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Dramatic experiments: Tudor drama, 1490–1567

In the prologue to John Dryden's revised version of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1678), Dryden had "Mr. Betterton, representing the ghost of Shakespeare" rise up and intone to the audience,

Untaught, unpractic'd, in a barbarous age,
I found not, but created first the stage.

Before Shakespeare was the void – an uncouth, dark time with nothing to offer England's first master dramatic poet. There are traces of Dryden's perspective in the titles of this chapter and the one that follows it. While the age of Shakespeare proudly sets forth "Dramatic Achievements," the pre-Shakespearean era can offer only "Experiments." To be sure, we have abandoned Dryden's formulation in some ways. No scholar would now contend that Shakespeare took nothing from the drama that preceded him; indeed, a flourishing twentieth-century scholarly industry has devoted itself precisely to demonstrating how Shakespeare's achievement needs to be understood as the culmination of earlier developments in the Tudor theatre. Shakespeare was neither "untaught" nor "unpractic'd" in an earlier English drama, but found much to emulate and adopt.

Although the more recent developmental paradigm escapes Dryden's error of effacing a pre-Shakespearean theatre altogether, it nevertheless devalues earlier dramatic activity except insofar as that can be seen as contributing to the brilliant final decades of the sixteenth century, when, we have long been told, the English stage achieved a poetic intensity, realism, and autonomy unprecedented in the theatrical history of any nation. Typically, earlier Tudor drama has interested scholars only as a transition to something else; the dominant critical mode has been genealogical, attending to origins and influence, but somehow embarrassed by the rudeness of the plays considered in themselves. The present chapter will make every effort to avoid the developmental paradigm that enables such judgments, for the plays we will be discussing deserve to be valued in their

own right, not only as “specimens” or “precursors” of what would come later. For that reason, we will avoid the unconsciously derogatory nomenclature that has pigeonholed the early Tudor entertainments as mere “interludes” or “moralities” (even though both terms date from the period) rather than plays. But we will also consider some of the playing conditions that made it possible for Dryden to overlook the existence of a vibrant, healthy English theatre before Shakespeare.

In the Restoration, the London theatrical scene could boast several competing commercial theatres whose offerings rivaled and commented upon one another, enriching the experience of playgoers. London had an established theatrical culture of actors and playwrights who were lionized in the same way that later cultures have venerated opera stars, sports heroes, and race horses. London also had a committed public of literate theatregoers who not only attended plays and commented upon them, but also bought them in printed versions, and in numerous ways made them part of the emerging “public sphere.” Small wonder that Dryden saw none of this in England before Shakespeare, for the “stage” as he understood it did not yet exist. In considering the earlier Tudor theatre, we have to work our way out of the long process of cultural conditioning that causes us to regard fixed theatres and a quasi-autonomous theatrical culture as normative and other forms of theatre as inferior and subordinate, provisional, and striving to become what they were not. The present chapter will not attempt to be all-inclusive; rather, we will consider several of the most important plays in roughly chronological order as a way of illustrating defining features of this theatre without a stage.

This chapter adopts as its terminus the year 1567, for in that year London acquired its first independent structure built expressly for the purpose of showing plays to the public, the scaffold stage at the Red Lion in Whitechapel, erected by John Brayne, a grocer.¹ There may have been earlier attempts; indeed, the evidence suggests that there may have been a specially built London theatre operating briefly during the 1520s. With the construction of the Red Lion, however, even though it appears not to have been successful, we can identify the instauration of a tradition: the Theatre in Shoreditch (1576) was built by the same John Brayne in partnership with James Burbage; then followed the Curtain, the Rose, the Swan, the Globe (built in 1598 out of transported timbers from the dismantled Theatre), and the Fortune, all of which had been constructed by 1600. As we have begun to recognize, these permanent or at least quasi-permanent structures, and the public taste for playgoing they catered to, helped to transform Tudor drama and the expectations audiences brought to it. One of our tasks here will be to recover some of the alternative expectations audiences

brought to the earlier Tudor theatre, before it had achieved the autonomy implied by the building of fixed London stages expressly designed for the performance of plays.

As the recent REED project has begun to demonstrate, it was not only Dryden who was unaware of the extent of pre-Shakespearean theatrical life. The *Records of Early English Drama's* researchers are methodically canvassing early modern manuscript records of all kinds for signs of theatrical activity, and finding it to be unexpectedly widespread in early Tudor England. In the absence of fixed public theatres, dramatic activity was often attached to some larger occasion or institution. In towns and villages, the church served as an important locus for plays and kindred productions: many towns kept their traditional mystery plays until the late sixteenth and even the seventeenth century, albeit often in an altered form that omitted material offensive to Protestant doctrine. Religious plays were often performed in churches, which in many communities would be the largest available space, but so were secular plays, particularly if the weather was too foul to permit performance in the churchyard.² Towns also sponsored plays and pageants as part of their communal civic activities, and as guild-sponsored mystery and miracle plays fell into disuse these secular productions became more prominent: Lord Mayors' shows, guildhall productions, entertainments for visiting royalty and aristocrats, and performances by traveling players belonging to the households of territorial magnates. The most famous of these civic entertainments from the early Tudor period was London's ceremonial welcome of Elizabeth in January 1559, the day before her coronation, when the Queen proceeded through the City to Westminster, encountering allegorical tableaux and interacting with the speakers who explicated them for her as she passed. According to Richard Mulcaster's highly charged description of the event in *The Passage of Our Most Dread Sovereign Lady* (London, 1559), "if a man should say well, he could not better term the City of London that time than a stage wherein was showed the wonderful spectacle of a noble-hearted princess toward her most loving people and the people's exceeding comfort in beholding as worthy a sovereign and hearing so princelike a voice" (Sig. A2 v). Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the collective, public "stages" of English streets and marketplaces in times of political and religious festivity were the primary sites for dramatic activity during the early Tudor period.

