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 elb 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 astrotuck audiences that mixed aristocrats and apprentices—and writing for profit—their texts and their actors brought to the stage a new tragic language, tragic heroes and villains, and inventive plots that muddled kings and clowns.

Literary historians contend in accounting for the intense explosion of tragic theatre. And it was indeed more like an explosion than a flowering, for its life span was relatively brief. What we remember and will reach 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 texts for their predecessors, we do want to uncover the prehistory of the phenomenon. What ignored 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 classic "popular" medieval theater, with its
explicit allegories, crude comedy, and stock characters. As David Bevington describes this perspective:

Dissatisfaction with this popular theater has led to frequent overemphasizing of classical
rediscovery as the main line of development in English Renaissance drama: the humanist
experiments of Medwall, Russell, and Heywood, the early "revel" comedies of the
schools and universities, and the realistic plays of the, arts of Court. The preponderance
of classical scholarship, with its preference for intellectual, 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
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
theology, 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 to change to reflect such criticisms as a classicist bias. This shift reflected
a swing in academic politics to the left, while as Lorraine Helms notes, "liberal and
democratic" scholars of the mid-century "distilled traces of classical antiquity as a
superficial and elite 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 playhouses as the "enrolled halls" of the schools,
aristocratic courts, and so-called "private playhouses" (Helms: 1997: 9-10).

Most influential was Robert Weismann's Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the
Theater (first published in Germany in 1967 and translated into English in 1978).
Weismann focused on the social functions of the vireoclastic plays, which he believed
defined the essence of the Shakespearean theater, tragic and comic. He had little
respect for "the contribution of the humanistic drama, its models in Seneca, Terence,
and Plautus, the French invasions by Guthrie and Jodельle, its classical examples as
seen in Gerbodas (1561) and the latter tragedies by Jakob Gervishe and Sir William
Alexander," who 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" (Weismann: 1978: 179).

In recent years some scholars have reevaluated the sixteenth-
century English theater. In Scene by Scene: "The Other Stories of Renaissance Drama"
(1997) Lorraine Helms explored the theatricality of Senecan rhetoric, and Bruce
Sinich wrote sympathetically in Ancient Script and Modern Experience on the Stage
1700-1800 (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 gifted stock: part medieval mystery, part revolulution, part
chronicle play; part Seneca, and part of the classical heroic tradition, handed down
Bevisong describes the humanist comedies of the The preoccurred dramatic poking, progress in the sick framed English 1-3, the approval of this renewed classicism, men and schools and English drama. This ship reflected notes, liberal and social satiric in a ticacy of medieval, were confided to stage opposed the life of the schools, 7: 9, 90.

The Tradition in the English in 1978, which he believed not. Had his own Seneca, Terence, usical examples as Sir William Dromio of Padua the seventeenth-Renaissance Drama, and Bruce of the Stage formed in schools without bug how issuance tragedy is art morality, put on, handled down 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 grip of political and social change. Weinmann observed how in comedy "the popular tradition itself assimilated wholly disparate elements (including classical, court, and folk-aunt材料, until it became part of a truly larger cultural and aesthetic synthesis the "mingle-mangle" of which John Lyly spoke when he noted that "the whole world is become an Hedge-podge" )" (Weinmann 1978: xiv). And such could be said of tragedy as well, although in the case of tragedy, the quality of "hedge-podge" came to threaten the values of generic poetry that sought the vision of tragedy to represent.

Even if we do take a side on this matter, at least we can recognize that if so doing, we reenact a debate that took place in the halls, streets, and theaters of sixteenth-century England. Simultaneously defending "poetry" and condemning most English vernacular poets, Sir Philip Sidney's Defense 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 operateth the greatest bounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue, that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants to moderate their tyrannical humors; that, with showing the errors of ambition and commissione, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations golden-rods are builded. (Sidney 1966: 45)

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

The tragedies and comedies (not without cause cried out against), observing rules neither of honest civility nor skilful poetry excepting Gorbisca (again I say of those I have seen), which notwithstanding as it is full of steady speeches and well-sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca's style, and as full of noble morality, which it does most delightfully reach, and so obtain the very end of poetry, yet in truth it is very deficient in the circumstances, which grieve me, because it might as well remain as an exact model of all tragedies. For it is a faulty both in place and time, the two necessary companions of all corporeal actions. For where the stage should always represent but one place, and the contiguous time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precepts and common reason, but one say, there it both many days, and many places, insuf-

