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Tragedy

> Tragedy . . . openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue [and] teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded.
>
> Sir Philip Sidney, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1582)[1]

> this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appeareth to me nothing but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties . . . and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?
>
> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.301–8

A theory of Renaissance tragedy

Art exists for a reason; it is not mere decoration, but a necessary worker in the necessary business of a human culture. No system of thought – mythological, religious, scientific – has yet represented reality to its believers so fully, accurately, and coherently that the system never fails,[2] that the gold roofs beneath which we stage our glories never crash down around us. Most forms of art are used to reconcile apparent contradictions in a culture's consensual view of reality; some radical forms, tragedy in particular, serve to acknowledge those contradictions and reconcile us to the problems and pain they generate. In times of radical change, tragedy may therefore represent a precious alternative to religious fundamentalism and its accompanying reactionary politics, which alluringly offer a collective denial of the imperatives of such change and the very existence of moral complication.

[1] Sir Philip Sidney, 'A Defence of Poetry', ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford, 1966), p. 45.

[2] Cf. the 'Incompleteness Proof' of Kurt Gödel, which (in an intriguing anticipation of deconstructive criticism) indicates that any system of unified explanation inevitably develops internal incoherencies; see his *On Formally Undecidable Principles*, trans. B. Meltzer (London, 1962).

Renaissance scholars generally understood tragedy as a narrative, often historically based, describing a fall from greatness to calamity. Usually such a narrative carried a warning against political or moral errors embodied by the protagonist (an allegorical function shared with the late-medieval morality plays), or purged destructive passions from readers and spectators to allow the triumph of reason (a psychological function associated with Aristotelian *catharsis*). Whether the essence of tragedy is thus the delivery of a message, with the medium as merely its seductive vehicle, or instead a process, irreducible to paraphrase, in which the medium is itself essential, remains a vexed question that divides modern scholars into those who read to isolate a thematic meaning, and those others who emphasize the full complexity of dramatic performances and interpretive ambiguities.

Cultural theorists tend to emphasize the barriers between past and present, scolding readers for attempting to experience Renaissance tragedies as accessible expressions of precious and lasting insights. The twenty-first century certainly differs from the sixteenth – but not so entirely as to prevent us from recognizing the kinds of conflicts its tragedies explore, or to deprive those tragedies of any relevance to the conflicts we ourselves face. A respectful reading of history does not require a reductive reading of tragedy. Those who conclude that art is merely a subordinate agent of an essentially economic social entity forget that societies face cognitive crises as well as political ones (though they often run in parallel). The commonly cited pressures towards the realignment of hierarchy and the redistribution of wealth are not the only ones that threaten the stability of a culture; without the complex guidance of art to help us process our experiences coherently, our daily experience would consist of a chaos as devastating as any rebellion.

Those who claim, more broadly, that human beings perceive wholly different kinds of reality in different historical periods, that shifting ideologies and epistemes necessitate a kind of archaeological detachment from the literary artifacts of the Renaissance, overlook the way drama, as a communal representation of human experience, itself refutes such exaggerated exclusions. The history of drama shows no direct line of survival from the great flowering in ancient Greece to Elizabethan England; the very fact that tragedy and comedy reassert themselves (like stubborn plants) after long burial, however, indicates that something persistent in Western civilization demands those particular forms of representation. Even two thousand years before Shakespeare, drama portrayed human traits and situations that still seem very familiar: forms of the democratic impulse and totalitarian reaction competing for political power, with recognizable kinds of schemers and idealists on both sides; married couples squabbling over money and the perpetual

lure of infidelity; sibling rivalries and oedipal conflicts; losses that are still agonizing and (perhaps most remarkable) jokes that are still funny.

Cultural theorists also warn that 'essentialism', which claims to articulate absolute truths about 'human nature', ignores cultural, class, and historical difference. Certainly nothing is quite universal – West African tribesmen offered some unorthodox interpretations of the Hamlet story[3] – but Shakespearean drama originally reached an audience that stretched all the way across the class spectrum, and the same drama has continued to command fascination (though its focus undergoes revealing shifts) over several historical periods. The plays have survived translation into print, into foreign languages, even into cultures as foreign as that of modern Japan, where the Shakespeare industry thrives.

So, without becoming essentialists, readers of drama can be durationists, believing that important aspects of human experience evolve as gradually as our bodily form. Tragedy typically reminds its spectators of something they share and commonly struggle to forget: the progress from aspiration to death, from moments that promise glory (even if they are only the infantile fantasies of omnipotence) to eventual surrender (even if it is only the banal fact of mortality). Tragedy also attunes itself to the sharings of primal guilt, in the practice of ritual sacrifice it essentially re-enacts, as well as in durable parables like that of Oedipus.

Several recent studies of Renaissance literature have been concerned with the notion that the unified 'subject', the emotional, volitional, or psychological self, was simply not invented until the seventeenth century.[4] It is difficult to understand how anyone who has read even such standard and various works as the poems of Sappho, the Book of Job, the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, and the Confessions of St Augustine can accept so extreme an assertion. Can self-consciousness and self-knowledge be such radically new notions if the central admonitory wisdom on the most revered oracle of the ancient world (at Delphi) was 'Know Thyself'? To insist that historical changes have altered only a small percentage of human consciousness and conduct is not to deny that even such fractional changes may be significant, or to deny that some forms of art will be especially concerned with exploring

[3] Laura Bohannan, 'Shakespeare in the bush' in James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, eds., *Conformity and Conflict* (3rd edn; Boston, Mass., 1977), pp. 13–23.

[4] See for example Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986), and John Lee, *Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and the Controversies of Self* (New York, 2000). Most such arguments originate from Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), and are strongly challenged by Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, 1989).

precisely those fractions. Among cultural historians the idea that the Renaissance produced a discernible increase in individualism has been a valuable commonplace for well over a century.[5] But that hardly justifies reducing Renaissance tragedies from immediate visions of life to alienated evidence of change.

The spectacle and imminence of death must surely have reminded people that they had integral individual existences, as a union of body and soul. 'Only we die in earnest – that's no jest', concluded Sir Walter Ralegh; clever fictions cannot impinge very far on biological facts. Even taxes have been with us throughout recorded history, on tablet, papyrus, paper, and computer disk, with similar rationalizations on the part of the collectors and similar complaints and evasions on the part of the taxed; it seems perverse to insist that those other eternal verities, sex and death, are much newer inventions and more completely subject to transient ideologies.[6] Humanists in the Renaissance understandably construed the classical world as an Other, yet they worked confidently towards a reconciliation. Modern humanists need to do the same, instead of estranging the past: a period of racism, terrorism, economic injustice, ecological disaster, and potential nuclear war demands that we expand our sense of kinship and our faith that communication and co-operation are possible.

English Renaissance tragedy repeatedly portrays the struggle of a remarkable individual against implacable, impersonal forces, a struggle no less impressive for its ultimate failure. The protagonists can be heroes even when they are not triumphant or highly virtuous, because the defeat of their aspirations (however tainted with blasphemy or selfishness) reflects a frustration common to the human psyche and heightened by the mixed messages of that culture. The aspiring mind of Faustus – an archetypal Renaissance man – confronts the restraints of conventional Christian morality and the banal facts of the physical universe; Macbeth – one of the most intensely subjective characters ever created – confronts literal prophecy, recorded history, and cyclical nature. Though no single paradigm can accurately describe the range of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, a remarkable number of the memorable heroes are destroyed by some version of this confrontation between

[5] The classic work in this regard is Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance* (1860; reprinted New York, 1960).

[6] By the same token, those who claim that human experience and behaviour are historical contingencies shaped by language and have no fundamental reality outside it must consider it a remarkable coincidence that other species, lacking anything accepted as language, engage in so many complex social and sexual behaviour patterns distinctly congruent to those of humans.

the desiring personal imagination and the relentless machinery of power, whether social, natural, or divine. The revenger is denied the satisfactions of true justice by civil law, political privilege, and Christian principles; the malcontent is denied respect and advancement by the perceived stupidity of his hierarchical society. Noble soldiers and lovers cannot escape the canker of envy and connivance in human nature, or the persistent pressures towards dynastic marriage and historical change in human society. And great spirits of all kinds face inevitable extinction by mortality, the ultimate power-broker and person-breaker.

No wonder English Renaissance tragedy rehearses obsessively this pattern of betrayal; in all other theatres of life, the liberated self was colliding with powerful impersonal machinery. Renewed human innovation and exploration were constantly running up against the stubbornness and mysteriousness of physical nature; thematically, *Doctor Faustus* (1588–92) was overdetermined by its surrounding culture. People displaced from hereditary feudal identities and employments were harshly repressed as they attempted to enter new arenas and arrogate new personal status; *Macbeth* (1606) (along with a variety of other Shakespeare plays in which the natural order punishes ambition)[7] thus offers a parable about the destructive tendencies of a society pursuing the contradictory goals of growth and stability. Worldly pleasure and individual identity – both increasingly valued in this period[8] – were never far from destruction by the plagues of the time, bubonic and otherwise. The intense pieties Protestantism instilled in the individual conscience were generally understood to be unavailing against God's inscrutable predestination of damnation.

Agonizing as these contradictions may have been, they nonetheless generated the kind of dual vision that enabled artists to convert agony into extraordinary beauty. The triumphs of Renaissance art, in a variety of media, depend on the conjunction of an active religious faith, a quest for transcendence, with an evolving science of realistic observation, a quest for empirical truth.[9] Furthermore, the same tension that enabled the greatness of Renaissance art made tragedy – inasmuch as tragedy draws its native energy from cultural schisms – uniquely capable of exploiting that opportunity. The most joyous art finds ideal beauty in real things; tragic art shows ideal beauty in collision with real things.

[7] Robert N. Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), *passim*.

[8] See the documentation and explication of this intensifying conflict in Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York, 1982).

[9] Murray Roston, *The Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1982), makes this argument with eloquent concision.

One traditional theory attributes the literary masterpieces of Renaissance England to a new national identity and an upsurge in national confidence – as if artistic quality fluctuated in the same way as the stock market, and for much the same reasons. Certainly England achieved new prosperity during the mid-sixteenth century through the cloth trade and the commercial and colonial uses of navigation. But it would be cruelly untrue to the experience of vast numbers of English men and women to depict this as a time of universal comfort and prosperity. As in most social reorganizations and economic booms, many human lives were squandered or devoured by the system, and certainly the people who tried to make their living as authors were almost always scraping for their meals. A converse theory has therefore developed, suggesting that literature necessarily evolved as an outlet for protest – and for regulating protest – against the emergent horrors of capitalism and centralized power.

Fortunately it is possible to avoid the old-fashioned scholarly élitism of claiming that Renaissance art succeeded because some bright lads studied the sublime classics, without resorting to the current proletarian chic that makes culture an economic machine in which authors perform only alienated labour and produce work of purely arbitrary value. Both assertions are just true enough to mislead. Perhaps the remarkable development of English literature in the later sixteenth century, like the triumphs of the arts in Italy in the preceding centuries, depended on the constant tension between the material changes reshaping daily life and the stable abstract authority of classical art and morality. (The English language itself was perfectly poised in the Renaissance to express this polarity, as an earthy Anglo-Saxon strain mixed with the Latinate diction encouraged by the humanist élite.) When one complete and valued world-view (the native Christian legacy) is actively tested against another (the revered classical example), and when new practical problems (merchandizing, manufacturing, navigation, optics, epidemiology) present themselves in a context imbued with established and evolving religious faith, powerful new perceptions are inevitable, and so are the artistic innovations that will seek to assimilate and expand those perceptions.

Medieval Western culture – roughly speaking, of course – was unified across different times and nations and topics by a reliance on authority; in both science and religion, received wisdom had priority over empirical observation. In the Renaissance, science and religion are actively transformed, as both nature and God become more accessible to the immediate experience of individuals. Art history reveals an essential difference – corresponding to the tragic conflict – between medieval and Renaissance painting. Flat, iconic portrayals of Jesus and Mary yield to Renaissance *pietà* and crucifixion scenes with ordinary faces in real pain, and in the background real cities,

rocks, and forests. What makes Leonardo da Vinci's religious works so enthralling if not their intimate involvement of the spiritual in a world that we recognize as intensely real? It is impossible to say whether discoveries such as perspective are cause or effect of a fresh way of seeing, but clearly they are part of an extremely powerful cycle.

The history of philosophy reveals the same sort of dialectic. On one side are the optimistic spiritual reconceptions emerging from the Italian Renaissance: Ficino's neoplatonism and Pico's 'Oration' suggest that human beings can exalt themselves, by reason and love, into something resembling divinity. On the other side are the documents of the Counter-Renaissance,[10] such as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which studiously avoids transcendent moral reference in favour of pragmatic political tactics, in much the way painters forsook ideal faces in favour of realistic ones. As the relative values of art and nature become prominently contested,[11] the theory that art enables and records a mystical union between the human soul and divine harmonies collides with a theory that defines art as the skill and practice of holding a mirror up to nature. The debate remains active even today, as a function of the continuing tragic disjunction between our spiritual sense that each person is a universe of eternal meaning, and our practical suspicion that each person is instead a transient and largely redundant event in the meaningless functions of nature.

Defining tragedy is impossible, because the word has meant different things at different times.[12] Even a broad ethical definition would involve articulating all the complexities and extremities of human suffering. The footprints of Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche in the dust hardly assuage a critic's sense of rushing in where angels might fear to tread. Nevertheless, the correlations between these theories and Renaissance practice deserve explication, particularly because the Renaissance example reconciles some of their apparent discrepancies.

Aristotle writes in the *Poetics* that tragedies must represent a complete, serious, and important action that rouses and then purges (by *catharsis*) fear and pity in the spectator by showing a central character moving from happiness to misery through some frailty or error (*hamartia*). The precise

[10] Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York, 1950), explicates this dark countercurrent to humanist rationality and optimism. The works of Montaigne are especially informative about the development of selfhood and scepticism in this period.

[11] Edward Tayler, *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* (New York, 1964), *passim*.

