

Revenge Tragedy Meeting City Comedy: Alan Ayckbourn's *The Revengers' Comedies**

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In *Renaissance Revivals* Wendy Griswold observes that revivals in the British theatre of Renaissance drama other than Shakespeare's works gathered pace after the Second World War with the institutional change of government subsidies for arts. Thus non-profit-making theatres were able to stage rarely seen plays which might not be commercially viable (194). Griswold's book was published in 1986 and a decade too early, according to Susan Bennett, because revivals since the late 1980s have been even more conspicuous. "In an economy where innovation anchored to the traditions of the past sells, and sells well," many sixteenth and seventeenth century plays have been making a comeback

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(79-80).

Revivals of old plays are often justified on the grounds of relevance to the present. Many Shakespearean productions, whether in period costume or modern dress, have tried to show that Shakespeare is our contemporary. Two Jacobean subgenres, revenge tragedy and city comedy, have been prominent in recent revivals on the British stage: they surprise theatregoers by their modernity and seem to reflect collective concerns about socio-economic issues of contemporary British society.

According to “the Cumulative Index to London Productions 1981-2005,” the most frequently performed non-Shakespearean Jacobean play is Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, with at least one production in twelve of the twenty-five years of the Index’s coverage. It is followed by Jonson’s *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, each with at least one production in seven of the twenty-five years. These three plays have rarely been out of the repertoire for long in the twentieth century anyway. However, since the end of the 1980s they have been joined by others: most notably two tragedies, *The Changeling* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, revived almost with the same frequency as those three revival favourites. As to comedies, when Shakespeare’s Globe opened in London in 1997, its first two seasons presented Middleton’s city comedies *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *A Mad World, My Masters*. At Stratford-upon-Avon Eastward Ho was a box office success in the 2002 season of Royal Shakespeare Company’s Swan theatre (Stock and Zwierniecki 1-2).

It is in this context of revived interest in Jacobean drama that we can read British playwright Alan Ayckbourn’s *The Revengers’ Comedies*, first performed in 1989. This is an original play rather than an adaptation of an ancient text. However, the title of the play clearly alludes to a Jacobean precedent, Middleton/Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. The title encourages the

spectators to anticipate the dramatic conventions of revenge tragedy, but at the same time marks the play as distinct from the Jacobean kind because it is a comedy. The conventions of revenge tragedy found in Ayckbourn's play include the use of intrigues and disguises to facilitate the revenge plans, deterioration of the chief avenger's personal morality and even sanity, some gratuitous deaths, and the final fall of the avenger. Though the plot belongs to revenge tragedy, the other half of the title suggests a link with city comedy. Indeed, the play is set firmly in city comedy territory: the scenes alternating between the English countryside and the business district of London. One of the protagonists is a middle-class office worker thrown into the company of the upper class, a replay of the encounter between the "middling sort" and the gentry in Jacobean city comedy.

In the opening scene of *The Revengers' Comedies* two people prepare to jump off London's Albert Bridge. Henry Bell has just lost his job to an aggressive colleague, while Karen Knightly has seen her lover go back to his wife. When the thought of suicide is abandoned, they decide to revenge. Karen comes up with the idea of swapping their revenge plans: she will infiltrate Henry's firm in the guise of a secretary to punish his enemy, and he will go to her home town in the countryside to deal with hers. As the play progresses, we find Karen succeeds spectacularly in her part of the action, but Henry derails the plan as he falls in love with the woman he is supposed to punish on Karen's behalf.

Ayckbourn is the most prolific playwright in contemporary British theatre and *The Revengers' Comedies* was his thirty-seventh play. He became famous in the 1970s for his portrayal of the dullness and conventionality of English middle-class life in intricately constructed plots with plenty of farcical situations. In the 1980s he began to expand the subject matter of his plays from

suburban domestic experience to include issues of a social or even political nature. In 1985 Ayckbourn was appointed as a company director at the National Theatre in London. His association with this institution, implying the status of a “national” playwright, has caused him to turn to “more overtly political themes” (Bull 152). The vision of his plays was said to become darker although the techniques were still those of comedy. The plays produced in the Thatcher decade and portraying greed and corruption in the society “claim kinship to the seventeenth-century comedies of Jonson and Middleton” (Rusinko 54).

