

The Grotesque Body: Early Modern Representations of Women and the Subversion of the Elizabethan World Picture

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Abstract

It goes without saying that some mainstream playwrights of the Early Modern period contributed to the portrayal and sustenance of the Elizabethan world view through the metaphor of the body politic and popular beliefs in the Great Chain of Being and the interconnectivity between Microcosm and Macrocosm among other hegemonic practices. Yet, these same playwrights, whether wittingly or unwittingly, acknowledged the marginal status of women and their subversion of the pre-established patriarchal order through depictions of female bodies that resist, deconstruct and mutate what Mikhail Bakhtin called the closed body. In *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Changeling*, new bodies are constructed and reconstructed, created and recreated by means of varied strategies. Shakespeare, Kyd, Webster, Middleton and Rowley employ subversive languages, the unsexing of the female body, the appropriation of masculine roles, and other marginal discourses to express the net of socio-ideological contradictions that make possible a vast array of what I call grotesque bodies in the context of Early Modern England.

Key words: Early Modern drama, female body, marginal discourses, cultural materialism

Resumen

Es un hecho que dramaturgos de la época moderna temprana contribuyeron a pintar y sostener una visión del mundo isabelino a través de prácticas hegemónicas como la metáfora del cuerpo político, creencias en la Gran Cadena del Ser y la conexión entre el Microcosmos y el Macrocosmos.

Sin embargo, fueron estos mismos dramaturgos quienes consciente o inconscientemente reconocieron la marginalidad de la mujer y cómo estas subvirtieron el orden patriarcal través de representaciones de cuerpos femeninos que resisten, deconstruyen y transmutan lo que Mijaíl Bajtín denominó el “cuerpo cerrado.” En *Tito Andrónico*, *El rey Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *La tragedia española*, *La duquesa de Malfi* y *El sustituto*, nuevos cuerpos son construidos y reconstruidos, creados y recreados por medio de diversas estrategias. Shakespeare, Kyd, Webster, Middleton y Rowley emplean lenguajes subversivos, la desexualización del cuerpo de la mujer, la apropiación de papeles masculinos y discursos marginales para expresar la red de contradicciones socio-ideológicas que posibilitaron variadas manifestaciones de lo que este estudio define como cuerpos grotescos en la Inglaterra moderna temprana.

Palabras claves: drama de la Época Moderna Temprana, cuerpo femenino, discursos marginales, materialismo cultural

Despite the fact that to a certain extent playwrights such as Thomas Kyd, William Shakespeare, John Webster, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley contributed to portray and sustain the Elizabethan world view through the use of imagery and tropes about the political, theological and social hierarchies that fixed human beings to their proper places, an analysis of at least one of each playwright's plays in light of Cultural Materialist and Bakhtinian reflections will try to prove that whether wittingly or unwittingly they made a critique of the metaphor of the body politic in Renaissance England by means of their representations of transgressive bodies. In *The Body Politic*, David George Hale explains that “the comparison between society or the state and a human body retained its vitality because for a long time certain assumptions about man and the nature of the universe in which he lived were accepted without significant or effective challenge” (12). Indeed, beliefs in the Great Chain of Being and in the interconnectivity between Microcosm and Macrocosm were so deeply entrenched in the psyches of Renaissance men and women that ideas about human nature and social order circulating at the time were considered normal and accepted without much resistance. Thus, an analysis of the female body in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Changeling* will reveal that Kyd, Shakespeare, Webster, Middleton and Rowley acknowledged the marginal status of women in their society. In order to reveal the subversion of a pre-established patriarchal order four feminine strategies will be analyzed: speaking up, unsexing themselves, stepping into the masculine sphere, manipulating marginal discourses.

