

## The Fall of Princes: The Classical and Medieval Roots of English Renaissance Tragedy

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No one can doubt that English Renaissance theater set one of the high-water marks in the history of tragedy's ebb and flow. William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, John Webster, Philip Massinger, and John Ford, among many others, crafted plays unlike any of their predecessors, whether classical or vernacular. Writing for sometimes rowdy, sometimes awestruck audiences that mixed aristocrats and apprentices – and writing for profit – these men and their actors brought to the stage a new tragic language, titanic heroes and villains, and inventive plots that mingled kings and clowns.

Literary historians contend in accounting for the intense explosion of tragic theater. And it was indeed more like an explosion than a flowering, for its life span was relatively brief. What we remember and still teach are a relatively small set of plays performed in England – and mostly in London – from the mid-1580s up through the early 1630s. We tend to begin with Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Kyd, and end with Ford and Massinger, since readers now feel little affection for what came either before or after them. But, while we may have lost the taste for their predecessors, we do want to uncover the prehistory of this phenomenon. What ignited this explosion? What factors happened at this particular place and time to fuel it?

A review of the scholarly debates over the origins of English Renaissance tragedy reveals that this is a loaded question, for how a scholar tells the story is tied to academic politics. Everyone agrees on one point: that English Renaissance tragedy is a mongrel genre, compounded of multiple traditions. But scholars continue to argue about the relative value and influence of the vernacular traditions and new forms of classicism in England.

Twentieth-century literary history periodically adjusted the relative weight of the classical and medieval influences on English Renaissance tragedy. In the earlier part of the century, scholars like T. W. Baldwin and Hardin Craig celebrated the victory of what they saw as new classical values over coarse “popular” medieval theater, with its

explicit allegories, crude comedy, and stock characters. As David Bevington describes this perspective:

Distaste for this popular theater has led too frequently to overemphasis of classical rediscovery as the main line of development in English Renaissance drama: the humanist experiments of Medwall, Rastell, and Heywood, the early "regular" comedies of the schools and universities, and the erudite plays of the Inns of Court. The preconceived standard of classical scholarship, with its preference for intellect, philosophical probing, and the correspondences of the Aristotelian unities, measures literary progress in the sixteenth century only by the degree to which sophisticated learning freed English drama from the fetters of ignorance and bad taste. (Bevington 1962: 1–2)

One can see from Bevington's tone here that he does not entirely approve of this teleology, which finds the "true" roots of Renaissance tragedy in a renewed classicism, which is also tied to high culture and the world of the grammar schools and universities.

By the mid-twentieth century, the attitude toward classicism in English drama began indeed to change to reflect such critiques of a classicist bias. This shift reflected a swing in academic politics to the left, when as Lorraine Helms notes, "liberal and democratic" scholars of the mid-century "dismissed traces of classical antiquity as a superficial and elitist literariness glossing the robust popular theatricality of medieval mysteries, moralities, and mummers' plays." Studies of classicism were confined to the products of the grammar school, and academics like Alfred Harbage opposed the vital world of the open-air popular playhouse to the "enclosed halls" of the schools, aristocratic courts, and so-called "private playhouses" (Helms 1997: 9–10).

Most influential was Robert Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (first published in Germany in 1967 and translated into English in 1978). Weimann focused on the social function of the vernacular plays, which he believed defined the essence of the Shakespearean theater, tragic and comic. He had little respect for "the contribution of the humanist drama, its models in Seneca, Terence, and Plautus, the French imitations by Garnier and Jodelle, its classical examples as seen in *Gorboduc* (1561) and the later tragedies by Fulke Greville and Sir William Alexander." What he did appreciate was "the moral vision and the dramatic potency of what humanism – as an approach to art and method rather than as doctrine or philology – gave to the theater" (Weimann 1978: 179).

In recent years some scholars have reevaluated how classicism shaped the sixteenth-century English theater. In *Seneca by Candlelight and Other Stories of Renaissance Drama* (1997) Lorraine Helms explored the theatricality of Senecan rhetoric, and Bruce Smith wrote sympathetically in *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the Stage 1500–1700* (1988) of experiments with classical models, mostly performed in schools and aristocratic households. It may now be possible to discuss without bias how English tragedy developed in this period. We can accept that Renaissance tragedy is the fruit of a multiply grafted stock: part medieval mystery, part morality, part chronicle play, part Seneca, and part of the classical heroic tradition, handed down

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through medieval epic and discovered anew, in the Renaissance, in its original form, as a genre for representing the passions and values of a society in the grips of political and social change. Weimann observed how in comedy "the popular tradition itself assimilated wholly disparate elements (including classical, courtly, and humanist materials) until it became part of a vastly larger cultural and aesthetic synthesis: the 'mingle-mangle' of which John Lyly spoke when he noted that 'the whole worlde is become an Hodge-podge' " (Weimann 1978: xviii). And such could be said of tragedy as well, although in the case of tragedy, the quality of "hodge-podge" came to threaten the values of generic purity that some took the notion of tragedy to represent.

