

# Early English Tragedy, Ibsen, and Drama's Mirroring Rhythm



# Early English Tragedy, Ibsen, and Drama's Mirroring Rhythm:

*Shades of Enactment*

By

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*Shades of Enactment:  
Early English Tragedy,  
Ibsen, and Drama's Mirroring Rhythm; What we can say in a time*

Frederic Will



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.....	1
Drama and its Moments in Cultural History	
II .....	7
The Return Gift Mirror	
III.....	9
Eight Early English Tragedies	
IV .....	55
Henrik Ibsen	
V .....	95
Postscript	





# I

## DRAMA AND ITS MOMENTS IN CULTURAL HISTORY

What was the moment for Greek tragedy, the earliest prominent moment for the genre of drama in the west? (We exclude, here, those Near Eastern drama poems like *The Song of Inana*, or early Indian religious drama, pieces of cultural perspective that hardly apply to the western mind set).

We see the hues of the western dramatic moment appearing by the eighth century B.C. Homer has opened up to art and discipline the possibilities of narrative. There have been epic cycles, and bards transporting ancient Ionian tales up and down the Aegean. Ionian Greece has learned, in that same century, to value the art of individual expression in many realms. Pots, jewelry, and lyrics all added themselves to the possibilities of expression. A new world was opening, and with it the sailing vessels that criss-crossed the Mediterranean, opening up harbors, pocket books and minds. The brightness of Hellas was starting to make itself felt. It would not be long before the communal spirit began to transform Hellas into a polity, with some cohesion firm enough to suggest the birth of a state. That was truly the future appearing.

But we mustn't get ahead of ourselves or far from the birth of Greek drama. What we are really aiming at, you see, is a glimpse of the origin of the tragic drama, the formula that Nietzsche found in the Apollonian and Dionysian principles he found fused in the greatest Greek art, and that he celebrated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The aesthetic sensibility, already exercising itself on the Greek mainland in the eighth century, was available for imaginative reconstruction just as the coherence of Hellenic political life was declaring a new presence. It is in fact no coincidence that Solon and Peisistratus were emerging as major social figures, just as the earliest proto plays were becoming objects of public awareness and competitiveness.

The anthropological perspective, of the step over the line into dramatic performance, after society and its artists had made for the ritual conditions, draws its life blood from the Cambridge scholars—A. C. Cook, Jane Harrison—who in the early twentieth first laid out plausible accounts of the origins of Greek tragedy. These scholars were not themselves without history, for classical scholarship had itself since the Renaissance taken on the burden of reflexivity, recognizing that it was itself a product of its own history, even in the process of carrying out the work of scholarship. As an historical product, itself, classical scholarship embodied inside itself the awareness that Greek tragedy had to have issued from concrete cultural-historical conditions, like the need to clarify, to itself, the character of its own lived reality.

With a perception like that behind us, we gain traction on the kind of realistic account of the birth of Greek tragedy that is given by the Cambridge University anthropologists. They argued as if from the existential center of the growing assemblies of communities in eighth century mainland Greece. From the standpoint of such viewpoint- testing groups, it seemed, an already popular set of inherited tales was available, popular oral fodder for the waves of new mainland settlers who had given their name to the Dorian invasion from the north. Those tales, which were to provide images of the peripeties of the human condition, flashed across eighth century eyes as reminders of the violences that make life hazardous, the threats that make peace fleeting, the powerful unions that sexuality and joy establish into events, or the rare promises, written in the movement of events, of durable meaning or even peace, inscribed in the seeming inexorability of being.

From that temporal background, believed the scholars from Cambridge, emerged some of the earliest and most promising fruits of writing, which though well practiced for several thousand years in the Tigris Euphrates Valley, and employed for masterpieces like *Gilgamesh*, as well as for lyric poetry in the Nile Valley, were just offering themselves up to westernized scripts in Greece at the time of which we write. For the much longed for textual samples, to which we might long to turn, for the filling out of the early Greek dramatic register, we have as heralds assorted fragments and bits until we more than stumble on plays like an unlikely narrative duel between an heroic man god and an eagle evidently sent by the supreme being. We can only speculate on the nature of this written crossing point of Dorian mind with a vast simulacrum of the human condition. World as interpretation pulsed through whatever sun struck grove was hosting this festival of intelligibility.

Greek tragedy presents itself as the Ur dramatic moment of western culture—and its assumption of role can never have taken position with more bravura than in that grove near Eleusis. Think of the western mind before it had drama artifacts to mirror against itself. The proposal is staggeringly rich in implications. Not that the line of that thought had not been opened. Between pure historical presence to the world, and a colored world in which the hues of humanity are mirrored back to human creators, lies all the difference that divides civilization from blunt presence.