He presents a withering description of the defects of the plays of his contemporaries, which have "Asia on the side and Afric of the other" and poetry 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 poetry, and now of history; not bound to follow the story, but having liberty either to reign, a quite new matter or to feature the history in the most tragic
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 steady 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 (Bradley 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. But the truth is that, outside of "closer" or purely academic tragedy, very few English tragedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ever exactly fit either the Senecan or the neo-Classical model. Cross-breeding a strong vernacular tradition of theater at 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 century's scholars and divines a definitive notion of what "tragedy" is, which was so 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 byswolen the cryinges of tragedyes but onely the dedes of Fornune that with weere stryken ouerturneth the realitez of grete nobelye/ (Chaucer, Troilus 1.164-44). In his Troy Book, Lydgate had also written:

But tragedie, who so list to know,
It begyneth in prosperite,
And endeth ever in adversite,
And it doth the conquest wreke
Of riche kynges and of lordys name,
Of mighty men and olde conquerours.
Which by frowne of Fornunys swerwris
Ben evercast and whelmed from her glorie.

(Cunningham [1951] 1964: 46-7)
The Classical and Medieval Roots of English Renaissance Tragedy

The three themes of this crevicesional 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 tragedy only happens to “noble” men — kings, conquerors, and those of “great nobility” — and not common people, and that 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 it irresistible turns.

This medieval conception of tragedy was fundamentally a religious concept, not a theatrical reality. Before the sixteenth century, tragedy as we know it was not played in the streets and halls of medieval England. What were performed were the mystery plays of the medieval church and the morality plays of schools and inns of court. The performances of these plays contributed to the performance style of later tragedy, while also creating a space for tragic theatre in the marketplace and city space. The allegorical morality plays, the stuff of school and court entertainments with their own sense of moral conflict and horribilia of fall and redemption, reinterpreted the medieval theory of tragedy for “everyman” and helped to define a new tragic theatrical drama.

The semiannual mystery (or miracle) cycle plays had a long life span, extending from the twelfth century up through Elizabeth’s reign. Thus, when English tragedy came to flower in the third decade of the sixteenth century, their influence was still acute. The mystery plays, with a pan-European provenance, were a sort of performance of biblical events often focused on the life of Christ. In England, we know that in the mid-sixteenth century, clerics in elaborate costumes acted a mixed Latin-French play, Mysterium Adveniendi, on a scaffold outside a church (Wood 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 Whitsun and Corpus Christi (and hence they are sometimes referred to as Corpus Christi plays) (Wood 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 acrobats to shepherds, unfolding the drama of the Old and New Testament. Lawrence Clapper argued that the transition from church porch to city street suggested 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 (Clapper [1999] 2002: 759-85). As such, they shaped a place
for a public tragic theater in England and for a theatre 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, centering 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. An 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 renowned well after their height for their representation of kings and knights, who, as Cooper notes, "are almost universally represented as tyrants and thugs" (Cooper [1999] 2002: 752). The mystery cycles' vain Herods and Pilates bluster about on stage, threatening to punish anyone who defies them (see Bushnell 1990: 84–85); their knights are at once intellectual 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 mystery plays were flourishing, but today the ones we know best are the Cast of Perseverance (early fifteenth century), The Cast of St. John (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 rich with stage directions that imply performance in a large open-air space surrounded by scaffolds representing the teams of God, the World, and the Devil. We can also see that the audience enjoyed viewing special effects, for example, that the actor playing Belial the devil had "gauze-powdered breathing pipes in his hand" and in his ears and in his arms wherein he goeth to the battle" (Happe [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 conflated allegorical characters with humanistic or mythological types. The interludes covered themes suitable to the groups of students and aristocratic families that were often their audiences. Favourite topics were the value of education, political virtues and general moral doctrine (see Happe 1999: ch. 9).

