

Drama before Shakespeare

The didactic interludes written by Heywood and others in the allegorical morality-play tradition cannot now be read with much pleasure, but in asking how Shakespeare's theater developed, it is important to recall the comparable conflict between good and evil in his tragedies and romances, as well as that between wisdom and folly in the comedies and the political plays. Shakespeare was rooted in the morality tradition, but not being bound by a didactic purpose allowed him to go far beyond it.

In recent years much has been written about the influence of "popular theater" on the development of Elizabethan drama. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can know about any truly popular forms of drama which may have existed; it is certain that there were groups of travelling entertainers who acted plays in the yards of inns, or in any kind of hall available. But what kind of plays were these? All the surviving texts of early 16th century plays are the work of learned writers and mostly give the text of plays intended for a limited private audience.

The major inspirations of comedy in the later 16th century were the Roman writers **Plautus** and **Terence**, who in the years between 200 and 160 BC adapted plays of the Greek New Comedy (especially Menander) for Roman audiences. 20 plays survive of the many Plautus wrote; his style is one of tremendous vigour, full of verbal humour, with elaborate poetry as well as direct addresses to the audience. He is not interested in unified plot but his habit of introducing stock characters was tremendously influential: miserly fathers, boastful soldiers, cunning parasites, courtesans and slaves are common.

Terence only wrote 6 plays, following the model of Plautus, but his drama is much more subtle. The basic plot is usually centered on a difficult love match which is finally successful, often when the true identity of an orphan is suddenly revealed (*anagnoresis*, recognition). For Terence human relationships are a serious matter, his characters have far more depth and they speak a language much closer to ordinary speech than in Plautus. Terence was admired for his serious style already in the Middle Ages.

The Humanists realized that school-boys would more easily learn Latin if they were able to play-act; at the same time, comedy often shows human vices being punished and good people being rewarded, and generally holds the mirror up to folly, so from the early 16th century the boys of St Paul's and other schools acted plays by Plautus and Terence, within the school and sometimes at court before the king.

Early Comedies and Tragedies

Nicholas Udall (1505-1556) was a humanist scholar who taught at Oxford, was headmaster of Eton College 1534-41 and headmaster of Westminster School from 1554 until his death. Inspired by plays of Plautus and Terence (*Miles Gloriosus* and *Eunuchus*), in about 1552 Udall wrote the first original English comedy, *Ralph Roister Doister*. Here a braggart simpleton, Ralph, is encouraged by the parasite Mathewe Merrygreek to woo the widow Christian Cunstance while her fiancé is away. The wooing is a disaster, Ralph cannot write a proper love-letter, then he gets beaten by the widow and her servants; when the widow's fiancé comes back, there is a moment of doubt when he suspects her, then the play ends in a party. It is not so far from Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

This play may have been acted by the boys of Westminster, it was only printed in 1566. The comedy is simple, the metre heavy, but for the first time we have here a play with a properly constructed plot, divided into five acts in imitation of the structure that humanists

had discovered in the works of the Roman dramatists. Udall may have written other plays, but nothing much is known of them.

The second comedy that survives comes from a similar context; *Gammer Gurton's Needle* was written for and acted by students of Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1566. It is a farce about the losing and finding of the needle that Old Woman Gurton uses to mend Hodge her servant's clothes. The Bedlam fool Diccon persuades her that her neighbour Dame Chatte has stolen it, the priest Doctor Rat is called in and gets beaten; at last Hodge sits down and painfully finds that the lost needle has been in the seat of his breeches all the time. Again there is a lot of very simple comedy provided by servants and stock characters; the plot is simple but well-constructed in five acts, and there are popular songs. Yet such simple stuff does not seem to have inspired many imitators; only about 35 comedies are known to have been composed before 1590 (texts of half of them survive), and it was tragedy that developed first.

Here the model was **Seneca's** Latin tragedies. These were plays based on Greek stories but originally intended for closet performance (to be read in private, not performed in a theater). *Troades* is known to have been acted at Cambridge (in Latin) in 1552, *Oedipus* in 1560 and *Medea* in 1561. The first translations of Senecan tragedies into English were those by Jasper Heywood (the son of John Heywood): *Troas* in 1559, *Thyestes* in 1560, and *Hercules Furens* in 1561. *Oedipus* was translated by Alexander Neville in 1560-3. A complete set of English translations of all ten tragedies was published in a single volume by Thomas Newton in 1581.

These were not accurate translations in the modern sense; certain speeches were shortened, others were lengthened, incidents were added or changed for greater dramatic impact. In order to suggest a high style, most of the plays were translated into the long, fourteen-syllable lines of ballad-style that T. S. Eliot admired, but C. S. Lewis and most other critics find rather grotesque. In several places the translators have added passages where unhappy ghosts lament and rave, screaming all kinds of blood-thirsty demands for revenge in imitation of Lucan's melodramatic epic style. This and other forms of **bombast** became highly popular features in Elizabethan imitations of Senecan tragedy. In Seneca, there is a high intensity of inner conflict and a subtle psychological analysis, which mostly failed to pass into the translations.

It is not easy to know what in Seneca appealed so much to the renaissance; there is a strong tendency in his works to moralize on the dangers of desire and the misery of life in this world. This latter had long given Christians a pagan model and a philosophical (Stoic) basis for the Biblical message of *contemptus mundi* (contempt for this world) that underlies the popular Elizabethan theme of mutability. Senecan tragedy generally serves to show how much pain comes with worldly success; "the higher you climb, the harder you fall" is one message of the plays, and of Boccaccio's *De casibus* (On the fall of Princes) which was the model for the stories of disaster and downfall told with such relish in the *Mirror for Magistrates* first published in 1559 (the year of the first Senecan translation). The puzzle is that the *Mirror*, like the Senecan plays, was enjoyed by the powerful and the ambitious whose insecurities they mirror!