The schools and universities were another fertile locus of dramatic performance: indeed, we need to remind ourselves that were it not for its preservation much earlier as a school text, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* would have been lost to the Renaissance and to us. The universities valued the

drama for offering language and oratorical training and put on extravagant theatrical productions for the edification (and stultification) of visiting monarchs. The new humanist grammar schools were similarly devoted to oral language training of a decidedly dramatic type, as witnessed by the many school dialogues that have survived, some of which were no doubt performed as dramatic skits by the students. The Inns of Court were also rich in dramatic activity that complemented the usual emphasis on oral debate that characterized legal training, and the Inns were particularly noted for their Christmas revels and “misrule.” At the royal court and in noble houses throughout the realm, holidays were especially favored times for maskings, disguisings, and plays, or all of these intermingled into a single vast season of managed revelry. Folk plays of Robin Hood, St. George and the Dragon, and other time-honored subjects were perhaps the most ubiquitous form of drama, performed in humble households, village squares, churchyards, and the royal court alike, often as part of a larger program of holiday revels.

Unfortunately, however, for most of these recorded events, nothing but titles, intriguingly brief lists of props or payments, and perhaps brief descriptions of the plot, have survived. Indeed, many such plays – particularly the folk plays – were probably not transcribed at all, but handed down through oral tradition and partially improvised every time they were performed. Only the most highly literate cultural groups made a regular practice of recording and publishing the texts of dramatic entertainments, and then, it would appear, only if the event carried special political significance or if repeat performances were planned for the future or for other locations. Entertainment first performed at festival banquets in a nobleman’s household could, through the medium of print, become available for use by unrelated troupes of players. Some of the plays to be discussed here, such as *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, had a performance life decades beyond the occasion of their original production because of the medium of print. The early Tudor drama no doubt appeared quite solid and reliably present to audiences at the time of its performance, but for us all of that lively, prolific activity has receded into fleeting glimpses since so little of it has typically survived on paper.

Even the dramatic productions that have survived in manuscript or printed transcriptions often appear disappointingly thin to modern readers because we lack the shared community knowledge necessary to interpret them adequately. Usually such transcriptions are aimed less at reproducing the event for readers remote from the original performance, and more at creating a written “memory” of it for those who were involved. For that reason, written accounts are often quite sparse, recording only words, with

little sense of accompanying dances, music, and revels, or of the specific milieu and purpose of a performance. Early Tudor dramatic performances, since they typically occurred as part of some larger collective activity on the part of a household, parish, town, or other institution, could count on a high degree of common knowledge and group cohesion on the part of most members of their audiences. That shared knowledge has to be recovered by way of painstaking historical investigation before we can fully appreciate the vitality and daring of the plays. Not coincidentally, some of the very features that make early Tudor plays fundamentally different from the plays that gradually came into fashion after 1567, during the era of permanent playhouses, are the same features that made them lively and successful theatre for their original audiences.

In the fixed playhouses, the relationship between audience and actors quickly became conventionalized because it was dictated by the structure of the theatres themselves, which offered clearly differentiated spaces for the stage and for the audience. The separation was, of course, not always observed; particularly in the private playhouses, young swells in the audience liked to sit on stage, and in numerous plays of late century, the actors on stage would still address the audience as though it constituted a collective personage within the world of the play rather than observers outside it. But in the early Tudor drama, each play of necessity had to carve its own performance area out of space that was also used for other purposes; hence the traditional mummers' cry of "Room, room!" by which the players requested that an area be cleared for the duration of their performance. The relationship between actors and audience was also less conventionalized than it became later, in part because most actors were amateurs rather than professionals, and even if they did accept money or goods as a reward for performance they probably held down other jobs as well. In community productions actors and audiences were likely to know each other well, and there was little or no professional divide between them.