What did the imaginers of this first of all plays, *Prometheus*, say to themselves of the image of themselves. they were presenting to themselves? What did they make of that NO to Zeus' tyranny, which rolls out over us in squadrons of oppression? What kind of neurological responses did their bodies dower? Did they dance? Are we talking, here, about celebratory festivals at which life meanings felt their ways down into and through the whole meaning hungry corpus?

We are thinking/dreaming/trying out, and yet we feel we have planks of psycho historical reality under our feet. Can we psycho dramatize further, and take Prometheus as our model? This play was composed in the first half of the fifth century before Christ, one of the earliest popularly performed of Greek dramas. Can we put ourselves before that drama, and take it into ourselves? Can we simulate our presence to this momentous occasion, and thereby purchase ourselves a hold on the 'dramatic experience' as we will be tracking it into early English tragedy? And beyond, into a dour and complex early modern Scandinavia?

The present, of the theater goer's experience, will sharply intersect with the kind of world he brings, to each watching of the play. (The first half of the fifth century in Athens was obsessed with the Wars with Persia, which more or less coincide with the performance dates of *Prometheus Bound*. The Athenian audience can be understood to be carrying the influence of war mixed with war news and mood straight into the haunting depiction of a banished god man struggling on man's behalf.

It is the role of Prometheus that we need most carefully to factor into the spectator of Aeschylus' most powerful remaining play. Prometheus' sin, in the eyes of the supreme god, was to have taken pity on mankind, the hairless and ultimately impotent species weakly cohabiting the earth with the other animals. The particular Power of Zeus lay in the gift of fire; the ability to

control this elemental substance gave man the ability to combat even the Gods.

The *Prometheus Bound* unrolls the scenario by which allies of Zeus, flying past a stark peak in the Caucasus, warn the god—whose name means *Forethought*—of an implacable hatred Zeus feels for him, a hatred rooted in a secret that we ourselves, the spectators today or in 475 B.C., cannot penetrate, the secret of when and by whom Zeus will fall. Prometheus himself remains stolidly defiant in face of the demand to reveal this secret. He is, after all, the god who dared to give man the power of fire, the source of all his skill with the arts and sciences. And the play deploying itself, across the sense place of the perceptive Athenian will be a humanist banner waved across a sensorium hungry for intelligibility and resolution in the midst of a seemingly endless war.

The birth of drama will be exemplified in the above—though sketchily and in a fashion hoping to build itself out seamlessly into the following text on Early English Drama, and from there onto the world of Henrik Ibsen. (The plan, obviously, will be to launch out from this preliminary material on the origin of Tragedy and the representative values it serves-- ordinary communities-- to make some passing moves through the topographies of Greco Roman drama, and then to wade into the earliest modern western drama. With luck we will have cobbled together an enlightening unitary picture of the cultural psycho genesis of western drama. We will conclude this brief classical prelude with some loose flowing excerpts from the author's wider thinking on history and drama.

### ***Drama in Ancient Greece***

Widening our time frame, from Aeschylus and Prometheus out into the soon to grow inward-cultural power of tragic drama, we see that the fertile psychodrama in the groves, from which the tragic model derives, had inexplicable developmental power. (We play too much, perhaps, with the notion of the inexplicable, and in fact may be clouding over, to ourselves, the very question of what forward movement is in history. What got us from the earliest Greek tragedies to the mid fifth century? What got us from Herodotus and Thucydides. from there to here?) We know that the greatest age toward which early Attic drama pointed, would be the final years of the fifth century, by which time hundreds of tragic dramas had been staged in Athens, and this particular art form had become an orthodox cultural behavior. What got us to there from the earliest Greek tragedies? The answer

will have to reside in the inevitable formula of success in the cultural arts. What promotes increasing clarity, aesthetic perspicuity, overall sense of world understanding—whatever in the art that meets these conditions will survive and generate more of itself. Whatever becomes a mechanical repetition of itself loses the power of self-generation.

The end of the Peloponnesian War, the end of the century, this is a time when cultural history seems to pause us as historians, and make us reflect, for instance, on the advancements introduced to us by the development of drama, in the foregoing century. We are at the end of the century leader, Pericles. We have seen the birth of modern history-presence. We have seen achievements in sculpture and architecture which serve still today as models of humanity's greatest achievement. As far as drama is concerned, and with reference only to the slim bundle of texts, forty or fifty, which survived temporality and papyrus, we have gathered to our eyes the fate-edited remains of a vast corpus of literary texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Euripides. We have major plays---thirty or forty-- in which to observe the functioning of the dramatic charisma, the projection of the social self into the fresh space of narrative invention, with the corresponding return in self-understanding. It is not to be wondered, given the durability of this dramatic syndrome, that tragic drama itself provided the axial energy for the most durable of Greek art forms.

