Chapter 1

Hamlet and the Renaissance

1 The Renaissance context

Ever since nineteenth-century historians such as Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt began elaborating a systematic concept of the Renaissance, the idea has proved controversial. Some have questioned whether it is accurate to speak of the Renaissance as a distinct period; others have confined themselves to questioning the dating of the age, or proposing a variety of Renaissances. Certainly when one surveys what has come to be known as the Renaissance, it looks different in different countries, and seems to proceed at different rates in different areas (the Renaissance in painting, for example, occurred long before what we think of as the Renaissance in music). Nevertheless, the fact that one still speaks of 'Renaissances' in these cases suggests some kind of underlying unity to the phenomena. And many of the figures who fall into the period we label the Renaissance show signs of having conceived of themselves as living in a distinct era, with a strong sense of having broken with the past. Though they may not have used the term 'Renaissance', writers such as Francis Bacon in his *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) speak of themselves as coming at the dawn of a new age. In the end, although one must grant that the idea of the Renaissance is the construction of historians, the concept remains useful for understanding a wide range of phenomena, including, as I hope to show, Shakespeare's achievement in *Hamlet*.

The Renaissance, as the name implies, was a rebirth: the rebirth of classical antiquity in the modern world, beginning in Italy roughly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and gradually spreading to the rest of Europe. Today we tend to think of the age largely in aesthetic terms, and point to such phenomena as the imitation

of Greek sculpture and architecture, the attempts to recapture the spirit of Homer and Virgil in epic, or the effort to recreate Greek tragedy in the modern form of opera. But the Renaissance was not merely what we would call a cultural event. It reached far deeper into the fabric of European life, involving attempts to revive the political forms of classical antiquity as well as the artistic. One can see this in the imperial ambitions of many Renaissance states, their hopes to rival Rome's conquests, reflected, for example, in Edmund Spenser's conception of England following Rome as the third Troy. More importantly, in Renaissance Italy attempts were made to revive the republican forms of government which were characteristic of the ancient world and which had largely disappeared during the Middle Ages. Indeed it is no accident that the Renaissance began in Italy, where republics such as Florence and Venice came closer than any other communities in Europe to recreating the civic life which had provided the basis for the great cultural achievements of Athens and Rome.

But the Renaissance was not simply a return to the principles or conditions of the ancient world. It was a rebirth of classical antiquity within a Christian culture, and that made a complete return to the way of life of pagan Greece and Rome impossible. As a result, the era was characterised by an uneasy and unstable alliance of classical and Christian elements. To be sure, there are ways in which classical and Christian culture can be harmonised. The ethics of both Christianity and classical philosophy tend to denigrate the passions as the animal part of human nature and to view the control of them as the goal of ethical conduct. Plato's presentation of philosophy as preparation for dying in the *Phaedo* could easily be reinterpreted in Christian terms; a character in Erasmus's colloquy, 'The Religious Banquet' (1533), when he reads Socrates' last words, feels moved to say: 'Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis' (254; 'Saint Socrates, pray for us'). Renaissance thinkers could draw upon a long tradition of adopting classical writings to Christian purposes. Even in the Middle Ages, many classical authors were viewed as anticipating Christian truths and were virtually canonised in the process. Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, with its prophecy of a new-born child who will usher in a golden age of peace, was long seen as reflecting a dim pagan awareness of the coming of Christ.

Such examples of the reconciliation of classical authors with Christian doctrine have led many historians to view the Renaissance as a grand and successful synthesis of classicism and Christianity, usually discussed under the label 'Christian humanism'. This term has in fact become so much a part of discourse on the Renaissance that we are in danger of forgetting that it is almost as much of an oxymoron as Romeo's 'cold fire' or 'sick health' (I.i.181). Christianity is not a form of humanism in any ordinary sense of the term; indeed throughout most of its history Christianity has been the antithesis of humanism. Thus, although one can certainly find authors in the Renaissance who thought of themselves as Christian humanists, one must remember that their programme was viewed as controversial at the time, and often seen, in fact, as heretical by church authorities. Any investigation of the phenomenon ought to begin with a frank admission of how deeply problematic the concept is, of how many tensions and contradictions lie concealed beneath what appears to be a simple label. Discussions of Christian humanism often make it seem as if nothing could be easier than to synthesise Christianity and classicism. But in fact the two traditions have almost always been antagonists, if not mortal enemies. Christianity arose in conscious opposition to classical values; classical culture in the form of Rome long sought to stamp out Christianity; though the two traditions have at times appeared to make their peace with each other, their reconciliations have been more like temporary truces than lasting alliances, and eventually one has always tried to triumph over the other.