The differentiation and identification of actors from audience is accomplished with particular wit in Henry Medwall's very early *Fulgens and Lucrece*, a two-part drama offered at the household of Cardinal John Morton during the 1490s, perhaps in the great hall of Lambeth Palace during the Christmas festivities of 1497, when Morton entertained the ambassadors of Spain and Flanders. As Suzanne Westfall has recently concluded, this play was probably put on by members of Morton's own household. Medwall, the author, was Morton's chaplain. As the play begins, A. and B. come up out of the audience and at first masquerade as simple onlookers like the rest of those at the feast. Each denies that he is one of the players: A. suspects B., who retorts, insulted, "Nay, I am none; /

I trow thou speakest in derision / To liken me thereto” (lines 45–47), whereupon A. goes into a brief disquisition about how little can be assumed by “nice array” among such a company of gallants. But both, of course, belong to the play: each manages later on to attach himself to one of the two youths who are wooing the young Roman maiden Lucrece, whose father Fulgens, a noble Roman senator, has given his daughter free rein to choose between them. By mediating between the audience and the play proper, A. and B. help to define the playing space and orient the audience to the action that follows: B. has at least been made privy to the plot of the play, which he proceeds to offer in precis form for the information of A. and also for the benefit of the audience. Through the rest of the action, as the two suitors, the patrician Publius Cornelius, and the recently ennobled Gaius Flaminius, vie for the hand of Lucrece, the “low” characters A. and B. comically vie for the hand of her maid, a fair “flower of the frying pan” (line 1174). Typically for early Tudor household revels, the play includes music, combat (a mock joust between A. and B.), and a holiday mumming brought in by B. to help win Lucrece for his master, Publius Cornelius.

In the form in which it has come down to us *Fulgens and Lucrece* could not be performed on a stage: it requires the atmosphere of a banquet and the intimacy of a household to succeed (and modern college revivals that can exploit the same conditions of performance have indeed been successful). Somewhat against the characters’ own expectations, Lucrece chooses the lowly born but virtuous Gaius Flaminius over the patrician but dissolute Publius Cornelius: a particularly appropriate message for a cardinal who was a “new man” serving a monarch, Henry VII, who was also a relative newcomer to a throne which he had seized from the ancient but (at least from a Tudor perspective) decaying house of Plantagenet. *Fulgens and Lucrece* brilliantly exploits the format of the household revel not only to bring good holiday cheer, but also to communicate a political message supporting Henry Tudor’s new order based on merit and virtue as opposed to the traditional aristocracy. Indeed, the choice made by Lucrece mirrors the choice made by Henry’s consort Elizabeth, daughter of King Edward IV, when she married Henry VII although rumored to be the chosen bride of his rival and victim Richard III.

Early Tudor drama almost invariably increases in interest the more we are able to immerse ourselves in its immediate political contexts. John Skelton’s *Magnificence* provides a good illustration. We do not know precisely when this brittle, daring play was composed – the traditional date assigned to it is 1516, but Greg Walker has recently suggested 1519 for reasons that will become clear later on. Nor do we have the wealth of

information provided about performance that is imbedded in *Fulgens and Lucrece*. It may be that when Skelton wrote it, he was not yet sure for what occasion it would be performed. Suzanne Westfall has plausibly suggested that it may have been performed at some holiday feast of the household of the Earl of Northumberland, but the poet also had connections with the Duke of Norfolk, and there is at least the possibility that he hoped the play would be performed at court. Alternatively, as the play's most recent editor, Paula Neuss, has suggested, it may have been performed in the London hall of one of the liveried companies, perhaps the Merchant Taylors. *Magnificence* has usually been read as an attack on Cardinal Wolsey, whose high-handed, opulent lifestyle had already made him many enemies in and around the court of the young King Henry VIII. Indeed, it would appear that Wolsey himself took *Magnificence* personally – after familiarizing himself sufficiently with it, he is reported to have become Skelton's lifelong enemy. But Skelton's barbed wit may have been aimed more directly at Henry VIII himself. The play applies a traditional redemption pattern rather like that of the fifteenth-century play *Mankind* to the conditions of rule.

At the beginning of the play, Magnificence rules wisely, with Moderation tempering and guiding Liberty; but soon he falls into bad company. Sinister characters like Counterfeit Countenance, Crafty Conveyance, and Cloaked Collusion, unrecognized in their true nature by Magnificence, introduce him to Vices like Fancy and Folly who are eventually replaced by the far more sinister Adversity, Poverty, and Despair. Indeed, in this bitterly satirical play the traditional mummers' demand for "room" becomes a conniving plea for advancement at court. At the play's lowest ebb, Magnificence's government lies in ruins and he is on the verge of stabbing himself, but is rescued by Goodhope, Redress, and other Virtues, whereupon he and his court are quickly reformed.

Thus summarized, Skelton's play could offer useful advice to any person in power, not only to Cardinal Wolsey. But the play becomes particularly interesting if it is imagined as relating to Henry VIII and his court "reformation" of 1519. As Greg Walker explains, in 1518 Henry VIII had made several of his young, madcap companions Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber. They abused their new power, quickly antagonized everyone, and embarrassed the English government through their irresponsible behavior during an embassy to Paris and their gallicized affectation after their return. Recognizing his error, Henry hastened, in a sensational and widely publicized move, to dismiss several of these minions in May 1519, replacing them with what Edward Hall's contemporary *Chronicle* described as "sad and ancient knights" who helped him to reform his demoralized court. The play's term "Magnificence" was, in fact, used in earlier court

records to refer to the Presence Chamber and the King's private apartments. Moreover, the many French affectations used by the Vices in the play link them closely with the King's gallicized companions. Taken with reference to Henry VIII, Skelton's play becomes a daring, trenchant accolade to the monarch for his 1519 household reforms, with an implied warning that a repeat lapse into bad companionship could produce the same disorders again. Thus understood, Skelton's *Magnificence* has a moral strenuousness and precision quite akin to that of the Stuart court masque of a century later, which both praised the monarch and held up his vices for royal acknowledgment and reform. In *Magnificence*, by contrast with *Fulgens and Lucrece*, a tried and true older nobility – like Skelton's allies Norfolk and Northumberland – are preferred over erratic upstarts. *Magnificence* brilliantly parodies the maneuvering and posturing by which would-be favorites gained and lost access to the monarch in the court of Henry VIII.

