SECTION 1

The Purpose and Method of Tragedy
CHAPTER I

The Mirrors of Fortune  The Problem of Evil
The Problem of Justice  How God Revenges Sin

The problem of tragedy has always been the problem of evil in the world. The presentation of the evil that befalls men is but one of the concerns of tragedy; the other and the more important is the explanation of the why of the evil so presented. Thus it is that tragedy and philosophy, tragedy and religion, must always have much in common. And if we are to find the meaning of Shakespeare's tragedies, we must find how men looked at this problem of evil in the day when these tragedies were first played to English audiences. We must, therefore, look to such explanations as were given both by writers of tragedies\(^1\) and by philosophers in Shakespeare's time, but these explanations will best be understood when we can trace them from their mediaeval origins through their period of modification by the re-born classical philosophy and classical literature.

Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* testifies to the fact that tragedies were considered as *exempla* to warn men of the fickleness of fortune and of the causes why men fell from weal to woe. The Monk begins:

I wol biwaille, in manere of tragedie,
The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree,
And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
To brynge hem out of hir adversitee;
For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,
Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.
Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;
Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde.

\(^1\) In this first chapter I have confined my study to non-dramatic tragedies, in which the tradition is carried over directly from the mediaeval period. In the second chapter I shall discuss this theory of tragedy as it was applied to the dramatic tragedies of the Renaissance.
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Moreover, the Monk not only speaks de Casibus Virorum Illustrium but points out in every instance the sin which led to the destruction described in the tragedy.

Lydgate followed his master, taking up the same theme in his Fall of Princes:

My master Chaucer, with his fresh comedies,
Is ded, alas, cheeff poete off Breteyne,
That whilom made ful pitous tragedies;
The fall of pryncis he dede also compleyne,
As he that was of makying sovereyne,
Whom al this land sholde off rilt preferre,
Sithe off oure language he was the lodesterre.

Senek in Rome, thoruh his hih prudence,
Wrot tragedies of gret morallte;
And Tullius, cheeff welle off eloquence,
Maad in his tyme many fresh dite;
Francois Petrak, off Florence the cite,
Made a book, as I can reherce,
Off too Fortunys, welful and perverse.1

Explicitly he stated the theme of his own work as well as that of his great original, Boccaccio:

And thus in cheeff thes causes affor told
Mevred the herte of Bochas to writyng,
And to remembre he many story old
Thesat of pryncis, in chairees hih sittynge,
And for vices ther unwar falsyng,
Yiving examuple, as I aferme dar
Of fals Fortune how thei shal be war.2

2 Ibid. vol. cxxii, p. 477. Bk. iv, Prologue, ll. 135–61. The Fall of Princes was a paraphrase of Laurence de Premierfait’s second amplified version in French prose of Boccaccio’s De Casibus Virorum Illustrium, of which Dr Bergen says: “It is a collection gathered throughout the centuries describing the most memorable and crushing blows dealt by fate to the illustrious personages of mythology and history, and written, as the author himself said, with the object of teaching princes the virtue of wisdom and moderation by holding up to them the example of misfortunes provoked by egotism, pride, and inordinate ambition”.
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Lydgate's main theme is thus seen to be, as it is in Chaucer and in the common inspirer of both, Boccaccio, the uncertainty of prosperity, but the theme which is not less insistent is that of the vices which cause the fall of princes. As Professor Farnham has pointed out, however, Lydgate was not thoroughly consistent in his relating of misfortune to desert, and "dwell lovingly on the evidence that even the valiant and the virtuous come to grief".¹ But in spite of this inconsistency, it is quite clear that the tragedies which he retold were offered as warnings, not only of the fickleness of "fals Fortune", but also as evidence that the "pryncis, in chaieres hih sittynge" must be considered "for vices ther unwar fallyng".