One can see how difficult it is to fuse Christianity and classicism if one looks at the concept of heroism in the two traditions. The Achilles of Homer's *Iliad* is the classical hero *par excellence*, and it would be hard to imagine a less Christian figure. Achilles is proud, aggressive, vengeful, exulting in his power, and implacable in his enmity. Consider how he characteristically boasts of his triumph over Hector and humiliates his fallen victim:

> Hektor, surely you thought as you killed Patroklos you would be
> safe, and since I was far away you thought nothing of me,
> o fool, for an avenger was left, far greater than he was,
> behind him and away by the hollow ships. And it was I;

> and I have broken your strength; on you the dogs and the vultures
> shall feed and foully rip you; the Achaians will bury
> Patroklos . . .
> No more entreaty of me, you dog, by knees or parents.
> I wish only that my spirit and fury would drive me
> to hack your meat away and eat it raw for the things that
> you have done to me. (XXII, 331–6, 345–8)

This is admittedly an extreme moment for Achilles, and even within the *Iliad* he has to learn to moderate his anger. Moreover, the Achillean model did not go unchallenged within Greek culture, as one can see if one looks at Socrates' critique of Homer in Plato's *Republic* (which suggests why the classical philosophic tradition was more easily reconciled with Christianity than the classical heroic tradition). But when all these qualifications are made, the fact remains that Achilles in all his pride and rage was held up as a model to Greek youth; Homer's portrait supposedly helped to fire the ambitions of Alexander the Great. The centrality of Achilles as hero within classical culture tells us something about the ancient Greeks (and Romans as well): the way they prized the whole spirited side of human nature – what the Greeks called *thumos* – the complex of pride, anger, indignation and ambition which fuelled the deeds of the great classical heroes (in fact as well as in fiction).

Contrast Achilles' speech with the words of the central model of the Christian tradition, Jesus himself, in his Sermon on the Mount:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . .
> Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth . . .
> Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy . . .
> But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire . . .
> Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
> But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.
> (Matthew 5: 3, 7, 9, 22, 38–9; Authorised Version)

Judged by these principles, Achilles is headed straight for hell. Jesus is in every respect the antithesis of the classical hero: he is humble rather than proud, merciful rather than vengeful, passive rather

than aggressive, and forgiving of sins rather than unyielding in hatred. In classical terms, one might question whether there is in fact anything heroic at all about Jesus, but the tendency of Christianity is to redefine heroism so that suffering misery becomes a higher or deeper form of heroism than inflicting misery. The Christian hero *par excellence* is the martyr. In his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* (1531), Machiavelli draws the contrast between the two conceptions of heroism:

> The Pagan religion deified only men who had achieved great glory, such as commanders of armies and chiefs of republics, whilst ours glorifies more the humble and contemplative men than the men of action. Our religion, moreover, places the supreme good in humility, lowliness, and a contempt for worldly objects, while the other, on the contrary, places the supreme good in grandeur of soul, strength of body, and all such other qualities as render men formidable; and if our religion claims of us fortitude of soul, it is more to enable us to suffer than to achieve great deeds. (285)

In Nietzsche's account of the origin of Christianity, he views it as a conscious reaction against the ethos of the classical world. What was regarded as good or noble by the Greeks and Romans is damned as evil in Christianity, while what was regarded as bad or base by the Greeks and Romans is prized as good in Christianity. More specifically, the pride and power of the classical hero is regarded as the height of sin in Christian terms, while the suffering of the hero's victim is reinterpreted as the result of conscious choice and hence becomes a virtue: the Christian martyr claims to will his suffering. As Rabelais's Grangousier defines the situation of the modern European in Book I of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532): 'To imitate the ancient Herculeses, Alexanders, Hannibals, Scipios, Caesars and that ilk is contrary to the profession of the Gospel . . . Is it not true that what the Saracens and Barbarians once called prowess, we term wickedness and brigandry?'(121).

2 Heroism in the Renaissance epic tradition

To insist upon the contrast between Achilles and Jesus may seem like labouring the obvious, but given the uncritical way in which the concept of Christian humanism has often been applied in studies of

the Renaissance, it is necessary to recall how basically incompatible Christianity and classicism are, and how much redefinition and reinterpretation of central concepts such as heroism were necessary to give even the appearance of a synthesis of the two traditions. This process can be observed in the Renaissance epic. Critics in the age tended to regard the epic as the highest form of literature, rating it even higher than tragedy, and they accordingly felt that modern literature could not claim to have equalled ancient until it could offer its equivalent of the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*. But one cannot separate the classical epic from a particular view of human nature, and especially a celebration of a particular form of aristocratic and martial virtue. Thus imitating the ancient epic presented a problem for writers in Christian Europe. They had to be mindful of Erasmus's warning in his *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516): 'You have allied yourself with Christ – and yet will you slide back into the ways of Julius and Alexander the Great?' (153).