In matters of dramaturgy, Ayckbourn has acknowledged that the cinema has a stronger influence on him than the theatre (Kalsou 141). Significantly, in *The Revengers' Comedies* the plot of swapping revenge plans is modelled on the film adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's thriller *Strangers on a Train*. The play also includes many references to Hollywood films (Kalsou 157-58). Therefore, we may wonder why Ayckbourn chose to link his play to Jacobean drama. In an interview the playwright said many of his plays “have been created as finite structures” and that he would try to arrange “situations and characters to happen within a small confined area or series of areas.” Alternatively he might go for the multi-set situation as was done “in Jacobean days” (Dukore 15-16). However, the number of Jacobean dramatic conventions used in the play would suggest that Ayckbourn saw in Jacobean drama more than the freedom to vary settings. Revenge tragedy and city comedy provide the playwright with a theatrical vocabulary to explore the themes of concern to him and, by extension, to his audience. The theatregoers, already exposed to revivals of Renaissance plays, can be expected to recognize conventions of seventeenth-century dramatic genres in this late twentieth-century comedy. The recognition of similarities and differences between then and now is a source of pleasure, quite apart from Ayckbourn's own comic techniques. We will examine how those conventions

are adapted to describe contemporary Britain and how effective such an adaptation is.

Before we begin an analysis of the play, a brief description of the two genres in question is in order.

Revenge tragedies, which offer the audience large doses of violence, cruelty, and horror, were once deemed to be in poor taste. But today's audience should have no problem with this seventeenth-century genre: for it has something in common with modern thrillers, both the novel and the cinematic versions, which have a popular appeal (Salgado 12; Simkin 5). Part of the fascination lies in the ingenuity with which violence and mayhem is handled on the page, on the stage, or on the screen. The excess of special effects provides the thrill that takes us temporarily out of mundane existence. Furthermore, the theme of revenge always accompanies questions of justice. Two conflicting notions of revenge existed in early modern England. On the one hand, both the law and religious teaching condemned private revenge: the Crown had a monopoly of judicial power. On the other hand, the tradition lived on of redressing an injury to one's honour by taking the law into one's own hand (Salgado 15). Revenge tragedies often place the avenger in a situation where justice is unavailable through the legal channel, and the early modern theatregoers would agree with the avenger, at least initially, on the necessity of private revenge. The days of private revenge have long gone, but people today are not necessarily satisfied with the judicial system. It is sometimes seen as taking too long to prosecute criminals, showing too much leniency for offenders, or not awarding victims adequate compensation. That is why the public can still admire, at least in a fiction, the lone avenger with a reasonable cause for vengeance.

Compared with revenge tragedies, Jacobean city comedies may be thought a genre not of all ages but of a specific time and place, dramatizing "conflicting

forces in the confused development from the England of Elizabeth towards the Civil War” (Gibbons 4). In the hands of less able dramatists the comedies simply exploit the local colour of Jacobean London; but the great playwrights are “sensitive to the pressures and cross-currents of large scale political, economic and social change, although their plays continue to utilize traditional elements of didactic form and satiric schema” (Gibbons 4). The genre’s popularity with today’s theatregoers, nevertheless, is unsurprising. Despite the unfamiliar language and topical allusions, the world of Jacobean city comedies is all too recognizable: it is energized by unscrupulous, enterprising rogues who aim to get rich quick. Interestingly, while spectators of city comedies may deplore the characters’ greed and delight in the comeuppance the rogues get in the end, there is no denying the fascination of the sheer exuberance with which intrigues are carried out. We can almost admire the rogues for their cleverness and energy. One of the critically acclaimed plays of the 1980s, Caryl Churchill’s *Serious Money*, satirizes the workings of the City of London, the morally and legally dubious activities of dealers, bankers, and company executives. The brisk pace of short scenes with witty dialogues overlapping each other creates an irresistible atmosphere of excitement and fun. When the play was running in the West End, City workers flocked to see their lives portrayed on the stage and cheered the exciting performance (Innes 470). The critique of the greed of the financial world could almost look like a celebration of its vitality.

A game called revenge

Compared with the motivations for revenge in the great classical tragedies—murders of a parent, child, sibling, or spouse, those in *The Revengers’ Comedies*

seem rather insignificant. The loss of a job or a lover does not generate the kind of anguish and outrage felt by the likes of Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Vindice. Yet, the thought of retaliation would not be unnatural in someone who feels unfairly treated at work or in the private life. For, like the avengers in revenge tragedies, the fired employee or the jilted lover despairs of ever seeing injustice redressed by the authorities.