### ***The meandering streams of Greek drama after the fifth century***

We have laid down some path ways into what will one day become the account we give of the history of a literary genre, classical tragic drama. So far it has been little more than schematic; our aim to explain the dynamic that our discussion has found at the genesis of the vibrant durability of classical tragedy. We now envision many mountains of time, before we reach the promised land of Early English Tragedy. We stand on the sill of a long new era, of which we ourselves are still part, and which will include nearly three thousand years of rituals designed to sustain the self reflexive traditions of Greek tragedy. (Self-reflexive? One acts out a self image, or a societal image, then mirrors it back onto the self or the social consciousness, to study oneself, to 'hold as twere the mirror up to life' or to where, as Leonardo da Vinci said, 'the mirror is our life.' Once this dynamic has established itself, and we have learned how to set it in motion, what we call cultural history will take care of the rest.

In the wake of the Hellenic achievement in tragic art, which was preponderantly in the arts of tragedy, the drama mirror of Hellenistic and Roman times opened its proscenia to the comic face—as well as the melodramatic. (We should freely attribute this modal shift to new urbanisms, new ways of experiencing others in society, and in general to increasingly astute inner equipment for analytical thinking.) Though the creations of Menander, Plautus, and Terence were all comic-tinged, they gave up nothing, thereby, of the benign advantages of the comic quest. Slaves, servants, and irascible masters strut their stuff through suburban mansions, acting out their suburban audiences' jocular self-discoveries of their foibles which, though not rising to the level of tragic realizations, were consistent reminders of the modesty becoming human creatures. As the viewer in Shakespeare helps us see, the comic and tragic syndromes are equally available to the stage and can equally—let us tap Aristotle's shoulder—arouse a kind of catharsis in the reader or viewer.

## II

### THE RETURN GIFT MIRROR

The return gift mirror of the dramatic act was not lost on the ages that separated Early English tragedy from Antiquity. For reasons difficult to formulate, the dramatic impulse flowers at various periods, and declines or grows very intermittently at others. We should be able to comment on this state of affairs to facilitate the uses for which we have found a plausible formula, the self mirroring formula, which culminates from an effort to play, the end of which play game is greatly to increase the advantages the human can derive from studying his own image. The play, as a way of playing oneself forward to take a good look at who we are, is a durable piece of human psychological equipment. That taking a good look at is of a mechanics the Japanese cinematographer Kurosawa illustrates in his film *What a Wonderful Day*, the tale of a young couple seeking for bliss on one of their every week end dates. Out of money, thwarted in their efforts to plan a life together, an upwelling theatrical urge overwhelms them. They build, in their minds' sky, an amphitheater from the podium of which he commences to direct Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. Before him outstretches a vast audience, lovers of this work of Schubert, separated from the conductor by... by nothing, in fact, but by the space of communication. It is the kind of return of the created onto the Creator—the audience in a theatrical performance creates the author—as the audiences of Menander are the *raison d'être* of Menander himself as author. Is this mirror instruction effect peculiar to the relations of the dramatist to his audience, or would it apply equally to that of the poet or novelist to their audience? The dramatist offers an action, then waits for an audience to study and evaluate that action. Do they recommend the play to their friends? Do their friends talk up the play in elite circles? What is the circumference of effect of a play? The novel or poem, for we have proposed those examples, do widespread work in the mind, but that work will tend to travel outward with the mind—even to divert, recenter, reorganize itself, follow, that is, lines promoted by imagination—while the drama tends to remain, to evolve along an intensive feedback loop that ties shaper to respondent directly to his audience.

The introduction of the notion of imagination adds a useful term to the language we will be about to employ, in talking about early English tragedy. It will be useful there to limit the use of imagination, because drama has been, as we will have seen, a product of a mechanical creativity cycle, more than of a recreative process. This may well be a misleading statement; the killer feature lies in the word 'mechanical', which is here intended to imply consistent and ritualized, rather than in any way sterile. What we said at the start, to configure the original type of the dramatic experience, invested us then in the classicist's favorite myth of the origins of drama in Greece.



### III

## EIGHT EARLY ENGLISH TRAGEDIES

### *1 Gorboduc (1561)* **Norton and Sackville**

#### *The Backdrop*

To the contemporary theatergoer—who hustles into Broadway or into Covent Garden—the intimacy and personal referencing of the sixteenth century British theatrical experience, comes as a surprise. We didn't really know what kind of theatrical world our forefathers lived in. The historical sense, of the bustling man on the street, was not greatly refined; in fact was probably minimal—as we tend to think it is today. (Only the most formally educated were likely to have had even a rudimentary sense of the past of their own nation.)

The present play was first performed in the Inner Temple, one of the four inns of Court—the vetting source for the barristers of England and Wales. The audience will have been part of the new upper-middle to elite city folk—living and working in the City of London and participating in the new values and modish expressions of this early modern age.