Even if we do take a side on this matter, at least we can recognize that in so doing, we reenact a debate that took place in the halls, streets, and theaters of sixteenth-century England. Simultaneously defending "poesy" and condemning most English vernacular poets, Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* (1595) strikingly defines the terms of the debate over the status of tragedy in the late sixteenth century. Sidney celebrates tragedy in his defense of the moral claims for "poetry": who, he asks, could condemn

the high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants to manifest their tyrannical humors; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded. (Sidney 1966: 45)

Yet when it comes to considering the productions of his own country, Sidney finds them lacking in style:

Our tragedies and comedies (not without cause cried out against), observing rules neither of honest civility nor skillful poetry excepting *Gorboduc* (again I say of those I have seen), which notwithstanding as it is full of stately speeches and well-sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca's style, and as full of notable morality, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtain the very end of poesy, yet in truth it is very defectuous in the circumstances, which grieveth me, because it might not remain as an exact model of all tragedies. For it is faulty both in place and time, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions. For where the stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one say, there is both many days, and many places, inartificially imagined. (Sidney 1966: 75)

He presents a withering description of the defects of the plays of his contemporaries, which have "Asia of the one side and Afric of the other" and portray a prince's life from birth to death, thus transgressing the limits of time and space (Sidney 1966: 65). Tragedy, he claims,

is tied to the laws of poesy, and not of history; not bound to follow the story, but having liberty either to feign a quite new matter or to frame the history to the most tragical

conveniency . . . Again, many things may be told which cannot be showed, if they know the difference betwixt reporting and representing. (Sidney 1966: 66)

The tragic poets are free, in short, to follow what Sidney poses as the new tragic artifice, which demands a new decorum.

In praising the high style of *Gorboduc*, with its stately speeches and shows, and yet condemning it for neglect of the neo-Aristotelian unities of time and place (see chapters 3 and 21 in this volume), Sidney draws on two distinct notions of "classical tragedy" in his time: "English Seneca" and the relatively recent introduction of the notion of the unities of time, place, and action. When Greek tragedy resurfaced in southern Europe in the fourteenth century, and much later in England, Seneca had already begun to exercise a strong influence on both English and French Renaissance drama (Braden 1985: 101–2). By the mid-sixteenth century, however, Italian and French commentators on Aristotle's *Poetics* were busy constructing the neoclassical theory of the unities, which burst into full flower in France in the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> But the truth is that, outside of "closet" or purely academic tragedy, very few English tragedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ever exactly fit either the Senecan or the neoclassical model. Cross-breeding a strong vernacular tradition of theater of the hall, school, and street with the voices of Seneca and the classical dramatic conventions, English playwrights developed a startling hybrid species, in defiance of the complaints of Sidney and his followers.

### The Fall of Princes: The Vernacular Traditions

The writers and actors of the sixteenth century did inherit from the preceding centuries' scholars and divines a definitive notion of what "tragedy" is, which was as much a political as an ethical concept: the fall of those of high estate or rank. Chaucer's translation of Boethius offered a simple definition: "What other thing bywalen the crynges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune that with unwar strook overturneth the realmes of great nobleye? (Glose. Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidness)" ([1951] 1964: 44). In his *Troy Book*, Lydgate had also written:

But tragedie, who so list to knowe,  
It begynneth in prosperite,  
And endeth ever in adversity;  
And it also doth the conquest trete  
Of riche kynges and of lordys grete,  
Of mighty men and olde conquerou[ri]s.  
Whiche by fraude of Fortunys schowrris  
Ben overcast and whelmed from her glorie.  
(Cunningham [1951] 1964: 46–7)

The three themes of this conventional image of tragedy almost always thus occur together: the fall from a prosperous or "high" condition to a wretched or low one; the role of "Fortune" in causing that fall; and the idea that the tragedies only happen to "mighty men" – kings, conquerors, and those of "great nobility" – and not common people, and thus they are fundamentally political. Absent from this idea of tragedy is the notion of *hamartia*, whether understood as a misjudgment or a flaw of character. The tragic fall was considered as inherent to nobility or political power, when the wheel of Fortune ground through its inexorable turns.

This medieval conception of tragedy was fundamentally a critical concept, not a theatrical reality. Before the sixteenth century, tragic drama as we know it was not played in the streets and halls of medieval England. What were performed, the mystery plays of the medieval cities and the morality plays of schools and aristocratic households, did leave their mark on the unique form of tragedy that emerged in London in the sixteenth century. The mystery plays contributed to the performative style of later tragedy, while also carving out a space for tragic theater in the marketplace and city space. The allegorical morality plays, the stuff of school and court theaters, with their core of moral conflict and homilies of fall and redemption, reinterpreted the medieval theory of tragedy for "everyman" and helped to define a new tragic political drama.

