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Musique et Polar

Music and the “Jacobean Thriller”

Chantal Schütz

RÉSUMÉ. Il est devenu coutumier parmi les critiques dramatiques anglophones d’appliquer des termes comme celui de « thriller » aux tragédies de la période jacobéenne. Bien qu’anachronique, cette catégorisation offre un cadre interprétatif que le présent article applique à l’emploi de la musique dans la *Tragédie du Vengeur* (*The Revenger’s Tragedy*, 1606) et *Femmes gare aux femmes* (*Women Beware Women*, 1621) de Middleton ainsi que la *Tragédie de la jeune fille* de Beaumont et Fletcher (*The Maid’s Tragedy*, 1610). Dans chacune de ces pièces, la représentation d’un masque de cour sert à dissimuler des meurtres tout en révélant la corruption qui y règne dans cette cour. Traitée en instrument de dérision, la musique clame son pouvoir surnaturel tout en révélant le cynisme de ceux qui la mettent en œuvre. En contrepoint, néanmoins, s’élève parfois le chant individué d’un personnage innocent et sacrifié, dernier refuge face à la clameur des meurtres en série qui viennent clore le drame.

ABSTRACT. *Jacobean tragedies are often labelled “thrillers” by reviewers of recent stage productions. This categorization, although anachronistic, offers an interpretative framework that this article seeks to apply to the use of music in Thomas Middleton’s tragedies The Revenger’s Tragedy (1606) and Women Beware Women (1621) and Beaumont and Fletcher’s The Maid’s Tragedy (1610). In each of these plays, elaborate court masques are used simultaneously to conceal crime and to reveal corruption. Music also serves as a counterpoint to the violence enacted on stage by way of its pervasive imagery on the one hand, and on the other hand through the insertion of poignant songs that briefly suspend the unfurling chain of murders and revenge.*

MOTS CLÉS : *masque, vengeance, viol, Thomas Middleton, Francis Beaumont, Lucy Bailey*

KEYWORDS: *masque, revenge, rape, Thomas Middleton, Francis Beaumont, Lucy Bailey*

While Jacobean tragedy has long been associated with extreme violence, lust and ambition, it has only recently become commonplace for program notes and reviews of *The Revenger's Tragedy* or *Women Beware Women* to present these plays as “Jacobean thrillers”.¹ Already in 1965, Gamini Salgado had drawn a comparison between Jacobean tragedies and the modern thriller in his introduction to *Three Jacobean Tragedies*, highlighting several points of resemblance between them, such as the central themes of crime and violence, but also the interest in the “sheer mechanics of mayhem, the means by which violent crimes or misdeeds are committed,” including the graphic details attendant on the staging of stabbing, poisoning or mutilation (Salgado 15). More recently, when the Globe Theatre staged Beaumont and Fletcher’s seldom performed play, *The Maid's Tragedy*, in London in 1997, director Lucy Bailey promoted it as a “modern erotic thriller” (Gross) and the notion was embraced by critics, who likened it to a Tarantino movie in view of its combination of gore and macabre humour (Gardner), its interlacing of sexual tension and naked ambition with suspense and unexpected plot-twists.

Thus, while this categorization can be regarded as anachronistic, it does help to underline the relevance of these plays to our modern world, even though some of the issues they address, such as regicide, may seem somewhat dated. Fittingly, in recent productions, the plays have often been performed in modern dress, set against mafia-inspired backdrops. In the three aforementioned revenge plays, music plays an essential role by way of the performance of a court masque, a highly codified ritual that resonates throughout the entire play, whether it occurs at the beginning, as in Beaumont and Fletcher’s tragi-comedy, or at the end, as in Middleton’s two tragedies. Hence, after having argued that these plays can indeed be considered as thrillers, I will examine the way the performance of music is subverted to reveal the corruption and loss of values of the society that commissions it. But music is not only performed in these plays, it also pervades the language of some characters, reaffirming the power of harmony in individuals while repudiating its manipulation through social events and entertainments.

Jacobean thrillers?