An epic hero like Achilles was on the whole too bloodthirsty and barbaric for Renaissance sensibilities. That is why authors in the era tended to prefer the *Aeneid* as a model, for Virgil had already to some extent civilised and domesticated the classical hero in the form of his pious Aeneas. In many respects, Virgil's Aeneas more closely resembles Homer's Hector, while Achilles appears in the *Aeneid* in the form of Turnus, the warrior Aeneas must defeat. In Virgil, the hero who serves a city and subordinates himself to its needs triumphs over the Achillean lone wolf, primarily interested in his own glory. But even the *Aeneid* clashes with Christian principles. The poem does after all celebrate the imperial ambitions and achievements of Rome, and although its hero pursues a purpose larger than personal glory, his goals are still patriotic and bound up with the pagan ideal of earthly fame.

The answer a number of Renaissance authors found to the dilemma of how to combine an epic celebration of martial heroism with Christian principles was the idea of a crusade. If a noble hero could be shown battling on behalf of Christianity against pagan enemies, then whatever ferocity he displayed would have a religious justification. He would be fighting not on behalf of his country – or at least not merely on behalf of his country – but on behalf of the one true faith and thus for the sake of eternal glory and

salvation. One can see this development in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516), and it becomes clearest in the greatest of the Italian Renaissance epics, Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1575). A hero fighting to deliver Jerusalem from Saracen hands seems like the ideal subject for a Christian epic. In England, Spenser carried the Christianising of the epic even further. In *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), Spenser's knights represent or champion some highly un-Aristotelian and unclassical virtues, such as Holiness and Chastity. It is no accident that Spenser turned for his subject matter to the Middle Ages and the legends of King Arthur and his knights. For with their conception of chivalry, medieval authors had gone further than Virgil in civilising and domesticating the epic warrior. Warriors who fight on behalf of women and who practice courtly virtues will be less ferocious than Achilles, and indeed in the chivalric epic poetry of the Middle Ages the fury of the warfare is moderated by a gallantry foreign to the spirit of the *Iliad* or even the *Aeneid*.

The notion of the chivalric knight or Christian warrior thus gave the authors of Renaissance epics the basis for claiming that they had found a way of going beyond the classical epic, with a new and nobler conception of heroism. One can hear their satisfaction in the opening of Canto One of Camoens's *The Lusiads* (1572), the national epic of Portugal:

> Of the wise Greek, no more the tale unfold,
> Or the Trojan, and great voyages they made.
> Of Philip's son and Trajan, leave untold
> Triumphant fame in wars which they essayed.
> I sing the Lusian spirit bright and bold,
> That Mars and Neptune equally obeyed.
> Forget all the Muse sang in ancient days,
> For valor nobler yet is now to praise. (I.3)

But, in his portrayal of the voyage of Vasco de Gama, has Camoens really come up with a higher, spiritualised version of heroism, transcending anything portrayed in the ancient world? Or has he merely spread a veneer of spirituality over an enterprise as worldly as anything undertaken by Achilles or Aeneas? The fact that *The Lusiads* celebrates the colonial ambitions of Portugal suggests that its high-mindedness may be largely a facade. In his closing address to his

King in Canto Ten, Camoens shows that his sympathies are evenly divided between the spiritual and the commercial:

> And hold your cavaliers in high esteem
> For, with their burning blood that knows no dread,
> Not only they exalt the Faith supreme
> But far abroad your splendid empire spread. (X.151)

In Canto Seven, in his exhortation to European conquerors, Camoens is even blunter:

> Such riches may perhaps your spirits spur,
> Whose hearts the Holy Temple cannot stir. (VII.11)

I do not mean to single out Camoens as a hypocrite, but merely to use the example of *The Lusiads* to suggest that the fusion of classicism and Christianity in Renaissance epic was deeply problematic, and did not always and necessarily yield a stable synthesis. One must be alert to the possibility that Christianity became corrupted in the process of being incorporated into the alien form of the classical epic, that instead of raising classical heroism to a new level of spirituality, Christianity was lowered into the service of worldly ends such as colonial expansion. Certainly not everyone in the Renaissance was happy with efforts to put Christian content in classical forms, for the result in the eyes of many – including the leaders of the Reformation – was not the Christianising of paganism but the paganising of Christianity. One man who questioned the whole enterprise of the Renaissance epic was John Milton. This may sound odd, since Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) has been called the greatest of all Renaissance epics. And yet even as the poem provides the culmination of the form, *Paradise Lost* fundamentally overturns the Renaissance epic tradition, splitting the alliance previous authors had tried to forge between classical and Christian virtue.