The law does not adjudicate on matters of affections. Instead, religion, tradition, peer pressure, or public opinion is supposed to provide the necessary regulations. Since the law is non-committal about which way affections should go, the injured party might resort to imaginative and spectacular methods of private revenge. We think of Medea's gift of the poisoned gown and her killing of her own children as a response to the faithless Jason. Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* tortures his twin sister's mind to punish her for bestowing her affections on an inferior. In *The Revengers' Comedies* Karen believes her lover abandons her to return to his wife. Unfortunately for her, there is no provision in the law to stop him doing so, however hurt she may feel. Yet, although jealousy and disappointment in love may be suitable subjects for a tragedy, Karen's situation is fit for a comedy because, as is gradually revealed, she completely mistakes not only the identity of her rival but also the man's view of their affair. As her motivation for revenge is discredited little by little, she becomes less and less a legitimate avenger.

The other avenger in this comedy, Henry Bell, has much more reason for demanding justice: he is sacked after fourteen years of hard work at the multinational firm Lembridge Tennit. Apparently he does not think it worthwhile to go to the industrial tribunal and sue the company for wrongful dismissal. He simply feels the pointlessness of everything and wants to end his life. But once the suicide attempt is averted, frustration and anger well up within

him as he explains bitterly to Karen why putting in extra long hours was not sufficient to keep his job: “You’ve also got to be working the system. Chatting up the right people. Buying the drinks that matter. Arranging the cosy little dinner with the boss’s P. A. Taking the right lift at the right moment with the right people...” (12). Those who know and play by these unwritten rules move up the corporate hierarchy, while those who do not either miss out on promotion or lose their jobs altogether. Worse than the blow of dismissal is the sense of betrayal: people in the office knew that a colleague was elbowing Henry out of the way but no one warned him about it: “everyone knew he was doing it—and no one—no one thought to... People I’d worked with for fourteen years. *Friends!*” (13).

In his outburst Henry speaks in a similar vein to the harangue of the malcontent in Jacobean drama. The malcontents are men of ability and intelligence whose thwarted ambition finds an outlet in their sharp tongue that lashes out at the society in general and the court in particular. They offer services to the ruling aristocracy and fully expect to be rewarded with patronage and advancement; when the reward is not forthcoming, they do not hide their frustration. Capable and ambitious men cannot bear to be neglected; moreover, disappointment and wounded pride have damaging effects on them: they might abandon their moral principles.

The appearance of the malcontent type in Jacobean drama had a historical base in early seventeenth-century England. There was an oversupply of university graduates but an insufficient number of court or church positions to give them employment (Burnett 339). To make a living, some of these educated men—George Chapman and John Marston—wrote plays for London’s commercial theatres. The malcontent in Ayckbourn’s comedy, similarly, is a familiar figure in a late twentieth-century industrialized society—the sacked

middle manager. As companies rush to downsize and streamline the workforce, many middle-ranking middle-aged office workers find themselves being made redundant, just when they think their experiences are an asset to their employers.

Despite the similarity in discontent between Henry Bell and the malcontents of Jacobean drama, Ayckbourn does not develop his leading character in the direction of the Jacobean disgruntled intellectuals. Hamlet, Vindice, Bosola, and the likes are intellectuals alienated from their society. Henry Bell, like most of Ayckbourn's characters, is no intellectual but an ordinary middle-class man. His ordinariness is an indication of the democratisation of discontent in modern drama. The sense of alienation and disaffection is no longer the privilege of the educated class but an experience common to all. However, Henry's frustration or even anger has no subversive power: he does not feel, as Hamlet does, that "The time is out of joint" and he should do something about it. In railing against injustice and taking on their enemies, Jacobean malcontents have the audacity to want to change the status quo. Most of them fail in tragedies, but their actions destabilize for a while the rigid order of their circle. Henry, in contrast, is a reluctant avenger; what's more, the punishment of his enemy is carried out by Karen. It's as if Ayckbourn divided the Jacobean malcontent into two halves: Henry is in charge of social criticism, and Karen of vengeance. But Henry's discontent is heard only at the beginning of the play; afterwards the focus is on how Karen pursues the plan of action.