What binds together this heterogeneous group of plays is not only their habit of alllegory or personification; it is also the plot patterns of a companionate, 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 in its core, whether played out in comic violence and action or high-flown theoretical debate. In Everyman the crisis is the coming of death. God summons Everyman to prepare to die, and so he seeks help from Fellowship, Kindness, Goodwill, and Riches, all of whom betray him. He finds aid in Good Deeds and Knowledge, as well as in his 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: these vices and virtues battle for the soul of Hummanum Genus. Encouraged by his Malus Angelus, or bad angel, Hummanum Genus decides to embark on a path 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, then fail. Avicia tricks Hummanum Genus, who then confronts his death in sin. He dies paying, and after a debate before God among Misericordia (Mercy), Veritas (Truth), Justicia (Justice), and Pax (Peace), Hummanum Genus is forgiven. Mankind is a safer version of the same conflict, with seven characters as opposed to the thirty-five of Perseverance. It is also more comic. When Mischief conflicts with Mercy over the consul of Mankind, a farmer he is tempted away from his work and godly life by Naught, New-song, 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 characterizeistically 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 spite and redemption. In his study of Ancient Scripts and Modern Experiences, Bruce Smith describes the two ethics in as follows:

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 tragic forces—over which they nevertheless triumph in the very act of dying. In the world of medieval morality plays, on the other hand, heroes with the life-size homiliae 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, however, in particular, make no claims for the justice of the universe; morality plays assume an almost inevitable but always certain providence. It is, perhaps, the interplay between these polarities, pagan and Christian, that defines the imaginative power of modern tragedy (Smith 1990: 202).

What this comparison implies, also, is this, in contrast with the mysteries, that the moralettes 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 political ideas 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 prepossessive men and women in power. The political moralities blended a medieval message of irresistible disaster under the rule of Fortune with the implication of moral responsibility, contrasting the fate of Everyday with that of the ruler and the state. The best developed example of such a play is John Skelton's Magnificience (ca. 1515), which stages the downfall of the prince, Magnificence, who is dragged into degradation when he follows Faustus's advice that he banish Measure and free the figure of Liberty. The false counsels Clandestine Collision, Counterfeit Countertranquillity, and Crafty Concealment lead him to a state where he confronts Adversity and Poverty. At the end, he is redeemed by the efforts of Good Hope, Bedreß, and Circumpection. Magnificence thus attaches 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 Cambises shows in spectacular fashion what the title page describes as a lamentable tragedy mixed with pleasant mirth, recounting the life of Cambises king of Persia from the beginning of his kingdom unto his death, to the good and evil, being a tale of many virtues and vices, and the end thereof, and of all his good deeds by God's justice appointed. (Preston 1570: title page)

This play represented a new direction for English theater, in tracing history with the morality's focus on the career of a single overwhelming protagonist. In his lamentable career Cambises is altered by the traditional morality "Vice" figure Ambidexter, who is both a vice of the devil and a figure of the corrupt counselor who is a double-dealer. Ambidexter urges Cambises to follow what appears to be his own violent instincts in murder and treachery, thus suggesting that he is at once a personification of Cambises' own evil and an image of bad counsel. Cambises' death comes unexpectedly, in a fall from a horse. It appears unmotivated but is motivated 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 Cambises as well as other hybrid plays that mixed morality or classical mythes or history with morality, such as George Whetstone's Primus and Cunstamna (1578), Richard Edwai'de's Damon and Paphius (1571), John Pleringes' Hemenst (1567), and R. B's Appias and Virginia (1575), the school and aristocratic audiences of the moral interludes would be prepared to appreciate the stage career of tyrants or hero born from half-allegorical, half-realistic antagonists who draw him toward a destiny of damnation or salvation. The career of king and hero is inexorable from the face of the country and the lives of his subjects, and ultimately, a mirror for an audience of state.
The Classical and Medieval Roots of English Renaissance Tragedy

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—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 Horace and Iphigenia at Aulis written when he was living in England from 1501 to 1505). The humanist and royal schoolmaster Roger Ascham was said to have translated Philebus, and Thomas Watson translated Antigone (see Cunliffe 1912: xxxii; see 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 and Francis Knevetmerne’s Iocasta was performed at the Inns of Court in 1566 (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 Scotsman Humanist George Buchanan composed Japheth and Battering, 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 "Battering earns young people from popular theatrical fictions (a vulgari fabularum suavissima) toward the imitation of antiquity (ad imitationem antiquitatis)" (Buchanan 1985: 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 1561 edition of the Teine 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 Gorboduk’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 Senecan themes to be its ossification.” (Bradley 1985: 104). Bradley does see Seneca powerful, fully defining a rhetorical drama, when freed from “its triarchic dramaturgical casing,” a liberation that allowed “its hyperbolic strain” to flourish (Bradley 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 it with a grim presentational style. The Senecan stage is imagined as haunted by ghosts, dripping with blood, and brawling with cries to revenge. In its preface to Thomas Greene’s Menaphon, Thomas
Nashe mocked English meddling with Seneca. He dismissed most English translators as poor Latin scholars, admiring

