

written ever since by John Gay, William Congreve, George Bernard Shaw, Joe Orton, Mike Leigh, Alan Ayckbourn, David Hare and the rest, mocking bourgeois pretension, exposing hypocrisy, revealing the corrupt underbelly of modern society, regarding them however, not as crimes, but as follies.

The distinction is important because it derives from a view of the world which is individualist and humanist, rather than communal and religious. That was the old, Catholic world, the world that saw King Lear raging against hypocrisy, not mocking it.

‘Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why does thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
For which thou whipst her.’

The drama of *King Lear* is possible only in a world where universal values still have some credibility, however faint.

‘And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all?’

In a world which is guided only by self-interest, enlightened or otherwise, it is possible only to mock human follies, not universally to condemn them, to deal only with the particular, not the universal. Hence Jonson’s credo and Lear’s despair.

‘When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools!’

That was the stage that Jonson created and that we enjoy still. The other stage, the one that Shakespeare called ‘this wooden O’, has not disappeared altogether, just gone abroad. It flourished for a while in mid-twentieth century America, in the plays of Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Crucible* and the rest, each a poetic drama, though written in prose, aiming at a metaphorical depiction of the human condition, not just ‘an image of the times’. In Ireland too, in the plays of Synge and O’Casey, we find a poetic spirit which does not depend wholly on actors to make it work, but which is able to make the transition from page to imagination without expert assistance.

Another Irishman, living in Paris, wrote the play that Shakespeare would have gone on to write after *The Tempest* had he lived long enough. What are Vladimir and Estragon after all but washed up sailors, surviving on what was left after Prospero drowned his book? What is Lucky but Ariel on a lead?

But for the most part and certainly in England, we live with the spirit of Ben Jonson, with realism, on stage and screen, mocking human follies in language such as men do use.