[12] See for example the discussion of the medieval variations of the term in H. A. Kelly, 'Chaucer and Shakespeare on tragedy', *Leeds Studies in English* 20 (1989), 191–206.

translations and applications of these terms are still hotly debated, but they certainly seem compatible with Renaissance tragedies that enabled their audiences to examine and exorcise their collective frustrations by watching a hero fail to fulfil his glorious aspirations. If there is any value in the supposed etymology of the word 'tragedy' from the Greek *tragoidia* or goat-play, it lies in the recognition that the tragic hero is essentially another version of the sacrifice offered throughout known human history to appease an angry god – in other words, both to acknowledge and to repress a contradiction in the culture's agreed way of perceiving reality.

The desperate Renaissance struggle to reconcile the beautiful aspirations of the mind with the fierce demands of the body corresponds to the battle which Nietzsche identified as the essence of tragedy: between Apollo (the god of civilization, rationality, daylight) and Dionysius (the god of frenzy, passion, midnight). Renaissance philosophy and theology highlighted the perplexing juxtaposition of the angelic human being, a creature of reason and art under the paternal benevolence of God, with the human being as a beast of appetite, subject to God's terrible anger.

Hegel argues that tragedy is generated when a heroic individual becomes trapped between the conflicting demands of two godheads, between two sets of values that are each imperative and mutually exclusive. Thus, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the heroine's familial and religious obligation to bury her brother collides with the demands of state authority. Similarly, Aeschylus' Orestes (facing a dilemma that has significant echoes in *Hamlet*) is violently torn between two aspects of his filial obligations, each advocated by a supernatural power.[13] These tragic figures cannot do good without doing evil; they are doomed, not by a random predestination or bad luck, but by a situation in which all roads lead to wrong. The tragedy lies not in the final destruction of the hero – indeed, many classical tragedies end with the hero in a state of redemption – but in the impossible conflicts the hero's particular situation serves to reveal. Tragedy thus allows its audience not only to confront its fears of suffering, but also to confront the half-recognized contradictions in its assumptions about truth and justice. The tragic genre voices the shared anxiety of a society enduring earthquakes generated by some ideological equivalent of tectonic plates, moving against each other with immense destructive power, and thereby threatening the stability of every superstructure built upon them.

Hegel distinguishes ancient tragedy from modern – in which category he includes those of the Renaissance – as focusing more on the conflict of

[13] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, reprinted in Anne and Henry Paolucci, eds., *Hegel on Tragedy* (New York, 1962), pp. 177–8.

values than on the personality of the character enduring them. This contrast between the classical and Renaissance versions of tragedy becomes less troublesome if we recognize that an increase in subjective personal identity is itself at the core of many profound Renaissance cultural conflicts. Protestantism itself can be viewed as a personalizing of salvation, away from group sacramentalism. Around the turn of the seventeenth century, anxieties about self-made men, exalted by new money and fine clothes, manifest themselves not only in sumptuary laws,[14] but also in comedies that deflate pretentious foreigners and fops, and in tragedies that feature the depredations of unprincipled Italianate schemers who (whether called Machiavel as in Marlowe's 1589 *The Jew of Malta*, compared to one as in Middleton's 1624 *A Game at Chess*, or merely acting like one as in Shakespeare's 1604 *Othello*) feed on the naïve trust of a traditional social order. Perhaps most important of all, the recognition of unique inward experience made the prospect of its annihilation much more terrifying. The fact that Renaissance tragedies end in death thus may not mean that the playwrights mistook personal disaster for the real meaning of tragedy; instead, death itself may have been the culminating instance of the kind of tragic conflict generated by this culture: the destruction of the feeling individual through collision with unfeeling larger orders. Indeed, the chief consolation at the end of many Renaissance tragedies is the recognition that the hero has reasserted his or her personal will and identity in the very face of death.

The seemingly facile formula that defines comedies as plays ending in marriage and tragedies as plays ending in death corresponds significantly to two other theories. One theory describes comedy as cyclical and tragedy as linear.[15] Another describes comedy as focused on types and tragedy on individuals. What underlies all these formulations is the perception that the story of each human life is essentially tragic, a plot of rise and fall, charting the linear path of each unique individual towards its mortal demise. Comedy escapes this tragic pattern by showing that some basic human qualities survive across generations, whether in the genetic likenesses produced by fertile marriage, or by the recurrence of behavioural patterns that override individuality (Jonson's 'humours', for example). The individual hero of comedy or romance may triumph on behalf of his progeny or his social class (or both, as in Dekker's 1599 *The Shoemaker's Holiday*); in history plays he may triumph on behalf of his country (like the Henry V of the 1586 *Famous Victories* or Shakespeare's 1599

[14] Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 27–9, 184–8, 547–81, discusses conspicuous consumption and its relation to the class system.

[15] See for example Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1957).

version); but when the individual hero is principally important for inward qualities of love, courage, or imagination, the play becomes a tragedy of extinction.

A history of English Renaissance tragedy

The story of English Renaissance tragedy is usually told diachronically as a literary genealogy, rather than as a synchronic matrix of social pressures. What might be called the authorized version of that story is full of speculations that have petrified into assumptions through frequent repetition, but it is worth telling, provided we understand that many different stories can be told about the same historical phenomenon, and that the leap from facts to explanations is always hazardous. Even the most conscientiously 'objective' histories eventually prove more revealing about the culture that made them than about the culture they purport to describe, and the following summary will doubtless prove no exception.

Provoked by the excesses of decadent Roman spectacle, the increasingly powerful Christian church effectively abolished theatre in Western Europe by the sixth century AD. For several hundred years, tragedy survived only in the form of Mass, with Christ as the tragic hero, priests as chorus, and congregations as audience. Both the history of Jesus and the Christian story of human history follow a tragic pattern of early greatness, betrayal into death by human frailty, and a palliating suggestion that the suffering earns transcendence and redemption. Gradually, dormant elements of theatre began to re-emerge around that core. As the church expanded its repertoire of indoctrinating devices, responsive readings (such as the ninth-century *Quem quaeritis* trope) became elaborated into liturgical drama, moved from the church to outdoor festivals (as with the early Corpus Christi plays), where English replaced Latin, and the scenes were woven together into entire 'cycles' of the biblical story. To the extent that these were affirmations of orthodox beliefs through familiar narratives, they lacked the interrogatory power of tragedy, but suspense and villainy became possible once these performances were liberated from the precise narrative of the Bible and the sanctity of the churchhouse.

In the fifteenth century, amid growing disputes about the mechanisms of salvation (and growing proto-Reformation resistance to the idolatrous representation of sacred figures), the morality play emerged, an allegorical genre in which a variety of personified abstractions battle for the soul of a figure known as Everyman or Mankind. Morality plays (and the succeeding 'moral interludes') portray the struggle between good and evil in psychological rather than historical terms, though the genre quickly proved congenial

to political controversy.[16] By describing the protagonist as a microcosm of universal forces, it may have anticipated the tragic formula in which the hero internalizes contradictions dangerously at large in the culture. Furthermore, the conjunction of morality plays with historical and religious re-enactments may have prepared drama for the crucial Renaissance conjunction of abstract moral thought with realistic personal presence.

Rapid economic change and growth – perhaps the emergence of capitalism itself – along with radical expansions in science and world exploration made Elizabethan England ripe for artistic innovation. Exciting but dangerous notions of individualism seeped in from the Continent. The progress of urbanization and commercialism made the theatre a viable new industry, less constrained by aristocratic conventions than poetry or prose romance (though portrayals of the emergent middle class tended towards chauvinistic propaganda or satiric comedy rather than tragedy). Although English history and classical stories were already providing some tragic material, the catalyst that precipitated the great tragedies of horror and revenge out of this mixture was the drama of Seneca, a Stoic philosopher from the first century AD. Long available to the intellectual élite, these tragedies achieved a renewed impact through their translation into English in the second half of the sixteenth century, as part of the general revival of classical learning that gives the Renaissance its name (juxtaposed with 'early modern' – the term favoured by some recent scholars – this name confirms that the era functioned as a fulcrum between the old and new in Western culture). Seneca's tragedies, based on Greek mythology, conveniently combined classical stature with sensationalism; revenge-motives took the place of classical polytheistic or fatalistic ideas that might have been harder for the Renaissance to assimilate.

This rediscovery might have meant nothing if the Elizabethans were not already developing dramatic techniques adequate to exploit it. Medieval *de casibus* tragedies – stories of the fall of great ones, on the relentlessly turning wheel of fortune – continued to be told in prose form, particularly as cautionary tales about young prodigals or bad kings. Thomas Sackville, the most important contributor to an influential collection of these tales called

[16] Skelton's *Magnificence* (1515–23), *Respublica* (1553), and Bale's *King John* (1538/1558–62) were staged equivalents of modern political cartoons; one could warn Henry VIII against the schemes of Wolsey as well as Humanum Genus against the schemes of the Devil. The legacy of the morality play is obvious in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (1599), and more subtly pervades countless other tragedies of the period. Bernard Spivack, *The Allegory of Evil* (New York, 1958), and Alan Dessen, *Jonson's Moral Comedy* (Evanston, Ill., 1971) and *Shakespeare and the Late Moral Plays* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1986), ingeniously explicate this pervasive influence. By the time of Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), parody has robbed the genre of its power.

A Mirror for Magistrates (1559), collaborated with Thomas Norton to adapt this admonitory genre for the stage in *Gorboduc* (1562), the earliest surviving tragedy in English. Sir Philip Sidney, condemning English drama in his 'Defence of Poetry', was willing to exempt *Gorboduc* on the grounds of its 'stately speeches' and 'notable morality'. Stiff and schematic as the play may be, it does manage to reconcile its classical–scholarly origins with current concerns about the unsettled Elizabethan succession – a type of combination crucial to the greater works that followed. Some early plays were a direct outgrowth of humanistic education, and the so-called University Wits included many of the great founders of Elizabethan drama: Greene, Lyly, Peele, Lodge, Marlowe. Mere story-telling (as in the naïve chronicle plays) became artistically complex with the introduction of sub-plots that resonate themes from the central story.[17] Contrary to traditional precepts (and much to the dismay of Sidney and other Renaissance literary critics), the sub-plots in tragedies were often farcically comic, even in as grand a classical story as *Horestes* (1567), or as lurid a story of tyrannical violence as Preston's *Cambises* (1558–69). The early Tudor tragedies generally strike modern audiences as dull or crude or both, often labouring along in the verse form known as 'fourteeners' (for the number of syllables per line), with predictable didactic morals and psychologically unbelievable characters. *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589) is chaotic and bombastic; *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1588) merely stultifying; *Gismond of Salerne* (1566–8) has all the inevitable incongruities of a Boccaccio story told in a Senecan mode.

The breakthrough to greatness may be located in Thomas Kyd's rich and vivid *Spanish Tragedy (*1582–92), and in the several triumphs of Christopher Marlowe, whose tragedies have the kind of raw power that often characterizes artifacts from young cultures discovering their strength. Marlowe's radical mind and poetic ear made a 'mighty line' out of blank verse and put its full power in the hands of overreaching heroes who conveyed the simultaneous grandeur and cynicism of this brave new Elizabethan world and its unbridled colonial appetites. With astonishing energy, he liberated English drama from the complacencies of both its academic and its popular conventions. As learned and popular drama commingled, the upper and lower classes became jointly invested in theatre. The despised and fugitive

[17] For example, see William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935), pp. 48–52, on the interplay between the main plot and the sub-plot of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*. Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot*, discusses the development of this dramatic technique, though his *New Readings vs. Old Plays* (Chicago, 1979) warns that the ingenuity of critics in finding correlations sometimes borders on fraud. More broadly, current critical theory mistrusts the entire practice of 'thematizing' literature, of mistaking an artwork for a coherent and objectively identifiable argument.

trade of player became increasingly respectable; its noble patronage became more than a technical defence against vagabondage laws. Popular theatres, mostly on the outskirts of London, provided an outlet for the new ideas and boisterous energies of the era.

By the turn of the century, however (the story goes), the fires of Elizabethan optimism had largely burnt out, and tragedy sadly poked the glowing ashes. The genre distinctions failed in new ways, as comedy sagged under the weight of social problems and tragedy savoured gallows humour. Coterie theatres – a haven for the old academic strain of drama – provided an outlet for a third genre, satire, when it was banned in printed form in 1599. Their use of child actors helped heighten the functions of social satire and literary parody, since exalted rant and profound lust in the mouths of babes brought pretentiousness and theatrical self-consciousness to the fore. These strategic exaggerations affected the competing adult theatres long after the fad for boys' companies had faded.[18] The senescence of Elizabeth may have encouraged an increasingly cynical attitude towards women (complicated by the reliance on all-male casts), and with it a sense of cultural decadence, though the tragedies were generally set in foreign countries to reduce the very real danger of offending the English court. Some dramatists could be justly accused of pandering to the gender prejudices and social *malaise* of the audience, even to its sadism. Before condemning the famous mayhem of Elizabethan tragedy as pathological, however, one must recall that violence has always been a selling point in commercial entertainments, and that Elizabethans were (necessarily) considerably less squeamish than modern Englishmen about many aspects of the human body, not just its violent abuse.

Broad representations of royal politics and warfare steadily gave way to domestic tragedies, heavily moralized stories about unruly passions destroying ordinary families. This sub-genre (which probably derived from popular ballads about actual domestic crimes) began with the anonymous *Arden of Faversham* (1585–92), a grimly realistic play loosely based on a contemporary case of husband-killing, and after a short eclipse reappeared in *A Warning for Fair Women* (*c.* 1599). The prolific Thomas Heywood liberated domestic tragedy from reliance on local events and spousal cruelty with *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603), in which Frankford treats his wife Anne so nobly after she betrays him that she dies of remorse. Domestic tragedy was also a favoured string in the equally versatile bow of Thomas Middleton; *Women Beware Women* (1623) demonstrates that playwright's talent for

[18] R. A. Foakes, 'Tragedy at the children's theatres after 1600' in David Galloway, ed., *Elizabethan Theatre II* (Toronto, 1970), pp. 37–59.

penetrating moral realism, and indicates the way domestic tragedy brought psychological issues and female protagonists to the fore in the Jacobean period.

