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Tudor Domestic Theatre: In Search of Political Consent through Folly

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In late medieval and Renaissance England, indoor dramatic presentation in the banquet-halls or great chambers of the nobility was a very popular kind of festive pastime. This paper is devoted to one of the most notable of early Tudor dramatic practices, the interlude, intended especially for playing in the great hall of a royal palace or noble manor house. Tudor domestic theatre as a means of relieving social strain through performance will be my principal concern.

When elucidating such issues as the social and cultural milieu of dramatic practice in England in the years 1485-1603, researchers highlight the peculiar setting of the interlude, which distinguished it from the other types of theatrical presentations of the epoch. It was a form designed for performance in a banquet-hall or great chamber during various kinds of festivities. For this reason, the introductory part of this paper will deal with the main physical parameters of the Tudor hall.

The spatial organisation of the hall created particular conditions for acting interludes. Among the basic features of great halls in Renaissance England, the absence of any kind of physical division between players and audience should be mentioned. There was no stage in the Tudor nobility's great chambers, and the whole interior of the banquet hall served as the dynamic performing area, with no distinction between stage and auditorium

structures. According to the theatrical records of this period, indoor performances usually took place in the centre of the hall, with the spectators grouped around (standing or sitting on four sides of the playing space). Some great halls had a sort of raised area or dais at one end, upon which the king or the master of the house, together with his honoured company, dined. From this place they watched the performance. The sovereign's or the master's seat could sometimes serve as one of "the focal points for the staging".[1] Actors could even apply to the patron with a request to resolve the conflict of the play.

At the other end of the hall, there were entrances to the kitchen and other service or private rooms, which were separated from the hall itself by a special partition, usually referred to as the Screens.[2] It was around the entrances and exits that the lower-status household members crowded while watching the performance. Popular audience members could also be standing at the doors in the side aisles behind tables placed alongside the walls on both sides, extending forward from the head table. In such a way, the banquet hall space was divided into a number of auditorium segments meant for different strata of the community, a practice which reflected the hierarchy of Tudor society. With representatives of different social groups and layers as the viewers at the banquet hall, the indoor performance—though located in noble premises—was not a presentation of "a closed type" aimed at a selected audience. On the contrary, it was obviously addressed to the whole community.

Being associated with festive ceremony, "household drama" was usually played on occasions of seasonal revelry (Christmas, Shrovetide, etc.), visits by honourable guests, personal celebrations or other festivities. This explains the evident entertainment function of household performance. The earliest record of the attempt to unite English secular drama with the Roman tradition of banquet entertainments goes back to about 1300. The English play *Interludium de Clerico et Puella* is considered to have been created at this time.

Given the idea of the interlude as an important component part of banquets in Tudor England, some scholars relate the origin of this Latin term to "entertainment between courses".[3] An illustration of this idea can be found in John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*. One of the interlude's characters—namely,

1 According to the analysis of Hattaway, p. 17.
2 See Walker, *Politics*, p. 301, and Bevington, p. 91.
3 See Westfall, p. 42.

the Boy—proclaims that his godfather, God Almyghty, "was come from Heven … /This night to suppe here with my lord" (Heywood, ll. 1026-27). So, one can assume that the performance took place between the parts of the banquet party. This is not necessarily proof of the term's origin. In many contemporary studies, "interlude" comes merely to be synonymous with "pastime" or "play", and perhaps the safest definition is still that given by E. K. Chambers in his fundamental study, *The Medieval Stage* (1903). In his view, the term refers to "the play between two or more speakers" (cited in Axton, Introduction, p. 2).

Whatever the direct etymology of the term might be, in Tudor England interludes presented dramatic pieces, basically secular in nature, incorporated into the feast as a break between the courses. They were structurally similar to other entertainments (dancing, musical performance, circus acts, etc.). Many of them preserve a sense of the occasion and are distinguished by a convivial and relaxed mood. At a time when religious drama was skilfully used as "a means of promulgating moral or theological opinions" (Nicoll, p. 43), the interlude reflected on topical, mainly secular, problems of the day that concerned individuals as members of society. On the other hand, the interlude, because of its "unusual freedom in construction and theatrical illusion" (Craik, p. 45), can also be contrasted with the formal tradition of Roman comedy with its classic regularity and compositional decorum.

