18

Something is Rotten: English Renaissance Tragedies of State

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"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," Marcellus famously murmurs as Hamlet goes off to confer in private with the Ghost (*Hamlet* 1.4.90). In this remark, as in Hotatio's speculation that the Ghost bears a primarily political message, Shakespeare refers to a long tradition in early modern English drama in which the state, often "gored" (*King Lear* 5.3.326), "tottering" (*Richard III* 3.2.37), and "practiced dangerously against" (*2 Henry VI* 2.1.174), is personified as fully human, having a body, with "nerves" (*Measure for Measure* 1.4.53), a "navel" (*Coriolanus* 3.1.126), an "ear" (*Hamlet* 1.5.37) and, of course, a head. Subject to disease, *corruption* in a medical sense of the word, the state can sicken, languish for want of a cure, and die. Mismanaged and erring, the state can hurl itself into self-destruction and disaster. The state, the realm, the kingdom, can turn on itself, dismember itself, and die.

In the early morality plays, the state could indeed appear as a character, like the allegorized figure of *Respublica* in the play of that name by Nicholas Udall (1553). A widowed, female character, Respublica is tempted by Avarice and his fellow Vices. These are indeed, as A. P. Rossiter would have put it, "flat Abstractions masking as characters" (Rossiter 1946: 9), and the eventual "squeezing" of Avarice by the People is straightforwatd both as political propaganda and as morality drama. A more complex representation of the body politic, with an expressly tragic as well as political agenda, can be found in the very first English verse tragedy, Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc*.

Gorboduc

In a recent study, Greg Walker declares:

> *Gorboduc* is rightly considered a landmark in English literary history. . . . As the earliest extant five-act verse tragedy in English, the earliest attempt to imitate Senecan tragic form in English, the earliest surviving English drama in blank verse, and the earliest English play to adopt the use of dumb-shows preceding each act, it offers itself as a

> point of departure for much of the Renaissance dramatic experimentation of the following decades. (1998: 201)

The play was performed at Christmas 1561, in the Inner Temple at the Inns of Court, and received a repeat performance in January 1562, before Queen Elizabeth I, at Whitehall. Its two authors, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, were powerful courtiers, with political as well as literary aspirations, though Sackville was also well known as a contributor to the *Mirror for Magistrates*, a series of cautionary, *de casibus*, or fall-of-princes tales for rulers that was a bestseller through the Elizabethan period. Recent scholarship, by Walker and by Marie Axton, has emphasized the very specific ways in which *Gorboduc* spoke directly to the issue of the Queen's reluctance to marry and championed her English favorite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, over the Swedish suitor, King Erik XIV, whose representative, Lord Nils Gyllenstjerna (the original Guildenstern), had led marriage missions to England in 1560 and 1562 (see Walker 1998; Axton 1977). *Gorboduc* has long been studied for its position of generic primacy and its importance as an extremely early English tragedy, but its performance at a pivotal moment in Elizabeth's and Leicester's careers marks how deeply embedded English drama was in the life of the polity.

The play's plot is derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regium Britanniae* (*History of Britain*, ca. 1137); it treats an episode that is one of several tragic errors reported by Geoffrey, in which the ruler of Britain foolishly divides the island into separate kingdoms. The first of these rulers in Geoffrey's account is Brut, according to legend the great-grandson of Aeneas, the founder of Rome. Unlike Aeneas, Brut determined that the future of empire lay elsewhere, and took his party to the island which he named after himself, as Brutoyne or Britain. At his death, he sought to divide the kingdom fairly among his three sons – Albanius, Logris, and Camber, identified with Scotland, England, and Wales. The result was civil war. Gorboduc, the king who retires at the beginning of the play and parts the realm between his two sons Ferrex and Porrex, is a direct descendant of Brut and an ancestor to King Leir (or Lear), who reenacts this fatal family mistake, angrily splitting the kingdom between his two sons-in-law after his favorite, unmarried daughter, Cordelia, disappoints him by refusing to declare her love with sufficient fervor.

Gorboduc thus by happy coincidence enjoys originary status, both as the first of its kind, but also as a tragedy of origins, a play that dramatizes the fall of Britain from an imagined paradisal unity to civil war and division. The play's authors clearly intended its royal audience member to draw the appropriate lesson from its presentation before her of a primal British monarch who arranged the succession foolishly, and to avoid his error by marrying prudently and promptly. *Gorboduc*'s way of teaching this lesson is closely connected with the morality tradition, as the dumb shows before each act indicate. Each plays out the allegorical significance of the scenes that follow, and the published versions of the play (an unauthorized edition in 1565 and a corrected version in 1570) are particularly insistent. For example, in the dumb show (pantomime) before the first act, six wild men enter and attempt unsuccessfully to break a

bundle of sticks; then they take each stick separately and break them one by one. "Hereby was signified that a state knit in unity doth continue strong against all force, but being divided is easily destroyed; as befell King Gorboduc dividing his land to his two sons, which he befote held in monarchy, and upon the dissension of the brethren to whom it was divided" (83). The first dumb show points, as does the Brut legend, to the appropriation of Roman legends and motifs to British folk material, as wild men of the woods attack the Roman *fasces*.