The vernacular mystery (or miracle) cycle plays had a long life span, extending from the twelfth century right up through Elizabeth's reign. Thus, when English tragedy came to flower in the third decade of the sixteenth century, their influence was still active. The mystery plays were a pan-European phenomenon, a mode for performance of biblical events often focusing on the life of Christ. In England, we know that in the mid-twelfth century, clerics in elaborate costumes acted a mixed Latin-French play, *Mystère d'Adam*, on a scaffold outside a church (Woolf 1972: 49–50). While still religious in theme, in later centuries the English plays became detached from the liturgical year, occurring mostly during the festivals of Whitsuntide and Corpus Christi (and hence they are sometimes referred to as Corpus Christi plays) (Woolf 1972: Ch. 4). In succeeding centuries the mysteries also shifted their playing space from the church porch to the streets and marketplaces of London and provincial towns. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the town guilds took over the sponsorship of the mystery plays, which had now become extensive "cycles" or long, episodic processional performances of up to forty-eight distinct plays with laymen playing all the roles. In these towns each of the guilds would have its play to perform on a wagon that processed through the town, and citizens enacted roles ranging from angels to tyrants to shepherds, unfolding the high drama of the Old and New Testaments. Lawrence Clopper argued that the transition from church porch to city street suggests a conflict over authority between the secular and religious spheres of English society. While the plays may have been religious in their content, representing the events in the Old Testament that prefigured those of the New, their origin and purpose were closely linked to the guilds and concerns of late medieval civic life (Clopper [1999] 2002: 759–83). As such, they shaped a place

for a public tragic theater in England and for a theater played by and for the people of the city.

The mystery plays also developed a mixture of sacred and profane that would also come to distinguish English tragedy. Their scope was wide, enacting events from the rebellion of the angels to the last judgment, and their form was episodic (see Woolf 1972: 55). The style could be rough, characterized by a mixture of piety and humor, devotion and violence: for example, in the Wakefield cycle the Second Shepherd's Play interweaves a comic plot about a stolen sheep with the mystery of the Nativity. The mystery plays were also remembered well after their height for their representation of kings and knights, who, as Clopper notes, "are almost universally represented as tyrants and thugs" (Clopper [1999] 2002: 762). The mystery cycles' vain Herods and Pilates bluster about on stage, threatening to punish anyone who defies them (see Bushnell 1990: 84–8); their knights are at once ineffectual and cruel. The mystery plays thus licensed the parodic representation of secular figures alongside sacred ones, juxtaposing the high and low in society, in public, and in the context of serious drama.

The other late medieval dramatic genre that shaped Elizabethan tragedy, the morality play or moral interlude, was peopled not by biblical characters but by abstractions, allegorical figures who met in battle over the destiny of a hero who stands for us all. The morality play emerged in the late fourteenth century, just when the mysteries were flourishing, but today the ones we know best are *The Castle of Perseverance* (early fifteenth century), *Mankind* (from the mid-fifteenth century), and *Everyman* (late fifteenth century). Such plays apparently made use of a fixed stage with scaffolding, rather than the mysteries' procession of wagons (although there is no evidence that *Everyman* was ever acted in its own time). The manuscript of *The Castle of Perseverance* is rife with stage directions that imply performance in a large open-air space surrounded by scaffolds representing the realms of God, the World, and the Devil. We can also see that the audience enjoyed riveting special effects, for example, that the actor playing Belial the devil had "gunne-powdyr brennyng in pipys in hys handys and in his erys and in his ars whenne he gothe to the batayle" (Happé [1979] 1987: 78). From the fifteenth century on, however, it is more likely that the morality plays would have been performed in the great halls of universities, schools, and aristocratic households, either by groups of traveling professional players or by students. By the sixteenth century, the morality play was more typically a short, more secular drama referred to as a moral interlude; these were a mixed bag of plays that often mingled allegorical characters with historical or mythological types. The interludes covered themes suitable to the groups of students and aristocratic families that were often their audiences. Favorite topics were the value of education, political virtues, and general moral doctrine (see Happé 1999: ch. 9).

