cry out against their usurpation. It is, however, not until the Four Daughters of God (Justice, Truth, Mercy and Peace) hear the pleas of People and Dame Respublica and descend from above that the Vices are exposed. The figure of Nemesis (Queen Mary), who is actually represented on stage, passes judgement on the Vices and saves the commonwealth. The play's structure is throughout stable and rational for all that its mood is satirical and farcical. *Respublica*, attributed to the humanist scholar Nicholas Udall, holds the popular English stage humour of a Monty Python kind, together with a sophistication normally associated with the classical models of Plautus and Terence. The ideological and theological ordering of the play's thought is responsible for the play's sustained firmness of structure and its usefulness in so directly dealing with perceived social evils.

As a prototype of a later dramatic tradition, *Respublica* presents the basic elements of structure as the Vice and his companions, a female presence for

the State, usurpation by dissimulation and deceit, the ineffectual counter force of People and the final transcendental opposition and judgement. The mood is available to either comic or serious treatment and application.

Immediately we turn to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, written approximately at the end of the 1580s and presumably after the crisis of the Spanish Armada we see the Respublica structure reappearing but significantly altered. Avarice becomes Barabbas, the Jew of Malta, at the centre of a Renaissance world of trading, with Spain, on the one hand, and the Turks, on the other, threatening Malta from outside, while internal instability between Christians and Jews weakens the state from within. Abstract universals are reduced to historical particulars. In this regard the crucial point to note in Marlowe's treatment is in the way he individualises and particularises the Avarice figure to give a very human portrayal to Barabbas early in the play only later to collapse the humanity of the Jew into a most stark melodramatic figure of the Machiavel or Policy as demonic menace. The Respublica pattern in Marlowe is stretched to breaking point as the Jew begins to work his vengeance on the forces of Christendom which has, in his view, so unjustly persecuted him. The poise and balance of the old Morality ideological relationship of Avarice becoming Policy is destabilised to the point of Marlowe's play becoming black comedy or tragic farce.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* follows the Respublica structural pattern but situates its frame and terms of reference as historical and personal. Yet while avoiding the abstract and universalising conceptual style of the Morality tradition, *Richard III* deepens its significance as a play by tapping into other religious sources at a different level. Act I of Shakespeare's play, almost one-third of the play's length and the core of the play's power and appeal, is not based on historical sources but is largely Shakespeare's innovation, an innovation for artistic ends. Richard's opening monologue ("Now is the winter of our discontent"), his confrontation with Anne, the wife and daughter-in-law of two men he has killed, and whom he then woos to become his wife, and his deception of his brother Clarence — these striking scenes in Act I derive their power from the earliest English stage tradition of the medieval mystery cycles where the opening pageants usually follow the sequence of the Fall of Lucifer, the temptation of Eve, and the Cain and Abel story. Shakespeare is tapping into race and cultural memory, his innovation is a kind of archaism.

It has been long held in literary criticism that *Richard III*, which catapulted Shakespeare to early fame as a dramatist, confirmed the Tudor myth by demonising and rejecting Richard III as a scapegoat figure. It was a way of closing off the internecine Wars of the Roses, which had occurred little more than a century before the 1590s when Shakespeare was constructing an English ideology of social and political order in his History plays.

Richard III, the play, is a cornerstone of Shakespeare's achievement. The sense of Richard's activism in his character and action, the ritualised presentation of the Queens of England as a chorus of lament and protest, the way a final nemesis is reached through supernatural visitation in the Bosworth dream scene and his final death by bravado in battle — these are organising formal principles which Shakespeare was to keep on using. He would considerably vary this pattern in his tragedies, yet ultimately derive his greatest strengths from this source.

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1605) is a self-consciously theatrical reflection upon this Respublica tradition. *Volpone*'s love of gold is the organising principle of the total play. He pretends to be dying, and the citizens of Venice come to him with gifts of money in order to be written into his will. He takes their money with wicked glee. The play presents Avarice as a vortex, sucking all kinds and conditions of society into itself. Avarice is universal here in effect. But what is most remarkable in this masterpiece of English moral comedy is the way Jonson is intent on destabilising and deconstructing the Respublica world of reference and processes of meaning. Conceptually, *Volpone* is clearly a study of Avarice but its characters are presented only in quasi-allegorical form. A nominalist shift is evident in their particularised names. *Volpone*, *Mosca*, *Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino* are Italianate names which both individualise and at the same time identify them as figures of fable. *Volpone* the fox and *Voltore*, *Corbaccio* and *Corvino* the birds of prey are creatures of the Aesop fable, which is the model which makes concrete a universal tale. Of equal interest is the way Jonson isolates the Policy role as a figure separate from the main plot and its formal concern. The subplot concerns two English tourists, *Sir Politic* and *Lady Politic Woudbe*, innocents abroad. They are Jonson's way of ridiculing the English imitating Italianate culture. He is, in effect, laughing the Machiavel and Italianate manners off the English stage. And if we accept the possibility of Jonson's writing *Volpone* at the height of the Gunpowder Plot conspiracy — Guy Fawkes and all that — then his play may be seen as

having bold application to the political paranoia and hysteria sweeping London and England in its fear of Catholic Europe during the winter months of 1605-1606. Jonson was a Catholic of a complex kind, one who knew the value (and price) of patriotism in Protestant England. His play satirises forces at work in the State but conceals its possible applications to specific persons. When the audience did make certain applications, Jonson wrote (or had to write) one of the fiercest denunciations of the audience's right to interpret his play. The Respublica tradition was too close to the bone or to the nerve centre of the nation to allow free interpretation of its meanings.

The final play I wish to present in this tradition is William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675). A strong play which still invites moral objections when presented on the English stage, it is the comedy of a Restoration rake who has the rumour spread in London of his having gone to Paris for an "operation". News of his becoming a eunuch makes him appear harmless to husbands but a source of great excitement and assurance to their wives (when they learn the true story). The play presents the assault of male Vices on female Virtues, who quickly become Vices themselves. The Country Wife is Margery Pinchwife who is like the figure of People in the old Morality play. She is a naive rustic with simple but strong feelings. Here, however, she wants to be seduced by London and possibly by Horner. She reminds me of the Wife in the Peter Greenaway film, at least in the way her husband's restraints force her to find her sex life illicitly. Wycherley's play has shifted the concerns of the Respublica tradition onto new ground. Avarice becomes sexual possessiveness and Policy sexual intrigue. The centre of reality becomes a world of social manners.

Tradition, it may finally be said, manifests itself in this Respublica line of plays as a repetition essentially of formal structures of theatre. It may vary in accordance with the author's intent and the historical and cultural contexts. It is also open to a variety of interpretations by the audience. By radically objectifying evil, by sophisticating the formal devices by which evil object becomes dramatic subject, and by focussing on such pertinent social issues as Avarice and Policy, the Respublica tradition proved central as the theatre's way of responding to the emergence of modern England. And who would say that the issues of Money and Power and the State are not with us today. Certainly not Peter Greenaway!