Inflamed by ill counsel and ambition, Ferrex kills Porrex; he in turn is killed by his mother, and she and Gorboduc are slain by a popular rebellion. The lords who remain face the threat of imminent conquest by Fergus, "the mighty Duke of Albany" (5.2.76), and they vow to resist. But more saliently, with a view to Queen Elizabeth's succession, the lords swear, once they have "with armed force repressed / The proud attempts of this Albanian prince" (5.2.137–8) to "have pity of the torn estate" and "help to salve the well-near hopeless sore" by meeting "in parliament" and awarding the crown to a "chosen king . . . born within your native land" (148, 150, 158, 169–70). Before such a wished-for end, however, Britain must suffer, as Eubulus, one of the sage advisors whom the king has disregarded, points out:

> Thus shall the wasted soil yield forth no fruit,
> But dearth and famine shall possess the land.
> The towns shall be consumed and burnt with fire,
> And peopled cities shall wax desolate;
> And thou, O Britain, whilom in renown,
> Whilom in wealth and fame, shalt thus be torn,
> Dismembered thus; and thus be rent in twain,
> Thus wasted and defaced, spoiled and destroyed.
> These be rhe fruits your civil wars shall bring.
> Hereto it comes when kings will not consent
> To grave advice, but follow willful will.
> (5.2.225–35)

Eubulus prophesies a future of civil war, with Britain personified as a dismembered, torn, and barren body politic.

Such a future is envisioned, too, by the Chorus at the end of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. After the marriage and peace that conclude that play, the Chorus reminds the regular theatergoers of Shakespeare's London:

> Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King
> Of France and England, did this king succeed;
> Whose state so many had the managing.
> That they lost France and made his England bleed,
> Which oft our stage hath shown; and for their sake.
> In your fair minds let this acceptance take.
> (*Henry V* Epilogue, 9–14)

Here the playwright alludes to the highly popular sequence of plays dealing with the loss of France and the Wars of the Roses in England, the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. Just as *Gorboduc* grounds early modern English tragedy in the sufferings of the common weal, the English history plays represent the realm as victim and protagonist playing out a tragic fate.

Tragical History

Shakespeare's early histories

In categorizing the genres of Shakespearean drama as Comedy, Tragedy, and History, the editors of the First Folio paid tribute to the prominence in the late sixteenth century and first decade of the seventeenth of plays that drew their stories (or fables) from the enormously popular narrative chronicles of Edward Halle and Raphael Holinshed. These sources were characterized by twentieth-century scholars as propagating a "Tudor myth," a version of English history which runs something like this: the deposition of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) was a kind of original sin, an act which ushered in a period of uncertainty for Henry IV, whose troubles included not only civil unrest in the North and in Wales, but also the drunken and riotous behavior of his son. A brief period of glory ensued with the reign of Henry V, who reformed his manners when he took the throne and restored England's dominions in France. Henry's untimely death, leaving a son "in infant bands," led to the Wars of the Roses, as the houses of York and Lancaster contended for power. Finally, England's suffering reached a nadir with the emergence of Richard III, whose tyrannous abuse of the people came to an end with the victory of Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond (later Henry VII) at the Battle of Bosworth Field. The power of this coherent narrative led A. P. Rossiter to argue that "it may be said that one way at least of composing a history-play in the XVIth Century was to read chronicle with a preconceived or ready-made moral in mind," and that this moral was one that ratified the current Tudor regime (Rossiter 1946: 8).

More recent critics have taken issue with the idea that the chronicle plays merely served the power structure as homilies on obedience. The New Historicist critics have seen the history plays as part of a dynamic of subversion and containment, functioning to express anxieties about the government's absolutist tendencies while participating, as part of the institution of theater, in the government's strategies of marginalizing, distracting, and containing political dissent (see Greenblatt 1980). The refusal of the plays fully to dramatize the Tudor myth has long been noted.

The generic uncertainty that accompanied the publication (and no doubt performance) of the early English history plays has been obscured by the Folio's classification of them as a separate genre. In reality, the situation was a "Polonian nightmare," to borrow Steve Longstaffe's terms, in which tragical–historical–comical–pastoral merged and diffused in wildly unstable combinations (Longstaffe 1997: 35). The

version of Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part Two* that appeared in 1594 was called *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster, with the death of the good Duke Humphrey: And the banishment and death of the Duke of Suffolke, and the Tragicall End of the Proud Cardinall of Winchester, with the notable Rebellion of Jack Cade: and the Duke of Yorkes first claime unto the Crowne*. The unwieldiness of this title is in part a function of the printer's desire to touch on all the play's features that might make this book a quick seller, but it also shows an uncertainty about where to place the emphasis, not least with regard to the problem of tragedy: of all the deaths mentioned, only one is singled out as "tragicall." The 1595 version of what we now call *Henry VI, Part Three* appeared as *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke, and the death of the good King Henrie the Sixt, with the whole contention between the two Houses Lancaster and Yorke, as it was sundrie times acted by the Right Honourable the Earle of Pembroke his Servants*. In their *Original-Spelling Edition* of Shakespeare's works, the Oxford editors Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor have restored these old titles.