Categories of the body and the way the hegemonic group imposes a certain view on the masses constitute some points of intersection between Cultural Materialism and Bakhtinian Carnival as they both aim at exposing the very same ideology that makes the social subject accept an elitist world view naturally, in the case of Cultural Materialism, that ideology would be the Elizabethan world picture and, in the case of the carnivalesque, the world governed by monologic utterances. While for Cultural Materialists, there is “a net of dimly understood and contradictory social forces that shape one’s circumstances” as Frank Whigham puts it in “Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*” (181), for Bakhtin issues of bodily exposure and containment explain how both authority and transgression may coexist in the same space. In “Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism,” Dollimore claims that “repression emerges not because the subversive was always contained, subversion being a ruse of power to consolidate itself, but because the challenge really was unsettling,” thus, “subversive knowledge emerges under the pressure of contradictions in the dominant ideology” (34). In the same way, Greenblatt contends in “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion” that radical subversiveness manifests itself as a challenge to authority rather than in the attempt to seize it (19). Regarding this, the medieval image of the pregnant senile hag is a symbol that embodies not only the principles of Bakhtinian carnivalesque but also those of Cultural Materialism/New historicism: it embodies both the authority and its subversion, knowledge of political domination and gay deceit.

The language of some tragic heroines from the English Renaissance is the first subversive strategy that contributes to uncover the oppressive doings of the hegemonic group. The ideal of the submissive, voiceless woman seems to be depicted in the only daughter of Titus Andronicus’, Lavinia. The target of Tamora’s revenge against Titus, Lavinia is first ravished by the fallen Goth queen’s lascivious sons, Chiron and Demetrius, on what should have been a blissful honeymoon. Then, she is savagely maimed and silenced to prevent her from telling on them. Actually, Chiron and Demetrius’ defiling of the virtuous Lavinia’s body is a metaphor of the way hegemony operates to make the masses accept an ideology unquestionably: her body castrated from different angles—mouth, hands, honor, and ultimately, mind. However, Lavinia fights back with body language and ingeniously communicates her father, uncle, and nephew the name of her ravishers. First, she follows her nephew Lucius around, making Titus and Marcus suspect that she has a purpose other than harming or smothering the child with love. Then, she uses her stumps to point to the tale of Philomel in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. Like Philomel, Lavinia is raped and her tongue cut to prevent her from telling on the ravishers. Just as Philomel finds a way to denounce the crime by weaving a tapestry, so does Lavinia, aided by the remaining Andronici men, incriminates the offenders, thus sealing their fates.

TITUS ANDRONICUS: O, do ye read, my lord, what she hath writ?
 ‘Stuprum. Chiron. Demetrius.’ (4.1)

Tongueless and handless, she employs her stumps, arms, mouth, and her uncle's staff to voice her silencing. In having Lavinia identify Chiron and Demetrius as the profaners of her body, Shakespeare probably acknowledged his society's measures to keep the female body under patriarchal control and gives Lavinia an unusual way of voicing her anger and unconformity with the system: her own body. The final verdict is the biblical "life for life, *eye* for *eye*, tooth for tooth, hand for hand" (Ex. 21:23, 24). The perpetrators of the crimes on Lavinia's body pay with their own bodies as they are murdered and served to their mother in a bloody meal cooked by the restorer of Lavinia's and the family's honor, her father Titus Andronicus. Other tragic heroines who are used to conspicuously materialize the playwrights's awareness of female oppression are Cordelia and Ophelia.

King Lear's Cordelia has traditionally been analyzed as the only faithful daughter, angelical and observant of the rules of her society as she is the only one who does not try to exchange a few words spoken with falsity for her share of the kingdom. Her silence has been praised as a characteristic of virtuous women. However, it can be argued that Cordelia's language is highly subversive because far from having "that glib and oily art/to speak and purpose not," (1.1.226-27) she speaks only the truth. Her laconic and blunt answers to Lear's self-aggrandizement and desperate want of attention prove to be particularly disturbing to the fixed order that characterizes his court. While her sisters pretend to follow that order by dissembling a love they do not necessarily feel, Cordelia ironically demonstrates more filial love by refusing to deceive her father with slick words.

Goneril. Sir I love you more than word can wield/ the matter [. . .] (1.1.57)

Cordelia. [Aside] What shall Cordelia speak? Love,/ and be silent (64)

[.]