The relevance of the current play, to the lives of a contemporary theatergoer, would have been as tangible as the proximity of the colorfully dressed actors. The play before them would have dealt with the subject of royal inheritance, and particularly with the disastrous consequences of a disorderly monarchical succession. The talk of the culture, after all, was Queen Elizabeth's much hoped for impending marriage, an event passionately hoped for by the British people. The plot of the present play at all points reflects the central importance of a good succession, and of an orderly government to support it. Americans of today, 2020-30 A.D., have learned, from the theatrics of President Donald Trump, how crucial a good leaderly succession is to a healthy polity.) They realized some time ago,

through the musical Hamilton, to cherish the power of musical theater, to celebrate the values of our own founding governorship.

### *The Play*

As the manuscripts of ancient classical literature made their way through the scriptoria of European monasteries, from the beginning of the Christian era to the Renaissance, such Roman writers as Seneca ( 4 B.C-65 A. D) came into significant prominence. A moralist and essayist, a prolific letter writer, Seneca came gradually to be viewed as a *quasi Christian* writer, in which guise he came to be read with close respect by the fourteenth century, the moment of Chaucer. It is not of course that Seneca had picked up elements of Christianity--the dates don't fit, not to mention the issue of personal style--but that Seneca's Stoicism, restraint, patience and self-discipline bordered on what influential Christians considered prominent virtues of their own new religion. There was no savior in the Stoic cult, but there was the kind of deep personal guidance that Buddhist practice then as now offers the searcher.(Within, one was to find sources of discipline and insight which served the purposes of a savior. There was in addition, to support the influential popularity of Seneca, the underground sense that he respected the hyper dramatic passions for the singular impulse they give us to calm and quell our passions. He was a moralist, wrote strongly about the virtue of self control, and created garish plays in which passions overblown were shown to have brought on disastrous consequences.

The material of Senecan dramatic presentation will be the opposite of the calm to which the author wants to lead us. In a Senecan drama full exercise will be given to the emotions of jealousy, anger, rage, cruelty--and all to the point of turmoil in displaying tragic consequences. In other words, turmoil is for Seneca the condition in which peace can be generated. In the play before us (*Gorboduc*) it is precisely that generation that we experience. The conflicts inherent to the present play will eventuate into a culture world in which the necessity for social peace displaces the human need for possession and domination. What is at stake, in many a Senecan play, is precisely the interest of social peace.

### *Plot*

The plot of the present play is relatively stark and simple, although the unique traits of it are noteworthy. Most remarkable, in the refinement of

this play, is the prosody: this is the first British drama to advance in blank verse presentation; Gorboduc proclaims that

***Nature hath her order and her course  
Which (being broken) both corrupt the state...***

Potent lines of thought which have Shakespeare's point all over them To .which add that the same play is deeply involved with political struggles within the Kingdom of England, between Ferrex and Porrex, the two sons of King Gorboduc. The prominence of the political element in this play is the more conspicuous in that the national topic is up front and center; the hoped for marriage of Queen Elizabeth, carries with it the robust fears and anxieties of the people attending the play. The drama itself advances starkly, one act of violence and fury followed by another, and always under the shadow of anarchy in the state, a frightful anxiety lest the shaky foundations of the state should totter.

Gorboduc himself is a central launching point for this killing- filled tragedy, although to be sure he dwindles in importance, as the play increasingly drifts into political drama, juxtaposing a furious and violent populace against a noble elite.

Gorboduc decides, against good advice, that he should arrange for his kingdom to be divided between his two sons. This is a bad mistake, for it is not a carefully planned move and the sons fight for power between themselves, each claiming his moral right to the greater portion of the inheritance. Before long, with the help of a mother who has herself entered the fray, brutally, the subjects in this kingdom are preternaturally horrified and infuriated by the mother's killing of one of her sons, and rebelling against Gorboduc and Queen Videna, slaughtering them both. This political insight seems to do as political philosophy--take care of your subjects. The Senecan type moral is appropriately bathed in blood.

That, in fact, is just about where the drama leaves us, with Eubulus, the secretary to Gorboduc, arguing that parliament and with it order, should have been called into the deteriorating scene far sooner--but also that much has been learned and a brighter future lies ahead.. A surprising ending, given the bleak pall otherwise cast over the human condition as depicted in the play. Yet the play is not known for organic wholeness, rather rough transitions,

### *Characters*

Gorboduc , mythical King of Great Britain. A titular paternal figure and revenger around whom an aura of order outspreads. Ultimately he is blamed by the people for the death of Porrex, and in the end, after his death he is looked back at critically, for having failed to act early, by bringing his parliament in to maintain order.