Gorboduc

On Twelfth Night (January 6) 1561, as part of their Revels (celebration) the young men who were preparing for worldly success by studying law at the London Inns of Court presented in the Hall of the Inner Temple a play called *Gorboduc*, written by two young lawyers, **Thomas Norton** (1532-84) and **Thomas Sackville** (1536-1608). Two weeks later it was acted before the queen. Sackville was the author of the introductory Induction to the second edition of the *Mirror* in 1563. *Gorboduc* (or: *Ferrex and Porrex*) is the first native English tragedy, and it has several features that anticipate Shakespeare, although it is not sure he knew the play.

The story of *Gorboduc* is not taken from the Greek legends used by Seneca (indeed, these legends were not destined to be the subject of many English plays), but from the chronicle history of ancient Britain written by Geoffrey of Monmouth out of which, in 1577, Holinshed was to draw inspiration for the *Chronicles* that Shakespeare so often used. *Gorboduc* is a chronicle play (or history play). Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Macbeth* have similar origins, to say nothing of *Richard III* and *Richard II*.

The story has marked similarities with that which Shakespeare so freely adapted in *King Lear*: King Gorboduc of Britain decides to divide his kingdom between his two sons Ferrex and Porrex, and retire in preparation for death. Envy grows between the two brothers, thanks to the bad influence of their two parasites. The younger, Porrex, kills the elder and their mother, the queen Videna, who loved Ferrex most, stabs Porrex to death. In a popular uprising of horror, king and queen are killed, leaving the land without a ruler. In the last Act, the Duke of Albany decides to make himself king, he is opposed by democratic forces including the Duke of Cornwall, and the play ends with a speech advocating a constitutional role for Parliament in such a crisis.

Gorboduc was written by audacious young lawyers living close to the corridors of power who knew that the young Queen of England had no heir and that if she were to die suddenly, England would be threatened with foreign invasion (in the play Albany becomes an Albanian!). This play, like others acted in following years on the same occasion, was designed to tell Queen Elizabeth to get married and have children. But that was not its only message. Responsibility is the challenge it addresses to princes and their servants alike. The disasters in the play come from the refusal of Gorboduc to listen to good advice, and from the corruption of the princes by irresponsible time-serving parasites. It is a play which illustrates retribution rather than revenge. In Seneca the spirits of revenge come directly from hell and bring indiscriminate destruction; in Christianity, retribution is seen as an aspect of divine justice, the fatality by which "murder will out." The optimism of Shakespeare's historical tragedies, in which evil may triumph for a time but is always overcome by good in the end, derives from this same source.

Gorboduc is a mixture. There are the five acts of classical tragedy, a Chorus closes the first four; all the action takes place off-stage and is only reported by messengers, as in classical drama; there is a revenge killing. In this sense the play is Senecan. But each act opens with an emblematic dumb-show announcing its moral theme, not portraying the action itself, and this seems to have been an English tradition that may be one origin of the masque. The play is marked (or marred) by speeches of sometimes enormous length which mean that it can hardly appeal to today's audiences. The style of the poetry, though, is remarkably light when compared to that of contemporary translations of Seneca, thanks to the genius who decided to use blank verse in decasyllables for the play, only using rhyme for the Chorus. The play begins in a remarkable dialogue between the Queen and Ferrex:

Queen. The silent night that brings the quiet pause
From painful travails of the weary day
Prolongs my careful thoughts, and makes me blame

The slow Aurore that so for love or shame
 Doth long delay to show her blushing face,
 And now the day renews my grief-ful plaint.
Ferrex. My gracious lady, and my mother dear,
 Pardon my grief for your so grieved mind
 To ask what cause tormenteth so your heart?
Queen. So great a wrong and so unjust despite,
 Without all cause against all course of kind!
Ferrex. Such causeless wrong, and so unjust despite
 May have redress, or at the least, revenge.

For the first time in English drama, it seems, an audience is plunged into a play without any prologue directly telling them what they will see and what has happened before the action begins. They are made curious by the riddles of the opening speeches, and only then does the Queen tell her son (and the audience) about the plan to divide the kingdom. Shakespeare employs the same technique, and these lines can be compared with the opening of *King Lear*; they are also noteworthy for the dramatic irony of words like “unjust” and “revenge” in view of what happens later. The style recalls that of *Hamlet*’s play-within-the-play.

When the Queen’s servant-girl enters in Act IV ii to tell how the Queen has murdered her son Porrex, the rhetoric of her emotion compares most favourably with that found in other plays:

Servant. Oh where is ruth? or where is pity now?
 Whither is gentle heart and mercy fled?
 Are they exiled out of our stony breasts,
 Never to make return? Is all the world
 Drowned in blood, and sunk in cruelty?
 If not in women mercy may be found,
 If not alas within the mother’s breast
 To her own child, to her own flesh and blood,
 If ruth be banished thence, if pity there
 May have no place, if there no gentle heart
 Do live and dwell, where should we seek it then?
Gorboduc. Madam, alas, what means your woeful tale?
Servant. O silly woman I! why to this hour
 Have kind and fortune thus deferred my breath
 That I should live to see this doleful day?
 Will ever wight believe that such hard heart
 Could rest within the cruel mother’s breast,
 With her own hand to slay her only son?
 But out, alas! these eyes beheld the same;
 They saw the dreary sight and are become
 Most ruthless records of the bloody fact:
 Porrex, alas, is by his mother slain...