Jacobean revenge tragedies are known for displaying excessive violence, gratuitous deaths, and shocking spectacles as if the playwrights as well as the theatre companies were vying to produce the most horrifying theatrical effects. Revenge in Ayckbourn's comedy, on the other hand, is much less sensational. However, the play does pay homage to the Jacobean genre by including some

gratuitous deaths cunningly engineered by Karen. Unlike Jacobean avengers, she uses neither weapon nor poison but simply pushes them gently “in the general direction of death” (100). Her first victim, Bruce Tick, is a glutton; so, with cholesterol and digestive problems, he collapses at a moment of extreme tension. The second victim, Mr Seeds, is a highly strung man just recovering from a nervous breakdown; it takes only a small hint from Karen that a fire has broken out downstairs for this man to run up to the roof and jump off. The first death is the revenge proper, Bruce Tick being the man who has ousted Henry from the firm. The second death, on the other hand, is unplanned and unnecessary: it happens because Karen is exercising her skill of manipulation. The ease with which Karen causes two deaths in quick succession is a source of black humour in the play. Just in case the audience does not notice the plot contrivances here, an offstage character says jokingly: “Now, Karen, my dear girl, what on earth have you been doing to half our middle management, eh?” (117).

The comedy does include violence. The first is the death of Anthony Staxton-Billing by a gunshot, accidentally triggered when Henry refuses to fight the duel by throwing down his gun on the ground. Henry is more stunned than anyone else present at the scene since this is not a death “put on by cunning” as those in revenge tragedies. However, a few moments later we realize that some cunning has been used to make sure that it is Anthony who gets killed: some people have put two dud cartridges in his gun. The witnesses to the duel will speak to the local chief inspector and see to it that the incident will be treated as a simple accident. Though there is not much blood shed in this scene, suddenly we seem to be thrown back to the Jacobean world of calculation and corruption. The other scene of violence is the burning down of Furtherfield House, Karen’s home. She sets fire to it to warn Henry not to disobey her. If

the intrigue involved in Anthony's death represents opportunists' cunning, Karen's arson suggests a dangerous and unbalanced mind. Though it is never spelled out, the deaths of Karen's parents in a fire seem to have been her doing, too. The more we see her act, the more she looks like a monster.

The way Karen infiltrates the multinational company is through the time-honoured dramatic device—disguise. The consciously theatrical Renaissance tragedies and comedies often require some acts of disguise to move the plot along, whether it is a Shakespearean heroine putting on a man's clothes to pursue her lover, or a Jonsonian rogue playing one role after another to cheat the gullible. Disguise is such a well-established convention in Renaissance drama that it is pointless to wonder where a character has learned to imitate to perfection someone else's speech pattern and mannerism, or why the disguise is never exposed or even suspected. In many plays changing one's identity is simply a matter of changing one's attire and behaviour. The very ease with which characters pose as someone else is also one of the ways in which Renaissance theatre admits being *theatre* rather than reality.

Disguise is inconvenient to use in realistic drama because it has to be made to appear plausible. How can Karen pass as a competent secretary without shorthand or typing skills? Ayckbourn has to establish early on in the play that Karen receives help from an experienced secretary: she uses a tape recorder to take the boss's dictation and courier the recorder to her helper, who types the letters and sends them back in time for the boss's signature. We can imagine that, if this were a Renaissance play, Karen would turn up at work ready with the necessary skills. With the question of plausibility solved, the play can concentrate on Karen's disguise in terms of attire and mannerism. Like all the Renaissance characters in disguise, she suits her appearance and speech to the role she plays.

Dramatic realism is also uncomfortable with a character who can assume different guises at will. There must be some special traits in the character which enable him or her to present a different self as occasions require. In contrast, all that is required of Renaissance characters when they disguise themselves is that they are skilful enough to do it well. In Ayckbourn's play the innocent Everyman figure, Henry Bell, has a hard time pretending to be an accountant. He fidgets in the outfit he is given to wear, does not know how to bluff his way out of an informal meeting, and is nearly found out to be a fraud. But Henry's awkwardness and nervousness at role-playing is meant to be normal: it is how you and I would behave if thrown into a similar situation. Karen is different. There is something disquieting in her frequent mood swings and her blindness to other people's wishes. When she disguises herself as a plain-looking, diffident woman going to her first job interview, the stage directions specify thus: "The overall impression is that she has tried to make herself as plain as possible. Yet, as with all Karen's varying personas, the impression is of someone ringing the changes within their own multiple personality, rather than inventing a totally new character" (50). In a later scene, her brother explains to Henry that, as a child, Karen loved inventing games to play and was a brilliant impersonator. In emphasizing the Karen's disguise as a facet of her personality rather than a skill acquired through training, Ayckbourn downplays the theatricality of the play, maintaining the pretence of realistic theatre that on the stage are real people, not role-playing actors.