Various dramatists, while all riding the crest of tragedy as a rediscovered genre, moved through the medium with their own characteristic strokes. Even Shakespeare, whose triumphs may seem 'not of an age / But for all time', nevertheless followed a cycle of Elizabethan comic optimism about the promise of new life and Jacobean tragic pessimism with its nihilistic overtones, modulating finally into the tragicomic escapism of the romances. In telling the stories of Bussy, Byron, and Chabot, George Chapman applied his classical learning to recent French court history, turning studies of decaying social orders into rhetorically difficult tragedies of ideas. Ben Jonson's more pedantic classicism, mired in historical facts and footnotes, rendered *Sejanus* (1603) and *Catiline* (1611) emotionally stillborn. Cyril Tourneur's mode was ironic and macabre, though his *Atheist's Tragedy* (1611) contrives an orthodox moral conclusion. In plays such as *Antonio's Revenge* (1600), the up-market satirist John Marston indulged in wild generic mixtures and wild 'fustian' vocabulary.

The various authors worked infinite variations on stock tragic figures such as the revenger (probably an expression of popular nostalgia for the private retribution abrogated by the centralized Elizabethan legal system, and of ambivalence about Christian doctrines demanding passivity to injuries), the malcontent (probably a reaction to the late-Renaissance epidemic of melancholy among frustrated courtiers), and the Machiavel (probably a reflection of the terror of a society changing from a traditional system of class and honour to a hierarchy of money and the rules of commercial competition). It is tempting to correlate the decline of Renaissance tragedy with the ironic conversion of these stock figures into self-conscious stereotypes, but in fact such metadramatic ironies were already common in the time of Elizabeth. Heroic tragedy may have become outdated for a sophisticated audience, and revenge tragedy may have exhausted its conventions through sheer repetition, but there is no clear reason why the emergent tragedy of sexuality could not carry an equivalent power. Something else seems to have happened to sap the strength of the genre.

As dramatists wrote for increasingly exclusive audiences (at indoor theatres or court masques), the habit of realism deteriorated. As London became a more cynical city, the idealistic element could no longer keep company with plain observation. The alternative to the destructive *Realpolitik* that had replaced the jingoistic attitudes of chronicle, and to the sexual decadence that had replaced romantic love, was pastoral escapism: the slick professionals Beaumont and Fletcher, though they continued both

the domestic and political strains of tragedy with some success in *The Maid's Tragedy* (1608–11) and *A King and no King* (1611), showed little appetite for searching moral questions. They were most important for leading a commercially successful effort to show tragic dilemmas (with the excessively elaborate plot and language now displaced into rustic and courtly tenors) miraculously undone in the genre known as tragicomedy or romance.

The dark alternative is visible in John Webster's episodic dramaturgy, which showed a grand, brittle world and its no less grand and brittle inhabitants doomed to meaningless suffering and annihilation. His and Middleton's tragedies constitute a magnificent final expression of the cultural explosion that would merely echo in the decadence of Caroline tragedians such as John Ford, who aggrandized twisted passions (as in *The Broken Heart*, 1629, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, 1632), but with a kind of resignation. There remain the chilly, dispirited tragedies of Massinger and the versatile, businesslike work of James Shirley (as in *The Cardinal*, 1641, an unsatisfactory echo of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, 1614), but the prodigious energy and sense of new possibilities that were so clear in Marlowe seem already to have been exhausted. Perhaps the English Civil War demonstrated that some cultural contradictions had proved impossible to negotiate by less violent communal rituals such as tragic theatre. Perhaps the decay of tragedy signalled that such crucial negotiations had moved onto other stages.

This provisional history of tragedy thus ends where the preceding theory began, with the recognition that drama is part of an elaborate and valuable mechanism for adjudicating cultural dissonances. The theatres were closed in 1642 by a fanatical puritan Parliament that declared its repugnance towards both the concept and the excesses of drama, then staged a ceremonious public deposition and decapitation of the King[19] – a contradiction less horrible but no less obvious than the accompanying slaughter of sisters and brothers over the true Christian way to save their souls. In the aftermath of the Civil War, even the same old tragedies were bound to look different. Old Hamlet's ghost demanding that his son avenge his death would have meant something new when the play was revived in 1661, as Charles II set about executing his father's killers.[20] Indeed, the emphasis in revenge tragedy (as in other artistic forms) increasingly fell on overtly political allegories after the Restoration, with only vestigial gestures towards metaphysics.

[19] Franco Moretti, '"A huge eclipse": tragic form and the deconsecration of sovereignty' in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (Norman, Okla., 1982), pp. 7–8, suggests that tragedy helped create a receptive audience for these acts.

[20] Nancy Klein Maguire, *Regicide and Restoration* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 121; cited in John Kerrigan, *On Shakespeare and Early Modern Literature: Essays* (Oxford, 2001), p. 237.

Under the providential model so vivid in Protestant polemics, revenge was often God's moral instrument, whether punishing the human race for the Fall, a nation for its false doctrine and moral laxity, or an individual for particular sins. But, as a rationalist system of deterrence and rehabilitation gradually replaced this model of punishment, the energies of revenge tragedy were inevitably muted, or at least transmuted.[21]

The tragedy that returned to the stage with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was formal even in its passions and violations; the so-called 'heroic drama' celebrated extremes of love and honour in a declamatory style, with more loyalty to literary conventions and political allusions than to realistic psychology. For all its polish, Restoration tragedy thus reverted to some of the characteristics of *Gorboduc*. The novel, which similarly exploits informality, indeterminacy, and interiority,[22] would eventually assume some of the functions of great Renaissance tragedy, but by the middle of the seventeenth century the remarkable ride in the tragic vehicle had come, full circle, to an end.

Brief readings of six major tragedies follow. Without claiming to be definitive or more than loosely interconnected, these readings may suggest the usefulness of the preceding theoretical and historical paradigms. This selection of canonical works is divided into two sections. *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* belong to a distinct sub-genre called revenge tragedy – a phenomenon with deep roots in both social and literary history. The other three engage a philosophical theme called theodicy – the enquiry into the nature of evil and the means by which it enters Creation. The availability of tragic dilemmas must itself have been troubling to a culture committed to the idea that the world had been made by a unitary, infallible, and benevolent God. Superficial discord could be blamed on the Fall, but the classical model of an innocent hero caught in a conflict among gods, or between the state and the gods, would have been profoundly threatening to a monotheistic culture that defended state authority as a natural extension of divine will. In *Doctor Faustus*, the diabolical enters the world through the pride of a single man, whose demise exposes the hazards of his aspiring culture. In *Othello*, the diabolical villain comes to represent the endlessly contagious evils of envy and self-consciousness that can subvert even an ideal

[21] Kerrigan, On *Shakespeare*, pp. 230–54, cogently articulates this afterlife of Renaissance revenge tragedy.

[22] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and novel' in his *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex., 1981), attributes the emergence of the novel as the essential modern genre to its ability to encompass 'heteroglossia', an indeterminate juxtaposition of conflicting attitudes and levels of speech.

civilization. *The Duchess of Malfi* presents evil as the natural by-product of the decadence, the social entropy, that one heroic woman resists to the limits of her mortality.

Each section begins with one of the earliest and greatest public-theatre tragedies; they may actually have been composed in the same room, since Kyd, under torture, testified that the atheistic papers found in his possession belonged to his room-mate Marlowe; within a few years of writing these masterpieces, both young men were dead. The second play in each group is by Shakespeare, who characteristically converts the generic conventions into indeterminate parables about the fundamental problems of revenge and evil; if *Hamlet* compels its audience into an uncanny identification with the tragic hero, *Othello* compels an uneasy association with the villain. The third in each group, by men about whom we know very little but their writings, reflects the macabre excess and the satiric self-consciousness typical of mid-Jacobean tragedy. Within each group, the plays are separated by intervals of about a decade, marking something like the youth, maturity, and senescence of Renaissance tragedy; altogether the selection covers the great quarter-century of the genre.

Three tragedies of revenge: *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*

Revenge tragedy diverges from its master genre in that the protagonist is usually in his miserable quandary from the beginning, so he neither falls from prosperity (the medieval *de casibus* model) nor makes a fatal error (the Aristotelian *hamartia* model).[23] When critics seek out the moral of revenge tragedies (and most do), they must look elsewhere, and the primary question is almost always whether the revenger ought rather to have left it to God to enforce justice, as Christian orthodoxy instructed: vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. English literature thus continues its seemingly life-long task of reconciling Christian heroism with an ancient legacy of tribal codes and instinctive behaviours. The contradiction certainly seems sufficient to generate Hegelian tragic dilemmas for the protagonist. Yet the oxymoronic quality of Christian revenge rarely proves to be the core of such plays; even where ethical debate becomes prominent, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599–1601) or Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (1610–12), the morality of revenge receives less consideration than mortality, Stoicism, and epistemology. The vengeful ghost inherited from Seneca is steadily exorcised, and God

[23] Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 41–2, observes these divergences.

rarely intervenes to take its place. The world of revenge tragedy is primarily a human world, and the bloody rule is to do unto others as you have been done to.

The reason playwrights neglect the ethical conflict may be quite simple: audiences in Renaissance theatres, like those in modern cinemas, probably enjoyed identifying with a hero whose bitter wrongs are, after a long delay, violently and ingeniously repaid. It seems to be a basic human fantasy, a balm to the helpless indignation most people regularly feel from early childhood onwards; and Elizabethan audiences would presumably have been no more ready than modern ones to forgive the sneering villains. Most action movies of recent decades have wooed audiences with this formula, including a portrait of the legal system as merely another infuriating obstacle between the revenger and true justice. Again, given the striking continuities, it seems pointless to defamiliarize the Renaissance experience by attributing the formula entirely to the particularities of Elizabethan theatrical convention and government policy.

This is not to deny that such conventions and policies helped shape the genre. The efficient cause for the prevalence of revenge plots in English tragedy is the example of Seneca, both directly and through the mediation of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Many of the ironies of subsequent plays become illegible unless we recognize the conventions they are exploiting. Furthermore, this Senecan model could hardly have proliferated so rapidly unless there were tensions in Elizabethan society to which it answered. Duels of honour would become a serious problem among the Jacobean aristocracy, but they are probably a secondary manifestation of a more basic shift that was already troubling the Elizabethan populace. The explosion of litigation in Tudor courts suggests how many impulses towards private revenge the system was struggling to accommodate through public channels. Local justice, based in the competing interests of families, was rapidly giving way to a centralized legal bureaucracy in which personal passions and honour counted for little, and patronage and lawyerly rhetoric became all-important. Little wonder that the revenger is usually a powerless outsider avenging an inflammatory offence to a lover or close kin; little wonder, too, that such stories still have such overwhelming appeal.

Furthermore, for a society increasingly fearful of death as absolute annihilation, there would have been a supplementary pleasure in the suggestion implicit throughout the stories of blood-revenge, as in many tribal cultures, that death is a contingent and unnatural event that can somehow be corrected by punishing the fatal agent. Mortality becomes conveniently externalized and localized in a villain, a villain both morally and practically more assailable than nature itself. Revenge tragedy offers a figurative way of

saying (with Donne), 'Death, thou shalt die' – a fantasy that cures the passivity and futility of mourning. If René Girard is correct that human societies are perpetually threatened by a potentially endless cycle of blood-revenge, and that theatre (as well as law) exists largely as a ritual circuit-breaker for that dangerous social malfunction,[24] it is also true that this notion of universal murder helps to conceal the inevitability of death. Revenge tragedy relocates mortality within the realm of human volition, sometimes even disguises it in the black robes of justice. The nostalgia for personal retribution in an increasingly impersonal system of justice may have reflected also a heightened concern about the fate of individual consciousness in what was increasingly recognized as the apathetic, intolerant machinery of biological nature. The individual will, finding itself increasingly excluded from the construction of an order of justice, finds itself similarly irrelevant to the order of nature. Many terrible crimes are committed in *King Lear* (1605–6), but are any finally more disturbing than the simple biological fact that Cordelia is 'dead as earth' and will 'come no more. Never, never, never, never, never' (5.3.235)? Neither the audience nor Lear himself can find any consolation, because they can conceive no revenge, when the true enemy is revealed as indifferent mortal nature: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all?' (5.3.281–2).

Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies are probably most memorable for their macabre elements: the vivid sadism of the elaborate killings, and the abuses of severed body parts such as Hieronimo's tongue in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Alonzo's finger in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622), the detached hand and leg in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Annabella's heart in Ford's *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*. Even Shakespeare, to whom we tend to attribute the high dignity conferred by the relentless approval of cultural authorities, spices *Titus Andronicus* (1593) with a variety of severed hands as well as a rape-victim's severed tongue, leading to the serving of human bodies as a pasty for their mother. In these great plays, and many other lesser ones, the dance of death becomes the work of autopsy; the ritual theatre of blood enters the scientific anatomy theatre.

The lurid excesses of revenge tragedy are not hard to explain. If Renaissance playwrights mistook Senecan closet drama for stage drama, they might have felt emboldened to show horrors that were originally intended only to energize the rhetoric.[25] If Renaissance playhouses were analogous to modern

[24] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977).

[25] See the reconsideration of this traditional idea in Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (New Haven, Conn., 1985).

cinemas, then we can recognize a common appetite for increasingly explicit gruesomeness in popular entertainments, particularly given the popularity of mutilations as public judicial events in the Renaissance. Playwrights were writing for the immediate commercial needs of their theatres, not for the approval of some future refined academic reader, and competition among companies for spectators (as well as the jading of those spectators) would naturally have led to an escalation of horrors. A glance through the plots of Renaissance tragedy confirms that the genre, competing as it did with adjacent entertainments such as prostitution and bear-baiting, concerned itself as much with the marketing principles of the shock-tabloids as with the artistic principles of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

It would be wrong, however, to dismiss these plays as misguided or trivial works merely because of their sensationalism; there is a necessary genius behind the misprision and exploitation of Senecan violence. Murder and incest are sensational precisely because they are important; they are primal violations of human bodies and of the social order established to protect them. If we feel a guilty, voyeuristic pleasure in watching these events, it is partly the Freudian relief of confronting the forbidden, here safely encased within the frame of artistic ritual and convention. Characters such as Oedipus and Macbeth remain the most vivid in the public mind, not because they are the worst or best of people, but on the contrary because they are Everymen whose circumstances provoke them into violating the most basic rules civilization has constructed. Revengers are specialists in the tragic contradiction of shattering the most fundamental rules of civil behaviour on behalf of fundamental justice.

