PART ONE

Themes

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English Renaissance tragedy: theories and antecedents

'The practice of Elizabethan drama cannot be easily brought into focus for us by the statements of Renaissance literary criticism.'[1] So writes George K. Hunter in a recent essay on 'Elizabethan Theatrical Genres and Literary Theory'. However, if we use the word *theory* rather loosely to mean a 'set of ideas', then perhaps we can discern a fairly clear line of development in the ideas of tragedy from the Middle Ages to the *annus mirabilis* of English Renaissance tragedy: 1587. This was the year which saw the appearance not only of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, but also, most probably, of Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* – the play which opens the sequence presented for analysis in the present volume. In this short essay, I shall try to give an account of at least some of the main features of this 'theory', from the late medieval period, to the new neo-classical theory which emerged in a 'strong' form in the mid-Tudor period, and developed into a more moderate (though not exactly 'weak') form in the early and mid-Elizabethan period. Then, I shall return to the two great plays already mentioned, in order to argue that we are in danger of missing a 'lost tradition' of early Renaissance tragedy which extends up to and beyond the watershed years of the late 1580s. As it happens, there are literally hundreds of works which might be described as the 'antecedents' of English Renaissance tragedy, so we shall only be able to look at a few of those which seem to me most important or interesting; but they should suffice to give us a decent picture of the spacious and energetic tradition of tragic composition and performance up to Kyd and Marlowe.

Medieval theory: tragedy before tragedy?

We now take it for granted that the term *tragedy* refers to a kind of play, but in pre-Renaissance England, the major form that the genre took was not that of a play but of a narrative poem telling the story of the fall and usually the death of some great man or woman of the past. This idea

goes back at least to Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Monk's Tale', which includes material probably written in the early 1370s, then later incorporated into *The Canterbury Tales*. Somewhere behind this notion of tragedy lies the great compilation of such falls by the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio: *De casibus virorum illustrium* [The Falls of Famous Men]. However, it seems to have been Chaucer who first decided to call this type of narrative a 'tragedy'; Boccaccio (or 'Bochas' as he was called in English) calls it a *historia* [history]. Moreover, the *De casibus* takes the form of a dream-vision, whereas Chaucer, despite his penchant for this kind of writing, lets his Monk simply rattle off one tale after another, until he is called upon to cease by the Knight. The direct influence of Boccaccio on Chaucer, then, seems not to have been very great.

More important for Chaucer as a source of ideas about tragedy was another equally famous book, by the sixth-century Christian philosopher Boethius: *De consolatione philosophiae* [The Consolation of Philosophy]. Chaucer actually translated this work, as *Boece*, about the same time he wrote his tragedies. It was in Boethius that Chaucer read what he translated as the following: 'What other thynge bywaylen the cryinges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune, that with an unwar strook overturneth the realmes of greet nobleye [nobility]'.[2] Chaucer added a note to this passage: 'Tragedye is to seyn [say] a dite [ditty] of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidnesse'; and his Monk elaborates slightly on this definition in the conclusion to his prologue:

> Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
> As olde bookes maken us memorie,
> Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
> And is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.[3]

He says much the same thing in the introduction to his tale, where he also mentions the crucial role played by Fortune.

Chaucer's definition of tragedy in 'The Monk's Tale' was the one passed on to English writers of the next two centuries and after. It was not the only idea of tragedy which Chaucer developed for his own use, for he also called his long novelistic poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, a 'tragedy'; but, though this poem was immensely influential as a source of material and attitudes for later poets in the courtly lyric tradition right up to the end of the sixteenth century, it did not come equipped with a convenient theoretical exposition of its form – and so its influence on later 'tragedy' was very unfocused (one only has to think of the satirical treatment William Shakespeare gives the