yet English Seneca read by candle light yeelds tooe good sentences, as Blood is a beggar, and so bount: and if you inureate him faire in a crouse morning, he will affred

you while Hamlet. I should say handfulls of tropical speeches: But a griefe' temper men
ean, what's that will last alwaies? The sea exhaled by drugs wais in continuance be
dre: and Seneca bee blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our

wagge. (Greene 1590: 59)

The Hamlet that Nashe refers to is the Shakespeare's, but certainly Shakespeare's Hamlet bears the marks of that boldly English Seneca, with its good 'sentences' or pithy apothegms and florid speeches, not to mention the ghost of Hamlet's father who walks 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 glorifies in the representation of tyranny and the violent exercise of power (see Bradley 1985: 107-8). Thomas Newton was quite aware of this element of Seneca in the translations he brought together in his Roman Tragedies. In his dedication he expressed his fear that his Seneca might at first be mistrusted as "literally tending (at the first sight) sometimes to the payre of Ambition, someday to the maintenance of cruelty, now and then to approbation of incontinence and here and there to the ratification of tyranny." Thus he worried that Seneca "cannot be digested without great danger of infection." But he reassured his readers that one should not fear

the direct meaning of Seneca himselfe, whose whole wrettings (penned with a perisseus
sublimity and brilliancy of style, are so farre from concomitance. Vice, that I doubt
whether there bee any amongst all the Catologue of Hartlies wretters, that with more
gracie of Philosophicall sentences, more waignorthy of superiour [no] words, or greater
authority of sound matter better downe stile, toone hee, standardealings, and
unbridled sensuality: or that more sensibly, pitfully, and byrringly layes doune the
guarteles of flythy iar, closed dissimulation, and odioes treachery: which is the dryft
whereunto be breede the whole issue of such one of his Tragedies. (Seneca 1527: 4-5)

Thus, like the motley plays, Seneca was seen as an antiske to unbridled power and the excess of vice, while it was posed a danger in so visially 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 Stackville's Gorboduc, or Forces and Powers, 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' Phoenissae Winnow, Thomas Hugues's The Murtherers of Arthure (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 Montred (like Gorboduc, this play was performed before the queen). Arviru is introduced as the child of Uther Pendragon's adultery. While Mordred is the child produced by Arthur's incest with his sister Anne, Montred 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. Montred 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 Rushkoff 1990: 103–5).

Whether read in the study or aristocratic "closet" or performed in the schools, universities, or halls of Court, classical tragedy in its quest form remained "private" and not public drama, produced as a self-consciously literate and didactic genre for a limited audience. All of the dramatic genres discussed in this chapter so far were meant in some way to reach as widely as possible: the mysteries, to unfold the events of the Bible and relate them to the lives of the citizens; the moralities, to reveal the "ills 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 beauty, for all its grand portrayal of social disaster and intense human suffering, classical tragedy was produced so as to confine, not challenge, the values of the closed society, the private aristocratic and seventeenth-century household, which watched it (Seneca's Phaedra and Oedipus, Euripides' Coriolanus and Electra, Sophocles' Antigone, Sartorius, 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 native English producers, performance of Greek and Roman tragedy became a ritual in which indistinguishable individuals were ceremonially excoriated from the social order. (Smith 1990: 239)

It is significant that in their own time the public 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 "too true Desastromatique poem," but he presented that it was so intentionally, since his audience would not suffer it:

for, should a man present so much an Auditory so more sentimentious Tragedy, that ever was written, observing all the criminal Laws, as height of style; and gravity of person, touch it with the sensuous Chorus, and as it were, let a Death, or the pantomime and wafting Nuptial: yet, after all this divine expanse, the boldness that comes from the uncapable multitude, is able to poison it. (Webster 1612: Actv-Av2v)
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 marks 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 drives 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 Stage (1300–1660), Glynne Wickham called the construction of this theater “a point towards which everything seems inevitably to move and after which those same things are never quite the same again” (Wickham 1959: lxix; 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 amphitheaters 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 moraines, it was also an imposing structure that could be seen as shudding to the classical past.