The Contention plays (as these two are sometimes called) show tragedy emerging out of the historical matrix. In these plays, as in *Gorboduc*, the realm is personified, and it is difficult to see by what criteria some deaths are tragic and some are not. York meets his end, in *The True Tragedie*, at the end of the first act, set upon a molehill, crowned with a paper crown, taunted by Queen Margaret, in a scene reminiscent of (and parodic of) the plays of the mocking of Christ in the medieval mystery cycles. The scene is mirrored later in the play by a scene in which King Henry, likewise on a molehill, witnesses the sad spectacle of a "Son that hath killed his father" entering "at one door," and, entering "at another door, a Father that hath killed his son." The pathos of these generic, allegorized figures comments on and amplifies the agony of York, whom Margaret torments with a napkin dipped in his son's blood and who is killed by Clifford to avenge Clifford's father's death. As King Henry comments on the scene, it becomes a metaphor for civil strife:

> O, pity, pity, gentle heaven, pity!
> The red rose and the white are in his face,
> The fatal colors of our striving houses.
> The one his purple right resembles;
> The other his pale cheeks, methinks, presenteth.
> Wither one rose, and let the other flourish;
> If you contend, a thousand lives must wither.
> (*2 Henry VI* 2.5.96–102)

At the end of the play, King Edward sits in the throne and describes his victory as a harvest: "What valiant foemen, like to autumn's corn, / Have we mowed down in tops of all their pride!" (5.7.3–4). Edward marks his own overweening pride as he arrogates to himself the function of mowing down the proud, a function reserved to the divine order in the *de casibus* tradition. "I'll blast his harvest," mutters the king's younger brother, Richard of Gloucester, as Edward presents his son to the court (21).

Richard III

Richard's own play, published in 1597 as *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* (but classified among the Histories in the Folio), marks the appearance in Shakespeare's work of a powerful central character whose actions precipitate the tragic plot. The overreaching protagonists of Christopher Marlowe's plays contributed to the emergence of such characters, as David Riggs has pointed out (see Riggs 1971). But Richard is composed of a variety of elements, in addition to being a Marlovian overreacher. Like the morality-play Vice, Iniquity, Richard can "moralize two meanings in one word" (*Richard III* 3.1.83); he can "set the murderous Machiavel to school" (*3 Henry VI* 3.2.193); his physical deformities derive from Thomas More's life of Richard III incorporated within the chronicle sources of the play. It is hard to overestimate the full impact of the emergence of this charming monster upon the development of English tragedy. Shakespeare faced a particular problem in adapting this figure to the demands of the historical narrative the play needed to follow. For the play's political agenda requires that Richard be a monstrous tyrant, and the earl of Richmond's victory at Bosworth Field a providential deliverance of the suffering realm; yet Shakespeare imbues the character with such energy, wit, and exuberance that audiences, like Lady Anne in the wooing scene at the beginning of the play, find him almost itresistible.

Through a sequence of sub-tragedies – the deaths of Clarence, Hastings, the little Princes in the Tower, and Buckingham – Shakespeare surrounds Richard with choric utterances proclaiming his inevitable doom in this great harvest of death. The murder of the Princes marks a turning point in Richard's career, as he ascends the throne only to overreach in seeking to control the succession and stifle Edward's line. Buckingham, his alter ego, refuses the assignment, and Richard enlists the aid of Tyrrel, who himself subcontracts the murder to Dighton and Forrest, "fleshed villains, bloody dogs." "The tyrannous and bloody act is done," Tyrrel announces, "The most arch deed of piteous massacre that ever this land was guilty of" (4.3.6, 1–2). Richard's worst crime becomes by metaphoric extension one of the land's many massacres, engulfed in the Wars of the Roses. The little Princes figure peace and reconciliation forestalled and denied in Forrest's account of their sleep,

> girdling one another
> Within their alabaster innocent arms.
> Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
> Which in their summer beauty kissed each other.
> (9–12)

The evocation here of white (alabaster) and red roses looks back to Henry VI's meditation on the Father and the Son, and the seasonal imagery, picking up from Richard's famous description of the Civil Wars as a "winter of our discontent" (1.1.1), anticipates Richmond's oration at the end of the play, which predicts a return to

"smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days" (5.5.34–5). Richmond offers a narrative in which the Wars of the Roses can come to a final end with his marriage to Elizabeth of York, and in which the realm can finally come to its senses:

> England hath long been mad, and scarred herself;
> The brother blindly shed the brother's blood,
> The father rashly slaughtered his own son,
> The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire.
> All this divided York and Lancaster,
> Divided in their dire division.
>
> (5.5.22–7)

The imagery presents the country's return to health as part of a natural process of healing and harvest.

Yet this is a language that Richard repeatedly mocks as he sabotages Edward's harvest and arranges his brother Clarence's demise. Edward himself proposed his reign as a restoration of natural balance at the end of *3 Henry VI*; so we are entitled to see Richmond's declaration of closure as provisional, with the language of nature leaving open the possibility of another cycle of the seasons. One way Shakespeare works to suggest that Richard's end really *is* the end of the vicious round of violence is to contrive it so that Richard self-destructs as soon as he gains the throne. The murder of the Princes loses him his one ally, Buckingham; and subsequent events in the play are marked by blundering and stumbling, carelessness unthinkable in the conniving Proteus of the play's first acts. His wooing of Elizabeth by proxy through her mother is a pale imitation of his triumphant suit to Lady Anne, and he seems not to realize that the Queen has no intention of surrendering her daughter to him (she immediately arranges the match with Richmond). A series of Senecan ghosts menace him with threats in the scene of the night before the battle. Shakespeare splits the stage, with Richard's tent on one side and Richmond's on the other. Richard's victims both enter, each intoning "Despair, and die!" to Richard and each offering words of encouragement to Richmond.

The split stage evokes the divided realm, but the vengeful ghosts remind us of Richard's private wrongs, his crimes against them personally. And the split is further dramatized as a split within Richard himself, as he awakes from his sleep:

> What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
> Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
> Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
> Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
> That I myself have done unto myself?
> O, no! Alas, I rather hate myself
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> I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.
> Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.
> (5.3.182–92)

This representation of Richard's splintering psyche is almost comical in its explicitness, as Richard virtually comes to blows with himself. The riddling self that Richard reveals in his soliloquies and asides becomes here a self-contradictory self; not a Vice moralizing two meanings in a single word, but an "I" that cannot recognize or acknowledge any integrity of self.

