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Jacobean tragedy  
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I love to open the door of jacobean tragedy with "The Duchess of Malfi ".In a hushed, darkened room inside London's Young Vic theatre, two young people are about to make a terrible mistake. The woman has just been married off to someone she doesn't love; the man is desperate for the two of them to be together. Perhaps, he suggests, he could confront her husband. She recoils: too public. Too liable to go wrong. If only there were another way ...

Anyone who's read or seen *The Postman Always Rings Twice* knows what happens next: the husband winds up dead. But this isn't James M Cain – it's a rehearsal for Middleton and Rowley's 17th-century thriller *The Changeling*; and, much more gruesomely, this will be the first murder of many.

**"Vengeance begins," the woman mutters, ominously, later on. "Murder, I see, is followed by more sins."**

Although it is four centuries since revenge tragedies like this first appeared on stage, they have lost little of their charge. And it seems we can't get enough of them. *The Changeling* opens in late January, to be followed a month later by John Webster's brilliant – and brilliantly chilling – *The Duchess of Malfi*, which opens just up the road at the Old Vic. In recent years, the National Theatre has hosted two more Middletons (*The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*), then, last summer, Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, which despite its domestic setting became, in Katie Mitchell's fiercely precise production, every bit as intense. By the time touring troupe Cheek by Jowl bring their new version of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore to the UK* – it is currently darkening summery Sydney – the theatrical murder rate in London will have notched up still further. One hopes that costumiers have stocked up on fake blood.

On the face of it, few things seem more remote to 21st-century Britain than the world of Jacobean tragedy: a shadowy universe in which sexual and political betrayal combine with incest, insanity, forced marriage and ferocious honour codes that would not disgrace the 19th-century mafia (many are, indeed, set in Italy). Their cast-lists are often an alphabet soup of semi-southern European names; their belief systems seem impossibly remote. And that's to reckon without the bizarre plotting. *The Duchess of Malfi* is tortured by her brothers for having remarried, then strangled along with two of her children; one brother runs mad. In *The Changeling*, the heroine loses her virginity to her disfigured servant – the ironically named De Flores – then is forced to pimp out her maid to the man she herself is in love with (the maid dies in a fire). In *'Tis Pity*, a sister becomes guiltily pregnant by her brother, only for her heart to be cut out and skewered on a dagger. *Women Beware Women* culminates in a killing spree administered by poisoned incense.

So what is it about these violent and baroque plays, four centuries old (Malfi dates from about 1613, *The Changeling* 1622 and *'Tis Pity* about 1630), that haunt our contemporary imagination? What kind of culture did they spring from? And why are they once again filling our theatres?

In the bustling café at the Young Vic, director Joe Hill-Gibbins admits it's a puzzle – but a fascinating one. "We consider ourselves as very different to the Elizabethans and Jacobean, but some moments you think: 'God, I had that conversation in a bar the other day.' Once you delve into it, it's not so different." He grins. "People have those T-shirts that say: Same Shit, Different Day. That's how I think about it."

Certainly the themes that dominate *The Changeling* – forbidden desire, political power struggles combined with battles between the sexes – haven't gone away. But one of the plot's key tensions (perhaps the major reason it still resonates) is the conflict between things that seem straightforward to us, yet are utterly insurmountable to the people in the play. The heroine, Beatrice-Joanna, can't simply get a divorce; she has to arrange a murder. De Flores can't dream of marrying his employer, so he sleeps with her by stealth. The pact they enter into, driven by mutual loathing and erotic frustration, is one of the most weirdly kinky in all early modern drama; even their death scene, in which they apparently stab each other while locked in a closet, has the feel of a sex game gone gruesomely wrong. The play, powered by Middleton's guttural, throaty language, has an immediacy that feels almost indecently alive.

The young actor Jessica Raine – currently on screen in the BBC drama *Call the Midwife* – is Beatrice in the new production, playing her with (if rehearsals are anything to go by) fragile sincerity rather than the spoilt brattishness she's sometimes given. "Middleton's characters are always in the moment," she observes. "They have the seed of an idea and follow it through with 100% certainty. They don't think about the consequences." Hill-Gibbins agrees. "We've been rehearsing the scene where Beatrice has the idea of getting De Flores to kill, and Middleton has De Flores just walk on. She just has to act. And at the end of that scene, De Flores says he's going to kill Alonzo, and who appears? Alonzo. The play doesn't allow anyone any time."

If *The Changeling's* plot seems suffocating, then so too is its setting: locked inside a Spanish castle from which there appears to be no escape, its characters are forever flitting from room to room, navigating a warren of Escher-like spaces in which some figures materialise as if from nowhere, others disappear without trace. In Richard Eyre's 1988 production at the National, the set was dominated by an enormous iron grille, staircases rising dizzily to either side; when Declan Donnellan of *Cheek by Jowl* brought the play to the Barbican in 2006, he and designer Nick Ormerod built a false auditorium on stage, plunging the audience into the sepulchral recesses of the theatre itself.

Chiaroscuro is these plays' default setting; not for nothing has the editor of Middleton's recent collected works, Gary Taylor, compared them to the paintings of Caravaggio and Frans Hals. Overhearing is a key component of their plots, just as characters often talk in whispered asides; and they are full of things being spied on or mistaken in the dark, whether it's wax statues impersonating dead children (Malfi) or a "bed trick" whereby a man is fooled into sleeping with the wrong woman.