Having surveyed the conventions of the venue of Tudor household presentation (that is, the hall layout, the social composition of the audience, the general atmosphere of the play) in the first part of this paper, I will go on to consider the distinctive role the Tudor hall theatre played in the political discourse of the epoch. Early modern English indoor drama was characterised by some special playing strategies that proved essential for the moulding of the interlude genre. These strategies at the same time provided conditions for rewarding exchanges of opinion between different interest groups in the Tudor political arena.

Since there was no formal division between the space of the players and that of the audience (no specific stage or auditorium space, no tiring rooms for the troupe members, almost no scenery), all the hall was used as a playing area. Early Tudor playwrights soon learned to make use of these distinctive staging conditions, available in great halls, for achieving special dramatic effects in their plays, one of them being the intimate atmosphere within the playing space. This feeling of unifying complicity, typical of Tudor household plays, was obviously engendered by the playing venue itself. Jean-Paul Débax characterises the Tudor hall

playing space as "transformable, plastique, protéiforme, à l'intérieur de ce cadre familier" ("Deux fonctionnements", p. 19) in a way that enabled constant play upon proximity and remoteness. Scenes of "serious content" were played out at the distant Screens, while broadly entertaining episodes were located closer to the hall centre. This technique of alternating distances helped greatly in establishing the intimate atmosphere in Tudor interludes, which Débax calls "un théâtre de l'intimité" ("Deux fonctionnements", p. 19). The practice of interposing the Vice's tricks into the main serious plot illustrates the "blithely undecorous mingling of hornpipes and funerals" (Russell, p. 110) in household theatre.This remained one of the principal devices of later Shakespearean drama.

The sense of complicity was only intensified when performers in hall presentations stepped out of the audience and began an action, "putting on" their roles in sight of the spectators.[4] Their acting consisted mainly in gesturing to one another, or exchanging remarks as if at a casual encounter. As soon as they started the play, the interlude performers got on familiar terms with the viewers. For in Tudor interludes the playing potential was implemented, not only through the dramatic interaction between the characters, but also in the relations between performers and spectators. Characters would address spectators with their asides, exchanging quibbles with viewers in the course of performing, thus drawing them into the play-world. In the extant texts of Tudor interludes there can be found numerous appeals to spectators: "A, for Goddis will / What meane ye, syrs, to stond so still?" (Medwall, ll. 1-2); "How say ye, gode women? Is it your gyse / To chose all your husbondis that wyse?" (ll. 2278-79); "All men beware of suche folys!" (Skelton, l. 1264); "Now syrs, take hede, for here comth goddess servaunt" (Heywood, l. 186); "Stande ye mery, my frendes, everychone!" (l. 220); "All you bere recorde what favour I have" (l. 476). These examples give an impression of the devices used to involve the audience in close association with the actors. Tudor hall performers were the descendants of "those individual artists of the Middle Ages, strolling actors, musicians, fools, tumblers, and jugglers, who made a living moving from house to house, fair to fair" (Hattaway, p. 19). From their predecessors, early Tudor writers and performers inherited a taste for improvisation, and they used this device actively in the dynamic process of interacting with the audience.