Karen regards revenge, and even life itself, as a game: she creates the rules and expects others to follow them as she does. Henry tries to make her see that reality is not a game: "Life's a lot more complicated and a good deal harder to play" (178). But this only infuriates her. In Karen, Ayckbourn creates a modern version of a danger to the public: she is not greedy or particularly cruel,

but she would impose her distorted vision of the world on others when she has the chance.

Corporate London vs rural England

The scenes of *The Revengers' Comedies* alternate mainly between two contrasting locations: the office of a multinational company in London and houses and fields in rural Dorset. It is the London scenes that have an affinity with Jacobean city comedy in a plot about a trickster operating in the business world for gain. Jacobean city comedies were topical; they depicted city life in early modern London as the contemporary audience knew it. The scenes are set in the urban landscape of streets, shops, and taverns. Ayckbourn's modern city comedy, too, is set in an environment familiar to the modern audience—the corporate office where many urban professionals spend most of their waking hours, five days a week.

The choice of the corporate office as the main setting of this updated version of city comedy is no accident. It testifies to the dominance of the corporation in the economy of industrialized countries as well as in the lives of people of those countries. In early modern London businesses were usually small organizations owned and run by small groups of people: for example, family members or a few like-minded partners. But joint-stock companies had been created in the sixteenth century to finance large enterprises, raising the capital through selling shares to a large number of people. The industrial revolution was powered by capital investment and hastened the growth of corporations (Bakan 8-9). Nowadays, corporations have extended their activities far beyond their countries of origin, and some are global players. The fictional Lembridge Tennit in *The Revengers' Comedies* is one such multinational

company, with interests in everything “from biscuits to bicycles” (12).

Jacobean city comedies satirize the greed and foibles of the shopkeepers, apprentices, fortune-hunting gallants, country squires, etc. who animate the urban landscape. Ayckbourn’s comedy, on the other hand, casts a wary eye on the modern corporations. A simple mention of a multinational company evokes negative images of “polluting the rivers, poisoning the atmosphere and secretly funding right-wing revolutionaries” (12). Written in a decade when the trend of downsizing was gathering pace, the dialogue cannot be more topical: management jargons abound, including a collection of euphemisms for firing people, such as “redefining the job profile”, “rationalizing the department”, “restructuring the management team” (12), “purely unavoidable wastage as a result of rationalization” (197), “a great deal of strengthening at board level” (198), etc. The corporation is depicted as callous to both the outside world and its employees.

In the London scenes Ayckbourn satirizes corporate cultures and office politics. The corporation does not reward honest hard work. Henry Bell pays the price for understanding too late the unwritten rules of corporate life. He has devoted himself to the job itself but forgotten to cultivate a network of useful contacts. He feels betrayed because no one in the firm gives him a hint about his imminent dismissal. He speaks bitterly of colleagues who take three-hour lunch breaks five days a week while others pick up their unfinished work. Worse still, it is a man who takes long lunch breaks that replaces Henry. Bruce Tick, loutish and swaggering, prides himself on working hard and playing hard but spends almost the entire afternoon having business lunch, returning to his office only at the end of the working day to sign his letters.

Bruce Tick is of course a caricature of a type of corporate males. But to contrast Henry Bell with Bruce Tick and present the former in a much more

positive light than the latter suggests that the playwright has a rather poor opinion of corporate cultures. Henry's neglect of networking is not presented in the play as a serious flaw. Yet, according to management experts, in an organization there is always an informal, hidden network through which information is circulated. Clerical workers, for example, are very useful sources of information because they are in touch with what is really going on in the organization; they are also good at passing on information through gossip. Therefore, "managers who want, first, to know what people in their organization are really thinking and, second, to influence their behaviour day to day must be deft at working the cultural network." Effective managers "recognize the network's existence and importance instead of feeling above it" (Deal and Kennedy 100-101). In other words, despite his ability and devotion to his job, Henry would not make a successful manager from the corporation's point of view. As to Bruce, his lunch breaks may be extravagant but it does not necessarily mean he simply lazes around. A manager's work is not tied to his desk, nor does communication take place only in the conference room: "the real process of making decisions, of gathering support, of developing opinions, happens before the meeting—or after" (Deal and Kennedy 86). In short, Bruce is an unpleasant person to work with, but he may be good at his job. It is the playwright's dislike of corporate cultures that makes the decision of Lembridge Tennit to replace Henry with Bruce appear unwise as well as unfair.