With good reason, suggests Emma Smith of Hertford College, Oxford, who has published extensively on revenge tragedy. In contrast to the outdoor playhouses of the Elizabethan era,

these were dramas written for cramped indoor theatres, hot, claustrophobic – and lit only by guttering candles. Moral shadiness is inevitable, she argues, particularly given their echoes of James I's gossipy, incestuous court: "It almost seems inconceivable that they would be wholesome entertainment. That's partly why they seem so gothic and shadowy."

What is striking, though, is that our taste for these dark brews is a recent one: for a good portion of their history, they were regarded as creaky and unconvincing. Although *The Changeling* and *Malfi* remained popular for their comic scenes when the theatres were reopened after Cromwell (Pepys saw the former in 1660 and thought "it takes exceedingly"), they fell from favour as neoclassical drama, clearer and more crystalline, came into fashion. After the 1670s, apart from a short-lived 18th-century reworking, *The Changeling* disappeared entirely from the stage until the 1950s. *Malfi* was luckier – the script was cleaned up a number of times, meaning it was restaged infrequently. But there is no record of a production of *'Tis Pity* anywhere between 1663 and 1923.

It was TS Eliot who rescued these plays from critical oblivion, writing (in a poem) of Webster's capacity to see "**the skull beneath the skin**", in a 1927 essay acclaiming *The Changeling* as Middleton's greatest drama: "an eternal tragedy, as permanent as Oedipus or Antony and Cleopatra ... the tragedy of the not naturally bad but irresponsible and undeveloped nature, caught in the consequences of its own action". Their ambiguity wasn't something to be apologised for; it was an essential ingredient of their success.

Even Eliot struggled with the plays' mutinous unwillingness to be pigeonholed. Though they are tragedies in the mould of the Roman writer Seneca, they are both funnier and crueller than we might expect. With their wisecracking antiheroes and deliberately unlikely plot twists, they are suffused by caustic irony, challenging us to take them as shlock rather than shock. *The Revenger's Tragedy* mercilessly sends up the entire genre, while *The Changeling* is in fact a tragedy and a comedy combined: alongside the Beatrice-De Flores plot there runs another story (probably written by Middleton's collaborator William Rowley) set in a lunatic asylum, in which a virtuous wife resists a series of suitors while all around her the inmates rehearse a court masque. The whole thing is quite literally mad; and when, for instance, De Flores presents the severed digit of his victim as a "token" to Beatrice, off-handedly remarking that "I could not get the ring without the finger", it is difficult to know whether to be horrified or to laugh.

Hill-Gibbins nods. "It's one of the reasons why the play's called *The Changeling*, I think, that fluidity. Even in the main plot there are sick, screwed-up jokes. And the subplot is comic, but also tragic. It's the old cliché, someone slipping on a banana skin – painful, but that's why it's funny."

Donnellan, who has probably staged more of these plays than any director living, sees a more serious purpose beneath their insouciant disregard for genre: the blurring of boundaries between right and wrong. "A really good horror reminds you that you're not just the victim; you're also the monster. *Psycho* is a great film because of the very subtle shifts of identification. You're not just the woman who is murdered in the shower, you're also the murderer. It's entertainment at the deepest level."

But "entertainment" comes at a price. These plays force us to look directly at taboos from which we naturally flinch. Female characters in particular are made to suffer to a degree now generally unimaginable: forbidden from attempting sexual independence, they are then tortured for daring

to resist. At times these texts have been seen as proto-feminist because they show women taking control of their own destinies – never more so than in the spine-tingling scene where the Duchess faces execution with an imperiousness that shames the men around her ("Tell my brothers," she coolly remarks, "that I perceive death, now I am well awake, / Best gift is they can give, or I can take"). Conversely, they have been written off as misogynistic, sadistic fantasies. Smith argues that the plays themselves can't seem to resolve the issue. "A lot of recent criticism has suggested that they are so multi-angular because they're documenting contemporary social uncertainties about what women are. Are these women remarkable and admirable, erotic and powerful, or shocking and terrible? They're both, and also neither."

Donnellan's own view has shifted over the years ('Tis Pity was the first play he directed, in 1980: a more straightforwardly feminist account, he admits, than their current one). "Malfi seems the cheapest of the plays, because it's watching men torture a woman to death all evening. But there's a lot of modern guilt in that reading. She and Annabella" – in 'Tis Pity – "are in impossible situations, but they do make decisions."

Still harder to assess is what these plays say about us now. They were rediscovered as psychological thrillers just as the writings of Freud began to take hold in Britain, before being punkily restaged by the counterculture that tore through theatre from the 1950s on. Between September 1978 and June 1979, as the government struggled with industrial unrest, uncollected rubbish and unburied corpses, there were no fewer than six professional stagings of *The Changeling* – so far a record. Is there an echo with the present? Does that play in particular speak to the fear of being trapped in never-ending crisis, that – as Beatrice worries of herself – we're in a "labyrinth" of own making?

Hill-Gibbins isn't convinced ("I'm not sure that the euro crisis has disturbed me so much that I've decided to put on a sex tragedy"), but Donnellan is at least willing to admit the idea that in troubled times we don't always yearn for feelgood entertainment. "I don't think we're getting any saner," he says, simply. "Nor do I think that these people are madder than we are."

Maybe in the end, too, the plays offer a kind of hope. Perhaps by observing such horrors, we escape the need to perform them for real. "It reminds us of madnesses that are present in all of us," Donnellan says. "Every so often it's important to empty our prisons and see who we've got locked up there. Even if it's just the prisons of our imagination."

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