This is very fine stuff of its kind; the classical drama of 17th century French tragedians such as Racine is written in the same tradition, with words and emotions in place of physical action. For comparison, the following lines were written some ten years later, by **Nathaniel Woodes** in *A Conflict of Conscience*, and were intended to be taken seriously:

O painful pain of deep disdain, oh griping grief of hell,
 Oh horror huge, oh soul suppressed and slain with desperation,
 Oh heap of sins, the sum wherof no man can number well:
 Oh death, oh furious flames of hell, my just recompensation,
 Oh wretched wight, oh creature cursed, oh child of condemnation.
 Oh angry God and merciless, most fearful to behold,
 Oh Christ thou art no Lamb to me, but Lion fierce and bold.

In Shakespeare, only Bottom's rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are given lines of this kind. As in *Gorboduc*, there is little variation in the rhythms, the speeches are too long.

Further developments

The use of *stichomythia* (a form of rapid dialogue in which characters speak alternating lines) was first introduced into English by the poet **George Gascoigne** when he helped translate *Jocasta* (1566) from the Italian version of a Latin translation of Euripides's *Phoenissae*. It was Gascoigne, too, who in *Jocasta* discovered ways of making blank verse far more expressive by using enjambment:

Oh careful caitif, how am I now changed (wretch)
 From that I was! I am that Oedipus
 That whilom had triumphant victory (earlier)
 And was both dread and honored eke in Thebes:
 But now (so pleaseth you my forward stars)
 Down headlong hurled in depth of misery,
 So that remains of Oedipus no more
 As now in me, but even the naked name
 And lo, this image, that resembles more
 Shadows of death than shape of Oedipus. (V v)

That actors enjoyed offering spectacles of horror and violence, and that audiences enjoyed watching, cannot be doubted. There was always the morality-play aspect in the text and action to give moral justification. In a play like **John Pickering's** *Horestes* of 1567, again acted at the Inns of Court, the story of the *Oresteia* is told with vigour, and the personification of Revenge is a Vice figure who pretends to be Courage but is unmasked in the end.

The most famous illustration of the entertainment function of early tragedy is found in the full title of **Thomas Preston's** *Cambises* of 1569: "A lamentable tragedy, mixed full of pleasant mirth." This play tells of the terrible fall of the Persian tyrant, with his "odious death by God's justice appointed" in the retribution tradition, but it has three clowns, Ruff, Huff, and Snuff, who interrupt the serious action with jokes and tricks. *Cambises* seems to have been a popular play from the commercial theater that appealed to the court as well as the ordinary citizens.

This play is marked by two features that characterize almost all English Renaissance drama. In no other European country do we find the court and the commons watching and enjoying the same actors performing the same plays; and in no other country do we find this combination of comedy and tragedy in a mixed mode that Shakespeare was to explore in both

directions, with tragic elements latent in comedies, and comic figures or themes present in the darkest tragedies.

The construction of the theaters

The most decisive event for the future development of English drama was the establishment of permanent commercial playhouses on the outskirts of London: in 1567 the first, the **Red Lion**, was built in Stepney, east of the city, by John Brayne who a few years later, in 1576, joined with his brother-in-law James Burbage to build **The Theatre** to the north of London in Shoreditch. From 1594 this was to become the home of the Lord Chamberlain's Men which included Burbage's son Richard, and William Shakespeare. A year later, in 1577, the **Curtain** was built very close to the Theatre.

The first playhouse built south of the Thames was in the village of Newington Butts, but nothing much is known of it. Then in 1587 the **Rose** was built on Bankside (Southwark), where there were already arenas for bull-baiting and bear-baiting (cruel battles between a bull or a bear and a group of wild dogs, where bets were made on which would win). The owner of the Rose was **Philip Henslowe**, many of whose business papers and accounts have survived, giving unique knowledge about the daily running of an Elizabethan theater. The foundations of the Rose were discovered in 1989, making it possible to see the base of the stage where several of Marlowe's plays were regularly acted.

The **Swan** was built to the west of the Rose in 1595; then in 1599 the Theatre was torn down when the lease on that plot of land expired, the beams were taken across the Thames and used to build the **Globe** in Southwark, where Shakespeare's later plays were mainly acted. Traces of the Globe's foundations have also been uncovered recently, although not enough to show exactly how large it was.

Each of these playhouses was built in imitation of the London inn-yards where troupes of actors had been accustomed to play in earlier times; there the stage had been raised against the inn on one side of the yard with the audience standing on three sides of it; around the yard the buildings of the inn offered galleries from which people could also watch. In the play-houses, the people that Hamlet terms "groundlings" stood in the open arena before the stage, unprotected if it rained; they usually paid one penny. In the galleries completely circling the open space there were tiers of steps under a straw roof where those with more money could sit by paying a penny more; it cost a penny extra to hire a cushion! There may even have been private rooms for special people directly behind the stage. The stage itself was protected by a canopy that became increasingly solid. Most of the play-houses were more or less circular in shape, and could hold 2-3000 spectators, or more.

The companies of actors

The permanent play-houses came into being at a time when a number of companies of actors were being taken under the protection of powerful lords. This was necessary because there was increasing pressure from protestant reformers and other moralists to ban such pernicious activities as play-acting and dancing. In 1572 it was made illegal for strolling players to perform plays without the permission of the local authorities, in an act equating them with vagabonds and other criminals.

In 1572, **James Burbage** seems to have been an actor in the Earl of Leicester's players, and other powerful lords gave their livery (official uniform) to companies of players who continued to travel from town to town, protected by their status as servants of the

Queen's highest councilors. In 1583 the best twelve players in the dozen or so companies then existing were chosen to form the **Queen's Men**; one of the most popular actors there was the clown **Richard Tarlton**, who was famous for extemporizing jokes and songs; it is significant that he was equally admired at court and in the provincial towns.

One important company was protected by Lord Howard, the Lord Admiral, as early as 1576. The **Admiral's Men** adopted Henslowe's **Rose Theatre** as their permanent London base in about 1587. They had a great tragic actor in Henslowe's son-in-law **Edward Alleyn**, who played the main parts in Marlowe's plays. The most famous company of all, because it included Shakespeare, was the **Lord Chamberlain's Company**. It was formed in 1594 by actors from various companies that had broken up in 1593 when the theaters were closed for about one year on account of the plague.