As we have noted, the late-medieval cycle plays that had been performed in various English towns during pre-Reformation times did not uniformly die out with the onset of the Protestant Reformation in England, though many of them were revised to suit the times. Rather, during the early Tudor period, Protestant dramatists attempted to create an alternative form of drama that existed for a while alongside the medieval plays, using some of the traditional plot structures but delivering an updated message. John Bale is one of the most interesting of the early Protestant dramatic polemicists. Having commenced his career as a Carmelite monk, he later joined the secular clergy and began promulgating strongly iconoclastic Protestant views. By the end of the 1530s we find him leading a troupe of actors apparently under the patronage of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's principal secretary, and writing religious plays, many of them with scriptural subjects, designed to wean their audiences away from Catholicism or cement their allegiance to the new religion. As Walker has convincingly demonstrated, Bale's *King Johan*, or at least an early version of it that was considerably shorter than the composite text we have now, was performed during the Christmas holidays in 1539 at the house of reforming Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. *King Johan* is drawn from English history, and attempts to portray the thirteenth-century King John, who had been vilified by monastic chroniclers, as a righteous proto-Protestant who was hounded into destruction by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, local and international. In the play, poor widow England complains to King Johan about clerical abuses that have brought her low. But Sedition prevails upon Clergy, Civil Order, and Nobility to conspire against King Johan's attempted reforms, which bear a strong resemblance to the religious reforms advocated by Cromwell and Cranmer. Widow England is besieged by the "wild boar of

Rome” and his followers: “Like pigs they follow in fantasies, dreams, and lies, / And ever are fed with his vile ceremonies” (lines 72–73). Under Catholicism, as we have seen, mummings and other holiday shows would normally have been part of a household Christmas feast such as that at which *King Johan* was performed. But Bale cleverly assimilates such gambols to the activities of the corrupt Catholic clergy, a “rabble of Latin mummers” who disorient the people with mumbo-jumbo and hypocrisy. Throughout the play, Bale mockingly exploits the theatricality of Catholic religious practices – processions, auricular confession, the singing of Latin litanies, the assertion of spiritual vocation through monastic rules and habits, and the like – as empty devices employed to bring down the just King by setting his subjects against him.

The parallels between King Johan in the play and Henry VIII in the late 1530s are clear, although Henry was considerably less zealous than Cromwell and Cranmer in his desire to cleanse the church of any remaining trappings of popery. Like Henry, King Johan faces excommunication by the Pope for his attempted control over the English church, and threatened invasion by Continental powers opposed to his reforms. Contemporaries saw the resemblances all too well: one sympathetic auditor at the 1539 performance sponsored by Cranmer baited his more conservative neighbor by saying, “It is a pity that the bishop of Rome should reign any longer, for if he should, the said bishop would do with our king as he did with King John” (cited in Walker, *Plays*, p. 172). Bale and his players evidently took this show (and many others with similar messages), on the road and performed it in numerous locales. Although *King Johan* began its career at a household feast, it went through many revisions over the years, and was performed as Protestant polemic during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I, just as, during the intervening reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor, a polemical anti-Protestant drama flourished. At two points during the period, in proclamations from the reign of Edward VI (1549) and Mary (1553), the environment had become so heated that “interludes and plays” were banned altogether; in 1559 Elizabeth forbade all such plays to be performed without permission beforehand.³ In its published Elizabethan form, *King Johan* ends happily, with Imperial Majesty redeeming Civil Order, the Clergy, the Nobility, and England, blessed with a “queen – thanks to the Lord above! – / Which may be a light to other princes all / For the godly ways whom she doth daily move, / To her liege people, through God’s word special” (lines 2671–75). But even Elizabeth had her limits when it came to antipopery. She walked out offended from one polemical play that burlesqued the Catholic Mass.

One of the features of early Tudor drama that has led to its margin-

alization by Dryden's age and our own is its frequent reliance on allegorical personages, as illustrated in *Magnificence* and *King Johan*. For us, allegory is offensive or at least uncomfortable because it seems to flatten the juicy fullness of human personality into the sterility of abstraction. For the early decades of the sixteenth century, I would suggest, it had just the opposite effect. In the absence of fixed playhouses, creating a world of interrelated allegorical characters was one of the primary ways in which the early Tudor drama defined its own conceptual space, both closely related to and of necessity distinguishable from the everyday space inhabited by the audience. We need to reimagine the ways in which allegory may have functioned for such audiences: like poetic metaphor, allegory needs to be seen as expanding and complicating the human situations of the play rather than diminishing them.⁴ On this reading, allegorical personages are not people reduced to abstractions, but abstractions attached to people – a compound entity that uses ideas to deepen our view of human transactions, sometimes with troubling ambiguity, by placing them within a dynamic matrix of ideas and moral insights.