Such close and dynamic interaction between the participants in the hall presentation created a basis for touching upon acutely topical issues of Tudor

4 See Hattaway, p. 21.

social and political life in domestic productions. The very chance in hall interludes to voice one's thoughts, to convey various (not infrequently contrasting) ideas, to play out opinions of different social or interest groups, to imagine possible consequences of actual or merely contrived events and the decisions of the authorities—this is in itself a very effective means of rendering less sensitive the problems under discussion. Domestic drama obviously could not have contributed to either the reconciliation of conflicting groups or the formulation of political decisions in the times of the Tudor monarchy if it had not been for the authorities' openness to dialogue.[5]

Active engagement with the audience was especially characteristic of what has been categorised as the "Vice function" or "Vice effect" (Débax, "Complicity", p. 33). The Theatre of Vice can be considered as the main dramatic principle of many English fifteenth- and sixteenth-century interludes. Vice figures were endowed with different names because multiple flaws or negative features of human nature could be demonstrated through them. This character was capable of arousing the public's laughter by bringing into derision everything and everyone around him (Débax, "Deux fonctionnements", p. 16). In Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece,* for instance, this role is attributed to the pair of servants named A and B. It is Jupiter's crier, Mery Report, that functions as the figure of misrule in Heywood's *The Play of the Weather*. He is, at the same time, the play's master of ceremonies, controlling the acting space as an intermediary not only between the characters but between the acting space and the audience as well. In such interludes as *Magnyfycence* (by John Skelton) or *Respublica* (attributed to Nicholas Udall), it is not single characters but whole bands of rogues who fulfil the Vice function. It is of interest that the tonality of the Vice's jokes depended upon their addressee: they could be decent or vulgar in their appeal. The playwrights who composed indoor presentations were clearly mindful of this differentiated audience in Tudor great chambers and banquet halls. The Vices used their undignified quips to seek comradeship with the low-status public, while the serious moral sentiments were addressed to the patrons and their guests (Walker, *Politics*, p. 301). Thus dramatists of the period were expected to take into account various tastes, intending the same piece for the instruction and delight of different social classes. It is noteworthy that the Vice character in Tudor interludes appears to be a recognisable representative of folk comic tradition, thus establishing a line of descent from English medieval popular theatre to early modern drama.

5 See Walker, *Early Tudor Drama*, *passim*.

The conciliatory nature of laughter, hence its role in upholding the social hierarchy, has often been considered in studies of medieval and early modern literature. I would like to stress the awareness of the uniting function of laughter that the authors of domestic drama manifested in their interludes. The subjects' laughing in their principal's presence, together with the principal himself laughing, could not but engender special "playful affinity" (Walker, *Early Tudor Drama*, p. 89) with the hall drama audience. The presence in interludes of a Vice function whose main responsibility was to provoke laughter clearly shows how much writers and performers of domestic theatre relied upon laughter's relaxing effect in their productions.

The interaction with spectators in Tudor interludes contributed to dissolving even further the vague boundaries between the dramatic fictive illusion and the real world. Since the performance space itself suggested no illusion of place, playwrights made no attempt to sustain the fictive bounds of the staging. As Michael Hattaway observes, "entertainments of this kind preclude any dramatic verisimilitude based on illusion" (p. 17). Thus, in Tudor interludes generally, the dramatic strategy is not aimed at constructing a play-world continuum, parallel to the real world. On the contrary, in many cases, indoor presentations give us a clear example of the original interpenetration of the two different worlds—that of the play and that of reality. Because of "the free-and-easy commerce between reality and make-believe" (Craik, p. 42), interludes proved ready to respond to current social problems, to reflect the concerns and preoccupations of the community that produced them.

For the Tudor audience, theatrical presentation was the most powerful means of mass communication available (probably comparable to today's Internet, though mainly located within the confines of one community). Every more or less significant event from the political, economical or cultural spheres of social life could become the focus of the playwrights' attention. The Tudor hall audience was a mirror image of the English community of that period, with the whole variety of interests and aspirations of the main social groups represented there. Theatrical ventures reflected widely on the political and ideological tendencies of the epoch, making topical use of current events and thus drawing connections between dramatic presentation and the everyday world.[6] As Robert Godfrey shows in his article on "Nervous laughter in Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres*", the interlude by Cardinal Morton's chaplain contains a possible allusion

6 See Микеладзе.

to the marriage of the king's sister—Mary Tudor—to Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. When choosing between two suitors, the Roman senator's daughter Lucres preferred the one who proved to be virtuous by his deeds, and not by his origin and titles. In such a way, the play was probably intended to reconcile the king to Princess Mary's choice, thus playing quite a risky role in court intrigue.