The actors in these public theaters played in the afternoons, using daylight for their lighting, on a stage that had almost no scenery but with a large quantity of props and impressive costumes. At the end of the play, the actors seem to have been led by the clown of the company in an improvised Jig. Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were eager for novelty; for example, in the month September 15-October 15, 1595, the Admiral's Men performed 28 times in 18 different plays, three plays being acted 3 times, 3 more twice, the rest only once. This repertory system must have made rehearsing very difficult and it is hard to imagine how actors could memorize so many parts. If a new play was being produced for the first time, there was always a packed house and often the entry-price was raised.

One aspect of the Elizabethan theater, that continued until the theaters were closed in 1642, was the total absence of women on the stage. The parts of Juliet and Cleopatra, and all other female roles in all the plays written before the Restoration, were acted by young men. These young men seem to have been apprentice-actors who often continued with the companies after their beards grew and their voices broke (like the young actor Hamlet greets). This fact, when recalled, only shows how strong must have been people's "suspension of disbelief" while watching these plays.

The University Wits

In the 1580s, London thus had several companies of popular actors, performing plays in which heroic and comic, classical and English features combined to please audiences of almost every social class. Young, clever writers fresh from the universities began to explore new forms and themes. **John Lyly**, whose pastoral prose romances *Euphues: the Anatomy of Wit* and *Euphues his England* were widely read, was the author of a number of entertainments for the queen that were acted by Paul's Boys at court. This form of court-theater, elaborately staged, with music and dance, was a preparation for the masques of the next century.

George Peele wrote a number of plays for the court and for the commercial theater from 1584 (*The Arraignment of Paris*) until the 1590s. His most important play is the comic *Old Wives Tale* that combines a lyrical love tale taken from heroic romance with popular tales of ghosts and magic. All his plays are spectacular, rather melodramatic and full of long speeches. Thomas Nashe, the poet Thomas Lodge and the prolific Robert Greene are other writers who, together with Lyly and Peele, are known as University Wits. Their published work includes some plays as well as romances, moralizing and satirical pamphlets, and poetry.

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

The most famous of the University Wits, though, was Christopher Marlowe. Born in Canterbury, the son of a cobbler, in the same year as Shakespeare, he was able to go to Cambridge on a scholarship, and while there (1581-7), encouraged by the dramatic activities in the various colleges, he probably wrote his *Dido* although it was only performed later, by boy actors. From 1587 he was in London, writing plays and frequenting various social milieux. He had the reputation of being a libertine, a free-thinker, even an atheist; his plays certainly challenge too simple a view of human morality.

One of the many problems with Marlowe's plays is their dating; there is no sure way of knowing when they were written, or in which order. The main problem, though, is with their text. When Marlowe was killed in May 1593, only one of his works had been published, *Tamburlaine the Great*, printed in 1590. *Edward II* was published in 1594, like *Dido*, *Queen of Carthage* and perhaps *The Massacre at Paris*; *Doctor Faustus* was printed in 1604, then again (in a very different version) in 1616. *The Rich Jew of Malta* was not published at all until 1633. Marlowe's original text of *The Massacre at Paris* is lost; what was printed seems to be a text reconstructed from some actors' memories of the play. The two versions of *Faustus* are both to some extent revisions by other writers.

Tamburlaine

When the two parts of *Tamburlaine* were acted in London in 1587, the new poetry of their blank verse made a deep impression on the audience. This was Marlowe's intention, as he shows in the first lines of the Prologue:

From jiggling veins of rhyming mother-wits,
 And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,
 We'll lead you to the stately tents of war
 Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
 Threatening the world with high astounding terms...

When Ben Jonson wrote his poem in praise of Shakespeare for the 1623 Folio, he referred to "Marlowe's mighty line" and this is the accepted term for such speeches as the following, where poetic intensity is gained by accumulating exotic imagery and startling conceits in a way that taught much to John Donne. This language is unlike anything heard in English before, whether the protagonist is wooing, or asserting his own ambitions:

Not all the gold in India's wealthy arms
 Shall buy the meanest soldier in my train.
 Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,
 Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,
 Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills,
 Thy person is more worth to Tamburlaine
 Than the possession of the Persian crown
 Which gracious stars have promis'd at my birth.
 A hundred Tartars shall attend on thee,
 Mounted on steeds swifter than Pegasus;
 Thy garments shall be made of Median silk,
 Enchas'd with precious jewels of mine own,
 More rich and valorous than Zenocrate's; (valuable)
 With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled

Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen pools
And scale the icy mountains' lofty tops,
Which with thy beauty will be soon resolv'd. (melted)
My martial prizes with five hundred men
Won on the fifty-headed Volga's waves
Shall we all offer to Zenocrate,
And then myself to fair Zenocrate. (Act I.ii)

The thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown
That caus'd the eldest son of heavenly Ops
To thrust his doting father from his chair
And place himself in the imperial heaven
Mov'd me to manage arms against thy state.
What better precedent than mighty Jove?
Nature, that fram'd us of four elements
Warring within our breasts for regiment, (control)
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown. (Act II.ii)

This second speech expresses one of the main themes in Marlowe's work, one that dominated the thought of the Renaissance as seen in earlier chapters: ambition. Human beings desire knowledge and power in their thirst to be like God; the "aspiring mind" is part of the divine image, ever reaching beyond its present condition in search of more. Marlowe's heroes are in many respects "over-reachers" whose intensity is a function of their vitality. Despite this limitless thirst, Marlowe's heroes encounter their own limits, and death comes to each in the end. Yet death here is no longer experienced as the moment of divine judgement, as in the morality plays; the audience is left to make its own evaluation of the life it has been shown.