Videna, Queen and wife to Gorboduc. Favoring her older son, Ferrex, whom her younger son, Porrex, has slain, she in turn kills her son, (An act of revenge, on behalf of the preferred son, carried out with Senecan blood thirstiness). Might well add that characterization in this play is one-dimensional, as in the contemporary British comedy *Ralph Roister Doister* (1567). (Note the discussion of these two dramas in the author's companion volume—Early British Comedy—a discussion of Roister as comic character--Gorboduc or Ralph—who is simply an aggregate of character traits--paternal but ill prepared; lecherous and greedy--so that in the end the play in question (*Roister Doister*) has developed no issues and raised none of the questions typically posed by personal dilemmas.

### *Characters*

Ferrex, elder son of Gorboduc

Porrex, younger son of Gorboduc

Clotyn, Duke of Cornwall

Fergus, Duke of Albany

Manduc, Duke of Leagre

Gweard, Duke of Cumberland

Eubulus, Secretary to King Gorboduc

Aostus, a counsellor to King Gorboduc

Dorean, a councillor assigned by the King to his eldest son Ferrex

Philander, a councillor assigned by the King to his younger son, Porrex

Hermon, a parasite of Ferrex and a slave of Fergus.

Tyndar, a parasite of Porrex.

Marcella, a lady of the Queen's inner chamber

Chorus; four ancient and wise Britons. The strains of string and lute, intertwined with voice, enchant the entire archaic setting of the play, casting an aura of Arthurian spell over the performance.

Dumb shows, dramatic enactments of future developments within the play; a mummery which bespeaks the rooting of the entire play in the popular street drama of the Middle Ages. The one dimensionality of this play's characters derives from the representative rather than full bodied presence of these pre modern actor-roles.

### *Themes*

While still living, King Gorboduc attempted, wisely it seemed, to share his power by dividing it between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex. Unfortunately the drive for power set the two sons to fighting against one another. The younger son, Porrex, killed his older brother, which brought on its own murderous onslaught. The Queen, Videna, preferred her older son, and in a fit of vengeance killed her younger son. This act of vengeance naturally inspired its own response. That response is violent throughout the state; a suppressed minority, facing off against an entrenched nobility, rises in horror and slaughters its oppressors. The political analysis of this uprising, and its consequences, reminds us of the considerable modernity we have reached by this point in early Renaissance culture.

### *Power*

Power pervades this entire drama. The initial power struggle breaks out between the two sons of Gorboduc, who go to war with one another over their father's land. The younger son, Porrex, kills his brother. This of course is a dreadful affront to the Queen Videna, whose favorite is her elder son, Ferrex. To show her own power, and of course to wreak her own vengeance - *a close cousin to power after all* - the Queen killed her younger son. At this point we run directly into the people, who are horrified and appalled by the behavior of the Queen. The power of the people explodes at this instant, as

they turn against and slaughter both the King and the Queen. At this point the coalition of power with vengeance reaches its climax.

### *Politics*

Power and vengeance are of course already fundamental ingredients of politics, but the present play emphasizes the political in an even wider sense, as the overall functioning capacity of a social whole. What is needed in Gorboduc's Kingdom is the interaction of a parliament with the behaviors of individual competitors.

### *How it all ends*

'The sons fell into dissension,' remarks the ancient playbill, introducing the oldest opener in the book ; a litany of the fall takes over at this point, indeed the following play is little besides a litany of disasters brought down on the house of King Gorboduc by the jealousy, violence, and fury of his descendants. There will be an eventual ray of sun--after much turmoil in the kingdom; after almost total collapse of the civil government--with the decision that a new King must replace the defunct Gorboduc, and that justice will eventually prevail.

Gorboduc's own folly plays into the drama from the outset; despite the fatal results of a kingdom division between his two cousins . Gorboduc to the death ignores this destiny, and proceeds to divide his kingdom between his two sons. Their murderous relation to one another leads straight into the heart of the present tragedy, thus into the fatal dissolution of Gorboduc's own family.

With the help of scummy parasites the two children of Gorboduc invent pretexts for war with one another. Gorboduc only too late grows aware of the serious accident he has made in dividing his kingdom. Just as he is preparing to fight against his two sons he is informed of the death of Ferrex. Porrex, called before his father declares that he has acted in self defense , but for his effort he is slain at the hands of Queen Videna, Gorboduc's wife. It is at this point in the killings that we realize the deep pinch of the Senecan tradition, devoted as it is to the hot and heavy presentation of manslaughter, and at the same time, by an alchemy distinctive to the drama of the Middle Ages, to a call for calm, patience and self control. The bloody peace established around the death of the Christ rises before us in this unique medieval aesthetic.

### *A looking backward*

The present play sits directly atop the literature we call mediaeval. Within that literature--in *The Niebelungenlied*, Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Petrarch--there is much poetic imagination, much tale-telling, much hymnology, but in addition a somber and tragic thematic--running through all genres; in addition there is a stark theatrical motif of human sin, with its roots in the dark recesses of our creation. The present play, following such darkness, taps studiously into those spiritual veins through which we imbibe our native 'turn of the screw.'