material in *Troilus and Cressida*). That said, the influence of 'The Monk's Tale' definition was not direct, but worked rather through the English adaptation of the *De casibus* as *The Fall of Princes* by Chaucer's admirer, John Lydgate. It was Lydgate who first called Boccaccio's *historiae* 'tragedies', using the Monk's definition, and it was through this medium that this idea of tragedy was passed on to early Renaissance writers in England. Lydgate also followed the spirit of what Henry Ansgar Kelly has called 'Chaucerian tragedy' in amplifying the element of sorrowful lamentation in his original. 'Bochas' tends to be rather sardonically judgmental in tone, whereas Chaucer, in line with his reading of Boethius, thought tragedy required weeping and wailing as a proper response.[4] This emphasis, particularly when combined with the violent lament of Senecan and neo-Senecan tragedy, gives English Renaissance tragedy its characteristic range of vociferative styles from mighty lines to mere bombast.[5]

Written in the 1430s, *The Fall of Princes* was immensely influential until superseded by *The Mirror for Magistrates*, edited by William Baldwin, in the mid-Tudor period. In this text, a succession of tragic English princes and noblemen from the reign of Richard II to that of Edward IV (and eventually that of Henry VII) were made to tell their sorry stories in their own ghostly persons; this was another deviation from the original format, in which Boccaccio tended to tell the stories of the fallen in his own person. *The Mirror for Magistrates*, first published in 1559, was one of the most popular books of the first thirty years of the reign of Elizabeth, and it probably defined 'tragedy' as a literary form for most English readers of the time. Helen Cooper writes: 'If in 1580 an Elizabethan had been asked what tragedies he knew, the answer would probably have been, the *Mirror for Magistrates*. Asked the same question in 1590, he might well have named plays' – and she probably has plays like *Tamburlaine* and *The Spanish Tragedy* in mind.[6] But asked that same question in 1587, our Elizabethan would probably still have pointed to the *Mirror*, for that *annus mirabilis* of English tragedy also saw its final and largest edition – with no fewer than seventy-three tragedies crammed between its covers.

Cooper's Elizabethan may also have mentioned the other main kind of early Elizabethan tragedy: the 'tragical tale'. Unlike the stately and vaguely 'political' tragedies of the *De casibus* kind, these tragedies were more frankly committed to the sensational. Jonathan Gibson writes:

> The lurid happenings they narrate are overwhelmingly motivated by sexual desire: rapes; suicides of rape victims; accidental deaths of young lovers; murders of love rivals – or people wrongly perceived to be love rivals; murders

of unfaithful lovers – or of lovers erroneously thought to be unfaithful; violent revenges for sexual assaults; violence against sexually promiscuous family members; murders undertaken to keep illicit relationships secret.[7]

More work needs to be done on these tragedies, especially those written in verse, but their influence on later stage-tragedy is already very well attested. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* bears a debt to Arthur Brooke's poem *Romeus and Juliet* (1562), and several plays, including John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, take their point of departure from stories in William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566–7). Prose tragedies of this sort continued to be written throughout the seventeenth century; indeed, they have survived into the present day.

Academic neo-classical theory: Ascham and Gorboduc

All of the various kinds of tragedy we have been looking at so far would have been repudiated by the first English writers to take a serious and informed interest in tragedy as a dramatic rather than a narrative genre. It is difficult to say when the idea that tragedy was a kind of stage-play really began to take hold, but it was probably in the reign of Henry VIII. For example, in 1542, in his translation of Erasmus's collection of *bons mots*, the *Apophthegmata*, the scholar Nicholas Udall talks of 'comedies, that is, merry interludes, and . . . tragedies, that is, sad interludes, which we call stage-plays'.[8] The easy way in which he can relate the classical terms to the vernacular word *interlude* – still the most familiar word for *stage-play* in early Tudor English – suggests that he was not breaking new ground here.