Richard is indicted by a multiplicity of tongues: "a thousand several tongues" testify against him in his conscience, "and every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns me for a villain" (193–5). Through this internalized juridical process, Richard's conscience links the ghosts' vengeance for their ptivate wrongs to a communal, public justice. The play works both as Tudor myth, shoring up the polity by dramatizing Richmond's rise to power as inevitable and just, and as tragedy, by dramatizing Richard's fall as the inevitable consequence of his divided, unstable, self-loathing self.

Sad Stories of the Deaths of Kings

Richard II

Shakespeare's Richard II, unlike Richard III, is not a usurper or a Marlovian overreacher. He sees his fall as fully within the *de casibus* tradition, and urges his supporters to join him:

> For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
> And tell sad stories of the death of kings–
> How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
> Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
> Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,
> All murdered. For within the hollow crown
> That rounds the mortal temple of a king
> Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits
> Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
> Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
> To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks.
> Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
> As if this flesh which walls about our life
> Were btass impregnable, and humored thus,
> Comes at the last with a little pin
> Bores through his castle wall, and – farewell king!
> (*Richard II* 3.2.155–70)

There is a delightful reference here to the previous stage triumph of *Richard III*, haunted by the ghosts of his predecessors, and to his scoffing, grinning, antic ways. But more characteristic of mature Shakespeare is the development of a pattern of imagery through the whole play that allows us to see in the second Richard a complex dramatic evocation of the political doctrine of the king's two bodies, a mortal body which can die, and a body politic, which lives on in the kingdom.

In this speech we hear an echo of John of Gaunt's famous "sceptr'd isle" speech. The walls of the impregnable body that Richard describes in the speech cited above are celebrated as the country's walls in Gaunt's invocation of England as a

> fortress built by Nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war,
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall
> Or as a moat defensive to a house,
> Against the envy of less happier lands,
> This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England
> This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings...
> Is now leased out – I die pronouncing it –
> Like to a tenement or pelting farm.
> (*Richard II* 2.1.42–52, 59–60)

Both speeches are rich with references to containment, to enclosure: the hollow crown and the castle walls in Richard's; the wall, the moat, the ring-setting in John of Gaunt's. Emptiness awaits the Duchess of Gloucester when she returns to her castle at Pleshey: "empty lodgings and unfurnished walls / Unpeopled offices, untrodden stones" (1.2.68–9). The Queen's complaint of an "unborn sorrow ripe in Fortune's womb" that she senses "coming towards me" (2.2.10–11) links up with the "teeming womb" of Gaunt's speech. The enclosing castle walls, bodies, theaters, islands, wombs, oscillate in a kaleidoscopic vision in which King Richard both is and is not contiguous and coterminous with his own body, the body of his kingdom, and the body of his wife.

Recent feminist criticism, especially the work of Coppélia Kahn, Phyllis Rackin, and Jean E. Howard, has seen the conflict between Richard and Bolingbroke in *Richard II* as a clash of gendered opposites (see Kahn 1981 and Howard and Rackin 1997). Richard is effeminately self-dramatizing, kneeling to mother earth; Bolingbroke phallically ascendant, taking the crown from the vain, weeping king. The conflation of crown, kingdom, womb, theater, castle, and farm in this particular cluster of images tends to support an identification of Richard as slipping elusively from male to female roles, playing the king and playing the "mockery king of snow" (4.1.261), being himself both the wearer of the hollow crown and the antic death gtinning within it.

Imprisoned at the end of the play, Richard fantasizes tearing "a passage through the flinty ribs / Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls" (5.5.20–1). In the context of his attempt to "people this little world" (9) with a "generation of still-breeding thoughts" (8), Richard imagines himself giving birth to himself, a doubling of himself into "king," "beggar," and then, finally, "nothing":

> But whate'er I be,
> Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
> With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
> With being nothing.
>
> (38–41)

Richard's prison soliloquy offers a vision of teeming barrenness that looks back to all the enclosures ranging through the play's imagery – the sceptered isle, the hollow crown, the empty rooms of Pleshey and the Queen's empty womb – to figure his deposition and death within a large scheme of dispossession and containment that alienates him from both his body politic and his physical body. "Exton, thy fierce hand / Hath wirh the King's own blood stained the King's own land," he charges his murderer. "Mount, mount my soul! Thy seat is up on high, / While my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die." Richard's last words triumphantly recall the doctrine of the king's two bodies, so shattered, fragmented, and unstable (like the mirror he breaks in the deposition scene) throughout the play. And the land, feminized and bloody, continues to haunt his successor Henry IV at the beginning of his first play. Carlisle's prophecy in the deposition scene – "The blood of English shall manure the ground / And future ages groan for this foul act . . . And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars / Shall here inhabit, and kin with kin and kind with kind confound" 4.1.138–9, 141–2) – strikes home as Henry's desire to end civil war proves bootless. "No more the thirsty entrance of this soil / Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood," he wishfully intones in the first scene of *1 Henry IV*; "No more shall trenching war channel her fields / Nor bruise her flowerets with the armèd hoofs / Of hostile paces" (1.1.4–8). No, as in *Gorboduc*, peace is not to come; the English hold "the knife" at their "own mother's throat" (*Gorboduc* 5.2.151).