Defining what constitutes a thriller is notoriously difficult given the many different strands that the genre includes – detective novels, thrillers, serial killer fiction, etc. The subgenre that Jacobean tragedy most closely resembles is the “the *noir* thriller, where we identify with protagonists who consciously exceed the law. This group extends from classical tragedy to ambivalent celebrations of criminal milieux to more individualized studies of transgression” (Priestman 33). *Hamlet* and *Richard III* are frequently invoked as models for modern crime fiction, the former because it stages a form of investigation into a murder that took place before the

¹ “*The Revenger's Tragedy*, a Jacobean thriller written a few years after *Hamlet*, is a searing examination of the need for justice and the desire for vengeance: <https://www.redbulltheater.com/the-revengers-tragedy>; see also Lyn Gardner’s review of the 2012 Hoxton Hall production: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/17/the-revengers-tragedy-review>.

action began, the latter because it focuses on an evil master-mind’s rise to power through murder, corruption and treachery. Revenge tragedies may thus be considered in retrospect as “Jacobean thrillers” since there are numerous aesthetic parallels between them and *noir* fiction, as identified by Salgado, who notes that revenge tragedies enjoyed “the same kind of universal popularity that the thriller has in ours” (Salgado 18).

There is no single model for modern day thrillers, any more than there was for revenge tragedies, but many involve studies of the effect of extreme and often random violence on the moral standing of their characters, as well as psychological analyses of criminal minds. They often feature ominous female characters of great beauty and mystery, the “femme fatale” whose motivations often remain unaccounted for. And they are concerned with the chains of events that lead to crime, especially in detective novels where the aim is to reconstitute the sequence and reasons for these acts. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606), *The Maid’s Tragedy* (1610), and *Women Beware Women* (1620-24) share several of these hallmarks: all three plays feature a relentless drive towards a conclusion involving betrayal, revenge and murder.

In each of them, the chain of actions is set off by a primal crime: *The Revenger’s Tragedy* stages the revenge carried out by Vindice in retaliation for the rape and murder of his betrothed by the Duke nine years before the action begins; the drama of *The Maid’s Tragedy* unfolds because the King has seduced the general’s sister Evadne well before the beginning of the play, and married her off to the general’s best friend just as the play begins. In *Women Beware Women*, Bianca, a young Venetian, has eloped with a Florentine, Leantio, just before the beginning of the play and is raped before the end of act II by the Duke of Florence (Dawson 304). Bianca and Evadne can both be considered as “femmes fatales” as much as victims since they take advantage of their seducer’s position to rise to power, simultaneously making fools of their respective husbands. However, the most prominent “femme fatale” is clearly Livia, the alluring, scheming widow who deceives not only Bianca but most of the other characters in *Women Beware Women*. Livia is a criminal mastermind whose hubris causes her downfall, as are Vindice (*Revenger’s tragedy*), who boasts of his successful revenge only to be carried off to his punishment, and the King (*Maid’s Tragedy*), who is ultimately murdered by his mistress, Evadne.

A defining characteristic of all three plays is the moral ambivalence of the protagonists: Vindice is clever and has legitimate reason to want revenge (as his name suggests), but he becomes a criminal in the process and is punished by the new ruler he has contributed to bringing to power. Evadne redeems her lost honour by killing the king but becomes a regicide and is rejected by her husband, which leads her to suicide. Bianca accepts the role of official mistress of the man who raped her but ends up trying to poison his brother, in order to secure legitimation through a wedding with her lover the Duke. Following a series of botched revenges attempted on the same day by the various characters who have been wronged or betrayed in the course of the play, Bianca ends up committing suicide after having mistakenly poisoned her own betrothed. Plot twists and unexpected turns are thus

fundamental to the structure of all three plays. They involve mistaken murders, as when the sons of the Duke in *The Revenger's Tragedy* organize what they think will be the execution of their rival step-brother but have their younger brother killed instead.