### *A looking forward*

The present play concludes with Eubulus' heavy admonition to his people that they should maintain their state in order, and above all apply their Parliament to serve the purposes for which it is intended--oversight and legislation. The awesome power of the rebellious populace is highlighted; exemplifying, as it does, the threats inherent in regal carelessness, an ill considered inheritance, a brutal homicide, such as the Queen's of her own less favored son.

### *Observations*

Were we to turn our steps backward from *Gorboduc*, onto the literary practices that just preceded it—and that made it possible-- we would soon find ourselves in a culture realm where the dramatic literature was much more closely connected with the Church and its religious narratives, than with the secular world that was unmistakably taking over the discourse, and promised to set the tone of the future. It might in fact be said that we find ourselves, with *Gorboduc*, precisely at a threshold moment in the evolution of British theatrical consciousness.

In the century prior to *Gorboduc* the dominant concerns of the Church would have provided an abundance of regional entertainment, miracle plays, such hits as the *Wakefield Shepherds Cycle*, amateurs featuring the Gospel Tales, and many forms of street theater, both secular—jongleurs and mountebanks—and sacred—pageantry and floats highlighting the major players in sacred history.

Depending on one's sentiments, there may or may not be charm in these deeply pre modern expressions of faith, and even of entertainment. The

theatrical productions of the late middle ages were radically diverse, but on the whole reposed on belief in the Christian narratives.

The demands made by secular theater like *Gorboduc* were interest in purported national histories, especially if they were one's own, and in the to and fro—aggression, romance, conflict—of daily life in the secular world. The audience of these plays were the raucous, often intelligent, new citizens of Elizabeth's world. They are not to be thought of as philosophers of the future, but from among them will come world-battered philosophers who will be able to interpret the future. Informed citizens, if only through the stage, we're that much closer to imagining, and imagining is what making a future is all about.

## **2 *The Spanish Tragedy* 1582-92** **Thomas Kyd 1556-1594**

### ***Background***

Thomas Kyd, a few decades later than the creators of *Gorboduc*, is widely viewed as the master of the revenge tragedy in Elizabethan literature. (It was not that *Gorboduc* was innocent of sizzling and internal conflict, vengeance included. It is that once again, as in *Gorboduc*, it is the figure of the Roman playwright and *essayist*, Seneca, who looms generatively in the background, delighting in the self nourishing substance of 'getting back at someone.') Elizabethan audiences proved reliably sensitive to this genre of forbidden emotions—emotions particularly objectionable to the Christian consciousness-- and more than able, say in Shakespearian drama like *Hamlet* or *MacBeth*, to turn the inherent complexities of revenge into powerful theater.

The writer to whom the present adventure in revenge is owed, Thomas Kyd, is little known to us from his time, and yet his thrilling excursus into psychological horror has made him one of the most fascinating Elizabethan dramatists. We can read Kyd today with an awe as great as Shakespeare inspires in us. And we will be able to look back on the creators of *Gorboduc* as country thinkers, prior even to the pre modern in their cultural and aesthetic practices. We are now prepared for the big time, revenge in which heads will fall, and in which the classic syndrome of drama will perform its expected ritual, driving the revenge creator back on himself, inducing him to eat his own pie.



Thomas Kyd was the son of a scrivener. He seems not to have attended University, but to have worked for some years in the employ of a Lord, and yet little more is known of his public life than that which is involved with his equally powerful contemporary, Christopher Marlowe. (Kyd is known for one other play, *Cornelia* (1594).) In 1591 Kyd was sharing lodgings with Christopher Marlowe; in this situation Kyd was arrested and put to torture, suspected of treason. His room had been searched, and certain 'atheistical' documents found there, denying the divinity of the birth of Jesus Christ. Kyd himself, apparently, attributed the papers to Marlowe. The rest of the affair, and of Kyd's biography, remains there.

Kyd himself was dead by the end of 1594. A youngster of 42, he left little but blood and violence—and plenty of memorable lines --to recall him by.

### *The plot of The Spanish Tragedy*

We know little about Thomas Kyd's life, thus must if possible understand him from the inside out, by observation and analysis. Behind the present play churns a bitter battle between the forces of Spain and Portugal, events normative for this age of adventure, discovery, and the incorporation of vast new sums of wealth. In the present play's battle a singular event sets fire to the sequence of major events that trigger the drama.

The Spanish King's son, Balthazar, kills the Spanish officer, Andrea, before being taken prisoner by the Spaniards. Thus the scene is set for an inward struggle between the ghostly Spanish Andrea--for this brave warrior has survived the war as a ghost, and appears to us at the outset of the play as a spirit buddy to the personification of Revenge--and revenge against the Figure of Balthazar, who is now a prisoner of the Spanish. The mediaeval taste for allegory continues to direct the movement of the drama, for all the fustian clutter of languages and people that crowd its pages. The Ghost of Andrea and Revenge continues to hover over the play, invoking Andrea's lust for Revenge. Mustn't we interpret this audience taste as an Elizabethan melodramatic version of our current taste for television murder and horror? Hadn't the Elizabethan audience some of the bloodlust that keeps many of us glued to True Crime on the tv? Was not *Gorboduc* itself equally bloody?