Regan. I am made of that same mettle as my sister. (71)

Cordelia. [Aside] Then poor Cordelia./And yet not so, since I am sure my love's/ More ponderous than my tongue (79-80)

Her silence first and then her plain words, however, have the effect of violating a conventional world where the strict observance of formalities is essential. Lear's "darker purpose" (1.1.31) and her sisters' "large speeches" (1.1.178) help sustain the ideology that keeps the balance of power in its proper place, but Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord" (1.1.81) and "no more no less" (1.1.87) dangerously step out of the boundaries of propriety. Her body then becomes a grotesque body as her mouth spills forth her innermost thoughts, thoughts that dangerously oppose and even threaten the artificial and contriving language of the court and of the ideology within.

In Ophelia's case, only when she becomes insane is she able to talk back to society using her own voice. The Ophelia who is manipulated by Polonius and Claudius avows the Elizabethan world picture with the elaborate language of the court. Despite Hamlet's outbursts of anger, rudeness, and foul language, she praises him: "O, what a noble mind is here overthrown! The courtier's, soldier's,

scholar's eye, tongue,/ sword; Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state" (3.1.151-162). Yet, it is precisely when her own mind is overthrown that she realizes that the ideal Renaissance man that Hamlet seemed to personify was an ideological misrepresentation. That could account for the new language that she adopts: the lowly speech of a wanton milkmaid and her untimely and simplistic outbursts. Despite the apparent eccentricities, her utterances prove to be highly disturbing as they reveal truths about the court and about her relationship to Hamlet. While she refuses to speak the logical linear language of patriarchy, which makes Laertes call her "a document in madness" (4.5.179), she, however, adopts nonlinear, illogical types of languages such as the symbolism of flowers and the bawdy. Her seemingly innocent distribution of flowers is aimed at supporting what Hamlet already implied with the dumb show, that Claudius did kill old Hamlet. Although it is unclear to whom she offers each type of flower, the corresponding symbolism should be used to solve the ambiguity:

Ophelia: There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

Laertes: A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted.

Ophelia: There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered when my father died. They say 'a made a good end. (4.5. 180-86)

Fennel and columbine seem to fit Claudius' flattery and lecherousness, but columbine could also refer to Gertrude's eagerness to marry Claudius only two months after becoming a widow. The rue is perhaps intended for both the king and the queen, who in Ophelia's logic should regret their actions. On the other hand, Ophelia's bawdy songs mock the seriousness of the court and, at the same time, uncover the unsettling truth about her relationship to Hamlet. She seems to be saying that they were not simple sweethearts but carnal lovers and that she, therefore, was not a virgin anymore:

Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
never departed more. (4.5.51-4)

Ophelia's candid verbalizations of her deflowering and of her father's untimely death make the court uneasy and, at the same time, serve to unmask the phallicies of an Elizabethan world picture that fixes social subjects to a determinate order that needs to remain undisturbed. These revelations along with her mocking tone and the inappropriateness of the songs' subject matter make her a Bakhtinian heroine of gay deceit, someone who speaks in unacceptable languages to distort acceptable ones.

Other tragic heroines like Lady Macbeth and Goneril choose to unsex themselves as a way to tip the balance of power in their favor but, paradoxically, without losing their femininity. That is, without stripping themselves of the traits that make them social constructs of women, both cross the boundaries that separate wife from husband and become active agents in the pursuit of their own ambitions. Afraid that her husband's nature "is too full o'th'milk of human kindness" (1.5.15) Lady Macbeth summons the "spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts" "to unsex [her]/ And fill [me] from the crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty! make thick [her] blood;/ Stop up the access and passage to remorse,/ That no compunctious visitings of nature/ Shake [her] fell purpose, nor keep peace between/ The effect and it! Come to [her] woman's breasts,/ And take [her] milk for gall" (1.5.38-47). Likewise, Goneril censures the "milky gentleness" (1.4.295) of Albany and, in the process, she is cursed with sterility:

LEAR: Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear:
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful.
Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her. . . . (1.4.230-235)

Besides, Lady Macbeth constantly alludes to Macbeth's manliness in her attempts to spite him and push him to seize the throne of Scotland, seemingly implying that she is more of a man than he is:

MACBETH: Prithee, peace:
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.
LADY MACBETH: What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. (1.7.46-51)