The final scenes of both *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women* stage a series of embedded assassinations where killers are outwitted by other killers and ploys malfunction or are subverted. *The Maid's Tragedy* repeatedly baffles audience expectations: first when Evadne reveals to her bridegroom that she has no intention of consummating the marriage, given that she is the king's mistress; then when she is persuaded by her brother Melantius to avenge her honour and kill the king; and finally, when she is rejected by her husband and commits suicide. Above all, those three plays captivate and *thrill* audiences through fear, excitement, and anticipation: will Livia's wiles be discovered? Will Evadne kill the king and get away with it? Will Vindice achieve justice without getting caught?

In keeping with the moral framework of early modern tragedy, the plays all conclude with an apparent return to order when the "villains" are punished, but in the process, what has been revealed is the lust, ambition, corruption, violence and hypocrisy of those who are supposed to represent authority. This is where music and its staging come into play: music in these plays is not only an image or a textual effort, it is part of the performance and in some cases literally drives the criminal events because it makes them possible by concealing them.

The masques

In the three plays under study, music is diegetically intertwined with the action in the court masques that each of them stages at decisive moments. It should be clear that masques were a self-standing genre of their own, that Jacobean dramatists began importing into their plays, especially Revenge tragedies, due to their importance at court. The performance of court masques had begun in the Elizabethan period, but they became a staple of the Jacobean period: starting in 1604, they became obligatory for most important festivals (Twelfth Night, Shrovetide, royal and princely weddings, the coming of age of princes etc.). Inspired by Italian *intermedi* and French *ballets de cour*, these masques combined text, music, dance and elaborate designs and costumes to celebrate, at vast expense, the wisdom of rulers or the joys of hymen. The most famous of these were devised jointly by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. Starting in 1609, Ben Jonson introduced an episode called the antimasque that provided a form of comic relief or subversive counterpoint to the more formal celebrations of the actual masque. The characters of the masque would typically be allegorical or mythological figures such as Flora, Apollo and other classical gods and goddesses, whereas the antimasques staged devils, witches, monsters, wild men or other disruptive allegories such as winds or hurricanes. The godlike figures' task would accordingly be presented as a restoration of harmony and peace to the world perturbed by the antimasquers. The antimasque would typically feature "dismal" or "howling" music to underline the wildness of

the characters (as in “O let us howl some heavy note,” the song performed in the masque of madmen embedded in Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*), whereas the masque proper would feature more harmonious numbers. However, contrary to the French custom, most masques were published without the pertaining music, and it has taken years of painstaking work by various scholars to gather and ascribe the songs and dances that were used in those events (Walls, Taylor and Sabol). Suffice it to say that the songs and dances of a single masque were not necessarily the work of the same composer, and that they were not characterized by the same artistic ambition as the textual and architectural components of these entertainments, although composer of distinction such as Thomas Campion or Nicholas Lanier were frequent contributors.

Masques were not operas, they were designed to entertain and impress, not to move and touch. Their transience formed an integral part of their meaning: a display of magnificence not destined to leave a material trace because it was reserved for the elite, those who had had the privilege of “being there.” However, they were predicated on interpretations of music that conformed to the neo-platonic notions that prevailed during the Renaissance and formed the core of academic teaching of the subject. According to this theory, as formulated by Boethius, the concord of numerous sounds results in harmony, whose proportions reflect the motion of the stars. The music of the spheres (*musica mundana*) constitutes a celestial harmony that humans cannot hear, unlike the “empirical” music that is produced by instruments or voices. Between the two, *musica humana* unites the body and soul in a harmonious whole. The principle of correspondence between human and celestial harmony was fundamental to the design of masques, since they were meant to celebrate and reinforce the legitimacy of the rulers who commissioned them, or for whom they were organised by courtiers eager to obtain favour: “In the Stuart masque, as in other European festivals, neoplatonic concepts were central to the uniting of music, design and words” (Lindley 52). Accordingly, even though the masques in the three plays under study do not feature songs that directly praise the Duke or King, the mere inclusion of music would have made it clear to audiences of the period that the underlying message conveyed by the entertainment was that the ruler enabled concord, in other words guaranteed peace, and maintained harmony by governing in the best possible way: the music and dance of the masque aims to be a model of the peaceful, ordered commonwealth (Walls 304). Thus, in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, the masque celebrates both the nuptials of Amintor and Evadne, and the victories of Melantius, Evadne’s brother and Amintor’s mentor, in the service of the King.