The Spanish Tragedy

No play in this period is more important historically than Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which established many of the themes, plot-lines, and atmospheric traits that the great subsequent tragedies have in common. The play was frequently reprinted and revived (once with new passages by Ben Jonson, commissioned by the enterprising producer Philip Henslowe), and the numerous contemporary parodies affirm its prominence. The chief characteristics of Renaissance tragedy are all abundantly on display here: the metatheatrical self-consciousness, the extreme ritualized violence, the black humour and the blacker mourning, the variety of stage business, the mixture of elegant and passion-torn speech, the concern with court corruption, and the centrality of furtive and finally excessive revenge to the plot. *The Spanish Tragedy* also shares with many of its great descendants – Shakespeare's

Romeo and Juliet (1595), Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Marston's *Sophonisba* (1605), Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Broken Heart* – a particular version of the tragic conflict between individual desire and powerful impersonal mechanisms: the disastrous insistence that a woman subordinate her marital preference to the interests of a greedy and tradition-bound patriarchal society. The demands of dynastic marriage override true affection as well as true justice.

The historical importance of *The Spanish Tragedy* is inseparable from the astonishing plenitude of the play in its own right: a richness of plot, character, symbol, spectacle, and rhetoric. Kyd gave his audience its money's worth. The story is framed by the observations of Revenge and the Ghost of Don Andrea, who together oversee the disasters that follow from Andrea's death in battle at the hands of Balthazar, Prince of Portugal. Andrea's friend Horatio vies with the Spanish nobleman Lorenzo for the credit of capturing Balthazar, a rivalry that becomes more complicated when both Horatio and Balthazar become enamoured of Lorenzo's sister, Bel-imperia. Lorenzo, hoping for social advancement, and the Spanish king, hoping for geopolitical advantage, both favour the match with Balthazar. Bel-imperia, however, loves Horatio, and meets him in secret. Not secret enough, though: Lorenzo and Balthazar interrupt the tryst, imprison Bel-imperia, and stab and hang Horatio. Horatio's father Hieronimo finds the body and goes mad, but recovers enough control to plot revenge. Frustrated in his attempts to reach the king directly with his complaint, Hieronimo (who has been reading Seneca) apparently lets himself be humoured with the privilege of staging a play for the combined royal courts of the two countries. His play, rich in correspondences to the aforementioned events, is acted (like a court masque) by the aristocrats themselves, and under the guise of play-acting, Hieronimo stabs Lorenzo while Bel-imperia stabs Balthazar. Hieronimo's subsequent suicide attempt is foiled, but he bites off his tongue to prevent any confession, and when he is ordered to confess in writing, he uses a knife (provided to sharpen his pen) to kill Lorenzo's father and finally himself. The play ends with Andrea's Ghost gleefully planning perpetual joys for his dead friends and an 'endless tragedy' for his dead enemies.

In telling this lurid and intricate tale, Kyd rediscovered the potential of tragedy for representing life in its beautiful and destructive complexity, rather than as a vessel for preconceived and predictable moral lessons. The burgeoning cultural conflicts of the Renaissance clamoured to be represented and adjudicated, and from the opening words of the play we find ourselves at contested boundaries:

When this eternal substance of my soul
Did live imprison'd in my wanton flesh,
Each in their function serving other's need,
I was a courtier in the Spanish court.
My name was Don Andrea, my descent,
Though not ignoble, yet inferior far
To gracious fortunes of my tender youth:
For there in prime and pride of all my years,
By duteous service and deserving love,
In secret I possess'd a worthy dame,
Which hight sweet Bel-imperia by name.
But in the harvest of my summer joys
Death's winter nipp'd the blossoms of my bliss,
Forcing divorce betwixt my love and me.
For in the late conflict with Portingale
My valour drew me into danger's mouth,
Till life to death made passage through my wounds.

The Ghost of Don Andrea, himself a liminal creature compromising the boundary between life and death, thus ushers us into the play – and ushers in the great age of Elizabethan tragedy. These first seventeen lines, laden with paradoxes and reciprocities, discuss the conflicts between mind and body and between hereditary and achieved nobility (both very lively Renaissance disputes), and sketch a story of secret love against bitter death (a favourite Renaissance polarity which will constantly tangle the kissing of Horatio and Bel-imperia in motives and metaphors of killing).[26] Death itself came at a liminal point, since the battle occurred 'where Spain and Portingale do jointly knit / Their frontiers, leaning on each other's bound' (1.2.22–3). In the remainder of this opening soliloquy, continuing to mix the familiar with the exotic, Kyd draws into his tale of modern Spain (a place of considerable interest to the Elizabethans) the powerful precedents of classical literature, as Andrea narrates his death in battle (which recalls that of Achilles), his stranding on the banks of the River Styx, and his liberation by Don Horatio, who (like Antigone) performs the neglected burial. Andrea then must walk a spiritual tightrope between a sort of hell and a sort of heaven, overseen by the *discordia concors* of Pluto and Proserpine, who represent the primal oppositions evoked by those seventeen lines: war and love, death and life, winter and summer.

As the play proper begins, the King of Spain attempts three related reconciliations: his country with Portugal, power with justice, and Lorenzo with Horatio. The tragedy will occur precisely because it is impossible to reconcile

[26] See for example 1.4.60–8, 2.2.21–40, and 2.4.32–49.

such oppositions in a fallen world – a world not only of money, politics, and betrayal, but also of scarcity, where there is only one royal Balthazar to be claimed as prisoner, only one beautiful Bel-imperia to be married, and only one mortal Horatio to carry all of Hieronimo's paternal hopes. The events that follow quickly sketch a test between love and friendship, and again between love and war, all presented simultaneously as psychologically realistic stories and as grand mythological confrontations. There is a powerful critique of lawlessness within a no less powerful critique of government, and every attempt at justice becomes self-contradictory.[27] War becomes a place of amity, peace of treacherous bloodshed. This flood of unresolved oppositions might be dismissed as artistic carelessness rather than artistic genius, but nearly all the great Elizabethan tragedies display a reckless delight in inclusiveness, an appetite for multiplying complexities. The very lack of an authorized tradition in the genre comparable to those long established in poetry may have allowed tragedy a freedom that made it adaptable to the new energies of Renaissance culture, which was itself an overflow of countless divergent influences. *The Spanish Tragedy* can be located at the perfect Nietzschean axis for tragedy, with the chilly Apollonian courtliness in constant tension with the Dionysian passions and horrors – a tension sustained right through the astonishing last scene, in which Hieronimo's brutal revenge takes place within the high-cultural rituals of a theatrical performance at court. Metaphors become grimly literalized, and high aspirations dragged down by the body, as when Lorenzo cruelly mocks the hanging Horatio with the observation that 'Although his life were still ambitious proud, / Yet is he at the highest now he is dead' (2.4.60–1). No play could articulate more clearly, in its texture and its plot, its genesis from a multi-culture struggling to resolve the many paradoxes in its evolving view of the universe.

The most memorable figure in *The Spanish Tragedy* is Hieronimo, father of the heroic victim Horatio. Though he is not established early as a protagonist – Kyd is too busy weaving the plot – Hieronimo becomes the emotional centre of the story. His nobly unified roles – as a man of love and of justice, of art and of law, as a husband and a father, a servant of family and of king – all become contradictions through his son's murder. Hieronimo thus wanders into a play-world thematically charged with paradox, and we are able to watch its effect on a sentient and eloquent creature. His predominant passion is mourning, and his predominant mode is madness: he is overwhelmed by the completeness, injustice, and irreversibility of his son's annihilation in death. Amid all the whirling of the plot, Hieronimo's speeches

[27] Hunter, *Dramatic Identities*, pp. 214–29, identifies 'ironies of justice' as thematically central to *The Spanish Tragedy*.

keep returning us to the plain truth at the core of the tragedy: the fact of death and the futility of trying to change or transcend it through love, honour, art, progeny, or justice. (The paganistic frame allows Kyd to leave the viability of religious redemption, along with the problem of Christian revenge, tactfully unexamined.) This thematic focus, more deeply than the many shared points of plot and style, is what *The Spanish Tragedy* bequeaths to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; it is also a distinctive concern of Renaissance culture, as the facts of error and mutability erased each mortal dreamer of glory.

Under the circumstances, revenging well seemed the best revenge. The performance of that revenge by a theatrical ritual in *The Spanish Tragedy* – a motif that recurs in *Hamlet*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* – may constitute an acknowledgment that such satisfactions are allowable and feasible only within a frame of fantasy. At an aesthetic distance, the massacre becomes an elaborate sacrifice which may serve to exorcise the demons of helpless frustration at perceived injustice, demons so common in the human animal, so heightened in the aspiring minds of the Renaissance, so focused in the fierce economies of Elizabethan England and Elizabeth's court. Hieronimo drops his metadramatic role to tell the assembled royalty,

> 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.
>
> (4.4.76–84)

And here he shows the unreviving body of Horatio, for which he has repaid these fathers in kind. By having Hieronimo negate the fictionality of his show in this way, Kyd removes one crucial level of detachment between his spectators and his play. Drama is not some academic historical exercise, the author-figure here reminds his audience; it is about real and present lives, and therefore about real and imminent deaths. Countless Elizabethans, bereaved by war, poverty, or religious persecution, could have conceived a complaint similar to Hieronimo's against their monarch; *The Spanish Tragedy* allowed them to witness and approve an almost inconceivable treason that follows naturally, by the logic of revenge, from that complaint.

Hamlet

To locate an intrinsic meaning in *Hamlet* is to defy augury, as well as critical fashion. This play has been subjected to the most intensive hermeneutic scrutiny of any work in Western culture, except perhaps those believed to be dictated by God. Yet the critical community still does not concur on whether the motivating ghost is angel or devil, whether Hamlet does or does not, should or should not, act promptly, or even what the most famous line of the play ('To be or not to be') really means. Nor can editors agree what the central word is in the second most famous soliloquy ('O that this too too sallied/sullied/solid flesh would melt'), or whether another famous soliloquy ('How all occasions do inform against me') even belongs in the text. This may reflect the critical industry's instinct for self-perpetuation, or the inevitable indeterminacy of any text read closely enough, but it certainly ought to make a conscientious coward out of anyone tempted to say what this play means.

Hamlet is therefore an embarrassing play for a scholar to write about, as 'To be or not to be' is an embarrassing line for an actor to speak. It is partly an embarrassment of riches, but partly also a recognition that it has been done so often before, done so well and done so badly. Moreover, this most famous of plays is particularly renowned for its infinite interpretability, for the way it (like the 'Mousetrap' Hamlet himself stages) causes its viewers to project themselves into the play. In this sense, *Hamlet* is less a tragedy than a frame and a stimulus for the creation of tragedies, infinitely various personal refractions of an archetypal story. Shakespeare uses an array of standard Renaissance tragic conflicts – mortality against ambition, Christianity against revenge, love against sexual horror, private truth against political imperatives – to compel a deep, sympathetic recognition of the way cultural contradictions agonize the sensitive individual. Observers who perceive the play as fundamentally concerned with their own crises may appear absurdly egoistical, but in a sense they are properly employing this tragedy-making machine.

Shakespeare biographers read *Hamlet* as Shakespeare's metaphorical autobiography, the story of a brilliant young man who liked to stage revealing plays and was doomed to be understood and admired only in the future retelling of his stories; the legend that Shakespeare himself played the Ghost of Hamlet's father corresponds suggestively to the fact that Shakespeare had a son named Hamnet who died young. Theatre historians insist that the play cannot be understood properly without viewing it as an artifact of the historical theatre (as a revenge tragedy largely borrowed from Kyd), and radical modern directors claim that its essential truths are best revealed by radically modernizing its setting. When the great actress Sarah Bernhardt

played Hamlet, she told interviewers that Hamlet was, after all, predominantly feminine.[28] *Hamlet* now strikes me as a play about information systems and virtual realities. The two most famous interpretations of *Hamlet* follow this reflexive pattern: melancholic intellectuals have described the play as a study of intellectual melancholy, and psychoanalytic critics have characterized the play as prescient psychoanalysis. Both interpretations are built around an interpretive crux as stubborn as that of Iago's motivation: Hamlet's delay in avenging his father.[29] Delays while the protagonist plots his elaborate revenge are quite conventional in Elizabethan tragedy, but that does not preclude interpreting Hamlet's delay as psychological evidence, since Shakespeare characteristically provokes conventions to express deep questions or truths.

Nearly two hundred years ago, several deep thinkers, oppressed by the brutal actions of the French and Industrial Revolutions, described Hamlet as a deep thinker trapped in a world of brutal action. Romantic poet-philosophers in Germany and England – Goethe and Schlegel, Coleridge and Hazlitt[30] – discerned a romantic poet-philosopher named Hamlet, drawing their keynote from the end of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action. (3.1.82–7)

How can anyone become a decisive executioner, this interpretation asks, in a world so lacking in absolute truth and moral purity that 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so . . . Use every man after his deserts and who should 'scape whipping? . . . I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me' (2.2.249–50, 529–30; 3.1.121–3)? Hamlet's intelligence makes him cripplingly aware of the good and bad pertaining to any action, and so

[28] See for example *Poet Lore* 4, New Series (1900), 149.

[29] Eleanor Prosser in *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, Calif., 1967) offers another perspective on this crux; taking seriously the paradox of Christian revenge, she argues provocatively that an Elizabethan audience would have recognized the Ghost as diabolical and that Hamlet's fatal mistake was his failure to delay further.

[30] These mighty opposites both recognized themselves in this hero: the conservative Coleridge remarked that 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself', and the liberal Hazlitt commented, 'It is *we* who are Hamlet.' See the 24 June 1827 entry in T. Ashe, ed., *The Table Talk and Omniana of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1905), p. 47; and *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt* (London, 1902), 1.232.

he accomplishes nothing until he yields the decisions to a Higher Intelligence: 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will', he tells Horatio (5.2.10–11), and later, 'There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (5.2.219–20).