Udall's tolerant attitude towards generic definition is only to be expected in a work which aims to introduce English readers to the stylistic riches of classical literature as set out in Latin by Erasmus; but it is not the one we find in the more elitist form of what we now call 'neo-classicism', which held that the writers of ancient Greece and Rome had already perfected all the forms of literature and were thus the only ones to be followed by modern writers. This type of theory was mainly bandied about by scholars at the universities, often in what seems like a spirit of partisan rivalry. So, for example, writing on neo-classical imitation in his famous essay, *The Schoolmaster*, in the mid-1560s, Roger Ascham looked back to his younger days at Cambridge in the 1530s and 1540s, reminiscing over talks he had had with like-minded colleagues on Thomas Watson's 'excellent tragedy of *Absolom*' (written in Latin around 1540). Ascham is particularly impressed by the fact that Watson would not let others see his play 'because *in locis paribus anapaestus* is twice or thrice used instead of *iambus*'!

The same rather footling attitude is evident in Ascham's critique of another Cambridge man who dared to 'bring matters upon stages which *he called* tragedies' (emphasis added). Here is Ascham's judgment:

> In one, whereby he looked to win his spurs, and whereat many ignorant fellows fast clapped their hands, he began the *protasis* with *trochais octonariis*, which kind of verse, as it is but seldom and rare in tragedies, so it is never used save only in *epitasi* when the tragedy is highest and hottest and full of greatest troubles.[9]

Here we see the crucial defect of the more rigorous neo-classical criticism: it is too much occupied with technical details which do not really say very much about the quality of the work, but rather reveal the critic's attempts to claim an exclusive privilege in judgment, often based on very trivial details. Modern readers – and critics – are much more likely to sympathise with the 'ignorant fellows' who applauded the tragedy because of its depiction of turbulent emotions. And, as it happens, we may note that Watson's *Absolom* is actually marked by 'tasteless rhetoric and monotonous versification'![10]

Nevertheless, the first decade of Elizabeth's reign also saw the emergence of a real interest amongst practising poets in dramatic tragedy. This vogue for tragedy may have been prompted, at least in part, by the queen's own interest in Seneca – she translated a chorus from his *Hercules Oetaeus* – which was made public by her old school-fellow, Jasper Heywood. In his dedication to the queen of his translation of Seneca's *Troas*, Heywood explains: 'I thought it should not be unpleasant for your grace to see some part of so excellent an author in your own tongue, the reading of whom in Latin, I understand, delights greatly your majesty'.[11] In any case, by the end of the decade, most of the other plays attributed to Seneca had also been translated, and English authors had produced a variety of experimental stage-tragedies in their own vernacular.

The most famous of these is without doubt *Gorboduc*, by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, written in 1560–1 for performance at the Inner Temple, one of the four Inns of Court in London, where the Tudor gentry went to learn the law and make connections. The Inns were a centre of academic theatrical activity throughout Elizabeth's reign, and it was here that the vogue for tragedy really took off in the 1560s. *Gorboduc* (also known as *Ferrex and Porrex*) tells the story of the unwise decision made by a king of ancient Britain to divide his realm between his sons, and the civil war and chaos that ensued. It certainly bears the mark of the neo-classical preoccupation with Seneca, and here and there translates lines from one of his plays or imitates a passage from another. The play is divided into five

acts consisting almost entirely of formal dialogue, including set speeches and some stichomythic exchanges, with hardly any action at all; each act is followed by a chorus. So far, so good: these elements would all pass muster when inspected by the academic neo-classicist. But *Gorboduc* also imports into its overall neo-Senecan format native elements, pre-eminently the dumb shows which precede each act, that seem to be derived from a variety of quasi-dramatic entertainments such as pageantry and the civic show. As Dieter Mehl suggests, the authors may have felt a little spectacle was needed to compensate for the static verbosity of the play itself – and the love of spectacle excited both elite and popular audiences throughout the Tudor century.[12]

Gorboduc, though it may properly be hailed (as it often is) as the 'first classical English tragedy', is nevertheless a *mixture* of neo-classical and vernacular – even popular – elements. In this it is typical of the neo-classical practice of the age (at least in plays written in English). Only one other tragedy from the 1560s is roughly as 'regular' as *Gorboduc*: the Italianate *Gismond of Salerne*, written by no fewer than five young lawyers and performed at the Inner Temple in 1567–8. But the general direction was towards the intermixture with the neo-classical base not only of vernacular elements, but also of frankly 'comical' ones, as in Thomas Preston's *Cambyses*, which appears to have been written for court performance in 1560, and which was printed as a 'lamentable tragedy mixed full of pleasant mirth' in 1570. Modern critics never miss the chance to laugh at this title, but it was in *Cambyses* rather than in *Gorboduc* that the future of English tragedy actually lay.