What binds together this heterogeneous group of plays is not only their habit of allegory or personification; it is also the plot pattern of a temptation, fall, and redemption, often centered on the fate of a single protagonist, who may be a figure of mankind, a king, or a youth whose soul is at stake. The morality play is a drama

with a crisis at its core, whether played out in comic violence and action or high-flown rhetorical debate. In *Everyman* the crisis is the coming of death. God summons Everyman to prepare to die, and so he seeks help from Fellowship, Kinsmen, Goods, and Riches, all of whom betray him. He finds aid in Good Deeds and Knowledge, as well as his Five Wits, but when the angel of death comes he is left with Good Deeds alone to bear him to his maker. *The Castle of Perseverance* model is the more prevalent one: there vices and virtues battle for the soul of Humanum Genus. Encouraged by his Malus Angelus, or bad angel, Humanum Genus decides to embark on a life of sin, but his Bonus Angelus persuades him to repent, and leads him to the Castle of Perseverance. There the powers of evil lay siege to the Castle: when war fails, Avaricia tricks Humanum Genus, who then confronts his death in sin. He dies praying, and after a debate before God among Misericordia (Mercy), Veritas (Truth), Justicia (Justice), and Pax (Peace), Humanum Genus is forgiven. *Mankind* is a sparer version of the same conflict, with seven characters as opposed to the thirty-five of *Perseverance*. It is also more comical. When Mischief conflicts with Mercy over the control of Mankind, a farmer, he is tempted away from his work and godly life by Nought, New-Guise, and Nowadays. When Mankind is brought to account, it appears it is too late, but Mercy finds him, and he is saved. The morality plays thus characteristically bring their heroes to the brink of damnation through their sin but allow for their salvation through mercy or grace.

In establishing this scheme for ethical drama, the morality thus defined a paradigm that both overlapped and conflicted with that of classical tragedy. Fundamentally, the conflict lay in the clash between Christian and classical ethics, between the image of a hero who confronts his own often inexplicable fate and a story of sin and death that finds its fulfillment in grace and redemption. In his study of *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience*, Bruce Smith describes the two ethics as in fact informing each other in the creation of Renaissance tragedy:

In the world of classical tragedy, larger-than-life heroes with an awesome capacity for action, for suffering, and for eloquence are destroyed by external forces – often very unjust forces – over which they nonetheless triumph in the very act of dying. In the world of medieval morality plays, on the other hand, heroes with the life-size homeliness of *Everyman* are faced with moral choices and are rewarded by a providential God when they choose rightly and are punished when they choose wrongly. Classical tragedies, Seneca's in particular, make no claims for the justice of the universe; morality plays assume a sometimes inscrutable yet always certain providence. It is, perhaps, the interplay between these polarities, pagan and Christian, that defines the imaginative power of modern tragedy. (Smith 1988: 202).

What this comparison implies, also, is that, in contrast with the mysteries, classical tragedy and the moralities share a focus on the reversal of fortune of a single protagonist. The allegory of the moralities reinforced the message that the protagonist's experience stands for more than his own life: somehow, that hero, that *Everyman's* fate either mirrors that of the spectator or takes us with him.

This focus on the career of a single protagonist also explains how the morality might come to define political tragedy. The medieval idea of the tragic as the unfortunate fall of princes paved the way for the allied genre of the "mirror for magistrates," didactic poems that recounted the disastrous careers of historical and legendary figures meant as warnings to presumptuous men and women in power. The political moralities blended a medieval message of inevitable disaster under the rule of Fortune with the implication of moral responsibility, conflating the fate of Everyman with that of the ruler and the state. The best developed example of such a play is John Skelton's *Magnificence* (ca. 1515), which stages the downfall of the prince, Magnificence, who is dragged into degradation when he follows Fancy's advice that he banish Measure and free the figure of Liberty. The false courtiers Cloaked Collusion, Counterfeit Countenance, and Crafty Conveyance lead him to a state when he confronts Adversity and Poverty. At the end, he is redeemed by the efforts of Good Hope, Redress, and Circumspection. *Magnificence* thus attributes responsibility to the prince for his own downfall. The message is clear to those who would aspire to rule: avoid excessive consumption and beware the flattery of false counsel, a timely message at its historical moment under the reign of Henry VIII.

In a different way, Thomas Preston's notorious *Cambyses* shows in spectacular fashion what the title page describes as

a lamentable tragedy mixed ful of pleasant mirth, conteyning the life of Cambises king of Percia, from the beginning of his kingdome unto his death, his one good deed of execution, after that many wicked deeds and tirannous murders, committed by and through him, and last of all, his odious death by Gods Iustice appointed. (Preston 1570: title page)

This play represented a new direction for English theater, in mixing history with the morality's focus on the career of a single overweening protagonist. In his lamentable career Cambyses is aberted by the traditional morality "Vice" figure Ambidexter, who is both a type of the devil and a figure of the corrupt counselor who is a double-dealer. Ambidexter urges Cambyses to follow what appear to be his own violent instincts in murder and treachery, thus suggesting that he is at once a personification of Cambyses' own evil and an image of bad counsel. Cambyses' death comes unexpectedly, in a fall from a horse. It appears unmotivated but is moralized by the onstage spectators, and the whole play is offered as an object lesson for Elizabeth and her council. By the middle of the century, with plays like *Cambyses* as well as other hybrid plays that mixed chronicle or classical myth or history with morality, such as George Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), Richard Edward's *Damon and Pithias* (1571), John Piker's *Horestes* (1567), and R. B.'s *Appius and Virginia* (1575), the school and aristocratic audiences of the moral interludes would be prepared to appreciate the stage career of tyrant or hero torn between half-allegorized, half-realistic antagonists who draw him toward a destiny of damnation or salvation. The career of king and hero is inseparable from the fate of the country and the lives of his subjects, and ultimately, a mirror for a audience of state.