Contemplation reveals action to be not only impossible to justify immediately, but also eventually futile. Hamlet's royal father was effectively forgotten after a few months by his own wife; and, as Hamlet observes in the graveyard, neither the lovely cosmetics of the lady nor the clever ploys of the lawyer have kept them from becoming rotting skulls. Indeed, imagination can 'trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bunghole' (5.1.203–4). The head emptied of its brains raises the same unanswerable questions that the head too full of brains raised. It is not surprising that Hamlet contemplating the skull of Yorick is this play's best-known image: the entire play may be aptly described as a skull set on stage confronting the audience with facts that render absurd our choices and efforts. Death, the great 'common' equalizer, mocks Hamlet's aspirations (and not only Hamlet's); only at the end does he recognize that the imminence of death can provoke action rather than dissuade from it.

A century after the Romantics, a new movement (again emerging from the Austro-German intellectual community) claimed *Hamlet* for itself. Psychoanalytic critics (beginning with Ernest Jones) interpreted Hamlet's delay as a psychoanalytic symptom. Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because Claudius, having killed Hamlet's father and married Hamlet's mother, is too deeply identified with Hamlet's own Oedipal impulses. This explains Hamlet's focus on the incestuous aspect of the violation, and explains also his sudden self-loathing and misogyny (the influence of this theory upon Laurence Olivier's film version of the play is unmistakable).[31] Thus, *Hamlet* has been simultaneously puzzling and compelling for so long because it draws on the darkest and most essential secret underlying all human behaviour. Like Oedipus, we all attack the riddle eagerly, and find the answer is ourselves; like him, we have chosen to be blind at the core of our insight. The play provokes subconscious recognitions; if dramatic characters are not really living people with full psychological histories, audiences still are, and *Hamlet* is an instrument of group psychotherapy, a tragedy designed to exorcise the demons of the nuclear family.

The only way to nail this protean spectre down to a few solid interpretive foundations is to enquire about the things *Hamlet* might have meant, or at

[31] Dale Silviria, *Laurence Olivier and the Art of Film Making* (London, 1985), pp. 171, 174. Most film adaptations intensely sexualize the bedroom scene between Hamlet and Gertrude.

least meant differently, to an Elizabethan audience, with its indoctrinations about revenge tragedy, incest, kingship, suicide, and mortality.[32] On the other hand, it seems foolish and pointless to dispel the peculiar magic of this play by refusing to acknowledge its suggestiveness as commentary on so many lives in so many eras. There are moments of seemingly timeless penetration, when the particular story of this Danish prince gestures towards universality. When Hamlet discovers that the gravedigger began work on the very day of Hamlet's birth and his father's great victory, the play acquires the archetypal power of tragic fate, the uncanny navigation to a predestined place of doom.

Shakespeare draws on another archetype by suggesting that the world has become 'an unweeded garden' of evil and mortality ever since the 'serpent' Claudius poisoned old Hamlet in his 'orchard'. *Hamlet* thus takes place during the awkward extended adolescence of the human world as well as of its hero. Eden has given way to a place that will err and decay until the purifying apocalyptic ending; the radiant world perceived in childhood has become infected with repellent hypocrisy and lust, answerable only with violence. In this sense, the plot of *Hamlet* is an elaborate vindication of cynical adolescence, which is itself a period of painful contradictions requiring tragic explication: the former great father really has been usurped by a weak, conniving, lascivious figure who turns the sainted mother into an epitome of corrupt sexuality, while stupidity and self-interest really have made love transient and friendship treacherous. Shakespearian tragedy never merely tells a sad story. The stories are always symbolic systems that allow us to re-experience and redefine the crises in the making of our own identities; the plays do also for the individual what I have suggested tragedy characteristically does for the culture as a whole.

Like Holbein's famous painting of *The Ambassadors*, *Hamlet* is a perfect two-faced Janus for the Renaissance, balanced as the culture was between the aspiring rediscovery of selfhood and the material world, and the cautionary heritage of medieval Christianity. One face of *Hamlet* is 'the mirror up to nature' Hamlet himself recommends for drama, a 'counterfeit presentment' of living families and kings, inspiring renewed awe and affection for the human mind and its voices. The other face is the anonymous skull Christianity has insistently urged people to contemplate, a *memento mori* that inspired *contemptus mundi*, a reminder of death that would teach people to emphasize spiritual salvation over transient worldly pride and pleasures. The conflict between heroic fantasies and mortal abjection was heightened in the Renaissance, but it was far from new then, and could hardly be called

[32] Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), and Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan Hamlet* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), are good sources for such an enquiry.

outdated now. Spectators at a production of *Hamlet* are looking simultaneously at a mirror and at a skull, and they are seeing themselves. They recognize in Hamlet versions of their own ideas and their own life-narratives, then must share his graveyard recognitions, as they must his graveyard destiny. When the audience is compelled to reconcile the two images, to see itself as both 'the wonder of the world' and 'this quintessence of dust', the juxtaposition generates the tragic effect in an extraordinarily pure form.

Perhaps, as T. S. Eliot's Prufrock says, we are not Prince Hamlet. Certainly we are not medieval Danish princes commanded by ghosts to murder our royal uncles. But we enter the stage of 'this distracted globe' born to a role and its 'cursed spite' (1.5.97, 188). We can hardly help seeing ancestors in the 'mind's eye', sensing a possessive spirit of heredity that tells us what class status, what mental and physical abilities and abnormalities, what ancient grudges, will shape our ends, rough-hew them how we will. As children of Adam and Eve, we live out the fatal legacy of our parents' crimes; as children of Israelis or Palestinians, as Sunnis or Shiites, we (like Fortinbras and his troops) kill and die on behalf of fruitless ancestral feuds, meaningless cycles of fear and vengeance, compelled by the ghosts of our fathers in armour. As *The Spanish Tragedy* suggests, such ghosts exact a terrible price from the world of the living: is there any worse poison that could be poured in our ears than these legacies of blame and hatred?

No wonder, then, that so many of us identify with Hamlet: the extraordinary genius of this play is the way it tricks us into recognizing that we, too, are tragic heroes. The metadramatic elements have as much to do with classical Stoicism as with literary criticism. Hamlet finally offers us nothing more, and nothing less, than a model for performing our painful roles most nobly. Whenever some haunting image from the past (like Hamlet's father) tells us who we must be and what we must die for, whenever friends (like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) betray us for profit, whenever lovers (like Ophelia) suddenly inexplicably reject or disgust us, whenever all those things make us wonder who ruined the world we once dreamt of ruling, then we become Hamlet, and are glad to have his company as we sit in 'this distracted globe', in these 'goodly' prisons of body and world (2.2.242–4).

The Revenger's Tragedy

Traditional literary historians might agree with post-modern theorists that *The Revenger's Tragedy* cannot be safely attributed to any single author. Editors have regularly tugged suspiciously at the slender thread by which the attribution to Tourneur hangs, and the play fits easily into the repertoire of Middleton, plausibly even into that of Marston. Materialists and theorists

alike have recently advocated a new model in which the attribution of any play to any person is misleading, either because plays were collaborative productions not proprietary to their authors in the Renaissance, or because the entire concept of authorship is a sentimental modern fiction disguising the fact that authors (like other individuals) are not really autonomous agents, but products of their cultures. Indeed, Tourneur and Webster both might serve as cautionary instances for traditional practice, since the extremely meagre biographical record of both men has lured critics into absurdly circular arguments in which the plays serve as evidence of the attitudes of the playwrights, and those posited attitudes are then used to explain the plays.

In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the same evidence supports both the traditional and the theoretical doubts about attribution. Deducing the author from internal evidence is difficult precisely because this tragedy seems so thoroughly a determinate product of its time. Many authors were writing this kind of satiric tragedy of horrors; it is full of devices (of plot, language, and stagecraft) familiar from earlier tragedies; and its fascination with the corruptions of lust and power at court seems to have been an obsession of the age. The device of disguising the body of the Duke for a second killing (5.1) comes from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. The commonplaces uttered to the skull (3.5.84–98) distinctly recall *Hamlet*. There are traces of Chettle's *Hoffman*, and the revenger incorporates, among other stock roles, the pose of the murderous Machiavel (1.1.93–6). The absurdly improbable disaster in which two competing sets of killers coincidentally each endeavour to assassinate Lussurioso under the guise of coronation masques (5.3) suggests an ironic acknowledgment that this Senecan convention had become outworn. The author in effect declares his awareness that *The Spanish Tragedy* has been performed too often (something asserted more explicitly by other Jacobean authors),[33] and must be converted into black humour through hyperbole.

The mistrust of law that helps to fuel revenge tragedy as a genre is here abundantly endorsed. When Antonio's virtuous wife is raped, the power of the Duchess precludes the execution of justice – that is, the execution of her son the rapist (1.2). Antonio appears to be quoting proverbial wisdom when he remarks, '*Judgement in this age is near kin to favour*' (1.4.55). A few scenes later, when Lussurioso is arrested for supposedly attempting to kill his father the Duke, we see that the law is just as cynical an exercise in its severities as in its mercies (2.3). Finally, after the avengers have at

[33] *The Spanish Tragedy* is regularly parodied from Greene's *Orlando Furioso* (1591) to Beaumont and Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607); the Induction to Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) mocks spectators who 'swear *Jeronimo* and *Andronicus* are the best plays yet'.

last repaid the wrongs, the noble Antonio arrests them upon taking power, because 'You that would murder him would murder me' (5.3.105). Perhaps Jacobean censors would have resisted a play endorsing the killing of even such corrupt rulers; perhaps the author was squeezing an extra drop out of the requisite closing bloodbath; perhaps Antonio has some grounds to fear the precedent. Yet, having seen the play essentially through the eyes of the revengers, the audience is likely to experience this ending as one more proof that law bears very little relation to the felt truths of justice.

Though Vindice's opening soliloquy lacks the richness of contradiction that characterizes Don Andrea's induction to *The Spanish Tragedy*, it nonetheless establishes the polarity that gives *The Revenger's Tragedy* its fascinating energy. On the one hand, as he contemplates the skull of his murdered mistress, Vindice is the classic brooding revenger. But the alternative to the physical decay represented by the skull is merely the ethical decay embodied by the ruling family, not (as in *Hamlet*) the transcendent glory of the human mind. As he narrates the entrance of the court, Vindice offers a dumbshow apt to a satiric comedy rather than a Senecan tragedy. Again the peculiar amalgam of Renaissance literary consciousness is at work: the medieval obsession with physical deterioration must find a way to function within a classical satire on Jacobean social decadence. As in the opening lines of Donne's 'The Relique',[34] the rhapsodic description of the beloved's beauty and purity must endure interruption, not only by the acknowledgement that she is now merely a decaying skull, but also by cynical observations on sexual corruption:

> When life and beauty naturally fill'd out
> These ragged imperfections,
> When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set
> In those unsightly rings – then 'twas a face
> So far beyond the artificial shine
> Of any woman's bought complexion,
> That the uprightest man (if such there be
> That sin but seven times a day) broke custom,
> And made up eight with looking after her.
> (1.1.17–25)

The sentence becomes a terrible let-down, and a significant one. If this is the only consequence of such beauty and virtue, then we have fallen very far from the Neoplatonic model of redemption. If Jacobean tragedies

[34] Donne's lyric tribute to chaste love begins, 'When my grave is broke up againe / Some second ghest to entertaine, / (For graves have learn'd that woman-head / To be to more than one a Bed)'.

reflect a bitter disappointment with the results of earlier Renaissance idealisms (a disappointment prophesied in *Doctor Faustus*), then this collapse of Petrarchan rhapsody entangles *The Revenger's Tragedy* in that cultural crisis from the opening scene. One may take sufficient revenge on the corrupt dukes with sword and poison, but the only recourse for a disappointed malcontent in the court of Renaissance culture is to inject cruelty and farce into its noblest undertakings. In this sense, the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* – whoever he was, to whatever extent he was distinguishable from the culture as a whole – becomes the primary embittered revenger of his own play.

Vindice himself is a self-conscious playwright of poetic justice:

> Now to my tragic business; look you, brother,
> I have not fashion'd this only for show
> And useless property; no, it shall bear a part
> E'en in its own revenge. This very skull,
> Whose mistress the duke poison'd, with this drug,
> The mortal curse of the earth, shall be reveng'd
> In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death.
> (3.5.99–105)

Hippolito replies, 'Brother, I do applaud thy constant vengeance, / The quaintness of thy malice, above thought'. As tragedy becomes a more self-conscious ironic exercise in the Jacobean period, the applause is reserved for quaint malice rather than grand virtue. Vindice has the heroic role, but he taints it with the sardonic cruelty of the satirist, a popular figure at the start of the seventeenth century, deflected into drama from other genres by government censorship. The discrepancy between Vindice's heroic and satiric roles may correspond to a tragic schism between hope and experience in Renaissance England. Drama and society both yield to an increasing scepticism about the possibility of meaningful virtuous action – to the extent that John Ford will be obliged to find heroism, by a sheer act of assertion, within Giovanni's incest, blasphemy, and murderous mutilation of his beloved pregnant sister in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*.