Yet the wedding masque in *The Maid’s Tragedy* is debunked even before it begins by a courtier, Strato, who cynically states that masques “must commend, and speak in praise of the assembly, bless the bride and groom in person of some god: they’re tied to rules of flattery” (I.1.7). Here Strato acts as a choric character, both part and observer/spectator of the action, and he provides a distanced and critical comment about it. The choric character, positioned midway between the writer of the fiction and the characters in it, proposes a redefinition of the conventional medium of the masque. His line also reveals how much the conventional associations of music with

good government were being challenged in Jacobean society. Caroline Baird notes that, both in *The Maid's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*, “the mere inclusion of a wedding masque signals that the marriage is doomed before it begins” (Baird 73). And Lynda Phyllis Austern points out that in Middleton’s plays, “music [...] often draws attention to a lack of concentric harmony from the world of human action through a broken body politic to distant, uncaring celestial spheres”, adding that he revels in an “ironic juxtaposition of sounding harmony with a tableau of mayhem and destruction” (Austern 192).

Real masques were extended events that could last many hours and were often followed without a formal transition by dancing and reveling. Including a masque in a performance at a public playhouse meant severely paring it down to make it fit into the two or three hours they lasted on average (Erne 136-137). Given that masques were usually designed as a diptych involving an antimasque and a more serious second part that functioned as a restoration of harmony against the chaos of the antimasque, it was sometimes necessary to conflate masque and anti-masque or to dispense with one of them (as in *The Duchess of Malfi*). The masque in *The Maid's Tragedy* is actually quite extended but given that the overall effect is that the finality of the conventional masque is subverted, it could in fact be considered as an antimasque. Indeed, the masque in *The Maid's Tragedy* completely reverses the normal patterns of flattery, giving agency to Night over Sun, to chaos (embodied by the wind god Boreas, who breaks his chains and interrupts the entertainment) over harmony, and to lust over love, thanks to songs that praise carnal love, in the conspicuous absence of the allegorical character of Hymen. The second song especially foregrounds murder by associating sex, violence, confinement and death:

Hold back thy hours, dark Night, till we have done;
The day will come too soon.
Young maids will curse thee if thou stealst away,
And leav'st their blushes open to the day.
Stay, stay, and hide
The blushes of the bride.
Stay, gentle Night, and with thy darkness cover
The kisses of her lover;
Stay and confound her tears and her shrill cryings,
Her weak denials, vows, and often dyings;
Stay, and hide all,
But help not though she call. (*The Maid's Tragedy* I.2. 229-240)

This apology of rape is echoed in the masque that concludes *Women Beware Women* in celebration of a wedding that originated with a violent seduction scene and a relationship that was consolidated through murder (the marriage is made possible because Leantio, Bianca’s husband, has been killed at the Duke’s behest by Hippolito). The masque derisively juxtaposes its praise of love and felicitous harmony with a series of botched assassinations. Cupids shower Hippolito with poisoned arrows, directed by Livia who is playing Juno Pronuba, the goddess of

faithful marriage. Not only do the deities of love carry out a murder, but the choice of Livia’s masque persona proves particularly ironic, since she has masterminded three sets of adulterous relationships (including her own with Leantio). The irony is not lost on Isabella who underlines it when she decides to poison Livia with the venomous fumes of a stage sacrifice, and thus to “teach a sinful bawd to play a goddess” (*Women Beware Women* IV.2.226).