'Popular' neo-classical theory: Sidney and *Clyomon and Clamydes*

What, one wonders, did Roger Ascham make of *Gorboduc*? He must have known of the play, and may have even read it in the printed version of 1565, whilst he was writing *The Schoolmaster*. He would have approved of the fact that it was written in blank verse, but he would probably have regretted its 'impure' mixture of neo-classical imitation and native invention. However, this combination of elements drawn from different traditions is really the norm across Europe during the sixteenth-century Renaissance, as Timothy J. Reiss has shown in a recent essay on 'Renaissance Theatre and the Theory of Tragedy'.[13] Seneca's plays were undoubtedly highly influential as a model, as was 'Aristotle' – the rather variegated body of theoretical material that had its origins (sometimes rather distantly) in the Greek philosopher's famous *Poetics*. But Seneca and Aristotle had to rub shoulders with other authorities, depending on the native traditions of each country, and we

have already commented on the importance of Chaucer and 'Bochas' in early Renaissance England. So it is that, on the one hand, the Elizabethans and the Jacobeans were virtually ignorant of key terms which are familiar (at least by name) to most undergraduate readers of this book: *katharsis*, *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, *peripateia* – these were unknown to all but a very few early modern readers. On the other hand, the Elizabethans were clearly very much in tune with the idea that tragedy required the fall of a great man and a lot of shouting to go with it.

This is not to say that neo-classical theory was without influence, however, as is clear from the comments of the young Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry*, written around 1580, though not printed until 1595 (under this title and also as *The Defence of Poesy*). Sidney wears his neo-classical credentials much more lightly than Ascham, though he is not afraid to criticise, regretfully, the by now famous example of *Gorboduc*. Sidney approved of the play's style with its 'stately speeches and well-sounding phrases'; but he did not like the structure:

> yet in truth it is very defectious 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 day, there is both many days, and many places, inartificially imagined.[14]

In other words, *Gorboduc* failed to observe the unities of time and place (and probably of action) as they had been set out by Italian critics, notably Ludovico Castelvetro, in the name of Aristotle.[15]

When Sidney comes to the generality of English drama, the sort of thing he himself might have watched at court or in the new purpose-built playhouses constructed in the late 1570s, he finds an even more exasperating disregard for the unities of time and place. In the popular drama of the period, the action of a play may cover the whole lifetime of the hero, and the stage may represent an infinity of different spaces, 'where you shall have Asia of the one side, and Afric of the other, and so many other under-kingdoms, that the player, when he cometh in, must ever begin with telling where he is'.[16] He goes on to describe a kind of play full of shipwrecks, monsters and battles, which we now call – by a post-Renaissance generic label – 'heroic romance', and his reference to a play where 'three ladies walk to gather flowers' may be a direct allusion to *Clyomon and Clamydes*, which deals with the chivalric and amorous adventures of the two sons of the kings of Swavia and Denmark. However, since Sidney compares these plays

unfavourably not only with *Gorboduc* but with the ancient Greek tragedy *Hecuba* by Euripides, it would seem that he saw them as a clumsy attempt at *tragedy*.