The quaint malice of artful revenge generates only a sterile admiration; the notion of resorting to art when life ceases to make sense is delusive, because without a coherent meaning to sustain or subvert, art becomes merely distraction and decoration. As the final vestigial ideals concerning law, love, and nobility decay around them, the inhabitants of this play-world become puppets of desire and vengeance. The Duke, his heir Lussurioso, and his bastard Spurio are all destroyed through their jaded mechanical pursuit of lust; the rest fall through vengeful scheming. The anguish (anticipated

by *Doctor Faustus*) of attempting to live without spiritual absolutes, the anguish of the Renaissance gone astray, here manifests itself in the portrayal of a world in which people are nothing more than desperate little bodies consuming each other, indistinguishably in sex and murder. Even when his plot against Lussurioso backfires, Ambitioso can find no reason to change course, because the absolutes have become absurdly self-referential: 'there is nothing sure in mortality, but mortality. Well, no more words, 'shalt be reveng'd i' faith' (3.6.89–91). If human life has no meaningful connection to anything beyond, then revenge becomes the only game in town. The thunder and the comet that accompany the culminating vengeance are theatrical effects that carry no Christian conviction. Vengeance is still referred to as 'Murder's quit-rent', but no one is under the illusion that it really cures anything. The revengers save no one, and no one thanks them; Antonio, the only vindicated victim left alive, does quite the opposite. Furthermore, the essentialist naming of the central characters virtually forbids any redemptive conversions or growth beyond the functions of the plot. In this sense, *The Revenger's Tragedy* harks back towards the earlier allegorical drama, but it is hard to have a morality play without morality; there are only negative forces here, cynicism earns better success than faith, and Everyman can triumph only by joining the carnage in both body and spirit.

The pull of horror on our sympathetic emotions in *The Revenger's Tragedy* is rarely equal to the pull of excess on our comic intellect, particularly when we are coached by the hard-hearted jeerings of villains and avengers alike. Of the fatally victimized women who might have provided a focal point for sympathy, the only one who appears on stage is a grinning skull. In a classic misogynist dichotomy, women in *The Revenger's Tragedy* are either monsters of maternal corruption (the Duchess, who seduces her step-son, and Gratiana, who plays pander to her daughter) or passive occasions for male idealization and outrage (Antonio's wife, Vindice's dead mistress, and his living sister). The result is a slashing and haunting portrayal, funny and horrifying at the same moments, of a world propelled eagerly to ruin by blood-lust, sex-lust, and power-lust. Modern critics and audiences seem to enjoy *The Revenger's Tragedy* as a sort of Hallowe'en toy, and it does glow in the dark. Events seem so deeply inscribed into the *ethos* and the artistic conventions of the Jacobean period that we feel little guilt in our sadistic and voyeuristic pleasures. Still, the play should not be dismissed as camp. It thrives at second hand from the motives that first made rape, blood-revenge, and irreligion compelling topics for dramatic exploration, but the satiric detachment may itself be an important signal of cultural crisis. In a world learning to snigger at escalating outrages, perhaps people sought out experiences that might still rouse authentic horror, to test whether the innovations

of the Renaissance – including capitalism, colonialism, empiricism, and relativism – had completely deadened their former moral sensibilities.

Three tragedies of theodicy: *Doctor Faustus*, *Othello*, and *The Duchess of Malfi*

Doctor Faustus

In the later sixteenth century, provoked by the accusatory zeal of Reformation theology, morality plays became increasingly likely to feed the protagonist to the stage prop known as the hell-mouth, marking his damnation. That is precisely what happens at the end of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, which puts the morality formula in the service of a devastating cultural critique. Faustus may be a remarkably brilliant and errant scholar, but he is also an Everyman who compels Renaissance audiences, and modern ones as well, to examine the perplexing choices facing a creature of desire and doubt in a changing world.

The play flirts with traditional moral allegory. The seven deadly sins parade across the stage, but Faustus enacts those same vices within common forms of human conduct. He receives conflicting advice from conventional good and evil spirits, but these spirits also take on human form as the good Old Man and Mephostophilis, who renew the tug-of-war on Faustus's final day. The play may thus serve as a sort of geological record of the old stark moralistic patterns of dramatic conflict metamorphosing into more subtle representations of ambivalence; in the process, the play similarly records the seismic collision of medieval and modern segments of Western spiritual history. The schematic battle among allegorical figures is still plainly visible here, but tied into the real temptations of a psychologically plausible human life. The vicious cycle of pride and despair becomes less demonology than psychopathology.

The moral of the story may seem orthodox and simple enough: to borrow a rhetorical question from the Book of Matthew, 'What profits it a man if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' That moral becomes tragically complex, however, in a culture enthusiastically engaged in gaining the world (through imperialism, commerce, science, and humanistic philosophy) despite the Christian doctrines of humility and *contemptus mundi* to which it nominally still subscribed. From a medieval perspective the chief of sinners, Faustus from another perspective dies for the sins of modern civilization, which was evidently finding the temporal world less contemptible than before. Again, as in the Hegelian model, tragedy shows a hero answerable to the contradictory demands of two ruling deities of his culture, which nurtured and feared ambition. Faustus may seem Promethean, sacrificing

himself to liberate human aspiration from physical instrumentalities and superstitious constraints, until the 'heavens conspir'd his overthrow', in the ominous phrase of the opening Chorus. But to project Marlowe's own theological radicalism directly onto Faustus is to overlook the fact that tragedy is finally answerable less to an individual than to a culture, and less to opinion than to conflict. The Renaissance fusion is visible here in its full ambivalence. Magic appeals to Faustus because it allows intellectual activity to control the physical world;[35] he is betrayed, as were many Renaissance aspirations, by the impossibility of freeing his intellectual activity from materialist motives and the material sphere.

Faustus opens the play as the perfect Renaissance man, on the brink of great new enterprises. His perplexity looks familiar, and innocuous enough: the choices of a new graduate wondering whether to enter law school (but it is too boring), medical school (but people eventually die anyway), or graduate school in theology (but damnation is predestined – though Faustus here reads only a misleading fragment of the biblical text). Faustus's alternative career is sorcery, a practice that looks very much like an extension of the emergent Renaissance sciences: it involves astronomy, optics, ancient history, foreign languages, and navigation for exotic delicacies that may be exchanged for money and court favour. Faustus is even a Reformer, using his omnipotent book to attack the Pope and refute the power of Catholic rituals.

As in the foolish-wish motif of folklore, Faustus discovers that purchasing the privilege of violating the rules of nature is a bad bargain. The world he now commands is a small and flimsy one, and so the quest for transcendence generates only more claustrophobia. In exchange for his forfeited soul, Faustus receives merely some slapstick revenge, a little money, praise from the ignorant, unfulfilling fulfilments of his sexual fantasies, and a horrible spiritual emptiness. This list will seem unpleasantly familiar to many modern readers; even a relatively good life could easily be dismissed in some such terms, perhaps because consumerism in recent centuries has arguably offered poor recompense for losses of personal authenticity and religious faith. The play openly accuses Faustus of being responsible for his own fall through his wickedness and stupidity, but always reminds us on another level, whenever we assume a complacent stance of condemnation, that we may be making the same mistakes in less dramatic fashion. As in the Aristotelian model, the tragedy provides the audience with a catharsis of its shared tension by showing the fall of a great man, a fall which (to the extent that it results from his

[35] Barber, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy*, p. 123, asserts that 'the heroic quality of the magic depends on fusing these divine suggestions with tangible values and resources of the secular world'.

characteristic error) rouses our pity, and (to the extent that it results from a characteristic problem of our culture) rouses our fear as well.

Instead of using the face of the skull to mock worldly ambitions, Marlowe here uses the face of the clown; an old iconographic tactic gives way to a dramatic one. The sub-plot (whether or not it is actually part of Marlowe's original conception)[36] underscores the stupidity of Faustus's pact. Faustus sneers at the petty uses the clown finds for his stolen magical powers, but his own magical works are not so different, and he has paid a far higher price for them. Wagner says the clown 'would give his soul to the devil for a shoulder of mutton', an offer the clown refuses unless the mutton has 'good sauce to it' (1.4.7–11); does Faustus appear any wiser when he uses his dearly bought powers to swipe food off the Pope's plate? It is more exalted gravy, but gravy nonetheless. The clown tries to use magic to pay his bar tab; Faustus uses his to defraud the horse-trader. The clown says he would use magic to shrink himself into a flea so that he could infiltrate women's underwear, and to enchant the kitchen-wench Nan Spit into dancing for him naked. Faustus's first demand of Mephostophilis is a beautiful spouse, and his final magical project is conjuring the legendary beauty of Helen of Troy.

In other words, *Doctor Faustus* is a parable about spiritual loss in the modern world, a warning, not only about damnation in the conventional sense, but about the fatal corruption awaiting all Renaissance aspirations. Faustus's early vision of glorifying the human race with a vast benevolent empire quickly fades, and instead he ends trying to please emperors with groceries and holography. He uses his magic, not to turn men into gods, but instead to turn his hecklers into beasts. Commerce becomes a confidence game, the quest for exotic treasures sinks to trivial gourmandizing, and the revived appetite for physical pleasures degrades to the most sterile kind of lust (the same trio of failings will recur comically in Ben Jonson's Epicure Mammon and Volpone). In the assault on the Pope, the Reformation becomes mere vandalism. Any idealistic era must fear that the movement will lose direction, that its spirit will sour. *Doctor Faustus* confirms that this anxiety lurked in English Renaissance culture from its early days: the fear that the brilliant dreams of converting humanity into a race of angels would instead – as in fact happened – fall into the hands of cheaters and tyrants who would use improved science and navigation to crush the spirits and plunder the lands of foreign peoples, and to brutalize their own people through improved weaponry and centralized government; that learning would become

[36] Neither the 1604 version nor the 1616 version provides a fully satisfactory text; see the Textual Introduction to *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, 1973), II.123–59.

merely another tool of the class system, used to impress monarchs at court in hope of stray favours; that productions of beauty would be consumed in the ostentation of power.

The conversion of the earlier religious and allegorical versions of drama into a prototype of more naturalistic Renaissance tragedy in *Doctor Faustus* hardly involves a forfeiture of spiritual values. Instead, once again, the combination of grand spiritual questions with the detailed observation of real life creates a compelling new form of art. Tragedy is of course much older than Christianity, and offers its own wonderful inspirations and terrifying warnings for the human soul. Pride and despair, as reciprocal ailments of the human spirit, hardly began or ended with the Christian fervour of Western Europe in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In his awe-inspiring final soliloquy, a terrified Faustus is unable to stop the flow of mortal time, and unable either to accept Christ's forgiveness or to bear God's wrath. He has nowhere to go, and he is rapidly going there. This is a Christian warning, certainly, but more than that it is a warning to anyone living in a world (like Marlowe's, or ours) that invites short-sighted pride in individual status and the technological achievements of our species, a world haunted by religious uncertainties and irrational denials of mortality. The wicked tempter is certainly a devil, but also plausibly stands for everything that stirs our superficial egotistical appetites, all the choices we will look back on at the hour of our death (as individuals, or perhaps as a species) and wonder what we have so proudly, blindly, spent our souls on.

Othello

Othello (1603–4) is a tragedy disturbingly grafted onto a budding comedy, a vision of social harmony undone by the persistent inscrutable agency of conflict and evil. *Othello* marks the beginning of Shakespeare's great tragic period, and the first half of the play is a classic comic plot,[37] a pair of true lovers overcoming the usual dramatic obstacles: discrepant origins, a repressive father who uses his legal authority to forbid the marriage, swordfights with domestic and foreign rivals, and separation by a storm at sea. But love and valour triumph; the Herald announces that the miraculous defeat of the Turks and the joyous reunion of the newlyweds will be celebrated with dancing and revelry, and calls down the blessing of Heaven on this happy little world of Cyprus. All that is missing for the ending of a typical Shakespearian comedy is the hero's closing couplet, and a few lines later we have that

[37] Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Princeton, N.J., 1979) brilliantly explicates the functions of this kind of generic mixture.

too: 'Come my dear love: / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue. / The profit's yet to come 'twixt me and you' (2.3.8–10). At precisely this instant, however, Iago re-enters. He watches this domestic bliss from the margin, like Milton's Satan, gazing – first with enchantment, then with bitter envy – at the joy of the loving couple in their Eden. If love is the fulfilling mystery that propels comedy, then jealousy is the hungry mystery that sits in the audience, like Iago on the battlements at Cyprus, feeling inferior or excluded, and needs to poison that happiness. The spectator becomes another voyeur, unwillingly complicit with Iago in the destruction of comic confidence. We meet the enemy of such joys in *Othello*, and it is us.

The destructive agent known as Iago is overdetermined in Renaissance dramatic convention. He is partly the scheming Machiavel common throughout Renaissance tragedy, partly the vengeful malcontent of revenge plays, partly the instigator of jealousy characteristic of domestic tragedy, and partly (as Othello suggests in the final scene) the devil incarnate of morality plays. The seemingly endless critical debate about Iago's motivation (like the projective interpretations of *Hamlet*) reflects a truth, rather than a confusion, about the play. This is a villain who seems to tap the very root of the evil that manifests itself in various ways in various other tragedies. Shakespeare invites us to distance ourselves from Iago by alluding to his diabolical attributes. But if it is disturbing to suspect that a devil may be lurking around us in human form, perhaps within our most trusted friend, it is even more disturbing to realize that this devil may be (as anthropology suggests most are) a reflection of our own destructive tendencies. Iago becomes the voice of pointless envy, the perpetual enemy of friendship, love, and trust that we have always rationally but futilely willed out of existence. Desdemona is the ally of those virtues, an ally we unwittingly banish. So the residue of morality drama, the theological allegory that makes Iago 'hellish' and Desdemona 'heavenly', is on one level (as in *Doctor Faustus*) a figurative acknowledgement that we meet evil tempters and good angels in human form every day. Torn between them is Othello, an inclusive kind of Everyman. He is animal and angel, pagan and Christian, black and white, soldier and lover, foreigner and patriot. Iago exploits those schisms, making Othello rant like a beast, renounce Christian belief for pagan magic and blood-sacrifice, feel ashamed of his blackness, turn the bloody honour of the soldier against the gentle heart of the lover, and, in committing suicide, turn the patriot fiercely against the foreigner.

Iago's effectiveness is plausible because he is an insider of social spheres where his victim inevitably lacks assurance. Iago is opaque precisely because he seems so typical: a bawdy, back-slapping, hard-drinking soldier who believes in practical thinking and male loyalty. The adept and oblique way he rouses and focuses Othello's doubts makes it hard for us to feel complacent,

to pass the kind of judgement Thomas Rymer did in the seventeenth century against Othello for mere brute stupidity. If any of us were to provoke a passionate secret resentment in a supposed friend who knew how to speak in perfect harmony with our own worst inward voices, offered to prove the truth of our worst fears of humiliation, and to justify all the worst vengeful impulses those fears provoke, we would doubtless fall also, even if we weren't a stranger in a strange land, the only black face in a city of white ones, a romantic innocent in a world of sexual intrigue.