In the plays we have discussed thus far, allegorical personages rarely operate simply; the actor performing one idea will frequently also perform its negation and sometimes take positions in between. By reading the plays in modern editions that identify the allegorical persons by name before they speak, we receive a false sense of certainty about the relationship of concept to person that was probably far less readily available to early audiences. *Magnificence* first takes Courtly Abusion for Pleasure: does the audience as well? *King Johan's* Civil Order doubles as Sedition, but does the costume change happen on stage or off? Early printed texts of such plays often suggest possible doublings for performance by the traditional four men and a boy; part of the theatrical pleasure of such doubling came from the weighing of ambiguities it created. But familiarity with the practice would not necessarily make it less intriguing for viewers because it would be mobilized differently from one play to the next. The abstract language of allegory enlivens these plays by giving them a mercurial conceptual dimension and tying them to specific ethical situations of concern in the community at large.

With the development of fixed stages in the final decades of the sixteenth century, the physical and psychological distance between actors and audiences gradually increased and the line dividing them became more clearly defined. As Anne Higgins has wittily put the matter in her essay in *New History*, "It took a long time for spectators to learn passively to watch someone else's play, silent in someone else's theatre, ignored by the play itself, but eventually we did" (Cox and Kastan, eds., p. 92). Early Tudor

drama usually assumes a more highly charged immediacy between players and onlookers; a modern American analogue might be the strong interactivity between preacher and congregation in a gospel church, by contrast with the customary sedateness and muteness of Presbyterians and Episcopalians. In the latter setting, the preacher performs before a seemingly passive audience who may dutifully intone their liturgical responses, but are not expected to show outward signs of active engagement with the ritual; in the former, much of the electricity of the performance is generated by the spontaneous vocal interplay between preacher and congregation.

A favorite early Tudor device is for the allegorical personage to insult or otherwise stir up the audience, as in John Rastell's *The Nature of the Four Elements* (c. 1517), where Ignorance claims "all they that be now in this hall, / They be the most part my servants all" (lines 1301–02). John Heywood's *The Four Ps*, probably performed in a noble household sometime during the 1520s, is more cleverly devious. The play features a debate among a Palmer (pilgrim), a Pardoner, a Potheary (apothecary), and a Pedlar. First the four Ps debate their rival accomplishments, but, in the normal manner of such plays, they soon descend into a lying contest. The Pardoner shows off his relics and the Potheary his various medicines; both tell tall tales of the miraculous cures they have effected. The Pardoner's tale includes a heavy dose of antifeminism: he visits his friends, the devils in hell, to extricate the lost soul of Margery Coorson, evidently an actual historical person. The devils are glad to see her go for "all we devils within this den / Have more to do with two women / Than with all the charge we have beside" (Boas, ed., *Five Pre-Shakespearean Comedies*, lines 937–39). The Palmer responds, surveying an audience whose female part is no doubt by now bristling with indignation:

Much marvel to me ensu'th,
That women in hell such shrews can be,
And here so gentle, as far as I see. (lines 990–92)

Does the Palmer tell the truth or lie? When he asserts that in all his travels he has never met a woman out of patience, the Pedlar scoffingly retorts that the women in the audience should be canvassed as proof to the contrary, and awards the Palmer the prize for the "most excellent" lie of all. On most matters, however, the Palmer appears more reliable than the other Ps, and amid the conceptual tangles of their debate, a lie becomes hard to identify. The debate is projected out into the audience; its elaborate maze of lies within truths within lies is left unsettled; and how it is settled will depend on the individual beliefs of the onlookers.

The audience is enlisted in a more positive way in the later humanist

school play *Wit and Science*, written by John Redford, master of the choir school of St. Paul's Cathedral, for performance before Henry VIII and evidently performed before the King some time between 1530 and his death in 1547. *Wit and Science* adopts the typical fall and redemption pattern that we have seen already in *Magnificence* and *King Johan*, except the fall in this instance is not so much religious or political as pedagogical. Wit is a dashing but baseborn young fellow about to be betrothed to a modest, wealthy damsel named Science; her father Reason has given Wit a mirror that allows him to behold “yourself to yourself” (line 3). Wit starts out bravely, helped by Study and Instruction, but soon allows Tediousness to bring him low. Honest Recreation revives him, along with other comforts, but Wit decides that Science is not for him: “Shall I tell you truth? / I never loved her” (lines 298–99). He throws off his academic gown, dances a galliard, and falls into the voluptuously soft lap of Idleness, who frightens off Honest Recreation. But things get worse: Ignorance enters and is subjected to a hilarious language lesson in which Idleness vainly tries to teach him to pronounce his own name. Ignorance and Wit trade clothing, and when Lady Science comes in to check up on Wit, she can see him only as Ignorance. And yet the love story continues. Looking in his mirror, Wit sees a face black as the devil's, recognizes how far he has fallen, is whipped by Shame, taken in hand once more by Instruction, and shown his goal of Mount Parnassus, where he will make Science his own. At play's end, though Science continues to express some doubts as to Wit's intentions, the planned love-match is reinstated and Wit is once again on the right path toward learning.