### Classical Models

English readers and audiences who would come face to face with Greek or Roman tragedy in the early sixteenth century would not have necessarily found it entirely foreign – and indeed, they might have been fully prepared to assimilate it to existing dramatic structures and values. The story of Greek tragedy's reception in the English Renaissance is both less well known than that of Seneca and ultimately less productive. The sixteenth century saw the production of some Latin translations of Greek tragedy (including Erasmus' two influential translations of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* written when he was living in England from 1501 to 1506). The humanist and royal schoolmaster Roger Ascham was said to have translated *Philoctetes*, and Thomas Watson translated *Antigone* (see Cunliffe 1912: xlxxx; also Smith 1988: 224–6). Only one English translation of Euripides and one of Sophocles (Watson's) were published before 1600 (see Bolgar 1954: Appendix II), and a manuscript of Lady Lumley's translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis* survives to this day. For the most part these translations were purely literary and not done for the stage, although George Gascoigne's and Francis Kinwelmershe's *Jocasta* was performed at the Inns of Court in 1566<sup>2</sup> (see Smith 1988: 217), and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge recorded stagings of Greek classical tragedy. Several scholars also adapted Euripidean models for biblical drama. The Scottish Humanist George Buchanan composed *Jepthes* and *Baptistes*, two Latin imitations of Euripides based on biblical themes and acted in French schools in the mid-1540s. Later in 1576 Buchanan informed his young charge James VI that *Baptistes* turns young people from popular theatrical fictions (*a vulgari fabularum scaenicarum*) toward the imitation of antiquity (*ad imitationem antiquitatis*) (Buchanan 1983: 97).

But, as Bruce Smith puts it, "Sophocles may have had academic snob appeal; Seneca pleased audiences" (Smith 1988: 204). The peak of the reception of Seneca was Thomas Newton's 1581 edition of the *Tenne Tragedies* of Seneca, translated into English by several different authors (the translations themselves date from 1559–66). Seneca certainly had the potential to stultify Renaissance European tragedy, insofar as, in Gordon Braden's words, "the attempt to imitate Senecan drama directly at the level of the play as a whole, is still essentially a dead end; the general result is a static collection of formal speeches. . . . The rediscovery of tragedy through Seneca threatens to be its ossification" (Braden 1985: 104). Braden does see Seneca powerfully defining a rhetorical drama, when freed from "its treacherous dramaturgical casing," a liberation that allowed "its hyperbolic strain" to flourish (Braden 1985: 182).

Even in the sixteenth century, feelings about the value of Seneca's impact on the development of Elizabethan tragedy differed. Late Tudor writers also saw high-flown rhetoric as the hallmark of Seneca, but associated with it a grim presentational style. The Senecan stage is imagined as haunted by ghosts, dripping with blood, and sounding with cries to revenge. In his preface to Thomas Greene's *Menaphon*, Thomas

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Nashe mocked English meddling with Seneca. He dismissed most English translators as poor Latin scholars, admitting

yet English Seneca read by candle light yeeldes manie good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar*, and so foorth: and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will afford you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfulls of tragical speeches: But o grieffe! *tempus edax rerum*, what's that will last alwaies? The sea exhaled by droppes will in continuance be drie, and *Seneca* let bloud line by line and page by page, at length must needes die to our stage. (Greene 1589: 3r)

The *Hamlet* that Nashe refers to is not Shakespeare's, but certainly Shakespeare's *Hamlet* bears the marks of that bloody English Seneca, with its good "sentences" or pithy apothegms and florid speeches, not to mention the ghost of Hamlet's father who stalks the battlements of Elsinore.

Another significant feature of English Seneca was its obsession with the excesses of power. Like the original, with its typically Roman or historical subject matter, European neo-Senecan drama glories in the representation of tyranny and the violent exercise of power (see Braden 1985: 107–8). Thomas Newton was quite aware of this element of Seneca in the translations he brought together in his *Tenne Tragedies*. In his dedication he expressed his fear that his Seneca might at first be misread, as "literally tending (at the first sight) sometime to the prayse of Ambition, sometye to the mayntenance of cruelty, now and then to approbation of incontencie and here and there to the ratification of tyranny." Thus he worried that Seneca "cannot be digested without great daunger of infection." But he reassured his readers that one should not fear

the direct meaning of Seneca himselfe, whose whole wrytinges (penned with a peerlesse sublimity and loftinesse of style, are so farre from countenauncing Vice, that I doubt whether there bee any amonge all the Catalogue of Heathen wryters, that with more gvavity of Philosophicall sentences, more waightyness of sappy [*sic*] words, or greater authority of sound matter beateth down sinne, loose lyfe, dissolute dealinge, and unbrydaled sensuality: or that more sensibly, pithily, and bytingly layeth doune the gue[r]don of filthy lust, cloaked dissimulation, and odious treachery: which is the dryft whereunto he leveleth the whole issue of ech one of his Tragedies. (Seneca 1927: 4–5)

Thus, like the morality plays, Seneca was seen as an antidote to unbridled power and the excess of vice, while it was posed a danger in so vividly representing them.