In the first part of the play, the Scythian shepherd-king Tamburlaine, a historical figure known as Timur, dominates and conquers the Middle East, creating a vast empire like Alexander by his ruthless cruelty. In Act IV Tamburlaine arrives at the city of Damascus, the home of Zenocrate where her father rules as Soldan. Tamburlaine follows his usual practice: on the first day of the siege, the flags are white, a promise that if they open the gates all will be spared. Then the flags become red, a warning that the leaders of the city will be killed when Tamburlaine enters; on the third day the flags become black, announcing that every person in the city will be killed when it is taken.

When the flags are already black, the Soldan sends four virgins to plead for mercy; Tamburlaine has them killed at once, keeping his promise to himself, but then speaks a remarkable soliloquy expressing the power of Zenocrate's beauty over him. He has been keeping the Turkish emperor Bajazet and his empress Zabina in a cage, mocking them and humiliating them. At this point they commit suicide, breaking their skulls against the bars.

Then, in contrast, the father of Zenocrate is brought in, and treated with all due respect and dignity; only now will Tamburlaine marry her and rule in peace.

The first part of the play shows a lyric duel between military glory and love for a woman, in which love wins. The second part of *Tamburlaine* turns to the tragic, with the death from sickness of Zenocrate in Act II iv revealing already the limits of Tamburlaine's power:

Batter the shining palace of the sun,
And shiver all the starry firmament,
For amorous Jove hath snatch'd my love from hence,
Meaning to make her stately queen of heaven.
What god soever holds thee in his arms,
Giving thee nectar and ambrosia,
Behold me here, divine Zenocrate,
Raving, impatient, desperate, and mad!

His career continues, with revolts against him that cannot succeed; there is no downturn in his worldly career as "Scourge of God" punishing all nations equally, riding in a chariot drawn by the most powerful kings he has defeated. At last, in Act V, Tamburlaine reaches Babylon, drowns all the inhabitants and burns all the copies of the Coran, mocking Mahomet as he does so. Suddenly he feels unwell, but has assurance: "Sickness or death can never conquer me." Realizing at last that he too is mortal, Tamburlaine sums up his career, and crowns his sons to follow him. The coffin of Zenocrate is brought in, and he dies. Only five lines follow this climax:

Meet heaven and earth, and here let all things end,
For earth hath spent the pride of all her fruit,
And heaven consum'd his choicest living fire!
Let heaven and earth his timeless death deplore,
For both their worths will equal him no more.

Marlowe challenges the morality play tradition while he follows it; for his hero is at the same time a monster of cruelty and a paradigm of human striving. We cannot approve his actions, yet Tamburlaine is no power-crazed villain; he illustrates the value of ambition and desire as driving forces in human existence, and he is ever true to himself. The paradoxes that Machiavelli came to represent clearly fascinated Marlowe and his age.

Doctor Faustus

Marlowe's dramas, compared with those of Shakespeare, are lacking in human warmth and in psychological complexity. In all but *Edward II* there is a single central protagonist, whose career leads to ultimate solitude and failure, despite the courage displayed in taking endless risks. It is this which must have attracted Marlowe's attention to the story of the 15th century German theologian, Doctor Faustus, in which Goethe also found a parable of the desires of modern man. Despite the weakness of the existing text, it is *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* that is Marlowe's main work, for he first made the story of Faust into a modern myth.

In the 17th century the play continued to be popular among simpler people because of the spectacle of devils it offered; they appeared through a trapdoor in the stage with fireworks

shooting sparks from their mouths and ears! The central part of the play is largely given over to comic action, and for this reason, many critics prefer to discuss only the first two acts and the last, more or less suggesting that Marlowe did not write the central acts, although the spectacle of Faust wasting his life in foolish pranks was certainly part of Marlowe's original structure.

In Act I, Faustus surveys all that he has learned and rapidly rejects Aristotle, medicine, law, the Bible, in favour of something more dynamic. Life and death are the main themes of this opening soliloquy; he rejects medicine because it cannot give eternal life or raise the dead. In the Bible he finds first 'The reward of sin is death,' and then 'if we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves;' out of this he makes a syllogism: 'We must sin and so consequently die.' Instead he turns to magic:

O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence,
Is promised to the studious artisan! (magician)
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.
A sound magician is a demigod:
Here tire my brains to gain a deity!

Marlowe stresses the morality-play roots of his drama by introducing from time to time a Good Angel and a Bad Angel, who whisper their contrary urgings to Faustus at key moments:

Good Angel. O Faustus, lay that damned book aside
And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul
And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head.
Read, read the Scriptures! That is blasphemy.
Bad Angel. Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all Nature's treasury is contained:
Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements.

Faustus has magician friends, Valdes and Cornelius, who encourage him, while Faust's servant Wagner acts the clown in parallel scenes. Alone, Faustus conjures up the Devil who comes, first, as a dragon and then in the shape of a friar. Mephistophilis is honest with Faustus about the nature of hell, but Faustus mocks him: "Learn thou of Faustus manly fortitude."

From early in Act II, there are moments when Faustus thinks of repenting: "Despair in God and trust in Beelzebub. Now go not backward, no, be resolute! Why waverest thou?" And the Good Angel accompanies him to the end, helpless to influence his choices. When Faustus is to write the contract in his own blood, the blood will not flow, and the words "Man, flee away" appear on his arm, but nothing can stop him. Yet once the contract is signed, granting Faustus twenty-four years of life before his soul is taken, nothing seems to change. He again hears clear descriptions of hell, cannot take them seriously, demands a wife but Mephistophilis can only give him whores. In the questions about nature that follow, he

gets only answers he knows, and when he asks who made the world, his tame devil refuses to answer because the answer is God! In order to entertain him there is a parade of the Deadly Sins, instead!