Contrary to the entertainment in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, which is performed as planned but belied by the unsatisfying wedding night that immediately follows, the masques of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women* are exploited by the different plotters to conceal murder and revenge: in the latter, the irony derives from the fact that several of the characters are performers in the masque and thus simultaneously sing or dance and kill each other. The aristocratic onlookers are drawn into the musical action by way of an unscripted antimasque, organized by Bianca in order to poison her brother-in-law the cardinal. Three pages dressed as Hebe, Hymen and Ganymede “dance a short dance” (*Women Beware Women* IV.2.87 SD) before offering cups to Bianca, the Duke and the Cardinal, but because they are drunk, they hand the poisoned cup to the Duke instead of the Cardinal. The irony of this reversal is written into the very cues that launch the scene, where music and Bianca’s response to the Duke seem to announce fulfilment while in fact triggering the deaths of both speakers:

Duke. This music shows they’re upon entrance now.

Bianca. Then enter all my wishes. (*Women Beware Women* V.1.86-7)

In the main action that follows, Isabella sets up the altar and incense that will poison Livia while she sings a ditty “in parts” with two attendants. That the song is polyphonic rather than a solo as in act III (see below) increases the irony, since the concord of voices represented the highest form of harmony to Jacobean audiences. Though the stage directions do not mention music again, the descent of Juno was presumably also underscored instrumentally, as were the stately entrance of the Duke in I.3 and the Banquet in III.2, where the stage directions specify that “cornetts flourish” (*Women Beware Women* III.2.20 SD and 241 SD). In each of these occurrences, the ostensible concord of sounds and the “measures” of dance conceal betrayal and adultery instead of consolidating legitimacy and allegorizing good government and temperance, as suggested by the conventional punning on “measure” (Wilson and Calore 270-273).

While the masque and dancing of *Women Beware Women* rely on metatheatrical settings where the characters self-consciously assume mythological or pastoral identities, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* opts for an additional layer in the *mise en abyme* of the staged entertainment, by way of the artifice of costume and disguise: in the masque, Vindice and three accomplices dress identically to four “official” dancers and come on before their planned entry, to kill the new Duke and his nobles while music is playing – so that apparently nobody notices what is going on, and they are able to dance out of the room. After they exit, the brothers and step-brother of the

Duke who had also planned to kill him are so put out by this unplanned event that they end up killing each other, even as music continues to play. The elaborate stage direction explains that they “come in dancing” and only cease to do so (“start out of their measure”) when they hear their brother calling for help:

Enter the other masque of intended murderers, stepsons Ambitioso, Supervacuo, Bastard Spurio, and a Fourth Man, coming in dancing. The duke Lussurioso recovers a little in voice and groans, calls, “A guard, treason,” at which they all start out of their measure, and turning towards the table, they find them all to be murdered. (*The Revenger’s Tragedy* V.3. 47 SD)

In all three plays, the masques are thus subverted from stately allegorical glorification of supposedly wise leaders and faithful lovers to revealers of adultery and betrayal, in which the musical dimension functions both as audible underscoring of the visible discord, and as symbolic dislocation of harmony from the good government it was supposed to reflect in early modern minds.

Staging those masques is notoriously difficult, and many recent productions have chosen to reduce them or cut them altogether. One of the main reasons is the cost involved in such spectacles, since the court masques on which they were modelled were designed to be lavish and expensive, in order to impress the audiences (notably ambassadors, whose testimonials bear witness to the diplomatic function of these events). The high costs were associated far more with the manufacturing of costumes and stage devices than with the design or even the authoring of the text and music, let alone the musical performance. In fact, one of the main tasks of the musicians involved in the preparation of masques was to teach the choreography to the non-professional dancers who performed them: the members of the court (Holman 194). In addition, the companies that performed these masques in the public and private theatres of Jacobean London usually had access to the original event in some form or other, either because they worked with their authors (e.g. Ben Jonson, or Middleton in the case of city pageants), or because they were involved in the performance (most notably of antimasques). The rehearsing time could therefore probably be minimized, while the skills necessary for performance were readily available among the actors of the companies. This is particularly true of the children’s companies (e.g. the Children of Saint Paul’s cathedral) since the actors were selected for their musical abilities (Gair 33-36 and 75-112).