One could scarcely ask for a more seductive persuasion to learning than this romance between Wit and Science, promising the diligent student marital bliss, money, and security. The play's propaganda value for its performers, the choirboys of Paul's, is clear: hard work in the classroom will pay. But as Kent Cartwright points out, the play was performed at a time when Cardinal Wolsey and Henry VIII had made policy initiatives supporting the development of humanist education. At the point of his worst degradation, when Wit looks in Reason's mirror and sees himself as Ignorance, he tests the mirror by turning it on the audience:

Other [either] this glass is shamefully spotted,
 Or else am I too shamefully blotted!
 Nay, by Gog's arms, I am so, no doubt!
 How look their faces here round about?
 All fair and clear they, everich [every] one,
 And I, by the mass, a fool alone,
 Decked, by Gog's bones, like a very ass! (lines 806–12)

In all the company of noble auditors, he is the only ignorant fool. The audience is flattered by being numbered among the wise and witty, but also (at least by implication) encouraged to conserve their “fair and clear” aspect in Reason’s mirror through continuing support for humanist education. *Wit and Science* combines the power of drama with many songs and dances in order to preach the value of what it also demonstrates – the skill and mastery of its schoolboy performers.

Not all early Tudor plays produced by educational institutions are so clearly self-referential. As critics have frequently marveled, did we not know that the rollicking farce *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* originated as a university play in Christ’s College, Cambridge, we would be hard put to connect it with the universities at all. *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* was probably written and first performed during the early 1550s – before the death of King Edward VI in 1553, since it refers to the “king’s name.” The play’s author is identified in a late printed edition (1575 and probably not the first) as “Mr. S.,” probably William Stevenson, listed as Bachelor of Christ’s College, Cambridge, in 1550, who went on to attain the MA degree and become a fellow of the college. The play itself is centered on the muck, mire, and dissension of village life in the north of England. Gammer Gurton has lost her prized, long needle, an implement whose phallic implications are exploited with much humor. Diccon, a “bedlam” and licensed beggar, has wandered into the village and, purely for the pleasure of entertaining himself and his audience, connives to set Gammer Gurton and her neighbors at odds over the needle and a supposedly stolen cock. The play’s most unforgettable character is poor Hodge, Gammer Gurton’s servant, whose breeches are torn in the most embarrassing possible place, a fact that enables numerous scatological jests on the part of himself and the other characters.

It would be a mistake to identify this play as singular in its carnivalesque preoccupation with the lower bodily strata. One of *Fulgens and Lucrece*’s low characters delivers a message to Lucrece from one of her suitors that is supposed to be about a kiss under a hollow ash, but he mistakenly asserts that she “fair kissed him on the nook of the arse” or the “hole,” with predictably comic results. And in the *Four PP*, the Apothecary’s cure depends on an elaborate contrivance by which a projectile is shot ten miles out of a woman’s “tewel.” Undoubtedly, the fecal humor common in these plays is one feature that made them repellant to neoclassical tastes later on. But the scatology of *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* would have appealed to the play’s first audience of young boys, aged ten or twelve to seventeen, at university.

Moreover, as Cartwright has suggested, since many in Christ’s College were poor students who hailed from northern parts themselves, the north-

erners of Gammer Gurton's village would pointedly have reminded them of the foulness they had left behind them. For such an audience, the mock-heroic search for the needle would have been both an hilarious holiday escape from more serious endeavors and a reminder of how far they had progressed beyond their origins as a result of their devotion to learning. Diccon's escalating series of deceptions brings the rural society to confusion and, finally, gridlock, which is suddenly broken when he delivers Hodge a great "blow in the buttock." Hodge feels the blow as a bite – the long-lost needle, unwittingly left by Gammer in his breeches, is now impaled in his rump. All ends happily and Diccon gets off with only light punishment. What was his motive in producing this elaborate farce, beyond the odd rasher of bacon that he managed to procure on the side? To bring "good sport," as he avers several times during his stage-direction of the action, urging the musicians to pipe up during the intervals so that their "friends" in the audience will not lack "mirth," and, at the play's close, almost hating to abandon the audience. The madman-director abhors the vacuum that will be left when the interaction between players and the audience has ended.