The meteoric rise of Karen from secretary to top executive has hardly any base in the real world; the plot is written for satirical purposes. The play paints an unflattering picture of a firm that fires devoted employees and promotes someone who can bluff their way to the top. Moreover, the company seems staffed by narrow-minded, unimaginative, inward-looking people who jealously guard their spheres of influence. The status game is important for these modern

office workers. After all, only a handful of people can expect huge pay rises, so job satisfaction must come partly from the power and influence one has over one's colleagues.

In this mundane business environment Karen plays the role of the trickster of the traditional city comedy, providing the creative energy which makes the office scenes funny. The energy of Jacobean city comedies derives from the quick-witted rogues and gallants who invent one intrigue after another at a furious pace either to trap their victims or to get themselves out of a trouble spot. Tricksters succeed because they understand and fully exploit the weaknesses of their targets. They sell the philosopher's stone to those who dream of turning metals into gold, or nonexistent land to those who long to become landed gentry. The comedy in the London scenes of Ayckbourn's play, likewise, springs from Karen's ingenuity as she deploys little tricks to defeat other office workers and move up the corporate ladder. With every trick, she manipulates people's vanity, sense of insecurity, and petty jealousy to her advantage. She flatters her self-important superiors by playing the modest docile assistant and wins their trust: no one ever suspects her of any evil intentions. However, there is one important difference between Karen and the Jacobean tricksters: she is not after money. If the traditional city comedy is about competition for material gain, this modern version is about competition for influence in an organization.

The Revengers' Comedies is one of Ayckbourn's contributions to the "state of the nation" play, the type of drama that diagnoses the malaise of contemporary Britain. Written toward the end of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, *The Revengers' Comedies*, like some of Ayckbourn's other plays of the 1980s, has been regarded as a critique of Thatcher's Britain. The Thatcher era was marked by a complete break with the post-war consensus politics and

the embracing of radical free market policies. The arts world was badly hit as a result of repeated cutbacks in government subsidies, the lifeline for the arts since the Second World War. Theatres, from regional to national institutions, all felt the squeeze and struggled to survive. Consequently, even Ayckbourn, who was not known to be a political playwright, seemed compelled to assess the damage done to Britain by Thatcherism. Mrs Thatcher's leadership style was as controversial as the Conservative government's policies. And many political comments and satires have been made about her as much as about her policies. Some plays written in the 1980s also have characters whose behaviour or attitudes strongly remind the audience of Thatcher. One critic argues that Karen Knightly's rise to power and her ability to play power game parallels that of Thatcher: both women are "mad," the wrong people entrusted with great responsibility (Kalson 153-54). No doubt during the play's run in London's West End in 1991 some audience would be reminded by Karen of Thatcher, who had recently stepped down as prime minister. However, to identify Karen with Thatcher is too easy, and Ayckbourn does not try to emphasize the association. Karen is young and flighty, while Mrs Thatcher was then in her sixties, a formidable and authoritative figure. The latter believed in hard work and self-reliance, whereas the former has never had to earn a living. More importantly, Thatcher's exasperated detractors might call her "mad" in protest against her policies, but no one could say she pursued those policies for fun. In contrast, Karen is simply playing a game.

The real villain of the play is the corporation. Internally, the organization encourages its employees to compete against each other, so everyone constantly jockey for position for fear of being laid off. Externally, the money of the corporation can change and shape many people's lives as well as the environment. Toward the end of the play, with Karen in charge, Lembridge

Tennit is planning to change the face of the Dorset countryside by turning a country house into a plastics factory, paving a road through the wood, and building an industrial estate on the meadow. Rural England is under threat from corporate capitalism.

The Dorset scenes are a contrast to those in London. Here we look at a world that is old-fashioned and eccentric but at the same time warm and humane. Ancient customs are kept: for example, the last duel was fought “last June” rather than in 1750. Some people seem cushioned from the harsh economic reality of the outside world because they have more money than they could spend. The lifestyle of Karen and her brother Oliver is straight out of children’s books: they have no parents and are served by an old housekeeper; besides, rather than having to work for a living, they have accountants who look after their large family fortune. Other country folk, dabbling in business and making huge losses, are not acute enough to see financial disasters looming. Colonel Lipscott, for one, is a director of a firm which manufactures pipes that do not sell. He is an incompetent businessman but his heart is in the right place. When the firm is bought by Lembridge Tennit and the new management suggests some layoffs, Lipscott worries about the workforce: “I mean, some of those chaps have been with us practically from birth. I don’t want to see them on the scrapheap, you see” (197). This old-fashioned attitude is a direct opposite of modern business practice. Of course the countryside is not all innocence and goodwill: adultery, corruption, intimidation, and arson do happen in the Dorset scenes. However, on the whole the countryside is shown to be a much less harmful place than London.