Another prominent representative of the early Tudor group of playwrights, John Heywood, who was the chief maker of interludes at Henry VIII's court, issued a caution against the possible political and religious consequences of the monarch's being granted the title of Supreme Head of the Church. There is a distinct call for tolerance in the face of social and religious divisions in Heywood's *The Play of the Weather* and *The Four PP*. Both interludes also contain some innuendos concerning the king's private life. When Prince Lucifer of *The Four PP* complained of two women giving him more trouble than all the souls in hell, the spectators could not but think of the two women closely connected with the king at that time—Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn.[7] These are just a few illustrations of the strong political engagement of English household drama of the period. Tudor hall performance was an effective means of information exchange in both horizontal and vertical ways, with the highest as well as the lowest levels of the social hierarchy involved in the communication process. The acute topicality of household staging and its leading role in organising information exchange within the society would be inherited by the later Elizabethan drama.

As one of the vectors of the communication process in early Tudor society, domestic drama made its contribution to sustaining the balance within "the political ecosystem" (Walker, *Early Tudor Drama*, p. 88) that the Henrician court comprised. The involvement of the hall interludes' participants—both performers and audiences—in the communication process enhanced their civil consciousness and invited them to share the responsibility for their rulers crucial choices. Probably this feeling of responsibility, or of influence on the political events of the time, was often so tenuous that it was hardly sensed at all. Besides, representatives of different segments of this process at different levels would have felt involved in it to varying degrees. Still, the very participation of all parties in the topical information exchange provided by domestic theatre undoubtedly made them more concerned about the social and political situations of the day and more ready to assume various opinions and views.

7 See Axton, "Narrative", p. 55.

Tudor household performance was a novel and distinctive type of theatrical experience that in many aspects anticipated Elizabethan theatre, comedy in particular. It was a phenomenon starkly contrasting with the "elaborate spectacle or exact illusion that modern expensive and technologically equipped theatres arouse" (Hattaway, p. 23). Yet it remains an elusive phenomenon. There is still a need to rediscover the particular aesthetics of early Tudor dramatic practices.

The role of domestic theatre in Tudor political discourse will certainly be the focus of further studies in early Tudor drama. Its function in the process of social communication was no less determinative for working out the principal artistic strategies of household drama than were the entertaining and didactic purposes of the genre.

As has been shown in this paper, the dramaturgy of Tudor hall presentation was influenced considerably by the conditions of staging. These include the non-discursive playing area, which united the performers with the stratified audience. Intimacy and spontaneity as the interlude's basic playing strategies contributed greatly to establishing dialogue between the society and its ruling elite, to transmitting political ideas and to forming attitudes to them. The playful, festive atmosphere of household presentations, encouraged by the prominent role within them of laughter-provoking devices, contributed to turning Tudor domestic theatre into a kind of polyphonic performance area, where the positions of various interest groups could be voiced and heard. Directing and playing out different political ideas and views in interludes, as well as suggesting ways out of dangerous situations, helped to neutralise conflicts in the early Tudor community.

In the process of performing, the entire Tudor hall space was turned into the playing area. In this way, the idea of Tudor household drama transports us to a time when the entire world could really be considered a stage, without resorting to metaphor. Acting out one's fate in real life or living out one's role in a theatrical presentation (even if as a viewer) would have carried similar emotional and intellectual intensity for an early modern human being. Thus, seeing problems solved and decisions taken in household drama could serve, at least for a certain time, to reconcile him with the physical reality around him. Appealing to the tastes of a wide audience and representing the views of different interest groups of Tudor society in a fictional, fanciful way, the domestic theatre functioned as an effective instrument of conciliation.

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