This traditional view of tragedy was most conspicuously carried over into the Renaissance in the series of tragedies which were first published in 1559 under the title of A Myrroure for Magistrates. Wherein may be seene by example of other, with how grevous plages vices are punished: and howe frayle and unstable worldly prosperitie is founde, even of those, whom Fortune seemeth most highly to favour.²

It is significant that it was to the William Baldwin whose Treatise of Morall Philosophy, published in 1547, continued for more than a century to be the popular book of moral philosophy in England, that the printer went to secure the continuation of the Fall of Princes, which he was proposing to print. Baldwin says in his address "To the nobilitie and all other in office" that they can see in Boccaccio's book how God has plagued evil rulers in other nations, and he continues:

¹ Cf. Professor Willard Farnham's article on "The Mirror for Magistrates and Elizabethan Tragedy", in Jour. of Eng. and Ger. Phil. vol. xxv, pp. 66–78, for interesting though tentative comment.
² For an account of the history of The Mirrour for Magistrates, see the article by Professor J. W. Cunliffe in the Camb. Hist. of Engl. Lit. vol. iii, pp. 216–26; W. F. Trench, A Mirror for Magistrates: Its Origin and Influence, 1898; and the article by Professor Farnham already instanced.
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Howe he hath delt with sum of our countreymen your auncestors, for sundrye vices not yet left, this booke named A Myrour for Magistrates, can shewe: which therfore I humbly ofre unto your honors, beseeching you to accept it favorably. For here as in a looking glas, you shall see (if any vice be in you) howe the like hath bene punished in other heretofore, whereby admonished, I trust it will be a good occasion to move you to the soner amendment. This is the chiefest ende, whye it is set furth, which God graunt it may attayne.

Yet Baldwin was forced to admit that it was not only evil men who suffered misfortune:

And although you shall finde in it, that sum have for their vertue been envied and murdered, yet cease not you to be vertuous, but do your offices to the uttermost: punish sinne boldly, both in your selves and other, so shall God (whose lieutenantes you are) eyther so mayntayne you, that no malice shall prevayle, or if it do, it shall be for your good, and to your eternall glory both here and in heaven, which I besche God you may covet and attayne.

In his address “To the Reader” Baldwin extends his moral purpose as he explains that the printer came to him to procure to have the storie contynewed from where as Bochas lefte, unto this presente time, chiefely of suche as Fortune had dalyed with here in this ylande: whiche might be as a myrour for al men as well noble as others, to shewe the slypperie deceytes of the waveryng lady, and the due rewarde of all kinde of vices.¹

In 1574 this work was reprinted as The Laste parte of the Mirour for Magistrates, for the printer was publishing in 1574 also a collection of tragedies antedating in their stories

¹ These quotations are taken from the first edition of 1559, but Baldwin is himself the authority for the book’s having been partly printed in 1555. The purpose of the work was restated in the well-known Induction of Sackville in the 1563 edition:

“That musing on this worldly wealth in thought, Which comes, and goes, more faster than we see The flickering flame that with the fire is wrought, My busy mind presented unto me Such fall of peeres as in the realm had be; That oft I wished some would their woes describe, To warn the rest whom fortune left behind.”
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the stories collected in the original publication and now to be published as The First parte of the Mirour for Magistrates, containing the falles of the first infortunate Princes of this lande: From the comning of Brute to the incarnation of our saviour and redeemer Jesu Christe. The author of this group of tragedies was John Higgins, and in his address “To the Nobilitie and all other in office” he brings the whole discussion of tragedy and of reward and punishment over into the realm of moral philosophy. I quote from this address at length because Higgins gives here, somewhat wordily it is true, the philosophy that was more often concerned in forming tragedy than is usually recognized:

Amongst the wise (right Honorable) whose sentences (for the moste parte) tende either to teache the attaining of vertue, or eschuening of vice: Plotinus that wonderfull and excellent Phylosopher, hath these wordes: The propetrie of Temperance is to covet nothing which may bee repented: not to exceede the bandes of measure, and to kepe desire under the yooke of Reason. Whiche saying if it were so well known, as is needefull: so well imbraced, as hee wyshed, or so surely fixed in minde, as it is printed in his workes: then certis manye Christians might by the instruction of an Ethnicke Phylosopher, shunne great and daungerous perils. For to covet without consideration: to passe the measure of his degree: and to lette will runne at randon, is the only destruction of all estates. Else howe were it possible, so many learned, politike, wise, renouned, valiant and victorious personages, might ever have come to such utter decaye. Will you that I rehearse Alexander the great, Caesar, Pompey, Cyrus, Hannibal, etc. Al which (by desire of glorie) felte the rewarde of their immoderate and insatiable lustes... But you wil say, desire of fame, glorie, renowne, and immortalitie (to which al men wel nighe of nature are inclined especially those which excel or have any singular gift of Fortune or of the body) moved them to such daungerous, great and hardy enterprises, which I must nedes confesse as an infallible veritie: but for so much as the above named vertue by Plotinus his judgement hath such excellent properties, it is so fit in a Magistrate, that I surely deme those Princes above specified (considering their factes, estastes, fortunes, fame and exployes) had never come to suche ende, but for wante of temperance. Yet sithe there are three other Cardinall vertues whiche are requisite in him that should be in authoritie: that is to saye, Prudence, Justice,
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and Fortitude, which so wonderfully adorne and beautifie all estates, (if Temperance bee with them adjoyned that they move the very enemies with admiration to praise them) some peradventure as affection leads: will commend one, some another. Yea, and though Aristotle prince of Phylosophers name Prudence, The mother of vertues. And Cicero define hir the knowledge of thinges which ought to be desired and followed: and also of them which ought to be fled and eschewed, yet shall you finde that for wante of Temperance, those which were counted the wisest that ever were, fel into wonderfull reproche and infamie. Yea and though Justice that incomparable vertue, as the auncient Civilians define hir, be a perpetuall and constant will which giveth to every man his right. Yet if she be not constant, which is the gift of fortitude, nor equal in discerning right from wrong, wherein is prudence: nor use proportion in judgement and sentence which pertaineth to temperance, shee can never be called equitie or justice, but fraude, deceate, injustice, and injurie. And to speake of Fortitude which Cicero defineth, A consyderate undertaking of perils, and enduring of labours. If hee whom we suppose stoute, valiaunt, and of good courage, want Prudence, Justice, or Temperance, he is not counted bolde, manly and constant, but made beastly and desperate. I will also sith I have gone so farre with the vertues (and the place so urgeth) lastly set downe the definition of Temperance, according to Cicero his opinion, Temperance (saith he) is of reason in lust and other evill assaultes of the minde, a sure and moderate dominion and rule. This noble vertue hath three parts, that is continence, clemencie and modestie, which well and wisely observed and kept (if grace be to them adjoyned) it is impossible for him that is endued with the above named vertues ever to fall into the unfortunat snares of calamitie or misfortune... I have here (right honorable) in this booke (which I am so bolde to dedicate to your honors) only reproved folly in those which are heedelesse: injurie in extortioners, rashness in venterers, and excesse, in such as suppress not unruly affections.

It is evident that to Higgins the virtues are the only means to avoid misery and to secure happiness:

We ether are rewarded, as we serve:
Or else are plaged, as our deedes deserve.¹

But Higgins wrote of punishments ingeniously fitted to the vices they rewarded. Thus Manlius, minded to kill his

¹ From the story of Manlius, op. cit. fol. 36.
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brother, was by him slain: Bladud, practising by curious arts
to fly, fell and broke his neck; Kimarus, hunting, was slain
by wild beasts. It is the kind of punishment described by the
phrase “the biter bitten”. And bewilderment as to the ways
of Fortune or of divine justice is lacking.

In 1578 was published by Richard Webster The Seconde
part of the Mirrour for Magistrates, containing the falles
of the infortunate Princes of this Lande. From the Conquest of
Caesar, unto the commyng of Duke William the Conquerour.
This work, not originally intended for the public, was
published while the author, Thomas Blener-Hasset, was
abroad. There are interesting suggestions of changes in
the permanent theme of the mutability of human life and the
relation of the fall of princes to their deserts. Thus we find:
“How Guidericus refused to pay tribute unto Claud-
Caesar.... This historie is a singuler example of Gods
vengeance against pride and arrogancye”. And the motto
of the whole which is appended, Goe straight and feare not,
is summed up in the closing words of the story of Harold:

Let no man thinke by fetches finely filde,
By double drifts conveyed cunningly,
To get or gayne by any craft or guile,
A good estate with long prosperite.
His lust obtaynde, he lives in miserie,
His guilty ghost dooth see his plague appeare,
Who goeth straight he needeth not to feare.

In the same tradition should be noted particularly The
reward of Wickednesse by Richard Robinson, the prefatory
letter to which is dated 1574. The purpose of the author was
explained in his words of “The Authour to the Booke”,
bidding the book

reveale abroade the woe
That is among the sillie soules, in Plutos ouglie lake,
For wickednesse done on the Earth, howe Jove doth vengeance take.
Blushe not my booke, to thunder forth, the tormentes thou hast seene,
Tell wilfull wits, and hatefull hearts, what just deserved teene.