Milton's plans for the long poem he felt destined to write show that he originally had in mind a more conventional Renaissance epic. Among other subjects, he considered basing an epic on the story of King Arthur, which might have resulted in a poem resembling *The Faerie Queene*. But aside from the fact that Milton simply came to doubt the historical authenticity of accounts of King Arthur, his disillusionment with English politics during the 1650s probably

discouraged him from pursuing a subject that would inevitably have been patriotic in theme. By choosing instead the story of Adam and Eve, who as the progenitors of the human race cannot be pinned down to a single national origin and hence can lay claim to universal interest, Milton broke with the longstanding tradition that an epic poem should be national in character. One can see the polemical thrust of *Paradise Lost* as an epic in Milton's reflections on his choice of subject matter:

> Since first this Subject for Heroic Song
> Pleas'd me long choosing, and beginning late;
> Not sedulous by Nature to indite
> Wars, hitherto the only Argument
> Heroic deem'd, chief maistry to dissect
> With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights
> In Battles feign'd; the better fortitude
> Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom
> Unsung. (IX.25–33)

Milton explicitly contrasts the Christian notion of passive virtue with the classical notion of active, and clearly prefers the former while rejecting the celebration of warfare as a noble activity in the classical epic. He insists that he is offering an 'argument / Not less but more Heroic than the wrath / Of stern *Achilles*' (IX.13–15), thereby summing up the Christian revaluation of classical values.

The classical virtues do appear in *Paradise Lost*, but they are given to Satan and the other devils. Milton's Satan is the hypertrophy of a classical hero: he has all the pride, vengefulness, and self-reliance of Achilles, coupled with the guile, resourcefulness, and rhetorical skill of Odysseus, and like Aeneas he feels destined to found a new state. Viewing Satan in the context of the Renaissance debate between classical and Christian values helps to account for the longstanding controversy over whether he is the hero of *Paradise Lost*. In a technical sense Satan *is* the hero of *Paradise Lost* – that is, he is the one who embodies the virtues of the traditional epic hero – but Milton suggests that those virtues are demonic. The active heroism of Satan is contrasted unfavourably in the poem with the passive heroism of Christ, who is willing to sacrifice himself humbly so that God's will may be fulfilled. (This contrast is admittedly blurred in the

least satisfactory part of the poem, the battle in heaven, in which Milton wants to have it both ways and insists on attributing traditional martial virtue to Christ and the good angels.) Adam and Eve are poised between the competing ethical models of Satan and Christ. As long as they passively accept their subordinate places in the order of creation, they prosper, but as soon as they heed Satan and try to become self-reliant like classical heroes, they fall.

Paradise Lost is usually considered one of the great monuments of Christian humanism, and yet the poem actually embodies a polemic against classical values. To be sure, the poem is steeped in classical learning: its texture is a rich interweaving of classical and Christian elements and to that extent represents a synthesis of the two traditions. But one cannot look simply at the *presence* of classical references; one must consider their *function*, and the fact is that they work systematically to denigrate classical values. Milton thus shows how much conflict lies hidden beneath the seemingly simple label 'Christian humanism'. No one in the Renaissance had a more comprehensive knowledge of the classical and the Christian traditions, and yet no one was more acutely aware of how antithetical they are.

Thus what is fascinating about the Renaissance is precisely the rich variety of conflicting intellectual and ethical positions it produced, resulting in part from the encounter of two traditions which were already highly developed and which challenged each other's fundamental assumptions. Wherever one turns in the Renaissance, one finds different forms of combining the classical with the Christian. Take the case of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592). In the magician's desire to conjure up the shade of Helen of Troy, Marlowe found a perfect emblem for the inner meaning of the Renaissance. Faustus quite literally wants to revive classical antiquity within modern Europe, and through his poetry, Marlowe succeeds in making Greece come alive again on the stage. In one brilliant line – 'Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked' (V.i.105) – Marlowe manages to capture the thrust of the whole Renaissance, as Faustus hopes to see the city of Luther displace the city of Hector.

But Marlowe's portrayal of a revived antiquity is ambiguous. Helen represents the perfection of pagan beauty, but in Christian terms she is a succubus, a demon leading Faustus to his damnation; a healthy pagan appreciation of the flesh appears in a new light as the