While one strain of interpretation of Seneca led to revenge tragedies, beginning with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (ca. 1584; see chapter 19 in this volume), another thus led to the shaping of political tragedies. The first notable example in this line was Thomas Norton's and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex*, acted at the Inn of Court in 1561 and before Queen Elizabeth at Whitehall in 1562 (see chapter 18 in this volume for an extensive discussion of this play). Indirectly modeled on Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (printed

in 1587) used all the elements of Senecan rhetorical debate, the image of tyranny, and the theme of revenge, to stage the story of the defeat of Arthur and his tyrannical son Mordred (like *Gorboduc*, this play was performed before the queen). Arthur is introduced as the child of Uther Pendragon's adultery, while Mordred is the child produced by Arthur's incest with his sister Anne. Mordred arises as a tyrant when Arthur is away at war and takes Guinevere as his lover. As the play opens, the ghost of Gorlois, the betrayed husband of Uther Pendragon's lover, calls for revenge when Arthur returns. After attempts to reconcile them, Mordred and Arthur kill each other in a bloody civil war. Mordred himself is a composite of every Senecan tyrant (Hughes gives him all the best tyrant lines from Seneca), but Arthur, too is tainted by his descent from Uther Pendragon's adultery. The play is imbued with the kind of dark ambivalence and conflict that is the strongest expression of English Senecanism (see also Bushnell 1990: 103–5).

Whether read in the study or aristocratic "closet" or performed in the schools, universities, or Inns of Court, classical tragedy in its purest form remained "private" and not public drama, produced as a self-consciously literary and didactic genre for a limited audience. All of the dramatic genres discussed in this chapter so far were meant in some way to teach as well as to entertain: the mysteries, to unfold the events of the Bible and relate them to the lives of the citizens; the moralities, to reveal the evils that we must resist in order to be saved – or at least be virtuous; and the classical tragedies, to display the dangers of excess. Bruce Smith has argued that

For all its fiery poetry, for all its fierce portrayal of social disaster and intense human suffering, classical tragedy was produced so as to confirm, not challenge, the values of the closed societies, the private sixteenth- and seventeenth-century households, who watched it. Seneca's *Phaedra* and *Oedipus*, Euripides' *Creon* and *Eteocles*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *Orestes* – the insistent individuality of these heroes was seen as a threat to established social values of moderation, obedience, and rationality and thus was not allowed to engage an audience's sympathy for long. In the hands of the earliest English producers, performance of Greek and Roman tragedy became a ritual in which indomitable individuals were ceremonially exorcised from the social order. (Smith 1988: 239)

It is significant that in their own time the popular audiences were understood to have little taste for such elevated fare. Ben Jonson often complained that his audiences were like pigs that preferred acorns to the pure wheat of classical drama (see his "Ode to Himself"). John Webster, in his preface to *The White Devil*, admitted that his play was "no true Drammaticke poem," but he protested that it was so intentionally, since his audience would not suffer it:

for, should a man present to such an Auditory the most sententious Tragedy that ever was written, observing all the criticall lawes, as heighth of style; and gravity of person, enrich it with the sententious Chorus, and as it were, life'n Death, in the passionate and waighty Nuntius: yet, after all this divine rapture, . . . the breath that comes from the incapable multitude, is able to poison it. (Webster 1612: A2r–A2v)

Since both men wrote wonderfully complex and sophisticated plays for the public stage, seen by people of many different ranks, one must be cautious of interpreting these statements as marking a clear distinction between the classical and vernacular that also matches an opposition between aristocratic and popular audiences. However, such a distinction certainly had some cultural significance in its time, and it continued to shape the profile of the English tragic theater, balanced between the sometimes conflicting drivers of commercial appeal, academic values, and aesthetic exploration.