In *Richard III*, Shakespeare reconciles tragedy to history by conflating private vengeance and public justice in Richard's indictment by conscience. In *Richard II* he makes of Richard's fall and Bolingbroke's ascent a ravaging assault upon the female body of the land. By the end of the second tetralogy, this feminized land, "this best garden of the world" (*Henry V* V.2.36), has become France. Gaunt's fantasy of English Christian knights teeming forth on crusades, Henry IV's fantasy of an expedition to the Holy Land, turn England's "opposed eyes" outward, but the conquest of France sounds like another mutilation, an extension of England's civil wars out to her annexed conquest, and the Chorus compounds the irony with its prophetic reminder to the audience that what it has just seen is a prequel to the agonies of the first tetralogy.

Marlowe's Edward II

The relationship between Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (first published in 1598 as *The Troublesome Raigne and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England: with the tragicall fall of proud Mortimer*) and Shakespeare's first and second tetralogies is a complicated one (see Forker 1994: 18). Many early critics of Marlowe found the play to be anomalous: most of Marlowe's overreachers were felt to enact their crimes on a cosmic rather than national scale. Harry Levin's assertion that in *Edward II* Marlowe "was to bring the chronicle within the perspective of tragedy, to adapt the most public of forms to the most private of emotions" (quoted by Forker 1994: 90–1) assumes a primacy for Marlowe's play that the available evidence cannot support. Examining the relationships among *Edward II*, the first tetralogy, and the anonymous *Woodstock* (also known as the first part of *Richard II*), A. P. Rossiter, like Forker and other recent editors, notes a matrix of borrowings and lendings that, if not precisely collaboration and not exactly plagiarism, confounds older notions of authorship and current notions of intellectual property.

Nor is it accurate to say that Marlowe's dramatic output, with the exception of *Edward II*, was generally apolitical. Tamburlaine, after all, aspires towards "that perfect bliss and sole felicity / The sweet fruition of an earthly crown" (*Tamburlaine the Great I* 2.7.28–9). Faustus imagines walling "all Germany with brass," transforming Wittenberg into a Protestant island by circling it with the "swift Rhine," and "chas[ing] the Prince of Parma from our land," and his magician friend Valdes covets "from America the golden fleece / That yearly stuffs old Phillip's treasury" (*Doctor Faustus* 1.1.90, 91, 95,133–4). The Doctor works his magic in the Emperor's and Pope's courts. Lisa Hopkins has showed how deeply Marlowe's plays engage issues of immediate political concern to his audiences. Tamburlaine's conquests mark a kind of European imperialism in reverse, as his troops encroach on Christendom and as he dies looking "westward from the midst of Cancer's line": "And shall I die, and this unconquerèd?" (*Tamburlaine the Great II* 146, 150.) The Malta in which the Jew practices his Machiavellian schemes is, Hopkins points out, a very specifically historical Malta; and *The Massacre at Paris* is firmly grounded in the atrocities of the French religious wars (see Hopkins 2000).

Whichever way the influence went, *Edward II* participates in the tradition of *Gorboduc*, in which the King's crimes lead to suffering in both the body politic and the King's own private body. "England, unkind to thy nobility, / Groan for this grief; behold how thou art maimed," Mortimer proclaims as Warwick and Lancaster are taken off to "speedy execution" (*Edward II* 3.2.66–7). The conflict between Edward and the powerful nobles in the play over Edward's dependency on his favorites is recast in terms of a maiming of the body politic. Similarly, Queen Isabella, landed in England, moralizes the conflict: "a heavy case,

> When force to force is knit and sword and glaive
> In civil broils makes kin and countrymen

> Slaughter themselves in others, and their sides
> With their own weapons gored. But what's the help?
> Misgoverned kings are cause of all this wrack;
> And Edward, thou art one among them all,
> Whose looseness hath betrayed thy land to spoil
> And made the channels overflow with blood.
> Of thine own people patron shouldst thou be,
> But thou–

"Nay, madam, if you be a warrior," Mortimer interrupts, "Ye must not grow so passionate in speeches" (4.4.4–15). In both these instances, speeches whose homiletic content might be choric are ironically undercut by Mortimer's ambition and the Queen's own ruthless quest for power. The language of civil broils and internecine slaughter is here exposed as propagandistic, just as Henry IV's repeated invocation of this language serves to remind us of his unsteady, shaken grasp on power.

Edward's terrible death, by means of a red-hot spit forced into his bowels (see Forker 1994: 306–7 for discussion of the sources and possible staging), has been the source of much critical controversy. There are those who see it as a horribly appropriate end for a sodomite and a moral lesson taught on the king's body, but appropriate as well to the "unnatural state of the realm" (W. L. Godschalk, quoted by Forker 1994: 93). Stephen Greenblatt takes issue with such moralistic readings, and argues that "in *Edward II* Marlowe uses the emblematic method of admonitory drama, but uses it to such devastating effect that the audience recoils from it in disgust" (quoted by Forker, 1994: 94). Kept in "the sink / Wherein the filth of all the castle falls" (5.5.55-6), Edward acknowledges the connection between his loves and his fate: "O Gaveston, it is for thee that I am wronged; / For me, both thou and both the Spencers died,/And for your sakes a thousand wrongs I'll take" (5.3.41–3). No longer a king, he accepts his fate as a private man, asking Lightborn to give him a chance to make his peace with God: "let me see the stroke before it comes, / That even then when I shall lose my life, / My mind may be more steadfast on my God." "O spare me! Or dispatch me in a trice!" are the last words he utters before the terrible "cry [that] will raise the town" (5.5.75–7, 110). The brutality of the scene is enhanced by the emphasis upon Edward's isolation and vulnerability.