In Act III, they make a journey to Rome, which allows Marlowe to write anti-Catholic satire. Disguised as a Cardinal, Faustus sets free the Pope's enemy, then makes himself invisible and plays tricks, snatching away the food that the Pope is about to eat, and beating him when he makes the sign of the cross. These scenes alternate with others played by low-class clowns.

Act IV is set at the Imperial German court, where Faustus calls up spirits to perform a masque showing the emperor Alexander and his paramour. A man who recognizes Faustus for what he is suddenly grows horns on his head and spirit-hounds appear to torment him. This Benvolio tries to kill Faustus, cuts off his (false) head and is horrified to see him stand up without it. Devils take him and his companions away to plunge some in mud and drag others through sharp thorns. When they reappear, muddy and bleeding, they all have horns. This kind of game-playing continues as Faustus sells a man a magic horse; when he rides it into water the horse turns into straw. The angry man finds Faustus asleep; when he pulls at his leg it comes off in his hand.

Act V begins with Wagner's report: "I think my master means to die shortly". The years have passed, we gather. Faustus summons the likeness of Helen of Troy to satisfy the curiosity of some scholars. Suddenly an old man appears and exhorts him to repent; seized with despair, Faustus tries to kill himself, then promises to reflect, but on being scolded by Mephistophilis he returns to his old ways and asks to see Helen again "to glut the longing of my heart's desire." This sight of a devil disguised as a beautiful woman provokes a sudden lyrical outburst of heroic "strong lines" that are in complete contrast with the reality of the ageing Faustus's true situation:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul -- see where it flies!
Come Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips
And all is dross that is not Helena.
I will be Paris, and for love of thee
Instead of Troy shall Wittenberg be sacked,
And I will combat with weak Menelaus
And wear thy colors on my plumed crest;
Yes, I will wound Achilles in the heel
And then return to Helen for a kiss.
O thou art fairer than the evening air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars!
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele,
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa's azured arms,
And none but thou shalt be my paramour!

Ironically, this imitation Helen cannot speak, and instead of words of love Faustus hears the Old Man: "Accursed Faustus, miserable man!" There is a strengthening of the *psychomachia*, with the hellish trinity of Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephistophilis appearing to

tell us that this is Faustus's last night. Scholars urge him to trust in God, and he tells them of the contract he made twenty-four years before. Faustus realizes his plight, but feels "now 'tis too late." As a throne, representing God's judgement, descends from the canopy over the stage, the Good and Bad Angels appear for the last time. At last, Faustus stands alone and pronounces a hair-raising soliloquy of despair that is assumed to last one hour, since he starts as it strikes eleven; his soul will become Lucifer's property at midnight:

It strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!
O soul, be changed to little water drops
And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found.
My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe awhile!
Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books; ah, Mephistophilis!

Faustus is carried off by devils and the scholars come in, only to find Faustus torn apart. The Chorus speaks a moralizing epilogue:

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough
That sometime grew within this learned man.
Faustus is gone, regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise
Only to wonder at unlawful things
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practice more than heavenly power permits.

Yet Marlowe's *Faustus* is no simple morality play. Faustus is the focus of sympathy in a new way, more even than Tamburlaine was, and the audience's response is all the more complex. Yet there is something stiff and undeveloped in the inner conflict that Faustus expresses in his asides about grace; he sells his soul stupidly, not believing what is said about hell, and uses the possibilities given him even more stupidly. Yet until the end, he never once questions the worth of his initial desire for knowledge, any more than Tamburlaine ever sees that an earthly crown might not be the highest form of bliss. Shakespeare, in writing *Macbeth*, was to shed new light on these dimensions.

Marlowe's other plays

The rhetoric of over-reaching ambition turns into comedy, a parody of itself, in *The Jew of Malta*. Machiavelli speaks the Prologue, and the idea that "the end justifies the means" dominates the play, the end here being the limitless greed of the rich Jew, Barabas. He is a villain in a world of villains, only he is cunning where the Christian villains around him are stupid. Barabas is very proud of his skills, and by the end of the play he has killed his daughter, her two suitors, a convent of nuns, two friars, a Turkish army, and a prostitute with her pimp and a client, before being caught in a trap he had laid for another, and dying in a boiling cauldron. There is an unclear relationship between the Jewish hero of this play and Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

Edward II is today quite popular, partly because it is the first play in England to represent a form of homosexuality, in Edward's obsession with his favourite, Gaveston. The main plot, though, is political, showing the fall of Edward and the rise of Mortimer who becomes the lover of Edward's queen Isabella, and Protector of prince Edward, the child who is heir to the throne. It was deeply shocking for Elizabethan minds that in Act V the deposed king Edward II is shown being murdered in a wretched prison cell. At once the child Edward III takes command of the situation, orders Mortimer's execution and his mother's imprisonment. In many ways, this play is close to Shakespeare's history plays, especially *Richard II*, and it is not clear whether early Shakespearean plays such as *King John* (1590?) influenced Marlowe, or if Marlowe influenced Shakespeare. Mortimer makes a final speech that is one of the only moments of high rhetoric:

Base Fortune, now I see that in thy wheel
There is a point to which when men aspire
They tumble headlong down; that point I touch'd
And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher,
Why shall I grieve at my declining fall?
Farewell, fair queen. Weep not for Mortimer,
That scorns the world, and as a traveller
Goes to discover countries yet unknown. (Act V.vi)

In this play, Marlowe plays skillfully with the audience's sympathies, making Mortimer appear first as the saviour of the nation, and only later revealing his ambition and cruelty, while Edward II becomes the object of our pity. The end of the play, when the child Edward III lays Mortimer's head on his father's coffin and weeps, demands a further transfer of emotion, and a recall of the long reign that was to follow.