Although these early Tudor plays have their antifeminist moments, in general they accord women considerable agency. This characteristic is visible already in *Fulgens and Lucrece*, where a Roman patrician gives his daughter the right to choose her own husband; it is yet more visible in the anonymous *Godly Queen Hester* (c. 1529), in which Queen Hester, obviously a highly educated woman, pleads successfully for the lives and welfare of her subjects. Indeed, throughout the early Tudor period, powerful, well-educated, and well-connected women had strong impact upon the subjects and ideology of the drama, and the resulting power of women within the plays may be one of the things that made them vaguely uncomfortable for readers of later periods. Walker has suggested that the queen in *Godly Queen Hester* is to be identified with Henry's first wife Katherine of Aragon, who was lobbying strongly and bitterly against the King's plans to divorce her and thereby weaken his ties with the Catholic church. In the play, Hester argues that a queen must have the same ability to rule as a king does, and indeed Katherine of Aragon had served as Regent during Henry's 1513 campaign in France. In real life, Katherine was unsuccessful, but in the play, which was almost certainly intended for performance before the divorce was finalized, she succeeds in winning her husband from his tyrannous ways and thereby saves her subjects.

The pattern of woman heroines continues in Mary Tudor's reign with *Respublica*, probably written by Nicholas Udall, a humanist schoolmaster who was closely connected with Mary's court and the children of the

Chapel Royal; the boys probably performed the play before the Queen herself. According to its manuscript title page, the play was “made in the year of our Lord 1553, and the first year of the most prosperous reign of our most gracious sovereign Queen Mary the first.” In this interesting play, the reading of allegorical persons becomes genuinely perplexed. According to its carefully worded prologue, the play will demonstrate the abuses that beset “all commonweals” and Nemesis, the *deus ex machina* at the end who comes down to restore order, represents “Mary our sovereign and queen,” sent down by God to reform “th’abuses which hitherto hath been” (lines 49–50). Such an allegorical scheme makes the play a Catholic answer to Bale’s *King Johan*: Respublica, a lamenting female figure reminiscent of Bale’s Widow England, has been ruined by her credulous acceptance of false counselors, whose abuses recollect the Edwardian religious reforms. One of them, whose actual identity is Oppression, is renamed Reformation and proceeds to enact abuses that strongly resemble Protestant inroads of the previous decades on the rituals and religious foundations of the English Catholic church. Read on this allegorical level, the play lauds the beginning of Mary’s rule as a time for ecclesiastical recovery and reconsolidation. Lady Nemesis at the end deploys Justice tempered with Mercy to carry off Oppression/Reformation and his fellow Vices; she leaves Respublica under the protection of the Virtues, and announces “I must go hence to another country now, / That hath of redress the like case that was in you” (lines 1926–27). Presumably this “other country” is another Protestant nation in need of restoration to Catholicism, which Mary is proposing to restore to truth as she has Respublica. The play ends with Pax (Peace) and other Virtues lauding Queen Mary and her counselors and wishing them a long and peaceful reign.

But there are other cogent ways of reading the play which the Prologue, by insisting so strongly on the necessity of reading Mary as Nemesis, may actually provoke. Could it be that the author of the play had Mary’s own vulnerabilities more centrally in mind? On another level of political allegory, it is almost impossible not to identify Mary with Respublica, and indeed, according to the theory of the “King’s Two Bodies,” the ruler, as a composite entity, was held to partake both of human weaknesses and need (like Respublica) and of divine perfection and power (like Lady Nemesis). If Mary in her “mortal body” is identified with Respublica, the play becomes in many ways a female version of *Magnificence*; and like *Magnificence*, which celebrated reforms initiated by Mary’s father Henry VIII, *Respublica* shows a monarch beset by vices of her own making that threaten to bring down her government. Respublica’s chief flaw, however, is not youth and folly but credulity: she mistakes devouring Avarice for

Policy, Adulation for Honesty, Oppression for Reformation, and Insolence for Authority. Throughout the play, her motives are good, as was indeed true of the historical Mary Tudor, known largely to later history as “Bloody Mary” because of her persecution of obdurate Protestants.

Unlike Magnificence in his play, however, Mary as Respublica is deeply concerned with the sufferings of People, who is harried and beaten as a result of Respublica’s poor administrative choices. In her empathy for her suffering subjects, she closely resembles Queen Hester, and therefore Mary Tudor’s mother Katherine of Aragon, whom, as argued earlier, Hester was designed on one level to represent. Interpreted on this level, *Respublica* artfully integrates patterns from earlier plays celebrating reforms either introduced or contemplated by both of Mary’s parents. If Respublica is identified with Mary, Udall’s play does not so much look backward at Protestant abuses as forward toward Mary’s own potential for failure. The play is both cautionary and predictive: it movingly portrays Mary’s dilemma as a champion of religious truth who manages to produce great suffering; when she seeks divine guidance, her prayers are answered. Truth shows her the mistakes she has made and redeems her; Nemesis appears as a *deus ex machina*, or as Mary herself in her “immortal body” as monarch, to set Respublica and her People to rights. This Marian play is far more complex than either interpretation taken alone would suggest, and demonstrates the flexibility and continuing vitality of allegory as revelation and political intervention during the 1550s.