If Karen and Lembridge Tennit are metaphors for the destructive force of Thatcherism and corporate capitalism, then the Dorset countryside represents a Britain in thrall to their power. Ayckbourn chooses rural England to represent

the soul of the nation and sets the more touching scenes of the play in the countryside. This is where Henry Bell finds true love in Imogen Staxton-Billing, a woman trapped in a loveless marriage. Their romance completely disrupts Karen's foolproof revenge plan. Imogen is a no-nonsense, down-to-earth woman, clear-sighted about her failed marriage and honest about her feelings for Henry. Decent, practical, and hard-working, she seems to embody the qualities of an ideal Briton. Moreover, she has a deep affection for her home. When asked by Henry why she does not leave her husband, she replies: "I love my home, too, actually. So do the kids. It's paradise for them. What's more, it's mine" (137). This home-building instinct marks Imogen out as the soul of the country, in contrast to the family destroyer Karen, who even burns down her own family home. Yet, Imogen's home is under threat of attack: Karen places a petrol can on her doorstep and Lembridge Tennit plans to build a road past her farm. Imogen's home, and by extension rural England, symbol of the well-being of the nation, may not be able to withstand pressure from government policies and corporate development projects.

By contrasting corporate London with rural England, Ayckbourn follows the example of Jacobean city comedy that examines the correlation between rural economy and the business culture of London. Jacobean London derives its wealth not only from trade but also from the money which the country gentry spend in the city's taverns, shops, theatres, brothels, and many other urban attractions. Almost every comedy features one or two prodigal sons from the country who have sold, or will soon have to sell, their land to pay their debts to city creditors. On the other hand, there are rich London merchants keen to acquire land in rural England since land brings its owner the status of gentleman. The attraction of a country estate is such that crafty citizens will resort to dishonest methods to obtain it from a cash-strapped landowner. However, though land may change

hands, there is little suggestion in the comedies that the countryside suffers as a result of London's business expansion. Ayckbourn's play, however, contrasts an affluent, competitive, and merciless London with the lovable but vulnerable Dorset countryside. The playwright seems to worry about the survival of rural England and its way of life.

Ayckbourn's depiction of rural England's plight in the face of corporate London's encroachment is perhaps more an impressionistic view than a realistic analysis of Britain's rural economy. Firstly, rural economy is not the same as agricultural economy. The scenes of Imogen slaving away in the piggery, the hen house, and the cowshed represent but one facet of rural economic activities. In the 1980s agriculture in Britain employed "just over 2 percent of the economically active population", and accounted for "only a small proportion of employment even in the most rural areas". The majority of rural employment has been in the service and manufacturing sectors. In fact, rural industrialization has been promoted by the state since the Second World War to tackle the problem of rural unemployment (Phillips and Williams 27, 51-52). Secondly, other voices than corporate businesses are challenging the countryside to change its traditional practices. For example, environmental pressure groups have persuaded government officials and local authorities to recognize the problem of farm pollution caused by intensive farming. As water pollution by agriculture becomes a public issue, farmers have had to take steps to address the problem and comply with new environmental regulations. Another example is the battle between supporters for and protesters against blood sports. The hunting community resent what they see as urban dwellers' interference in a traditional way of British country life and vigorously oppose any legislation banning field sports, although they are aware that they are a beleaguered minority in a country where the majority of citizens find hunting with hounds morally unacceptable.¹⁾

The nostalgic view of the countryside as beautiful, peaceful, but vulnerable to change for the worse and therefore deserving protection originates in the anti-urban bias of the nineteenth century which viewed towns and cities as disorderly and unhealthy and idealized the countryside (Phillips and Williams 2-3). The romantic myth of rural Britain still persists. The Dorset scenes of *The Revengers' Comedies*, in short, are more in tune with the London audience's imagination of the countryside than with researchers' findings.

The Revengers' Comedies has been regarded by critics as a less bleak and more optimistic play than several other Ayckbourn's plays of the 1980s, which dramatize the materialistic obsessions of the nation in microcosm (Kalsou 164; Wu 127-28). The decent, ordinary Henry Bell is not involved in corrupt practices, unlike Guy Jones in *A Chorus of Disapproval* (1984) and Jack McCracken in *A Small Family Business* (1987). What's more, his relationship with Imogen Staxton-Billing affirms the redeeming power of love. "In the wake of a series of dramatic works in which love is disempowered, mocked and rejected, *The Revengers' Comedies* attempts to revalue it, to redefine it in the face of the spiritual desolation that epitomised the 1980s" (Wu 128-29). External forces may threaten the peace of the countryside, but together Henry and Imogen will work the farm and keep the home a paradise for the children.