It is perhaps hard for us to see how a play like *Clyomon and Clamydes* could be seen as a tragedy, precisely because the brilliant achievement of the later drama has defined for us what the word *tragedy* means. But things might have looked very differently in the 1570s, especially to a writer like Sidney, whose neo-classicism might – with only a touch of exaggeration – be called 'popular'. For all that he admired the classical epic poetry of Homer and Virgil, Sidney could also write: 'I must confess my own barbarousness, I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet; and yet it is sung by some blind crowder [harpist], with nor rougher voice than rude style'.[17] Sidney's neo-classicism is more generous than Ascham's in its desire to accommodate native popular tradition; indeed, it might more properly be described as 'classicism', since Sidney seems to have sensed that each nation's poets might find their own way to the literary 'ideal' which the ancient Greeks and Romans had so superbly realised in their own idioms.

So, for example, Sidney writes in academicist vein when he berates the English dramatists of his day because they write

> neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by head and shoulders, to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration [of tragedy], nor the right sportfulness [of comedy], is by their mongrel tragic-comedy obtained.[18]

But moments later, when he refers to 'that comical part of our tragedy', his thoughts have returned to plays like *Clyomon and Clamydes* and the prominent part they gave to clown scenes (the comic shepherd-clown Corin was popular enough to reappear as Colin in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*).[19]

Sidney wants to have the comical part of these English 'tragedies' reformed by cutting out the clown and making the hero look ridiculous instead, giving the image of 'Hercules, painted with his great beard and furious countenance, in woman's attire, spinning at Omphale's commandment' as an example of 'right comedy'. This example probably explains why Sidney thought *Clyomon and Clamydes* might be a tragedy – even if it was not entirely 'right', that is, 'regular'. It is because the play deals with kings (there are three in the play as well as Alexander the Great). That might in itself have been sufficient, but we should also note that several scenes in the play – Clamydes as he languishes in prison, Neronis when she is about to kill

herself – are the occasion of the sort of lament or outcry that every Elizabethan playgoer would have recognised as 'tragical'. The fact that the play does not end in the death of either hero would not have mattered so much to Sidney, who probably had read of the interest shown by Italian writers, especially Giraldi Cinthio, in *tragedia di fin lieto*: 'tragedy with a happy ending'. To the modern Anglophone critic, the idea of such a play is so scandalous that he or she instinctively reaches for the word *tragicomedy* instead, or, as we have seen, for some phrase containing the term *romance*. But even the briefest glance at the plot of a play like Cinthio's *Arrenopia* (1563) shows a 'romance' plot which is almost identical to those of contemporary English plays like *Clyomon and Clamydes*. Yet as Marvin T. Herrick writes: 'In *Arrenopia*, the most romantic and chivalric of all Cinthio's plays, the author was still writing tragedy'.[20] The main differences between the Italian and the English play are nevertheless instructive: *Arrenopia* has a chorus, like *Gorboduc*, but, unlike *Clyomon and Clamydes*, it has no clown. Sidney would have approved.

Marlowe and Kyd: rival traditions?

In the previous sections of this essay, I have tried to give some idea of the great variety of forms of writing that were labelled as 'tragedies' by the late medieval and early- and mid-Elizabethan predecessors of the writers whose plays are singled out in this volume. In this final section, I want to suggest that it is the success of the new kinds of tragedy signalled by *Tamburlaine* and *The Spanish Tragedy* in the late 1580s that effectively wipes out this variety and establishes a much narrower range of forms in a kind of monopoly. This should not be entirely surprising, since the new playhouses ushered in an age of commercialism in the theatre, which meant more new plays to satisfy the demand for more or less continuous performance throughout the year, but also the tendency for companies to rely on genres which could prove themselves a winning formula – as a certain kind of stage-tragedy did during the half-century between 1590 and 1640. To simplify matters very greatly, we might say that it was the new revenge play, inaugurated for his generation by Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy*, that eventually established, if not a monopoly, then certainly a dominant position within a relatively narrow range of kinds of tragedy.

The present volume bears out this observation, and also the further point that this process occurred over time. The Jacobean plays – *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Changeling*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* – are all hyper-canonical revenge tragedies, which, with *The Spanish Tragedy*, feature regularly in anthologies and companions compiled for