Macbeth contends that in being pushed to murder his king, he would be less of a man, but she argues back that it was his initial plan that gave them wings to dream of becoming Scotland's royal couple. She wily manipulates him into accepting the role of the man, which she implies, she is taking on while he makes up his mind. Although it could be argued that ambition is typically constructed as a masculine trait and that her ambition is one of the elements that trigger Macbeth's tragedy, she conventionally remains at his back, never taking a physical part in the murder. That is, she remains a woman in appearance and as such she cannot bring herself to stab Duncan. She actually gives what could pass as a stereotypically feminine excuse: that Duncan looks like her father,

thus, implying that she is a dutiful daughter. Like Lady Macbeth, Goneril is constantly emasculating her husband for being such a milk-livered man. Her ambition, like Lady Macbeth's pushes her to subvert the established order since in both cases the women trample one of the laws that sustain the Elizabethan world picture, the civil law that establishes the inviolability and sovereignty of the king/queen (Spencer). Likewise, although by metaphorically castrating her husband, Goneril becomes a strong female figure, her unsexing is merely depicted by Shakespeare as the loss of her procreating capacity. She does not lose her femininity or libido as she actually lusts after Edmond and skirmishes with her sister for him. That is, Lady Macbeth and Goneril transgress gender roles as social constructs, but they do not subvert what can be considered the male radius of action and never attain real power to even try to transform the ideological forces of society.

As opposed to Lady Macbeth and Goneril, Bel-Imperia, the Duchess of Malfi, and Beatrice-Joanna dare to step into the male sphere of action by taking control over the outer world. That is, they do transcend gender impositions. It could be argued that *The Spanish Tragedy* is the outcome of a woman's machinations, Bel-Imperia's. Her name is a mix of both the woman and the man inside her body, a beautiful darling, but also an imperious human being. Like the Duchess of Malfi and Beatrice-Joanna, Bel-Imperia has a say in who she wants to love. An inconstant woman, she soon forgets the death of her beloved Andrea in the arms of his friend Horatio, a man who in the eyes of her brother Lorenzo is socially unfit for her. Her infatuation with a new *beau*, Horatio, and her refusal to accept a matrimonial allegiance with Portugal and give birth to an heir to both royal houses prove to be a highly subversive behavior that must be curbed instantly. Worried about her willfulness, her uncle, the king of Spain, states during both courts' negotiations: "If she neglect [Balthazar] and forgo his love/ She both will wrong her own estate and ours [. . .]/ If she give back, all this will come to naught" (2.3.45-46, 50). Since she dares to defy patriarchal designs, her brother and her suitor treat her like an equal and savagely kill her current lover right before her eyes. However, faithful to the principles of women like Lavinia, Cordelia, and Ophelia, she denounces patriarchal injunctions and tells on Horatio's murderers, thus, gaining an ally to concoct her revenge against the oppressive patriarchal system. What seems to be Hieronymus' revenge of his son's murder is actually Bel-Imperia's carefully-thought plan to disclose the machinations of the state and of the royal family. Hers proves to be a Spanish tragedy in all its socio-political dimensions. In the process, two countries that were to become allies remain enemies and two royal dynasties await their extinction, as the heirs to the throne all perish in Bel-Imperia's revenge. In that sense, the Spanish tragedy becomes, not just the tragedy of a Spanish family, but the tragedy of a whole nation, and all because of a woman who dared to trespass the line separating men from women.

The Duchess of Malfi in the homonym play is able to transcend her gender's limitations as an aristocratic widow. The death of the Duke releases her from the relegated position of a wife and transforms her into a Prince that even

Bosola thinks is worthy to be served. Her initial acquiescence to her brothers' injunction of remarrying becomes a blatant rebellion when she marries Antonio shortly after her meeting with them. By cunningly hiding her new marital status, she keeps the power as the head of her estate and the unique position that only widows who did not depend on their kinsmen had. Besides, by marrying a man who is lower in the social scale and by keeping it a secret, she reverts gender roles and even steps into the sphere of male action. Not in vain is she called a prince rather than a princess, as an acknowledgement of her authority in Malfi. In boldly proposing Antonio to marry her, the duchess keeps an ambivalent position: Antonio's wife and mother to his children in the secrecy of the bedchamber, that is, in the domestic sphere, but Antonio's master (or rather mistress), lady of the castle, and ruler of Malfi to the rest of the world, that is, the outer world. Her duplicity proves to be too subversive to be handled by her brothers because even when her pregnancies are the gossip of society, she does not acknowledge her new status publicly, thus, making her children bastards in the eyes of the church. In this way, she subverts the interconnectedness of the social, political and theological realms of Elizabethan body politics.