Iago is an insider in another, more metaphysical sense as well: he appears at times to be less an actual person than a demonic possessor of the victims he reads so preternaturally well. He seems to be a catalogue of bad motives: social envy, sexual jealousy, lust and bloodlust, greed and pride. But instead of presenting us with a parade of the sins like that in *Doctor Faustus*, *Othello* hints at an essential spiritual deformity underlying all these forms of evil. Iago has a faculty of envy as insatiable as Faustus's faculty of desire, and thereby as devastating to his society as Faustus is to his own soul. Iago's peculiar encounters with the verb 'to be' are symptoms of the disease: 'Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago', 'I am not what I am', 'And knowing what I am, I know what she shall be', 'He's that he is . . . If what he might he is not, / I would to heaven he were' (1.1.57, 65; 4.1.73, 270–2). This version of the villainous Italianate 'New Man' is also a hollow man, a Machiavellian with no self to serve.[38] Iago has a pathological tendency to see other people in his place – his rank, his night-cap, his sheets – as if he were invisible to himself, as if a kind of ontological lack compelled him constantly to replenish himself from the more authentic selves around him. His revenge against those he suspects of stealing his share of human authenticity is to bankrupt their love, their trust, even their socially constructed identities: Brabantio declares in anguish that he no longer has a daughter, Cassio that he has lost his name and rank, Desdemona that she has lost her lord, and Othello that his occupation is gone, that he has no wife, and finally, that he is no longer 'Othello'. If there is any truth to the notion that subjective selfhood was being (re-)invented at this historical moment, then Iago may be seen as a first symbol – and a first victim – of existential inauthenticity. No jealousy could be more pervasive; like the jealousy of the dead towards the living that sometimes seems to be driving Don Andrea's ghost in *The Spanish Tragedy*, it could drive a man to decimate the world and gloat over the ruins.

[38] W. H. Auden, 'The joker in the pack' in his *The Dyer's Hand* (New York, 1962), comments on the difficulty of defending against a villain who seeks no profit but the satisfaction of a perverse spite.

At the end of the play Shakespeare taunts us with the riddle of Iago's motivation, by having Iago vow never to explain himself. Again Shakespeare repeats a convention (Hieronimo's refusal to testify in *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example) in a way that infinitely expands its suggestiveness. Why is this refusal so disturbing? Iago has explained that he resents Othello for promoting Cassio over him. But (in soliloquy, where only a profoundly inauthentic person would have reason to lie) he has also attributed his vengefulness to love of Desdemona, and hatred of Othello; he suspects Othello with his wife Emilia, or perhaps Cassio with Emilia; he covets Roderigo's money, or Cassio's 'daily beauty'. Psychoanalysts diagnose repressed homosexuality behind all the spite and evasions, as if this were nothing a little therapy couldn't clear up. Christian-minded critics focus on the allegory of an 'eternal villain', 'demi-devil', and 'viper' attacking the angelic Desdemona and dragging Othello's soul to damnation; nothing, in other words, that couldn't be cured by a good exorcist. Historical critics link Iago to the malcontent figures such as Bosola in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, embittered beyond reason or morality by lost promotions; so there is nothing here that cannot be explained away by theatrical tradition and Renaissance court politics.

Though each of these arguments has some validity, and Shakespeare provides each with ample material on which to build, their limitations reveal the impossibility of defining the problems that tragedy poses. Such answers are consoling, which is precisely why they are wrong. People turn to therapists, exorcists, or even historians, when their changing worlds place them in impossible and even inarticulable conflicts. The role of tragedy, ideally, is to acknowledge those conflicts, to represent them in their unconquerable complexity, and to offer no solution except endurance on the part of the hero and awed sympathy on the part of the audience. Brabantio can blame witchcraft when his world collapses, the Venetian Senate can blame the Turks, Lodovico can diagnose madness, Othello can see a devil. Modern critics can blame the Fall, capitalism, or patriarchy. If we could know who or what or why Iago is, if we could understand why the comic dreams of love fulfilled come unravelled, then we could control the destructive element. We cannot, and we go to tragedy to reconcile ourselves to that hard truth.

Venetian society is as desperate as modern criticism to analyse Iago's motives: 'Torments will ope thy lips' (5.2.305). Society must explain and isolate the agent of discord which it necessarily calls evil, the corrosive on its necessary lines of trust. But the inexplicable thing at the heart of evil – the evil in our hearts – cannot be so efficiently regulated. The deceptive movements of the Turkish fleet can be successfully analysed in the bright lights of the Senate chamber, but outside in the darkness a more inward enemy will wreak the same kind of destruction to the Christian state and its values. Iago is

the continuation of pagan subversion by other means, by the eternal enemy swirling in the storm around the little island of civilization here represented by Cyprus.[39] From the beginning to the end of the play Iago is the voice of street crime, of sexual violation and murder in the dark, the waking embodiment of Brabantio's wicked dream, all the fears that make people lock their doors at night. He allies himself with the 'Turk' – by the play's metaphor, the enemy of Christian civilization – within each Venetian: with Brabantio's racism and sexual possessiveness towards his daughter; with Roderigo's wastrel spending, illicit lust, and cold-blooded violence; and with the vanity, hostility, and lust accessible in Cassio through the devilish 'spirit of wine' (2.3.281–3).

Above all, Iago rouses the residue of pagan violence lurking in Othello. As the play moves geographically to the East, Othello seems to come back under the spiritual gravity of his old world, where handkerchiefs have supernatural force, where people mate like goats and monkeys, where women bear a sinister magic, where murder can be called sacrifice, and where justice is revenge in the dark rather than deliberation in the bright light of the official reason.[40] That is why Othello, unable to kill Iago, settles for killing this revivified pagan self, a suicide by which he reasserts the identity that made him a hero in the Christian society:

> And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
> And smote him – thus. *[He stabs himself.]*
> (5.2.352–6)

This amputation may save the status of the hero, but it cannot again protect his adopted society; the good that dies at the end of this tragedy does not really take the evil with it. Lodovico and the Venetian emissaries do what they can to clean up the mess: closing curtains around the bodies, reassigning Othello's responsibilities and possessions, designating punishments for the villain, and shutting things up with another couplet that promises a full report to the authorities. But these official formulae cannot assure us that evil has disappeared, especially not in performance, because we see all too plainly that Iago is still there – still here. Iago has emerged from nowhere, the hero has failed to kill him, and the authorities have failed to explain him. The state can send out armies against the infidels, build prisons and

[39] Alvin Kernan describes this symbolic siege in his superb Introduction to the Signet *Othello* (New York, 1963), pp. xxvii–xxix.

[40] Kernan, *Othello*, pp. xxix–xxxi, traces the effect of this migration on Othello.

torture racks for the criminals, but to some extent such efforts are merely symbolic gestures; the scapegoat may be confined, the tumour excised, but the cancer is still whispering from cell to cell in the body politic. The mere fact that someone cruelly destroys a potentially happy marriage is sad, but not necessarily tragic. What gives *Othello* its magnificence is the immense beauty of its language and its passions; what gives the play its lasting penetration is the warning that there is an enemy lurking in human nature, in each of our human natures, waiting for a chance to rewrite the potential joyful comedy of life into a tragedy.

The Duchess of Malfi

The Duchess of Malfi (in Webster's version of the story) is a young widow who, despite the fervent warnings of her brothers (Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal), decides to remarry. She successfully conceals this remarriage until the malcontent Bosola, hired by the brothers to spy on her, discovers that she has borne a son. After two more children appear, Ferdinand furiously confronts the Duchess, but she conceals her husband Antonio's identity (especially necessary because he had been her lowly steward) and smuggles him out of Amalfi. Unfortunately, she confides her plans to Bosola, so the couple are separated, and Ferdinand and Bosola torment the imprisoned Duchess with a swarm of madmen, a dead man's hand supposedly belonging to Antonio, and a wax *tableau pas encore vivant* supposedly showing her slaughtered husband and children. Bosola then strangles her, but her noble defiance at the point of death, and the continuing failure of the brothers to reward his service, convince him that he should save Antonio. Ironically, in his first effort to strike down the Cardinal, Bosola accidentally kills the man he had come to save; he does finally kill the Cardinal, only to exchange fatal wounds with Ferdinand, whose guilt concerning the Duchess has driven him into a lycanthropic madness.

This plot, based on events that took place a century earlier in Italy, is clearly less important than the play's vivid characters and haunting atmosphere. The action is generated by the jealousy, greed, and pride of the brothers, but the tragedy is less concerned with evil than with corruption, with the struggle of Bosola to maintain his integrity. Bosola is a spiritual kinsman of Vindice: a malcontent revenger whose strong moral instincts have been perverted by the decadent court he inhabits. He leads the moralized parade of characters which (as in *The Revenger's Tragedy*) opens the play, where he is described as the conventional 'railing' satirist; and his first words, a complaint of official neglect, mark him as the conventional malcontent: 'I have done you better service than to be slighted thus' (1.1.24, 33). This might identify Bosola as

another Iago, a treacherously 'honest' Italian confidant of the passionate unlikely lovers at the heart of the story. Iago, however, is interesting because his evil is too fundamental to be changed, whereas Bosola is interesting because the nobility of the Duchess reawakens his bitterly repressed virtues.

If it were not for the Duchess herself, *The Duchess of Malfi* would end this triad of theodicean tragedies in the same ironic vein as the triad of revenge tragedies. Without her steadfastness and tenderness, this would be a play of irony and scorn like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, rather than (as it proves) of passion and sorrow. Like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi* toys with the queasy humour of theatrical self-consciousness, as in Delio's remark on the passage of time between the second and third acts. More often, however, Webster uses metadrama for serious interrogations of identity and predestination. The Duchess tells Bosola, 'I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will' (4.1.99–100). This is partly Stoicism – an essential component of most Renaissance tragic heroism – but it is also (as in *Hamlet*) a commentary on tragic human destiny. For her to carry her archaic virtues successfully to the Jacobean audience, she must redeem the genre of the play she inhabits from the satiric tragedy of decadence and horror envisioned by Bosola.[41]

Unfortunately, as many critics have complained,[42] *The Duchess of Malfi* does not end with the heroine's courageous death that closes the fourth act. She may be present in the wistful disembodied echo that subsequently tries to warn Antonio away from his doom, but that prophetic voice proves as futile as Cassandra's (5.3.21–54). She scores heroic victories against many of the villains of Jacobean culture – false pride of rank, greed for inheritances, religious doubt, political corruption, patriarchal tyranny – but her victories endure only within her subjectivity, which may itself be vulnerable to her death. The fact that Bosola inadvertently continues to do the work of evil when he tries to perform virtuous retribution suggests that this play-world suffers not from a few evil men or evil choices, but rather from a decadence so pervasive and an entropy so unprovidential that individual assertions count for little. The theodicy of *The Duchess of Malfi* thus becomes virtually the opposite of *Doctor Faustus*, where one person perversely rejected a Providential universe; now evil is a normative condition of civilization that only a heroic will can defy. As the decay of Elizabeth and the growth of

[41] Norman Rabkin characterizes this tragedy as predominantly satirical in the Introduction to his edition of *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of 'The Duchess of Malfi'* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 10; the volume contains many valuable essays and excerpts.

[42] See for example William Archer, *The Old Drama and the New* (New York, 1929), p. 60. For a contrary view, see Lee Bliss, *The World's Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983), pp. 158–9.

astronomy renew anxieties about mutability, and as Reformation theology commandeers popular consciousness, the notion that individual virtue can meaningfully affect destiny becomes enfeebled. This may help to explain the emergence of women as tragic protagonists: especially after the death of the Virgin Queen, male playwrights increasingly acknowledge this tragic deprivation of control as the normative condition of women. *The Duchess of Malfi* leaves us perplexed as to whether the heroine's long endurance is the redemptive truth of the tragedy, or whether the continuing descent into irony, error, and destruction in the final act proves that even such a magnificent embodiment of the old virtues cannot finally redeem a world – her Italian one or the author's Jacobean one – from a loss of meaning, an epidemic of moral as well as physical decay. She makes a good end and a beautiful corpse, but dying well may not be good enough.

Furthermore, her task as tragic protagonist is to escape precisely the grand scenes of ambition that Elizabethan tragic heroes pursued so avidly. All she seeks is happy domesticity with her accountant husband, and she faces assassination with pious acceptance and a last request that could hardly be more poignantly maternal, or further from questions of politics and revenge: 'I pray thee look thou givest my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers ere she sleep' (4.2.207–9). This subjugation of traditionally heroic values to bourgeois ones[43] may signal a growing Jacobean despair about the morality and manageability of the public sphere. The captured King Lear certainly seeks a comparably domestic refuge, forswearing all political involvement and begging permission merely to live in playful solitude with his daughter Cordelia.

In tragedy, some envious force on the fringe of the domestic paradise intervenes to subvert this familiar comic solution. *Othello* shifts suddenly and chillingly from the marriage celebration to the perspective of the villain; *The Duchess of Malfi* allows us our first glimpse inside the Duchess's happy household, only to confront us shockingly with its nemesis. As the Duchess banters with her husband and her serving-woman about sex, marriage, and grey hair, her companions sneak playfully out of the room, and she turns to find herself alone with her evil twin, the murderously jealous Ferdinand, who has overheard all this domestic prattle (3.2.1–79), and who will lie in ambush for years, if necessary, to reclaim her from her little world of bliss.

[43] Rabkin, *Interpretations*, p. 7, perceives a despondent Jacobean inversion of tragic values in this transformation of a great heroine into a 'good bourgeoise'; Bliss, *The World's Perspective*, pp. 144–6, 167–8, explicates this idea perceptively. But even Faustus and Macbeth express regret, in their final moments, that they did not settle for pleasant little dinner-parties with their friends.