### The New Tragedy: Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus*

All this distributed theatrical energy of the school play, mystery cycle, inn-yard performance, and household entertainment continued to surge in the second half of the sixteenth century. Yet matters changed in London, first in 1567 with the building of the Red Lion Theater in Whitechapel, and then, more significantly, with the construction of the spectacular open Theater in Shoreditch in 1576 (see Gurr [1987] 1996: 13). In his massive history of *Early English Stages 1300–1660*, Glynne Wickham called the construction of this theater “a point towards which everything seems inexorably to move and after which those same things are never quite the same again” (Wickham 1959: I.xxix; see commentary by De Grazia 1997: 17–18). Built by James Burbage and John Brayne, the Theater in Shoreditch, with its polygonal structure and open galleries, set the model for the later amphitheatres that to at least one observer, Johannes De Witt, appeared to be in a Roman style (Gurr 1992: 132). While it echoed the older inn-yards and scaffold stages of the early moralities, it was also an imposing structure that could be seen as alluding to the classical past.

This theater thus situated the performance of English tragedy and comedy in a unique space that was very much its own while echoing both the vernacular and classical traditions. Its creation signaled a new freedom for professional playwrights and actors: as Margreta De Grazia puts it, “In 1576, it might be said, the theater became free to occupy its own time and space” (De Grazia 1997: 13). What the construction of this theater meant for the development of English tragedy is far more than can be explored in this short chapter. But it is crucial to note that the location of the theater in this space disentangled the plays performed there from the world of church, on the one hand, and that of the state and city on the other (while its relationship with the latter two institutions remained complex). While their companies still nominally operated under aristocratic or royal patronage, they were preeminently commercial, thriving on the attendance of all ranks of city folk and flourishing outside the halls of the universities, schools, and the aristocratic households that had defined the audiences and ends of the moral interludes. The acting companies were bound by the constraints of censorship, but their commercial orientation also pulled them toward the tastes and desires of this new audience. This new theater was also freed from any associations with the liturgical year and from any

"stately tent of war" and Tamburlaine's relentless rise from base shepherd to world conqueror, subjecting mighty princes to defeat and humiliation.

But what does the reader/spectator see in "the tragic glass"? It depends on whether you are looking at Part One, Part Two, or the arc of both plays seen together. While scholars debate whether both plays were composed at once, the prologue to Part Two tells us that "the general welcomes Tamburlaine receiv'd / When he arrived last on our stage, / Have made our poet pen his Second Part" (Marlowe 1969: 183). Thus it would seem that, in fact, Marlowe originally intended his story of Tamburlaine to end, not with Tamburlaine's fall, but with his violent subjection of the kings of Arabia and Turkey and his marriage to the fair Zenocrate. What is "tragic" about that? Tamburlaine's upward trajectory proceeds without a pause, and the fall we witness, if any, is of the arrogant Turk Bajazeth, not of Tamburlaine.

The second part of *Tamburlaine* does follow its hero to his unanticipated death. Part Two traces his career of conquest (and his disappointment in his third son), climaxing in his siege of Babylon and burning of the Koran. Shortly thereafter he is stricken by a fatal illness. Some readers feel that we are to understand this end as precipitated by Tamburlaine's hubris, expressed in his defiance of the gods. Even in his sickness he cries out against them:

Come, let us march against the powers of heaven  
And set black streamers in the firmament  
To signify the slaughter of the gods.  
Ah, friends, what shall I do? I cannot stand.  
Come, carry me to war against the gods,  
That thus envy the health of Tamburlaine.

(Marlowe 1969: *Tamburlaine*, 5.3.48–53)

Yet at the same time this breathless speech offers no indication of any clear cause of this sudden turn of fortune, other than his burning of the Koran. In Marlowe's time, any retribution for this act would surely be seen as ironic. There is little sense that either Marlowe or his audience condemned his hero (and indeed, the play was evidently wildly popular then). As an example to later playwrights, it had the power to define a secular tragedy that transcended simple moral formulae and played to an audience's desire to witness the shepherd triumphant, defeated only by death, "where death cuts off the progress of his pomp, / And murderous Fates throws all his triumphs down" (Marlowe 1969: *Tamburlaine* prologue, 4–5).

The Chorus of *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* self-consciously presents this play as a different sort of performance. It is not one where you will see the hero "sporting in the dalliance of love / In courts of kings where state is overturned, / Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds." Rather, as the Chorus says with wonderful ambiguity, it is the staging of "the form of Faustus' fortune, good or bad" (Marlowe 1969: Chorus, prologue 18–22). *Doctor Faustus* is a history of a man low born like Tamburlaine, who rose to the heights of scholarship and theology "excelling all," "till

swol'n with cunning of a self-conceit, / His waxen wings" (Marlowe 1969: *Faustus*, prologue). In this sense, unlike *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus* set up the trajectory of its hero in terms of the tragic paradigm of Icarus, displaying a heroic ambition that soars above human limits – and which is punished by the "heavens." But the moral resonance of the play is far more complex than the Chorus would suggest.