Marlowe's death at the hands of Ingram Frizer, during a fight over the bill in a Deptford tavern on May 30, 1593, is shrouded in mystery. Was it a political murder? Marlowe was due to appear before the Privy Council for questioning, and after he died his 1591 room-mate, Thomas Kyd, and others gave testimony to his blasphemy and outrageous beliefs.

Thomas Kyd

Thomas Kyd (1558-1594) is a shadowy figure compared with Marlowe, mainly notable for his play *The Spanish Tragedy*, first published in 1592 and going through ten editions by 1633, (including one in 1615 with the alternative title *Hieronimo is Mad Again* that Eliot quoted in "The Waste Land"). None of these editions mentions Kyd's name, and we only know that he was the play's author by a chance remark of another writer. In 1597 Ben Jonson acted the main role in it, and he wrote extra portions of dialogue in 1601-2. In addition, it seems likely that Kyd wrote a play on the story of Hamlet in the later 1580s, which served in one way or another as the source (the so-called *Ur-Hamlet*) for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; it was probably never printed.

Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* was written before the Armada of 1588, in 1585 or so. Its setting is the war between Spain and Portugal of 1580, but there is no direct source for its plot. Kyd has followed the model of Seneca in making revenge the main thrust of the plot, as well as in his use of a ghost, of soliloquy, dumb-show and play-within-the-play. The published text has four acts, not five, but Act III is as long as the rest of the play. The interest in high passions, madness, and a violent outcome, are also found in native forms of English

drama, such as the Mystery Plays, from which Kyd, Marlowe, and their successors may have inherited their taste for on-stage violence, for the classical theater only has reports by messengers of off-stage killings. It is likely that Kyd wrote this play after his version of the Hamlet story proved popular. The story of *Hamlet*, reversed, underlies it: a father who knows his son was murdered but has no proof slowly prepares revenge, at times pretending to be mad and at times really so.

This first **revenge-tragedy** written in English begins with a dialogue between the ghost of a young Spanish soldier, Andrea, killed in battle, and the personification of Revenge. Andrea describes his journey down to the Underworld of classical myth, his meeting with Proserpine; Revenge promises that Andrea will see his beloved Bel-imperia kill the Portuguese Don Balthazar (who killed him in battle), and they settle down to watch the play, a Chorus that does not intervene in the action.

In Act I, Don Balthazar (the son of the Portuguese Viceroy) is brought to the Spanish court as a prisoner. The son of Don Cyprian, Lorenzo, and the son of Hieronimo, Horatio, both claim credit for his capture. Don Cyprian is brother of the King of Spain and his daughter is Bel-imperia, Hieronimo is Lord Marshal of Spain. Horatio tells Bel-imperia how Balthazar killed his friend Andrea, and how he buried him; alone, she speaks of her love for Horatio just before Balthazar comes to woo her, encouraged by Lorenzo. In Portugal, the Viceroy believes Villuppo who says that one of his own men, Alexandro, killed Balthazar during the fighting. He refuses to believe Alexandro who says that he is alive. In a banquet, Hieronimo presents a masque to entertain the Portuguese ambassadors; Andrea's ghost complains but Revenge assures him:

Be still, Andrea; ere we go from hence
I'll turn their friendship into fell despite,
Their love to mortal hate, their day to night,
Their hope into despair, their peace to war,
Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery.

At the beginning of Act II, Lorenzo forces Bel-imperia's clown-servant Pedringano to reveal that she loves Horatio; Balthazar decides to kill him in order to gain her love himself, then they watch as the two lovers meet. Already Bel-imperia's father is urging the king to allow Balthazar to marry her, undertaking to gain her acceptance. The lovers meet in a garden and retire to a bower where Lorenzo and Balthazar come in disguise, kill Horatio and carry Bel-imperia away. Hieronimo comes out and finds his son's body; his wife follows and they lament, then promise revenge. Andrea's ghost is angry to see his friend, not Balthazar, killed, but Revenge reminds him that "The sickle comes not till the corn be ripe."

At the start of Act III, the Viceroy of Portugal is about to have Alexandro killed, when the Ambassadors return from Spain and denounce Villuppo, who is executed instead (a subplot on the theme of lies and credibility). Hieronimo in Spain is found lamenting Horatio's death in a famous soliloquy:

O eyes! no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;
O life! no life, but lively form of death;
O world! no world, but mass of public wrongs,
Confus'd and fill'd with murder and misdeeds!
O sacred heavens! if this unhallow'd deed,
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,
If this incomparable murder thus
Of mine, but now no more my son,

Shall unreveal'd and unrevenged pass,
How should we term your dealings to be just,
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust?

Suddenly he finds a letter written in blood, apparently by Bel-imperia, denouncing Lorenzo and Balthazar for the murder. Hieronimo fears that it is a trap, unable to believe that Bel-imperia could ever denounce her own brother. He decides to dissimulate, in order to discover more. Meeting Lorenzo, he casually asks where Bel-imperia is, and learns that she cannot be seen. Full of suspicion, Lorenzo thinks that Balthazar's servant Serberine, involved in the murder, may have betrayed them, and gives orders to Pedringano to kill him that evening; he then orders the police to keep watch so that they will catch Pedringano once the deed is done! This then happens as planned, on stage.

Balthazar is angry that his servant is dead, Lorenzo encourages him to demand vengeance, the death of Pedringano. How to prevent Pedringano from betraying what he knows of Horatio's death? Lorenzo sends him a box, telling him that it contains his pardon so that he has nothing to fear, and has no need to reveal the facts. This episode is cruel comedy, for the messenger bringing the box to Pedringano has already opened the box, and found it empty; he decides to say nothing, and enjoy the spectacle of Pedringano's misplaced assurance (theme of illusion and reality). So it turns out, with a comic trial followed at once by the execution. Only Pedringano too was suspicious, and the hangman brings Hieronimo a letter Pedringano had written to Lorenzo in which he reveals the truth. Hieronimo decides to go to the king.