Contemporary companies on the contrary tend to concentrate on acting skills, and while English-speaking actors also receive training in music, dance and fencing, it is more unusual for them to achieve the same level of accomplishment in musical as in acting performance. Thus, staging a believable masque today, one that would convey the impression of lavishness and solemnity, would involve hiring a choreographer and also adding musicians and dancers to the cast, thereby increasing the number of necessary costumes and set designs. Only well-funded companies are likely to take on such a financial burden, an unlikely proposition for plays that are not mainstream and do not muster the same large audiences and high number of performances as Shakespeare plays performed at the Globe or Royal Shakespeare Company playhouses. Even at a time when new technologies make it possible to

overcome many difficulties in transposing page to stage, a significant cost would be involved in staging a regal entertainment for example by shooting a video that might then be projected. Another obstacle to the staging of the embedded masques is the need to commission new music, since the original scores are not available, while extant Jacobean airs that might be substituted would not be deemed sufficiently dramatic by directors and audiences if they were used in productions transposed to the 20th century. Finally, the allegorical discourse and figures in the original productions must already have challenged Jacobean audiences’ understanding or interest, given that they rely on extensive mythological references. Needless to say, the average 21st century audience member lacks most of the knowledge necessary to follow their rhetoric.

Of course, in the original productions, the masques embedded by Middleton or Beaumont and Fletcher were not merely decorative but had a structural and thematic function. So what staging strategies are developed to compensate for their reduction or suppression? One notable exception to the rule of omission was the production of *The Maid’s Tragedy* at the Globe in 1997 under the direction of Lucy Bailey, for which new music was commissioned along with extravagant set designs and costumes (Schütz 11). Bailey insisted that the masque was fundamental to the plot, because of its celebration of the inviolability and divinity of the King, an argument most pertinent in a play which on the one hand sets out to show that the king is really the most immoral character in the story, and on the other hand has a hero who refuses to disobey or kill the king because of the sovereign’s superhuman status.

The masque turned out to become a fascinating experiment in social and spatial organization of musical performance, since the king sat in the middle of the yard on a specially built rostrum, while the courtiers not actually taking part in it stood on the balcony above the stage, embodying the chorus led by Strato. Some brass instrument players performed from the galleries. Cynthia, the moon, descended from the Heavens trap and remained suspended in mid-air for the whole duration of the Masque, singing a duet with a character on stage. Night emerged from the stage trap, and her starry blue skirts covered the whole stage. The other characters in the Masque then emerged from under the skirt. The costumes consisted of ancient Greek-style bodies drawn on body suits on the upper half, scales or feathers on the lower half. Sea monsters appeared with Proteus. Flamboyant brass instruments were played by musicians costumed as mermaids. This full embracing of the Globe space by music and spectacle succeeded in conveying both the solemnity and the absurdity of the masque, holding up the action before the chain of murders was unleashed.

On the contrary, a recent production of *Women Beware Women* at the Globe’s Sam Wanamaker theatre in London (2020) emphasized the contemporary reading of the play but reduced the musical dimension of the masque, though it added several songs and a jazz band playing the type of interludes “often heard in a hammy detective thriller” (Harrison) that, according to one reviewer seemed “out of place” and “furthered the farcical nature” (Loxton) of a production that was on the whole rather coolly received.

An equally recent revival of *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Declan Donnellan's Cheek by Jowl company features "manically danced masques" against a backdrop featuring the word "Vendetta" in Italian, emphasizing both the mafia connection and the musical dimension inherent in a piece where broken harmony is not only implied by the staging of a court entertainment but also through the imagery present in the dialogue (Lawson).

Musical Imagery

The paradoxical role of music is underlined repeatedly in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, through references by the characters to its importance in courtly life, and through the subversion of this very music in the scenes where it is actually heard.

The conventional association of music with courtly revels is asserted by Vindice on two occasions that rely on the conventional *memento mori* imagery of the seventeenth century vanitas, which usually includes both a skull and a musical instrument, symbolizing the fleeting nature of time as much as the joys of love. Music belongs in vanitates for two reasons: because it is associated with youth, love and courting, but also because it is fleeting by nature, and cannot be retrieved once performed, constituting a perfect metaphor for the passing of time.