The architecture of the play, which sets Faustus caught between the realms of Heaven and Hell, and the influences of Good and Bad angels, does set that classical plot motif of Icarus and a figure of Senecan ambition in an explicitly Christian universe. As Ruth Lunney comments on the division of critical opinion on the play, this generic hybridity can generate contradictory meanings:

From one perspective of course Faustus remains just another conventional figure: readily typed (fool, "insatiable speculator"), his career an old-fashioned cautionary tale. Then again, the character is complex enough to satisfy the "commonsense" expectations of the 1590s audience. But his presentation before an audience is by no means coherent: when Faustus makes important choices, the action ranges from the up-to-date Senecan set-speech which opens the play, methodically surveying his career options like Gaveston or Richard of Gloucester; to the routine psychomachia late in the play where Mephistopheles threatens arrest and Faustus submits like a typical morality character; to the complex debate with himself in the final soliloquy. (Lunney 2002: 132–3)

This constant change in dramatic convention in the representation of Faustus's character, crossed with the shifting frame in which one scene is a tavern and the other the world overseen by Satan, results in proliferating interpretations, whereby one reader can claim that the play is severely Christian in outlook, true to its morality model, and another reader aver that it is daringly subversive, observing Faustus' excess and defiance (see Bluestone 1969; Dollimore [1984] 1989: ch. 6).

The interpretation of *Doctor Faustus* and our characterization of it as a tragedy is further complicated by the existence of two quite different texts of the play, neither of which has undisputed priority or authority: the A-text published in 1604 (ten years after Marlowe's death), which is sparer, and the B-text printed in 1616, which includes not only a great deal of comic business not in the 1604 version but also extra appearances by Lucifer and Beelzebub. Readers continue to debate about which is more "tragic." J. B. Steane expresses his preference for the A-text on the grounds that it

has everything essential to the presentation of "the tragical history"; the B-text . . . adds, for the most part, light, simple-minded comedy, innocuous enough except that it distracts the mind from what is serious and valuable in the play; or rather, it fails to occupy the *mind* at all and so lessens the poetic and dramatic intensity. (Marlowe 1969: 261)

It can, however, be argued that the B-text's comic business, where Faustus's servants adapt his magic and manage to call forth Mephistopheles, brilliantly parodies Faustus's career and thus offers ironic commentary on it. In this sense, the B-text's mixture

of modes, which evokes vernacular traditions, serves to define the style of English tragedy, and especially Shakespearean tragedy, where comic scenes complement and comment on the main plot. The world of English tragedy that *Doctor Faustus* defines, where popes and emperors are chased off the stage by hostlers and serving men, and where the specter of Helen of Troy shares a stage with Mephistopheles and Wagner the servant, is one that is rich in irony, even while it stretches to the very limits of belief. It is a world that is as much this world, a world of the historical present and the lives of the audience, as it is of myth and providence.

By the time Marlowe died in 1593, after writing *Edward II*, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, *The Massacre of Paris*, and *The Jew of Malta*, in addition to *Faustus* and *Tamburlaine*, the audience of the London theaters had gained a taste for such tragedies that charted the spectacular careers of men – and women – who clawed their way to a victory that was also their disaster. In particular, they had learned, through Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the works of playwrights whose names we have now lost, how history could be staged as tragedy. In 1591, the anonymous *True Tragedy of Richard III* was performed; it was followed, near the time of Marlowe's death, by Shakespeare's *Richard III*, which was significantly named a tragedy and not a history play when it appeared in print in 1597. *Richard III* reeks far more of English Seneca than *Doctor Faustus*, in its formal structure, multiple ghosts, and set speeches, all drenched in the blood of Richard's murders. However, like *Faustus*, it is very much a story that an English audience would see as real – and as their own, even when it challenged the boundaries of the real. Like *Faustus*, too, *Richard III* was indebted to the conventions of the morality play, and its obsession with the moral downfall of a protagonist who in this case was the sovereign prince of England. English Seneca and moral interludes thus met to define a uniquely political tragedy in the English Renaissance.

In the end, then, we can see in these plays of the 1590s that, even while some might have felt compelled to take a side on the classics or vernacular, in fact, tragic playwrights, eager to please an audience that ranged from a queen to apprentices, borrowed from multiple sources and models. In this feverish time, a new tragic art was generated from the energy of a culture and society on the move, painfully conscious of the weight of the past but also with a growing confidence in the future of England. Tragedy was to become one of the arts of the new age that at once expressed its deepest anxieties and recorded its greatness.

#### NOTES

- 1 The key texts were Francesco Robortello's *In Librum Aristotelis De arte poetica explicationes* (1548), Giambattista Giraldi's *Discoursi* (1554), the *De poeta* of Sebastiano Minturno (1559), and the *Poetice libri septem* (1561) of Julius Caesar Scaliger (Sidney's source was Lodovico Castelvetro's *Poetica De' Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* from 1570) (see Cunliffe 1912: xlviv–xlvii).
- 2 This *Jocasta* was a version of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* based on Ludovico Dolce's Italian *Giocasta*, adapted in turn from a Latin translation of Euripides' play.

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