Scene viii shows Isabella, Horatio's mother, going mad in her grief; meanwhile Bel-imperia is confined to her room until Lorenzo and Balthazar confront her and pretend to have saved her from her father's anger and long disgrace. Balthazar renews his wooing. In the next scene Hieronimo shows signs of mad frenzy which become extreme when he hears the king talking of Horatio whose death has not been made public, Hieronimo keeping his body unburied until he has taken revenge. (Here Jonson or another revisor has inserted a scene in which Hieronimo talks with a portrait-painter who has also had a son murdered). In a soliloquy, Hieronimo explains the need to wait for the right moment.

He is suddenly interrupted by an old man coming asking for justice for his murdered son. He identifies with him and loses control of himself, tears up the papers of other suppliants and runs off, shouting "Catch me if you can!" Returning, he mistakes the old man for the ghost of Horatio then takes him in to join Isabella in mourning.

In scene xiv, the Viceroy of Portugal arrives for the marriage of Balthazar with Bel-imperia. Lorenzo's father is afraid that Hieronimo will make an outburst, so arranges an apparent reconciliation with Hieronimo. The fourth act ends with a longer dialogue between Andrea's ghost and Revenge, who seems to be sleeping. Revenge shows him a dumb show of death in marriage that satisfies his impatience.

At last, at the start of Act IV, Hieronimo and Bel-imperia can speak openly. She reproaches him for his ingratitude towards his unrevenged son. He now believes in her letter and they agree to combine their efforts to take revenge for Horatio's death. Lorenzo and Balthazar come to ask Hieronimo to entertain the Viceroy with one of his little plays; he happens to have a tragic love story with him, written in his youth, that they could all act in together. In the play all the characters kill each other. Balthazar would rather have a comedy, but Hieronimo insists that "comedies are for common wits" and that a "stately-written tragedy" is better for kings. In addition, each one is to speak his part in a foreign language!

Isabella has become quite mad; she breaks down the bower where Horatio died, then complains that Hieronimo has made peace with the murderers, and kills herself. The court

gathers for the play. In it, the emperor Soliman (Balthazar) is in love with the fair Perseda (Bel-imperia) who is married with Erasto (Lorenzo); Soliman's servant (Hieronimo) offers to remove Erasto, whom he stabs. Soliman now woos the lamenting Perseda who resists him, then stabs him before stabbing herself. The kings are very entertained, until Hieronimo begins his great speech of explanation:

Haply you think (but bootless are your thoughts)
That this is fabulously counterfeit,
And that we do as all tragedians do,
To die today, for fashioning our scene,
The death of Ajax or some Roman peer,
And in a minute starting up again,
Revive to please tomorrow's audience.
No, princes; know I am Hieronimo,
The hopeless father of a hapless son
Whose tongue is tuned to tell his latest tale,
not to excuse gross errors in the play...

Then he pulls back a curtain to reveal the body of Horatio: "The cause was love, whence grew this mortal hate." He tells the story, naming the murderers and explaining that they are dead indeed, not merely pretending. Then he runs to hang himself but is captured; the kings do not believe his story, assume he is a traitor, and try to make him reveal his confederates. Instead of explaining more, he bites out his tongue, in a final gruesome stage-effect. Oddly, he then consents to write what he would not speak, makes signs for a knife to mend the feather he must use as a pen, and with the knife kills Lorenzo's father, then himself. The kings remain, without any heirs.

The final Chorus between the ghost and Revenge begins with a review by Andrea of the nine characters who have died in the play. He promises to bring the spirits of the good to happy parts of Hades, while the others will get the worst punishments mythology has to offer.

The cosmology of this ending has nothing Christian about it, but corresponds quite closely to that of Seneca's plays; but there the destructive act of revenge is inspired by hellish furies, without any sense of retribution and justice. Here the moral sympathies of the audience are mostly followed, and poor Hieronimo is given a place with the poets, "where Orpheus plays, Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days." The personification of Revenge has the last word:

Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes,
To place thy friends in ease, the rest in woes;
For here though death hath end their misery,
I'll there begin their endless tragedy.

Few in the audience may pause to reflect that Andrea had no reason to call for revenge in the first place; his death was not caused by treachery or personal enmity at all, but by the normal chance of war. There is a skillful interplay in the drama between what he is looking for, the death of Balthazar, and what the plot of the play is centered on, the revenge of Hieronimo for the death of Horatio. There is deep irony in the way Hieronimo is made to seem, through the framing device of the Chorus, to be the unconscious agent of a revenge he knows nothing of; Andrea was, after all, nothing to him.

Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* is important because it is in itself a fine play, as well as having been a direct inspiration for the revenge tragedies that were to follow, including

Shakespeare's version of *Hamlet*. The rhetorical style is generally formal, but varied enough not to become dull; the action is very well structured, with each element of the plot and subplots combining for a unified effect. The emphasis on violence and extreme emotions perhaps seems melodramatic in comparison with Shakespeare, but these were the elements that the post-Shakespearean theater returned to.

In particular, the complexity of the ending, with its multiple layers of illusion and reality in the play-within-the-play, is worth close study. Here the audience in the theater is watching actors playing kings watching a play in which the illusion of death is suddenly declared to be a reality of death; only later will the audience recall that in actual fact the actors playing the actors did not die! The thrill comes from the apparent confusion between the theatrical representation and the act represented, and this combination of play-within-the-play with the tragic climax is a stroke of theatrical genius.

Kyd died late in 1594, after being tortured while spending a time in prison for his association with Marlowe. There is no telling what would have happened if either, or both, of them had lived to write more plays. Instead, their death left an almost complete vacuum, in which William Shakespeare's works shone with particular brilliance.

Further Reading

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