Vindice conjures up "Banquets abroad by torch-light, musics, sports" as he falsely praises "the pleasure of the palace" to his sister Castiza whom he is trying to seduce on behalf of one of the Duke's sons (*The Revenger's Tragedy* II.1.193-197). Likewise, as he prepares his dead lover's skull for the macabre scene in which he will present it (dressed up and poisoned) as a paramour to the Duke, he underlines the presence of music in all the revels and pleasures a beautiful young woman would enjoy and recommends displaying such a skull during such musical events:

Who now bids twenty pound a-night, prepares
Music, perfumes, and sweetmeats? All are hush'd;
Thou mayst lie chaste now! It were fine, methinks,
To have thee seen at revels, [...] (*The Revenger's Tragedy* III.5.89-91)

Death and music are thus linked symbolically, but this conjunction is also achieved through the treacherous use of music to conceal crime, at odds with its supposed ability to bring peace and joy. Accordingly, early in the play, when Antonio recounts the rape of his wife by the Duke's son, he highlights the role of loud music in tricking the victim:

And therefore in the height of all the revels,
When music was heard loudest, courtiers busiest,
And ladies great with laughter; – O vicious minute!
(*The Revenger's Tragedy* I.4.37-39)

Later in the play, loud music makes it possible for Vindice and his brother Hippolito to carry out the murder of the Duke:

DUKE
I cannot brook—
[*Vindice kills him*]

VINDICE
The brook is turn'd to blood.

HIPPOLITO
Thanks to loud music.

VINDICE
'Twas our friend indeed:
'Tis state in music for a duke to bleed:
(*The Revenger's Tragedy* III.5.219-21)

While Hippolito here ironically refers to the supposed magical power of music to effect metamorphoses, Vindice's sarcasm re-assigns the solemnity of a state funeral to the merry music of the banquet that is taking place offstage, as announced by the adulterous duchess as she summons her lover, the Duke's bastard son:

DUCHESS
Why, now thou'rt sociable! Let's in and feast.
Loud'st music sound: pleasure is banquet's guest.
Excunt. (*The Revenger's Tragedy* III. 5. 217-18)

In a complete reversal of its conventional associations, to Vindice and his brother, music becomes a metaphor for violent action as they ironically "invent" a form of "silence" for the Duke, in order to force him to witness his wife's adultery with the accompaniment of music while keeping him gagged:

VINDICE
Hark, the music!
Their banquet is prepar'd; they're coming.

DUKE
Oh, kill me not with that sight!

VINDICE
Thou shalt not lose that sight for all thy dukedom.

DUKE
Traitors, murderers!

VINDICE
What? Is not thy tongue eaten out yet?
Then we'll invent a silence.
[...]

HIPPOLITO

Whist, brother: music's at our ear, they come. (*The Revenger's Tragedy* III.5.187-193; 203)

This subversion culminates in the preparation for the masque, when Vindice, punning on the word “strike”, suggests to his brother that they need to “Strike one strain more and then we crown our wit” (*The Revenger's Tragedy* V.1.171), then calls upon his allies to “be all of music; strike old griefs into other countries / That flow in too much milk and have faint livers,” (*The Revenger's Tragedy* V.2.1-2). Faced with the failure of music, that has turned his “heartstrings into fret” (I.1.13) instead of celebrating his nuptials, the protagonist calls upon it to forward his murderous plans.

Songs

While *Women Beware Women* and *The Maid's Tragedy* make less use of musical imagery outside the masques scenes than *Revenger's Tragedy*, they both feature songs performed by an innocent young woman who is tricked by wiler characters and loses her life in the process. Such musical moments of stillness before the storm are frequent in Jacobean tragedy – as famously exemplified by Desdemona's Willow Song, sung minutes before she is strangled by Othello.

The Maid's Tragedy opposes the sincerity of a genuinely melancholy love-song performed by the rejected lover Aspatia, to the artificial revelries of her fellow-courtiers, whose songs celebrate fickleness and pleasure. Aspatia's mysterious song, performed in Evadne's bridal bedroom, contributes to the gradual construction of horror, conjuring up nightmares and hobgoblins in the minds of her listeners, although at that point in the play nothing has yet emerged to show that things are amiss:

Aspatia. Lay a garland on my bearse

Of the dismal Yew -

Evadne. That's one of your sad songs, madam.