The impulse to use Renaissance arts to build a new Eden always proves a dangerous delusion in drama, whether that paradise is envisioned with tragic grandeur as in *Doctor Faustus*, with satiric excess as in Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), or with a magical romantic aura as in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611). In these three cases one can blame the new Fall on vanity; the forgotten darker side of human nature (embodied by devils, cheaters, and savages respectively) exacts retribution. In the case of the Duchess's domestic retreat, however, the audience confronts the possibility that destruction needs no licence from sin, that a mutable indifferent world consumes each caring mortal creature, that (as Bosola says) 'We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and bandied / Which way please them' (5.4.63–4). By sustaining her faith, hope, and charity until her final belated breath, the Duchess of Malfi strives to forestall that recognition, but her end is not the play's end, and her last word – 'Mercy' – hardly characterizes the random carnage of the closing scenes.

In the world of *The Duchess of Malfi*, 'all things have their end' (5.3.18), and no one has control – an impression the abrupt shifts in Webster's dramaturgy serve to reinforce. The magnificent Duchess may conceal and protect her family for a while, but punishment is promised and eventually performed. The tough and crafty Bosola may scheme, but his deeds contradict his own wishes, and even his successes are without reward. Ferdinand makes hyperbolic efforts to forbid and penalize his sister's remarriage, but she promptly defies both his warnings and his tortures, and madness soon prevents him from controlling even himself. The Cardinal, the most detached and powerful manipulator, finds events fatally run away from him even among his family and his hirelings, and dies with the saddest, most defeated last words of all: 'And now, I pray, let me / Be laid by, and never thought of' (5.5.112–13). Even the Duchess's surviving young son, who (in a familiar tragic consolation) righteously assumes power at the end, already seems doomed to early, violent death by the horoscope made at his birth (2.3.72–80).

Though it is facile to schematize cultural shifts by quoting lines out of context, it is hard to mistake the profound collapse of optimism signalled by the change from Faustus's youthful exclamation, 'O what a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, and omnipotence, / Is promised to the studious artisan' (1.1.80–2), to Bosola's dying question, 'In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, / Doth womanish and fearful mankind live?' (5.5.125–6). Faustus fails, but he leaves us thinking about the human mind; Jacobean tragedy more often reverts to the medieval model by leaving the skull instead, with its mocking grin, as our dominant impression. In Jacobean playwrights, as in the Metaphysical poets of the same

era, the spiritual component of human experience struggles perpetually to avoid eclipse by the physical. Bosola associates his own corruption from a moral idealist into a Machiavellian pragmatist with the Renaissance fashion in painting that rejected the grand iconic style in favour of realistic reproduction of the lowliest things: 'Now for this act, I am certain to be rais'd, / And men that paint weeds to the life are prais'd' (3.2.378–9).

At the same time, however, Jacobean tragedy and Metaphysical poetry commonly strive to rescue individual experience and expression from absorption by the conventional. *The Duchess of Malfi* resonates this fundamental Renaissance ambivalence about the relative values of the abstract (which imposes impersonality, but may permit transcendence) and the empirical (which permits individual experience, but imposes the limits of physicality). T. S. Eliot remarks that 'The art of the Elizabethans is an impure art' because they sought 'to attain complete realism without surrendering any of the advantages which as artists they observed in unrealistic conventions'[44]; but contamination can sometimes be enrichment, and so it is in the case of Webster's dramaturgy.[45] Though many of the devices of plot and spectacle in *The Duchess of Malfi* are quite conventional, the powerful impression of doomed personality evoked by the fragments of Webster's poetry is not; once again the tragic hero inhabits a universe that constantly threatens to eradicate her individuality. The Duchess herself gratifyingly combines unrealistic extremes of conventional virtue with realistic bodily frailties, including impetuous appetites for food and sexual love; the plot of the play, concerning her doomed determination to obey her personal desires, is virtually inseparable from the tension inherent in the literary form itself. She is a heroic individual, a tautology in that Renaissance tragedy made individuality a precondition for heroism, an oxymoron in that conformity to a heroic role necessarily entails some surrender of individual traits, and loyalty to the heroic principles commonly leads to the obliteration of individual existence in death. Even the Duchess, who abjures traditional public heroism for the sake of private experience, must endure this bitter paradox.

So it is not surprising that the Renaissance tragic hero is so often shadowed by a negative image of individualism: the self-fashioned, self-conscious Machiavellian villain who coldly assumes that human identity has neither a stable core nor a meaningful connection to anything beyond itself. The brothers lure Bosola into this condition, and the Duchess retrieves him from

[44] T. S. Eliot, 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists' in *Selected Essays* (London, 1951 edn), pp. 114–16.
[45] Inga-Stina Ekeblad, 'The "impure art" of John Webster' in Rabkin, *Interpretations*, pp. 49–64, comments on the potential richness of such mixtures.

it by sustaining her virtues through the worst morbid and mordant scenarios he can cast her in. The fear and pity that the malcontent Bosola feels may therefore pass through him to the cynical audience of Jacobean tragedy. In the haunting *pas de deux* of the torture scene – a scene of modern absurdist, more than medieval macabre, terror – the archetypal confrontation between the heroic individual and the implacable, impersonal forces of the physical universe becomes starkly visible. Bosola comes to the Duchess aptly disguised as a tomb-maker and as the old bell-man who visits condemned prisoners; when her personal misery leads her to curse 'the world / To its first chaos', he tauntingly replies, 'Look you, the stars shine still' (4.1.118–20). Yet in the following scene, as Bosola relentlessly attacks her morale with his *memento mori* commonplaces, the Duchess replies defiantly, 'I am Duchess of Malfi still' (4.2.115–39). These counterpoised declarations are each manifestly true. Death (accelerated by the evils of pride, greed, and jealousy that propel the other tragedies of theodicy) does indeed destroy her, and the universe goes on. But she also retains her heroic integrity in the very face of death, forbids it to compromise the power of her will and the tenderness of her heart. Compelled to adjudicate this confrontation, the audience must internalize the tragic ambivalence, the choice between absorption in the determinate forces of decay, and futile rebellion on behalf of the human individual and her unfathomable capacity for love.

Conclusion

Ideally, the modern audience of Renaissance tragedy must remain simultaneously aware that the plays were created within a particular historical context, and that they may still bear on the audience's own world. A tragedy is a product of very specific issues in crisis at the time of its generation; continuities and analogies may also allow it to speak to persistent problems of human existence. The critical movement called New Historicism shares with old-fashioned historical criticism a tendency to isolate the plays as political artifacts and allegories: the old version tried to determine which courtiers are being praised or mocked in which characters, whereas the new one tries to determine which cultural orthodoxies and governmental powers are being implicitly endorsed or subverted, but the interpretive attitude is generally comparable.

Though such information is certainly useful, allowing it to estrange us from the implied psychological experience of the characters is wasteful, because there are at least two important ways of connecting the past with the present. The liberal-humanist viewpoint, which has been fundamental to most teaching of Renaissance tragedy (and may have been fundamental to the writing

of that tragedy as well),[46] suggests that canonical literature is the vessel by which eternal human truths and values are conveyed across time. Opposing this rather patrician and ahistorical model is a cultural-materialist approach that seeks in Renaissance tragedy the ancestry of modern radicalism,[47] a frequency-channel on which ideas that undermine the status quo and common wisdom of dominant Renaissance cultures (by exposing them as arbitrary) were already audible. The theatre is thus a place of subversion – though (some New Historicists now believe) a strategically isolated one, a dead virus used to inoculate the body politic against revolutionary tendencies.

Surely art does both things: preserves cultural values and tests their weaknesses. Surely there is validity in both the liberal-humanist fear of losing the past with its accreted moral wisdom, and the cultural-materialist fear of remaining inscribed in regressive values; there is virtue in both the traditional insistence that personal experience must not be obliterated by systematic political thinking, and the revolutionary warning that sentimental focus on the tragic individual conduces to quietism concerning the mechanisms of widespread social injustice. Circumventing the severe but literal-minded censorship of the Revels Office, Renaissance tragedy was often an expression of anarchical popular will and a cry of protest against the shared agonies of historical change, but it may not have its ultimate reference, or offer practical solutions, to specific political or economic problems, because it cannot isolate or erase the contradictions created by our cognitive failings, by our simultaneous co-operation and competition in the business of survival, by our mixed nature as mental and physical beings, or by our status as creatures aware of our ineluctable and imponderable mortality. These are not crises of an age, but for all time.

Still, the points of contestation in a late-twentieth-century intellectual community often diverge from those of Elizabethan culture, so modern students and theatre audiences may feel compelled to highlight and to challenge aspects of the plays that are likely to have been inactive ingredients to Elizabethan consumers. Some scholarship discerns tragedians who were prophetic, but necessarily covertly so, in challenging the humanistic presumptions, the class system, the gender discrimination, even the Christianity

[46] Hardin Craig, 'The shackling of accidents' in R. J. Kaufman, ed., *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1961), p. 24, argues that the Renaissance 'doctrine of imitation . . . rests ultimately upon the great doctrine of similitude. The Renaissance looked upon man as a universal being repeating in his life the deeds of all men . . . Men's actions are always alike because their natures are always the same.'

[47] See for examples the essays in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester, 1985), and John Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares* (London, 1985).

of their societies. Other scholarship assumes the tragedians were complacent or even propagandistic on these points,[48] and attacks them for that failing. Is *The Changeling* a proto-feminist play for showing its female protagonist destroyed because (like Gertrude in *Hamlet*) she has no imputed power except as an object of sexual and marital desire? Or a sexist play, for failing to focus our outrage on that aspect of her dilemma? Or an historical artifact to which modern feminist terminology cannot justly or productively be applied? Similar questions can of course be raised about racism in Marston's *Sophonisba*, anti-Semitism in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, or the class system in Fletcher's *Bonduca* (1611–14). The questions are impossible to answer, and well worth asking.

In fact, tragedy is a genre of unanswerable questions that are worth asking. Renaissance theatres were, as the authorities often suspected, the breeding-grounds of profoundly seditious conspiracies – not because the heroes advocated destruction of the social order, but because the tragic dilemmas of those heroes performed a kind of deconstruction on the limiting and contradictory aspects of the current vocabulary of belief. Every culture has lines of enquiry it must forbid in self-defence; the Renaissance strained the mechanisms of repression and diversion to their limits, and one result was a variety of great drama. When ideology loses its ability to explain away human suffering and mortality, what remains is a sympathetic recognition of our kinship with the victims. Tragic theatre is not only a precious institution for the negotiation of cultural change, it is also the supreme instrument for nurturing such sympathy. For most students and audiences the language of Renaissance tragedy must now be almost opaque, the conventions unfamiliar; yet something survives that makes the modern appreciation of these works more than merely archaeological. Is it really surprising that dramatic confrontations with jealousy, revenge, and mortality should exercise continuing power? No mystical theory of archetypes is required to justify the belief that human beings can recognize, learn from, and care about the suffering of even their distant kindred. This is not to exclude the diversity of human experience by sentimental appeal to an essentialist idea of human nature, but rather to acknowledge the force of shared recognitions when they are made available – and tragic theatre has long been the most compelling medium for the shared recognition of what many human beings, in their passions and their losses, have in common.

[48] E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1943), has been the main target of revisionists seeking to liberate the plays from the hierarchical ideas of their time, or seeking to prove that those ideas were in fact the propaganda of the power élite rather than universal belief.

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Relatively recent books discussing English Renaissance tragedy in general include Irving Ribner, *Jacobean Tragedy* (1962); Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (1965); T. B. Tomlinson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* (1964); J. M. R. Margeson, *The Origins of English*

Tragedy (1967); Roger Stilling, *Love and Death in English Renaissance Tragedy* (1976); Nicholas Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (1979); Thomas McAlindon, *English Renaissance Tragedy* (1986); Roland Wymer, *Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama* (1986); and Raphael Falco, *Charismatic Authority in Early Modern English Tragedy* (2000).

Neither Cultural Materialist criticism (despite the impressive efforts of Terry Eagleton, Peter Stallybrass, and others), nor its American cousin, New Historicism (best represented in the work of Stephen Greenblatt), has yet colonized tragedy as successfully as they have several other Renaissance genres. Nor has deconstruction found especially good hunting, perhaps because the tragedies are avowedly multivocal and indeterminate. Some structuralist arguments, based in anthropology, have gained attention, such as René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), which describes tragic theatre as an essential social ritual used to forestall potentially endless cycles of blood-revenge; and Susan Cole's *The Absent One* (1985), which describes tragedy as a displaced ritual of mourning. Robert N. Watson, *The Rest is Silence* (1994), and Michael Neill, *Issues of Death* (1997), explore mortality as a provocation and topic of tragedy. Stephen Booth, *'King Lear', 'Macbeth', Indefinition, and Tragedy* (1983), develops superb close reading into a theoretical insight. Timothy Reiss's *Tragedy and Truth* (1980) attempts to provide a sophisticated theoretical view covering several periods and nationalities; Reiss's 'Renaissance theatre and the theory of tragedy', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Renaissance,* (vol. III) ed. Glyn P. Norton (2000), offers an excellent, information-packed summary of scholarly views across early modern Europe.

Feminist approaches to the genre are increasingly prominent, focused primarily on the exploitative tendencies of patriarchy; in addition to Belsey, see Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate* (1981); Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters* (1983); Dympna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (1989); and Alison Findlay, *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama* (1999), as well as Janet Adelman's shrewd psychoanalytic reading of Shakespeare, *Suffocating Mothers* (1992); for a controversial attack on feminist readings of tragedy, see Richard Levin, 'Feminist thematics and Shakespearean tragedy', *PMLA* 103 (1988), 125–38. Important recent work on other dramatists includes Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (1980), A. R. Braunmuller, *Natural Fictions: George Chapman's Major Tragedies* (1992), and Rowland Wymer, *Webster and Ford* (1995).

Texts

All references to Marlowe and Webster are based on the standard editions cited at the front of this volume. References to Shakespeare are based on the Riverside edition, 2nd edn, ed. G. B. Evans *et al*. (1997). *The Spanish Tragedy* is cited from the Revels version, ed. Philip Edwards (1959); *The Revenger's Tragedy* is also cited from the Revels series, ed. R. A. Foakes (1966).