Lastly, the fact that Middleton and Rowley choose Beatrice-Joanna to be a match to the villainy and treacherousness of De Flores signals an important change in the way body politics is conceived in late Jacobean times. As Michael Neill argues in his article "Hidden Malady: Death, Discovery and Indistinction in *The Changeling*," Beatrice-Joanna becomes the body and the consciousness to be possessed, in a Iago-like fashion, by De Flores (96). This is a significant revision of the status of women in Renaissance tragedies since she is elevated to the status of both heroine and villainess. Contrary to meeker heroines like Mariam, her most abominable sin is not pride or arrogance, but want of male power. This desire to do politics is, however, what also makes her a villainess in a play that inevitably sustains the Elizabethan world picture. With her inventive schemes and deviant mind she proves to be a fitting adversary to the patriarchal prohibitions voiced by Vermandero and Alsemero. Although her father is the head of the estate and tries to keep her virginity and honor at bay by giving her a respectable husband, she manages to get the intended husband, Alonzo Piracquo, killed, so that she could marry her new *beau*, Alsemero. In fact, Middleton and Rowley have her express, on the stage and in a Machiavellian manner, her desire to step on men's sphere:

BEATRICE. Would creation—

.....

BEATRICE. Had formed me man.

.....

BEATRICE. Oh, 'tis the soul of freedom!

I should not then be forced to marry one

I hate beyond all depths; I should have power

Then to oppose my loathings [. . .] (2.2.109-114)

When her first plan goes awry and De Flores demands her virginity as the price for disposing of Alonzo, Beatrice's treacherous mind designs yet another plan to fool Alsemero during the wedding night. Indeed, it is not until the end that Beatrice's dirty handling of politics surfaces and, even when it does, Beatrice still questions the conventionalities of patriarchal, monologic thought. She plays semantic games with Alsemero when questioned whether she is honest and gets offended when, enthroned in his male chauvinism, he fails to be sympathetic to a crime of passion that originated because of her love (or should we say, infatuation) for him:

ALSEMERO. None can so sure. Are you honest?

BEATRICE. Ha, ha, ha! That's a broad question, my lord.

In this conversation there are echoes of Hamlet and Ophelia's conversation about her honesty. While a submissive Ophelia denies the accusations of the prince of Denmark, Beatrice-Joanna does not and rather banters with the meaning of the word honest. In doing so she questions the notion of honesty and, in turn, the body politics of her time. Alsemero's is a broad question because there are other questions that need to be answered before asking. Who has the right to question whether a woman is "honest"? From whose point of view is someone "honest"? Can the term be applied to both men and women with the same significations and implications? Beatrice-Joanna's outburst is typical of a grotesque body. Unlike many other tragic heroines, Beatrice's fate is not an early death. She is the only woman in all the plays analyzed to survive until after the death of a major male character. For all these reasons, Beatrice-Joanna stands for what Dollimore calls "knowledge of political domination" a type of knowledge that "was challenging [because] it subverted, interrogated and undermined the ruling ideologies and helped precipitate them into crisis" (34).