Aspatia. Believe me, 'tis a very pretty one.

Evadne. How is it, madam?

SONG.

Aspatia. Lay a Garland on my bearse

of the dismal yew;

Maidens, willow branches bear;

Say I died true:

My Love was false, but I was firm

From my hour of birth;

Upon my buried body lay

Lightly, gentle earth!

Evadne. Fie on't, madam! The words are so strange, they are able to make one dream of hobgoblins. 'I could never have the power', sing that, Dula.

Dula. *I could never have the power
To love one above an hour,
But my heart would prompt mine eye
On some other man to fly;
Venus, fix mine eyes fast,
Or if not, give me all that I shall see at last.* (II.1.67-88)

The song performed by Isabella in act III of *Women Beware Women* is an equally poignant testament to the powerlessness of young women in Jacobean society, and shows her up as a struggling victim-to-be of the murderous machine set in motion before the play begins. She is invited to perform in front of the Duke and the whole court to display her talents as a singer and dancer in view of her unwilling wedding to a rich idiot (the Ward). The song she sings, bemoaning the fate of young women, and the elegant dance she subsequently performs with her lover-uncle Hippolito pitch the harmony and proportion of movement and sounds against the mockery that is made of them, given the falsity of the situation. Music is used in the service of the commodification of Isabella's body, and the truth of her talent is perverted by the lies it shields: her own illicit and incestuous relationship with her uncle, but also the cruel and degrading mockery her husband-to-be makes of it, singing a bawdy song in response to her melancholy one and “ridiculously imitat[ing]” Hippolito's dancing moves. The lyrics of the song are surprisingly candid, yet the ward seems to resent the tune more than the meaning, comparing it (to its disadvantage) to popular broadside ballads “sung i'th' Nose” and complaining about “these simpering tunes plaid upon Cats-guts, and sung by little Kitlings” (*Women Beware Women* III.2.154-157):

*What harder chance can fall to woman,
Who was born to cleave to some man,
Then to bestow her time, youth, beauty,
Life's observance, honor, duty,
On a thing for no use good,
But to make Physic work, or blood force fresh
In an old Ladies cheek? She that would be
Mother of fools, let her compound with me.* (*Women Beware Women* III.2.145-153)

Just as the lyrics belie the “simpering tune” by revealing the purely commercial transaction that marriage represents, so the dancing moves of the lovers who “*make honours to the Duke and curtesy to themselves both before and after*” serve as a metaphor for the corruption of the court: the movements are beautifully executed, as all the onlookers notice, and the accompanying music adds a certain gravitas – but the scene also gives the Duke an opportunity to exhibit his liaison with Bianca and thereby serves as a trigger for Livia's seduction of Leantio. Both of these adulterous relationships will eventually lead to the string of murders that reaches its apex during

the final masque. The music of III.2 thus prefigures the music of the masque, showcasing Isabella's vocal skills but simultaneously revealing how she is trapped by a society that only values this talent because it increases her salability on the matrimonial market.

Conclusion

Music plays multiple roles in Jacobean tragedy: as a symbolic system it is subverted to reveal the corruption at the heart of the court or society it describes; in the form of gentle melancholy songs, it serves to suspend the tension just before chains of violence are set in motion; as an audible soundtrack, it jarringly celebrates rulers and promotes enjoyment in the very moment authority is challenged and lives are brutally taken. The contrast between the merry music and the violence of the action may seem to eschew the manipulative dimension that music usually takes on in 20th century thrillers, yet by reinforcing the black humour inherent in the drama of that period, it foreshadows the sarcastic approach taken by directors such as Quentin Tarantino, who is often invoked as a reference by reviewers of modern productions. The only closure is provided well before the ending of *The Maid's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*, by the achingly beautiful songs performed by the sacrificial victims Aspatia and Isabella, yet even those are offset by their proximity with the sleaze and sexual undertones that steer the plays.

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