By making Henry's loss of his job an understandable cause for revenge, Ayckbourn suggests that for the modern office workers unfair dismissal may generate a sense of grievance almost comparable to that which causes avengers

1) See two essays, "Environmental 'Others' and 'Elites': Rural Pollution and Changing Power Relations in the Countryside" and "The Beleaguered 'Other': Hunt Followers in the Countryside", in *Revealing Rural 'Others': Representation, Power and Identity in the British Countryside* edited by Paul Milbourne.

to take action in traditional revenge tragedies. Whether it is employees going to an industrial tribunal or avengers punishing their enemies in tragedies, it is justice that they seek. However, Ayckbourn does not pursue this parallel further but alters the nature of the revenge instead. If Henry were to sabotage the company that fires him, this could be seen as an attempt, however feeble or ineffective, of rebellion. Karen, in contrast, disrupts the running of the firm in the spirit of a game. Henry is too passive to even make a formal complaint to the company about his dismissal: his first thought is to end his life and later he retreats to the countryside. It seems Ayckbourn is totally pessimistic about the effectiveness of individual protest against a corporation.

Karen's successful campaign within the multinational firm is not probable or necessary by the standard of realism. But seen in the context of revenge tragedy conventions, her perfect disguise, her fast rise to power, and the multiple deaths she causes are not so extravagant. The convention of "purposes mistook / Fallen on the inventors' heads" (*Hamlet* 5.2.363-64) also provides a neat ending of Karen: she insists on playing by the rules but Henry turns the tables on her with those same rules. In short, conventions of revenge tragedy are used in this play more for aesthetic than for thematic purposes.

The multi-set convention of Jacobean drama allows Ayckbourn to stage scenes in contrasting locations of corporate offices and the countryside. The London scenes in this play, like those in Jacobean city comedies, remind the audience of the power of the City of London to affect the economy of the nation. The indispensable trickster figure of city comedy is also operating in this play, but she is all alone. In traditional city comedies there are always several enterprising rogues at work, trying to outsmart each other; their competition is fun to watch. However, Ayckbourn feels such antipathy toward multinational firms that he would not allow their employees to be smart. The directors and

secretaries at Lembridge Tennit are pale characters next to the chameleon-like Karen. Since she is virtually unopposed in the office, the comedy is not as exciting as it could be if there were more of her equals.

As a “state of the nation” play *The Revengers’ Comedies* offers an analysis of contemporary Britain marked by a deep mistrust of corporate cultures and a romantic longing for the countryside. Both attitudes have prevented the playwright from identifying the more fundamental tensions in the society. However, as an experiment with Jacobean genres the play shows that seventeenth-century dramatic conventions can be successfully adapted to accommodate modern issues.

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Revenge Tragedy Meeting City Comedy:
Alan Ayckbourn's *The Revengers' Comedies*

Abstract

Hui-chuan Wang

Since the 1980s there has been a marked interest, in the British theatre, in the non-Shakespearean early modern plays, particularly two subgenres of Jacobean drama—revenge tragedy and city comedy. Jacobean drama finds renewed favour because it seems strangely modern and familiar, staging conflicts and tensions that preoccupy many minds in the late twentieth century.

It is in this context of recent Renaissance revivals that we can read British playwright Alan Ayckbourn's *The Revengers' Comedies* (1989). The play charts the double revenge plans of two complete strangers who undertake each other's revenge, a scheme reminiscent of the plot of Patricia Highsmith's thriller *Strangers on a Train*. The title of the play, however, clearly alludes to a Jacobean precedent, Middleton/Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

Initially famous for his comedies about the dullness of suburban English middle-class lives, Ayckbourn turned his attention in the 1980s to broader social issues, condemning the materialism of Thatcherite Britain in several plays. *The Revengers' Comedies* satirizes the unscrupulous and irresponsible behaviour of the multinational corporation and points to the harmful effects it has on the society. The playwright adapts conventions of both revenge tragedy and city comedy to a modern story.

Key Words

Ayckbourn, Jacobean, revenge tragedy, city comedy, dramatic convention

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