No choric prophecy of the misery of civil war follows this end. Rather, such utterances in the play are ironically undercut by the blatant self-interest of their speakers. Where a figure like Carlisle in *Richard II* may speak out with authority on the country's impending torment (and be arrested for it by Bolingbroke), the moralizing of Marlowe's characters rings hollow. When the new king, Edward III, hears the news of his father's death, he "vows to be revenged" on Mortimer and his mother; with the "aid and succour of his peers" he commands the hanging and quartering of Mortimer (5.6.18, 20). Mortimer meets his death with a thoroughly conventional invocation of fortune's wheel:

> Base Fortune, now I see that in thy wheel
> There is a point to which, when men aspire,
> They tumble headlong down. That point I touched,
> And seeing there was no place to mount up higher,
> Why should I grieve at my declining fall?
> (5.6.58–62)

But is this Stoic resignation or arrogance, a final sneer at the "paltry boy" (56) who now occupies the throne? While Edward III's reputation as a great warrior-king certainly precedes him in this play, are we to see his seizure of Mortimer (with the counsel of his peers) as a heroic counterpoint to his father's dismissal of his peers' advice and blatant preference of his favorites? And what are we to make of his insistence, in the play's final lines, that his tears are "witness of my grief and innocency" (101)? Like all the Marlowe plays, *Edward II* offers a plot that is moralistic, pious, and conservative, but lavishes sympathy upon its transgressive agents. The protracted and sometimes vehement critical disagreement about his plays is a reflection of this divisive dramaturgy. Marlowe leaves the problem with the audience.

Radical Tragedy

It has not gone unnoticed that the problems Marlowe asks his audiences to wrestle with are problems that are central to most recent criticism of early modern drama: race, class, and gender. Postcolonial approaches have opened new ways of thinking about *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine*, and queer theory has devoted much attention to *Edward II* and the representation of male–male desire. Mortimer Senior urges his son not to oppose Edward and invokes the classical precedents:

> The mightiest kings have had their minions:
> Great Alexander loved Hephestion;
> The conquering Hercules for Hylas wept;
> And for Patroclus the stern Achilles drooped.
> And not kings only, but the wisest men,
> The Roman Tully loved Octavius,
> Grave Socrates, wild Alcibiades.
> (1.4.390–6)

But Mortimer rejects this argument, claiming not to be "grieve[d]" by Edward's "wanton humour" (401) but rather by the challenge to class barriers that Gaveston's promotions mount. The powerful barons in the play also stigmatize Edward's other favorites, the Spencers, in class terms, seeing them also as upstarts, dapper Jacks.

Marlowe has indeed been seen, by Jonathan Dollimore, as the proponent of a "radical tragedy" that challenges the premises of Western essentialist humanism.

While American New Historicist criticism has tended to see early modern English tragedy as representing social mobility and challenges to political orthodoxy primarily within the containment and license of the institution of theater, Dollimore's cultural materialist criticism sees in the plays calls for revolutionary rethinking of and action against the social structure. In Dollimore's argument, *Doctor Faustus* "is important for subsequent tragedy" because, like *Edward II*, it features "the inscribing of a subversive discourse within an orthodox one, a vindication of the letter of an orthodoxy while subverting its spirit" (Dollimore 1984: 119). Thus *Edward II*, in this view, does not merely dramatize transgressive behavior; it anticipates a Brechtian alienation-effect by forcing an audience to consider what kind of social system makes Edward's behavior transgressive. What notions of "nature" make certain kinds of sexual conduct "unnatural"?

Such interrogation of *nature* and *the unnatural* is characteristic not only of Marlowe but of Shakespeare in his mature tragedies. In these plays, strange perturbations to the state reach out into the natural world. Ghosts walk in *Hamlet* and, as Horatio points out in that play, before the death of Julius Caesar as well. Duncan's horses eat each other in *Macbeth*. And in *King Lear* the storm on the heath mirrors the perturbations in the kingdom and in Lear's own "little world of man" (3.1.10).

Macbeth

The parallel between the little world of an individual and the larger world of the state finds explicit expression in terms of bodies and diseases in all the mature tragedies. In *Macbeth*, for example, Shakespeare presents a "Doctor of Physic" as a character, commenting on the illness that besets Lady Macbeth. After witnessing her guilt-ridden sleepwalking, the Doctor connects her troubles with Scotland's:

> Foul whisperings are abroad. Unnatural deeds
> Do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds
> To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
> More needs she the divine than the physician.
> God, God forgive us all!
>
> (5.1.71–4)

A little later, Macbeth himself interrogates the Doctor about his patient and also about Scotland: "What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug / Would scour these English hence?" he asks (5.3.57–8). Parodically, Macbeth seems unaware that he is himself his realm's disease. Malcolm and his English allies envision themselves as offering a laxative cure for the bloated king: "He cannot buckle his distempered cause / Within the belt of rule," says Caithness in an image that links Macbeth's usurpation with bilious flatulence. "Meet we the med'cine of the sickly weal," he urges as the troops proceed to their rendezvous with Malcolm, "And with him pour we in our country's purge / Each drop of us" (5.1.15–16; 27–9).