A romantic complication is soon introduced, with the hatred of Bel-Imperia--the Spanish daughter of the Duke of Castille-- toward Balthazar, the killer of her former lover, the Andrea who has paired himself with the spirit of Revenge. Bel-Imperia, like the ghost of Andrea, devotes her passions to the

desire for revenge, which is on its way toward becoming the overriding theme of the play. The reader of *Hamlet* will find himself freshly immersed in the argument of that play: that when the need for revenge meets intellectual indecisiveness action is thwarted and easily turned self-destructive. Hamlet himself is turned, by the evolution of such a crisis, into an exemplar of the conflicted modern man, cut off from his roots in belief.

A labyrinth of events brings Hieronimo, the Marshall of Spain, to the center of the action. In essence Hieronimo is a slighted figure; his son, Horatio, is denied credit for the capture and slaying of Balthazar, at the outset of the play. Then Bel-Imperia falls in love with Horatio, Hieronimo's son. (She wishes to torture Balthazar, who killed her former lover, Andrea, and she knows that erotic jealousy is the sharpest way to torture him) In the event, Hieronimo does his best to intervene, which he does, only further inciting the passion of Balthazar and ultimately leaving Hieronimo and his wife Isabella to find the fruits of their intervention, their son, Horatio, hanged. The total devastation of Hieronimo, by this tragic and unexpected loss, gives the drama its powerful and unexpected center.

Hieronimo essentially goes mad with the discovery of his son's body. His wild horror brings the entire tragedy to a standstill.

Lorenzo, who is behind the murder of Horatio, does all he can to conceal the truth of the murder. But the truth comes out, insistently, thanks to Bel-Imperia; and Hieronimo, alerted by the truth, realizes how deeply he has been deluded. His whole mental house collapses, especially after the grief-destroyed Isabella commits suicide. (The verse of Kyd fits hand to glove around line 431 of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, in which the author declares himself ready to write a tale of the greatest destruction. Eliot's brilliant adaptation of Kyd's lines brings the Elizabethan vision potently to the center of contemporary English poetry.)

The audience, properly horrified by the injustice done to Hieronimo and his son, will have watched with fascination, to see what kind of revenge Hieronimo will exact, for the suffering he and his family have been through. After a period of anxiety, during which the murderer Lorenzo, does everything possible to keep the actual truth away from Hieronimo--he explains to the King that preoccupation with Isabella's death is the source of her husband's deranged behavior--Lorenzo goes on to fabricate a fantasy psychology for Hieronimo, which ultimately only deceives the liar himself.

Finally Hieronimo goes beyond himself with acting out--incoherent rants, stabbing the earth with his sword--and decides on a genuine strategy.

Taking Bel-Imperia as an ally, Hieronimo fakes a reconciliation with the murderers, and asks them to work with him in staging a play. The play, *Soliman and Perseda*, is intended as an entertainment for the court. Hieronimo so arranged the play that real--rather than make believe--daggers were used in the course of the drama, and Lorenzo and Balthazar are stabbed to death in front of the Spanish King. The play inside a play, which makes us think ahead to the same literary device in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' being brutally foreshadowed by the murderous intent of Hieronimo. As we read the play today, in our studies or library carrels, we need to stretch the mind backward into an era of bloody staged melodrama, in which traits of our own taste can be keenly read. We are sharply ejected from any sense that we are just reading a play.

### *Characters*

#### *In The Frame*

The ghost of Don Andrea, the embodiment of revenge

#### *Spain*

The King of Spain, a figurehead, overseeing the turbulent events which transpire in his postwar court

Don Cyprian, Duke of Castile; the King's brother

Don Lorenzo the Duke of Castile's son

Bel-Imperia, the Duke of Castile's daughter; central to various consequential love affairs at the Spanish court

Pedringano, Bel-Imperia's servant

Christophil, Don Lorenzo's servant

Don Lorenzo's page boy

Hieronimo, Knight Marshall of Spain; father of the murdered Horatio; ultimately deviser of the play, in which the murderers of Horatio are themselves stabbed to death

Isabella, his wife; commits suicide after murder of her son

Don Horatio, Isabella and Hieronimo's murdered son

Don Bazulto, general in the Spanish Army

A hangman

### ***Portugal***

The Portuguese Viceroy

Prince Balthazar, his son; captured by the Spanish and a major player in the court intrigues which lead up to the murder of Horatio.

