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Lily Bess Campbell

Excerpt

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SECTION I

*The Purpose and Method
of Tragedy*

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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 tragedies¹ 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 stode 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 maister Chaucer, with his fresh comedies,
Is ded, allas, cheeff poete off Breteyne,
That whilom made ful pitous tragedies;
The fall of pryncis he dede also compleyne,
As he that was of makyng sovereyne,
Whom al this land sholde off riht preferre,
Sithe off oure language he was the lodesterre.

Senek in Rome, thoruh his hih prudence,
Wrot tragedies of gret moralite;
And Tullius, cheeff welle off eloquence,
Maad in his tyme many fressh dite;
Franceis 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 cheef thes causes affor told
Meved the herte of Bochas to writyng,
And to remembre be many story old
Thestat of pryncis, in chaieres hih sittyng,
And for vices ther unwar fallyng,
Yiving exaample, as I afferme dar
Of fals Fortune how thei shal be war.²

¹ E.E.T.S., Ex. Ser. vols. CXXI, CXXII, CXXIII. Ed. by Dr Henry Bergen. Cf. vol. CXXI, pp. 7, 8. Prologue, ll. 246–59.

² *Ibid.* vol. CXXII, p. 477. Bk. IV, Prologue, ll. 155–61. *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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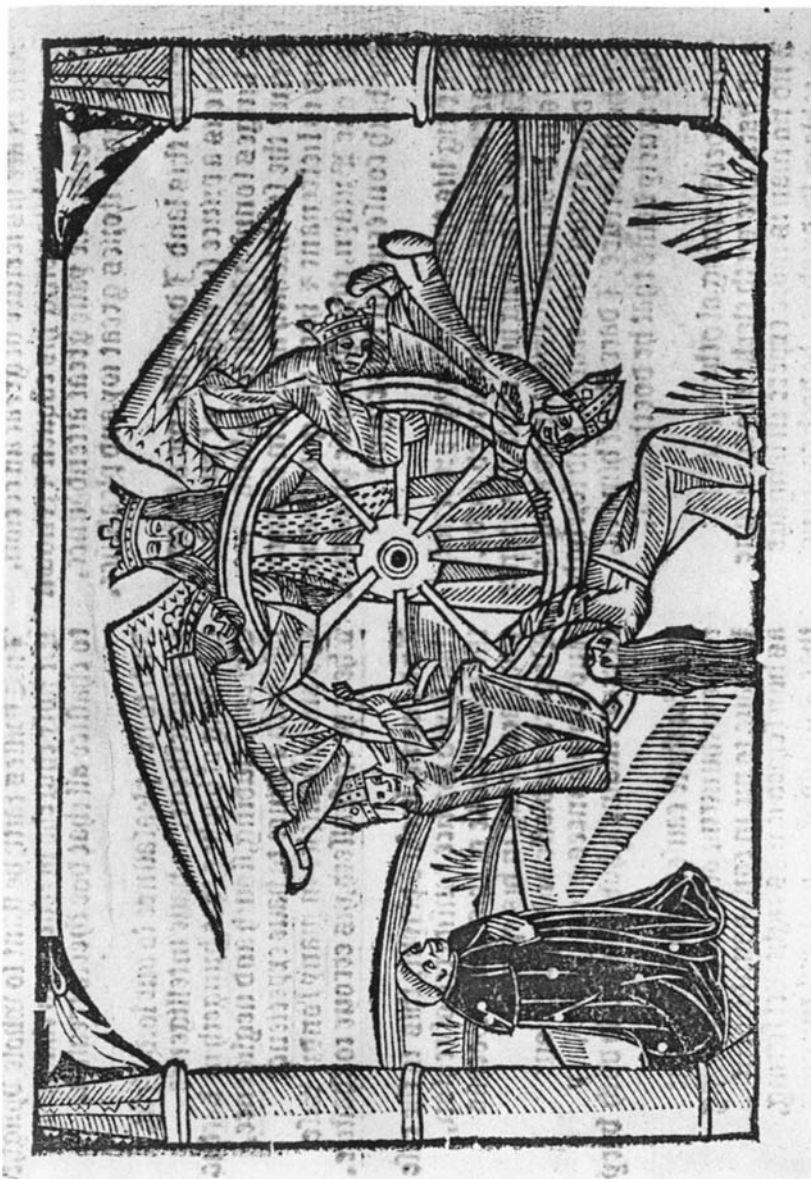


PLATE II. Illustration from the 1574 edition of Lydgate, *A Treatise excellent and compendious, shewing and declaring in manner of tragedye, the fall of sondry most notable Princes and Princesses with other Nobles, through ye Mutabilitie and change of unstedfast Fortune together with their most detestable & wicked vices.*

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PLATE III. Illustration from the 1554 edition of Lydgate, *The Falles of Princes*.

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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 "dwells 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 chaires hih sitt yng" must be considered "for vices ther unwar fall yng".

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 nobilitye 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 countrey men your auncestors, for sundrye vices not yet left, this booke named *A Myrroure for Magistrates*, can shewe: which therefore I humbly offre unto your honors, beseching you to accept it favorably. For here as in a loking 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 shal be for your good, and to your eternall glory both here and in heaven, which I besече 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 storye contynued from where as Bochas left, unto this presente time, chiefly of suche as Fortune had dalyed with here in this ylande: whiche might be as a myrroure for al men as well noble as others, to shewe the slyppery 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 fallles of the first infortunate Princes of this lande: From the comming of Brute to the incarnation of our saviour and redemer 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 eschuing of vice: Plotinus that wonderfull and excellent Phylosopher, hath these wordes: The propertie of Temperaunce is to covet nothing which may bee repented: not to excede the bandes of measure, and to keepe 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 woorkes: 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, renoumed, valiaunt 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 singuler 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, estates, fortunes, fame and employtes) 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 Temperaunce bee with them adjoynd that they move the very enemies with admiration to praise them) some peradventure as affection leades: will commende 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 Temperaunce, 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 geveth to every man his right. Yet if she be not constant, which is the gift of fortitude, nor equal in discerning right from wrong, wherin is prudence: nor use proportion in judgement and sentence which pertaineth to temperaunce, shee can never be called equitie or justice, but fraude, deceate, injustice, and injurie. And to speake of Fortitude which Cicero definith, A consyderate undertaking of perils, and enduring of labours. If hee whom we suppose stoute, valiaunt, and of good courage, want Prudence, Justice, or Temperaunce, 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 Temperaunce, according to Cicero his opinion, Temperaunce (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 partes, that is continence, clemencie and modestie, which well and wisely observed and kept (if grace be to them adjoynd) it is impossible for him that is endued with the above named vertues ever to fall into the unfortunate 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 foly 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.