Under Macbeth's tyranny all Scotland has fallen ill. "It cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave," Ross says, echoing the imagery of *Richard II*. "What's the newest grief?" asks Malcolm; "Each minute teems a new one," replies Ross (4.1.167, 175, 176). Scotland is fertile only in horrors, and the childless Macbeth breeds heirs only for "blood-boltered Banquo" (4.1.123). In this Scottish play, England, ruled by "the most pious Edward" (3.6.127), is itself a medicine, its monarch a physician. Edward cures with his touch the "wretched souls" that suffer from scrofula, the king's evil, and he can pass on the gift: "to the succeeding royalty he leaves / The healing benediction," Malcolm tells Macduff (4.3.156–7). When Macduff learns that his wife and children have been massacred by Macbeth's agents, Malcolm urges him to join the rebellion against Macbeth: "Let's make us medicines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief" (4.3.215-16). Marlowe's exposure of the use of the language of the body politic by self-interested agents allows us to question whether Malcolm really is the cure, whether he offers Scotland a return to a time when, as Macbeth wistfully puts it, "humane statute purged the gentle weal" (3.4.77). The historical fact that Banquo's heirs must succeed Malcolm's undercuts the purgative, curative rhetoric of the play's close.

King Lear

"Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Lear asks as he presides over a mad imaginary anatomy – dissection – of Regan (3.6.75–6).

This inquiry reaches beyond the political, but it too has a dimension of state: for if the monarchical polity is mandated by God, a mirror in little of the divine hierarchy, then action that disrupts the social order is unnatural, a defiance of God's will. But, as J. F. Danby pointed out, when Lear rebukes his daughters as unnatural and calls down Nature's curses on them, "Lear is tacitly condemning the social order in which they stand" (Danby 1968: 30). What is appalling in Goneril and Regan is not that their Machiavellian self-seeking rends the body politic and drives their royal father mad, but that their ways are the ways of the world. In *Gorboduc* and in the history plays civil war's self-inflicted wounds are seen as terrible retributions, the working-out of crimes against the state; in *Edward II* and in *King Lear* the horror is that the state of nature is a state of war.

To a great degree the warfare is class warfare, as Lear shows when he dissects Regan's gorgeous clothing (just before he is shut out for the stormy night):

> Our basest beggars
> Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
> Allow not nature more than nature needs,
> Man's life is cheap as beasts. Thou art a lady;
> If only to go warm were gorgeous,
> Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
> Which scarcely keeps thee warm.
>
> (2.4.267–72)

A strand of vehement satire about clothing runs through the whole play, and it is of course gorgeous clothing, protected by sumptuary laws, that marks the upper classes. Mortimer resents the "short Italian hooded cloak / Larded with pearl," that Gaveston, "dapper jack" that he is, wears; "and in his Tuscan cap / A jewel of more value than the crown." Worse, Gaveston and his cronies "flout our train and jest at our attire" (1.4.411–14; 417). In *Woodstock*, the king's uncle is mistaken for a groom and handed a horse to care for: his clothing is warm, not gorgeous. "You cowardly rascal, nature disclaims in thee," Kent snarls at Oswald. "A tailor made thee" (*King Lear* 2.2.55–6).

It is in terms of clothing that Lear arrives at his famous moment of empathy with the homeless and dispossessed:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just.
>
> (3.4.28–36)

Moving though Lear's prayer is, it is laced with ironies. Lear experiences the miseries of the homeless poor not as a king, but as one of their number, locked out and houseless. The fairy-tale motif of beggar and king – exchanging places with an inevitable reversal, so that the king can know what beggars feel and become more just – is alluded to here, but the play's refusal to restore Lear to his throne (as the sources do) contradicts that motif. Lear takes physic – medicine – here, but since he is no longer king, the cure has no effect. No more than does the discovery that Regan's hard heart has a natural cause.

The state in *Lear* mirrors the natural world not, as in the orthodox political theory of Hooker and other Tudor thinkers, by being hierarchical and well ordered, but instead by virtue of its chaotic violence. A perverse arbitrariness divides the world into rich and poor, kings and beggars, as Lear perceives in his madness:

> Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;
> Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.
> None does offend, none, I say, none.
>
> (4.6.164–8)

From setting himself and his kingdom up as objects of a grotesque love-auction in the first scene, Lear descends to poverty and sees a world where everything is for sale,

especially justice. The body politic in *Lear* is feminized, as in the history plays and in *Macbeth*: "To't luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers," Lear cries. The teeming womb of John of Gaunt's dying vision becomes Lear's nightmare vision of Goneril and Regan's voracious sexuality: "But to the girdle do the gods inherit; / Beneath is all the fiend's" (4.6.117, 126–7). While at the end of the play the "gored state" is sustained by Albany and Edgar (with Kent slipping quietly away to die), a dim memory of *Gorboduc* stirs (was it not Albanius who threatened the maimed state then?) and undercuts any consolation, any sense of order restored.

John Turner has pointed out that *King Lear*'s return to origins has special reference to the chronicles deriving from Geoffrey of Monmouth. At Dover Cliff, where mad Lear and blind Gloucester meet, one of the original Brut's retinue, Corineus, wrestled with the giant Gogmagog and threw him off. Thus, to Turner, the play "depicts the history of its country as nightmare... The play is *dangerous*... it *initiates* its audience into the injustice, confusion, and violence of the past which become in performance the injustice, confusion and violence of the present" (Turner 1988: 117, emphasis in original). The act of Corineus is what Rene Girard would call an act of "foundational violence or foundational murder," an original scapegoating that grounds the state in collective violence (Girard 1991: 201). In *King Lear*, the state's collapse into internecine chaos is predetermined from its very beginnings.