Don Pedro, the Viceroy's brother

Alexandro and Villuppo; Portuguese noblemen

The Portuguese Ambassador

### ***In Hieronimo's Play***

**Soliman, sultan of Turkey**

**Erasto, Knight of Rhodes**

**Bashaw**

**Parseda**

### ***Inside the Events***

The play opens with the apparition of Andrea, who was killed by the Portuguese, and of The Spirit of Revenge. These symbolic figures, each speaking for a dominant element of the play, an inevitable feature of the human landscape, book-end the language of the drama, reminding us that from start to finish the desire for revenge drives the action. From the outset, with the defeat of the Portuguese and the capture of Balthazar, each side has undertaken actions which infuriate the other. The open dagger slaughter,

during the inner play of Hieronimo, is the climax of the central revenge of the play.

Hieronimo increasingly moves into the deepest role in the play. Once he has learned, through Bel-Imperia, that Lorenzo and Balthazar are behind the murder of Horatio, his desire for revenge grows overwhelming. We are not led to the interior of the play, *Soliman and Perseda*, but are able to judge, from the assignment of roles--Balthasar as Soliman; Bel-Imperia as Perseda--that the play brings together forces violently opposed to one another as well as forces eager for revenge.

Heralding in the final drama, the Hieronimo play, we are introduced to the true madness and suffering of this bereft father, Hieronimo. It is only in view of this inner scenery that we understand how murderously ready Hieronimo is to take action. The entire play has oscillated between melodrama and hard core emotions, and at this point the stress on Hieronimo breaks out into violence, leaving him digging in the soil with his sword, and crossing the line between insanity and homicide. We are reminded, perhaps, of the madresses of Sophocles' Ajax or Shakespeare's Lear, whose playwrights have barely been able to contain them.

By this whole unyielding drama we are induced to think freshly about the dynamic that powers a tragedy, the theme with which we opened this book. There we spoke about the mirror effect, which engenders the wisdoms we gather from seeing the reflections of our own suffering and pain, as they rebound on us through our imaginations. What else was Aeschylus speaking of, when he said in *Prometheus--pathei mathos*---that suffering is the source of wisdom? He could not have been thinking of what we might consider banal tragedy--the train wreck on the Atchison Pacific, which stole the lives of sixty five cowhands, the passing destruction of a family under a bridge that collapses fatally onto the entire gang. For Aeschylus, as for the greatest of the Greek dramatists, high tragedy was not a cause for weeping but for 'exaltation, ' if we can truly accept that bewildering kind of account of the joyful. To accept that proposition has to mean that one has come to terms with the meaning of pain as a constructive element in being as we know it.

### ***Themes***

#### ***Revenge***

The personification of revenge--the making this abstraction into a concrete figure--hovers over the beginning of the present play. It is paired with the

soul of Andrea, who is himself determined to have vengeance on the Portuguese. This note of profound resentment segues, in the magic hand of Kyd, into high poetic divagations into the ancient underworld, with a profusion of gate Guardians, myth figures, Acherontic borders and sulphurous fires of hell; the classical landscape of Hades, in and through which the present play will regularly take us. Revenge is the basic diet of many of the players: the tenor of the entire play will drift through this wounded atmosphere. Within the play, Bel-Imperia smarts with desire for revenge against Balthazar who killed her former lover, Andrea. Above all Hieronimo is vengeful, consumed in the end by fury at the murder of his son.

### ***Love***

The emotion of love is complicatedly intertwined with the emotion of revenge. The emotions of Bel-imperia provide a case in point. She is comforted by Lorenzo for the loss of Andrea, with whom she was in love, to the Portuguese. Before long, however, Bel-Imperia falls in love with Horatio. The lady confesses that her falling in love with Horatio is in part driven by her desire to take vengeance on Balthazar, who killed her former lover Andrea. Hieronimo learns that Bel-Imperia is in love with Horatio. Ultimately Bel-imperia is able to inform Hieronimo that the murderer of his son was Balthazar. From this complexity it turns out that the nexus of love with vengeance is a constant threat to human relations.

### ***The Depths of Human Experience***

*The Spanish Tragedy* is a deeply felt excursus into modalities of human experience. From the outset of the work a great loss is made apparent--the Portuguese loss to the Spaniards. Ghosts have appeared, as have dead men walking, who are the relics of the war. From that point on we plunge into the intricacies of life at the Court of Spain, much involved with the events of the previous war, jealousies (swirling around Balthasar, the captured relic of the Portuguese army), or agonies attached to the dreadful loss of Andrea, which ushers in the ghostly presences which preside over the entire play. One might say that the entire play is a ghostly love sonata, leading up to the excruciating cadenza of the murder of Horatio and the madness of Hieronimo.)

By contrast with *Gorboduc*, which is far more preoccupied with affairs of state, the *Spanish Tragedy* penetrates the deepest emotions of individuals