This theater thus initiated 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 Margareta 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 disengaged 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 household that had defined the audiences and ends of the moral interludes. The acting companies were bound by the constraints of craftship, 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
"sately rest 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 vague glass"? It depends on whether you are looking at Part One, Part Two, or the act 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 received / When he arrived but on our stage. / Have made our poor poet 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 false Zenocrate. What is "vague" 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 serpents in the firmament.
To signify the slaughter of the gods.
Ah, friends, what shall I do to leave stand?
Come, grey, go to war against the gods,
That thus may the heathen of Tamburlaine.

(Marlowe 1969: Tamburlaine, 3.3.48–55)

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 pomps." And marvellous Fates throws all his triumphs down." (Marlowe 1969: Tamburlaine prologue, 4–5).

The Chorus of The Tragedy History of Dure Faucon 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. / Not in the pomp of proud audacious deeds." Rather, as the Chorus says with wonderful ambiguity, it is the staging of "the form of Faucon's fortune, good or bad" (Marlowe 1969: Chorus, prologue 18–22). Dure Faucon is a history of a man born low born like Tamburlaine, who rose to the heights of scholarship and theology "extolling all;" "til
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would not in cunning of a self-conceit, / His waxen wings" (Marlowe 1609: 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 most of Icarus and a figure of Senecan ambition in an explicitly Christian
universe. As Ruth Lueney 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: mostly
ruled God, "inimicable spectacles"). But a career of seductive narrative. Then
again, the character is complex enough to satisfy the "common-seen" expectations of the
1590 audience. But his presentation before an audience is by no means incoherent when
Faustus makes important choices, the action ranges from the up-to-date Senecan set-
which opens the play, methodically setting off his career options like Witten or
Richard of Glencent, to the routine psycho-biographical in the play where Mephistophe-
les-heroes street and Faustus commits like a typical morality character: to the
complex debate with himself in the final soliloquy. (Lueney 2002: 112-3)

This constant change in dramatic convention in the representation of Faustus's
character, crossed with the shifting frame in which one scene is a career and the
other the world overseen by Satan, results in proliferating interpretations, whereby
one reader can claim that the play is superficially Christian in outlook, true to its morality
model, and another takes away that it is deeply subversive, observing Faustus's excess
and defiance (see Blustone 1960; Dollimore 1984: 1989: ch. 6).
The interpretation of Doctor Faustus and our characterization of it as a tragedy is fur-
ther 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 but in the 1604 version but also extra appear-
ces by Lucifer and Beelzebub. Readers continue to debate about which is more
"tragic." J. B. Stace expresses his preference for the A-text on the grounds that it
has everything essential to the presentation of "the tragic's harmony": the B-text... adds,
for the most part, light, simple-minded comedy, incoherent enough even that it
distorts the mind from what is serious and valuable in the play; or rather, it fails
to occupy the mind at all and so loses the poetic and dramatic intensity. (Marlowe
1609: 261)

It can, however, be argued that the B-text's comic business, whose Faustus's servants
adapt his magic and manage to call forth Mephistopheles, brilliantly parodies Faus-
tus'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 hunters and serving men, and where the specter of Hero 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 believability. It is a world that is at such times a 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 been, through Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the works of playwrights whose names we have now lost, how history could be staged as tragedy. In 1597, 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 seeks for 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 a 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 is integrated 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 interlude thus meet 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 vs. 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 Barberino’s In Librum tragediarum De arte poetica exercitationes (1448), Giovanni Battista Grimaldi’s Discurso (1555), the De poeta of Sebastiano Majocchi (1579), and the Poetico et morale (1572) of Pietro Macchia Scaglione (Sidney’s source was Lodovico Castiglione’s Practica De’Arteironi valoristico e quota fono 1570) (see Corbett 1912, 388–389).

2 This Justus was a version of Euprepis’ Phoebusian Women based on Ludovico Dolci’s Italian Giulietta, adapted in turn from a Latin translation of Euprepis’ play.
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Pinnock, Thomas (1570) (also conjectured by the Short Title Catalogue), A lamentable tragedy called Jewes Philosophy with the life of Cornelia wife of Pius, London: John Alle.


A COMPANION TO
TRAGEDY

EDITED BY REBECCA BUSHNELL

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