Tragedies of Rome

Girard posits the assassination of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play of that name as such a "foundational murder": it establishes the Roman state as a state of almost constant civil war. Coining the phrase "tragedy of state" in 1970, J. W. Lever took another angle, and proposed that with these early modern English plays we are dealing with "modes of tragedy unrelated to Aristotle's familiar definitions":

> They are not primarily treatments of characters with a so-called "fatal flaw", whose downfall is brought about by the decree of just if inscrutable powers. The heroes may have their faults of deficiency or excess; but the fundamental flaw is not in them but in the world they inhabit; in the political state, in the social order it upholds, and likewise, by projection, in the cosmic state of shifting arbitrary phenomena called "Fortune". (Lever 1971: 10)

Lever goes on to consider in detail the way in which Roman history encouraged dramatists to explore "the workings of power, the concept of freedom, and the bearings of history itself upon the fortunes of the individual. More specifically," he continues, "they recognized as the period of maximum tension the years which marked the rise of Caesar and the civil wars leading to the replacement of the republic by the empire" (Lever 1971: 60).

Julius Caesar

As Lever and Rebecca Bushnell have demonstrated, Julius Caesar occupied a major place in Renaissance European debates about tyrants and tyrannicide. This was a confused issue, as Caesar was both revered as a precursor of the age's absolutist monarchies and reviled as an arrogant usurper of his people's ancient liberties. Bushnell points out that James I's "fondness for the high Roman style" gave him "a way of styling himself as a god," while "for his antagonists, the comparison would suggest a less complimentary association with depravity and cruelty" (Bushnell 1990: 149-50). As Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* demonstrate, the preferred dramatic mode for approaching the paradoxes of Rome, as republic or empire, was irony.

The irony is both historical and theatrical in *Julius Caesar*. As the conspirators stoop to "bathe [their] hands in Caesar's blood," they imagine the effect upon posterity of their great act and propose a motto of "Peace, freedom, and liberty!" (3.1.107, 110):

> CASSIUS: How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
> In states unborn and accents yet unknown!
> BRUTUS: How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport
> That now on Pompey's basis lies along
> No worthier than dust!
> CASSIUS: So oft as that shall be,
> So often shall the knot of us be called
> The men that gave their country liberty.
> (113–20)

While Brutus and Cassius envision a future in which their act will be replayed in places (England?) and languages (English?) that they do not know, they do not anticipate the contests that will erupt in the early modern period over the word *liberty*, which they claim as their own here. As Catherine Belsey points out, in these Roman tragedies, "Freedom is only an idea, popular sovereignty no more than a momentary possibility." And she makes the connection between stage representations of Roman struggles and the English political context: "The civil war is still forty years off." "Absolutism, the plays imply," she continues, "produces precisely the resistance it sets out to exclude. And the dramatization of absolutism gives birth, however tentatively, to the concept of the autonomous subject" (Belsey 1985: 109).

Historical Parallels

The frequent use of historical parallels in early modern English drama analogizes contemporary events to precedents in the past, often the British past, as in *Gorboduc*, but more frequently in the late Elizabethan and early Stuart period the Roman or

recent French past. Increasingly vigilant government censorship and a clearer sense of the absolutist Stuart agenda on the part of officials seem at least partly responsible for the scarcity in the 1610s and 1620s of plays in which the gored state was nominally English. In George Chapman's Byron and Bussy plays (*The Tragedy and Conspiracy of Byron*, *The Tragedy of Bussy d'Ambois*, and *The Revenge of Bussy*) a corrupt French court stands in for a corrupt Jacobean polity, and Italian courts in John Marston's and John Webster's plays appear to perform the same function. In Jonson's *Sejanus* (1605), for which the playwright claims he was hauled before the Privy Council and charged with treason and "popery" by his old enemy Northampton, censorship itself is a major issue, as the historian Cremutius Cordus gets into trouble for writing "annals of late, they say, and very well" (76). "Those times are somewhat queasy to be touched," says Natta (an informer for the tyrannical Tiberius) thoughtfully (82). "These our times are not the same, Arruntius," comments Silius, provoking this outburst from his friend:

> Times? The men,
> The men are not the same! 'Tis we are base,
> Poor and degenerate from th'exalted strain
> Of our great fathers!
>
> (85–9)

In this interchange, Jonson not only offers a glimpse of life under an oppressive regime, but also anticipates the uses that can be made of historical applications under such regimes. The Germanicans (to whose party Arruntius belongs) invoke a glorious past to shame the present, while the agents of the government seek to suppress Cordus' annals.

An autonomous subject is perhaps a dream in Jonson's Roman tragedy, in which the emperor Tiberius simply replaces the overweening favorite Sejanus with an even more dangerous, because more efficient and less self-absorbed, agent of tyranny, Macro. Cordus's annals are suppressed (with the ironic consequence that they become more sought after) and the opponents of the regime are caught in their own nostalgia for the Republican past, with no hope for the future.

"O world, no world but mass of public wrongs," exclaims Hieronymo in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (3.2.2): the chaotic worlds of the Roman, French, and Italian plays of the English Renaissance show characters hemmed around by oppressive systems, betrayed and exploited by lustful tyrants (as in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*), excluded from any remedies of civil justice. Their only recourse is to oppose this "mass of public wrongs," this "sea of troubles" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.60) with strategies of misdirection and concealment, pursuing private agendas of revenge. The blood of English may cry out for justice as it manures the ground, but who will hear?

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