In fact, *The Changeling* is a play that mimics the net of contradictions that take place at the socio-ideological level in Renaissance England. The asylum represents a microcosm of marginal voices that hover in the ideological universe that constitute what E. M. Tillyard called the Elizabethan world picture. The outcast voices of women who speak in unacceptable languages and cross the boundaries between men and women find a parallel in other marginal discourses like madness, witchcraft and the supernatural, and the speech of foreigners, the peasantry and the rabble, discourses that conspicuously appear, at varying degrees, in all the plays analyzed in this essay. Actually, at least one character becomes mad or feigns madness in those plays: Hieronymus, Titus Andronicus, Hamlet and Ophelia, Lear and Edgar, Lady Macbeth, Ferdinand, and Francisco and Antonio. In some plays, there are references to witchcraft and the supernatural. For example, the ghost in *Hamlet*, the witches and the ghosts of Duncan and Banquo in *Macbeth*, and lycanthropy in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Other pariah voices with great unsettling potential are those of Soliman and Perseda in Hieronymus' play within *The Spanish Tragedy* and those of Tamora, her sons, and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, or the caustic jokes of the fool, the feigned rustic dialect of Edgar,

and Kent's riff-raff talk in *King Lear*. Then, in all the plays, there are examples of what Bakhtin called the grotesque body: female bodies whose apertures prove to be threats to the stability of the social group. The unrestrained sexuality of women like Bel-Imperia, Tamora, Gertrude and Ophelia, Goneril and Regan, the Duchess of Malfi, and Beatrice-Joanna constitute an "othered" type of discourse with the potential power to disrupt the patriarchal system.

One final point consideration is the nature of the theater and its role in reproducing and transmitting both the Elizabethan world picture and its contravention. The marginal nature of the theater perhaps lies in the belief (from some social sectors during the Renaissance) that actors were linked to corruption, licentiousness, and even homosexuality. David Scott Kastan and Jonathan Dollimore discuss the potentially disruptive nature of the theater as they analyze gender and social cross-dressing. In "Is there a Class In This (Shakespearean) Text?," Kastan claims that "if role-playing intellectually challenged the would-be stable and stabilizing social hierarchy, the role players were themselves perhaps a greater social threat. If the actors' ability to represent a full range of social roles disturbingly identified these *as* roles, the actors' conspicuous existence in society exposed the instability of the social categories themselves" (7). That is, actors did not necessarily enact realities of the time, but a filtered, fabricated view of life in the English Renaissance, and worse of all, they were exposing this knowledge to thousands of spectators, many of whom would go home having a grasp of the inner workings of the dominant ideology. In this regard, Dollimore claims that "Cross-dressing epitomizes the strategy of transgressive reinscription, whereby, rather than seeking to transcend the dominant structures responsible for oppression and exclusion, the subject or subculture turns back upon them, inverting and perverting them" (35). In our plays, many are the characters who metaphorically cross-dress. Just as men played the parts of women in early modern theater, Lady Macbeth, Goneril, Bel-Imperia, the Duchess of Malfi, and Beatrice-Joanna all appropriate the roles of men in varying degrees. However, they do not have to disguise as men but use what I called feminine strategies earlier, and in doing so, they end up mocking and carnivalizing structures of power. It is perhaps Beatrice-Joanna the one who best reproduces this model of inversion and perversion of dominant structures as she can distort the truth, quickly come up with devious schemes, and fool all those around her except De Flores. That is, she can deftly move from one role to another, just like actors in the theater. In fact, she epitomizes Shakespeare's assertion that "one man in his time plays many parts" (*As You Like It* 2.7.142).

Despite their role in crucial revelations and in transgressive acts, tragic heroines are doomed to die muted like Lavinia. Nonetheless, saying that most women at the heart of early modern tragedies find an untimely death because they are objectified by patriarchy would be oversimplifying their vital role in the ways that body politics is conceived at the time and in the ways in which the Elizabethan world picture is both sustained and transgressed in the plays. To put it in the language of some of the playwrights analyzed: Is "All the world [. . .] a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players"? (*As You Like It*

2.7.139-140), are we “merely the stars’ tennis-balls, struck and banded/ Which way please them”? (*The Duchess of Malfi* 5.4.54-55), are we “As flies to wanton boys [. . .] to the gods”? (*King Lear* 4.1.36). Indeed, the Renaissance man and woman were part of a carefully designed cosmic, theological, and ideological plan. But were Kyd, Shakespeare, Webster, Middleton and Rowley simply recording the hegemonic forces at play in their societies? Or were they manifesting increasingly deviant types of thinking meant not to revolutionize society but to express popular unrest?

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