After the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1559, woman-centered drama took a seemingly odd turn. Plays like *The Tribulations of Mary Magdalene* and *The Play of Patient Grissell* began to emphasize women’s victimization rather than their achievement. There are many possible explanations for this development, but one surely is that Queen Elizabeth herself was an important national symbol of martyrdom and resistance to tyranny. As a “second person” under Mary Tudor, she had come close to execution on more than one occasion for alleged treasonous activities designed to take over Mary’s throne and restore the kingdom to Protestantism. Indeed, she herself admitted in her speeches later on that she could easily have become involved in such machinations. But she chose instead a path of heroic endurance.⁵ The story of Elizabeth’s noble sufferings is movingly told in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, even though, unlike most other martyrs in that volume, she managed to avoid execution. Elizabeth’s motto was *semper eadem* – always the same – but with an oxymoronic feminine twist, in that her use of *eadem* instead of the usual masculine *idem* associates the feminine gender with steadfastness rather than the more stereotyped flightiness and changeability.

Beginning with its memorable treatment in the writings of Petrarch, the story of patient Griselda had become an exemplum for resistance against political tyranny.⁶ We now see Griselda only as a masochistic sop who allows her husband to dominate her and haul her children off to be murdered; but in Petrarch's Latin version of the story, Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale," and the early Elizabethan *Play of Patient Grissell* (c. 1558–61), written by John Phillip, Griselda is rather a pattern of heroic steadfastness in the face of adversity, a pattern held up for emulation by women and men alike. The preface to the undated quarto edition of the play from the mid-1560s seems likely to have been part of the play in performance, and counsels its readers or viewers:

Let Grissell's Patience sway in you, we do you all require,
Whose history we unto you in humble wise present,
Beseeching God we always may in trouble be content
And learn with her in weal and woe the Lord our God to praise.
My time is past, my charge is done, I needs must go my ways.

(Preface, lines 17–21)

This early Elizabethan play parallels Chaucer's more familiar version in terms of plot, but lays rather more emphasis on the idea of tyranny. The low-born Grissell's loutish noble husband Gautier is persuaded by Politic Persuasion to deprive her of her children and finally even her marriage, as he sends her back to the humble cottage from which she came and makes plans for a new wedding. Every time they push her further, Gautier and Politic Persuasion watch closely for any sign of revolt, but to the long series of atrocities Grissell utters not one word of protest, although she movingly laments her sorrow and refers more than once to the "tyranny" of their proceedings. To my knowledge, no one during the period seriously advocated passivity and duty in a wife so profound that she would fail to protect the lives of her children, but many contemporaries did argue for heroic passivity as the only just response against tyranny. As Kent Cartwright has pointed out, the outraged reaction of women in Grissell's household points toward a normative response to Gautier's tyranny, and makes her own steady silence appear all the more uncanny.

During the tumultuous years before Elizabeth's accession England had in fact required very similar sacrifices on the part of her dutiful subjects. Cranmer and other Protestant notables were burned at the stake; many others were hounded into exile; families were divided and children lost. Without portraying Elizabeth's precise experiences under Catholic persecution, *Patient Grissell* gestures toward both her own and her nation's required fortitude under Mary's attempted reimposition of Catholicism. It

is not uncommon for the drama, a sensitive barometer of public opinion, to help its audiences “work through” a major national calamity. Plays of the early 1590s obsessively replayed motifs relating to England’s victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 and her continuing vulnerability to Spanish invasion. Similarly, after 1660 the English stage convulsively reenacted elements of the traumatic civil war and execution of Charles I. In *Patient Grissell* and other similar plays of heroic endurance from the late 1550s and early 1560s, we can identify the same phenomenon, centered on the charismatic, iconic figure of Queen Elizabeth and heroines who resembled her, but celebrating the survival and steadfastness of a persecuted people who had suffered under the many cataclysmic alterations in the national destiny since the reign of Henry VIII, particularly Mary Tudor’s forced reinstatement of Catholicism, which had abruptly been reversed upon the accession of Elizabeth. *The Play of Patient Grissell* closes by naming Elizabeth and the “lords of the Council” in a way that both links England’s Queen with Grissell in the play and warns her and her government to “govern aright” so that they will avoid the tyranny illustrated in Gautier.

One effect of Gautier’s cruelty in *Patient Grissell* is that he appears destined to die without heirs, as Mary Tudor did, until he reveals to Grissell that her children were not murdered, but secreted away. Contemporaries may have seen a parallel with Elizabeth’s imprisonments at the Tower and Woodstock – a seeming extinction from which she yet emerged to carry on the Tudor line. A key concern of Elizabeth’s subjects during the early years of her reign was the securing of heirs through her marriage (a fate that she managed to resist), or, failing that, through her designation of a list of successors to take over the throne in the event of her sudden death (a list that she steadfastly refused to make). The final play to be considered in this brief survey is also the most famous: *Gorboduc* or *Ferrex and Porrex*, written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton for Twelfth Night during the 1561–62 Christmas revels of the Inner Temple and performed at court on 18 January 1562.

The Inns of Court were famous for their Christmas revels: during the 1561–62 holiday season, according to the diary of a London citizen, a lord of misrule rode through London, gorgeously dressed and accompanied by a hundred horsemen with chains of gold, into the Inner Temple, “for there was great cheer all Christmas . . . and great revels as ever for the gentlemen of the Temple every day, for many of the [Privy] Council were there” (*Gorboduc*, Cauthen, ed., p. xi). Usually, misrule meant jollity and comic topsy-turvydom. It is difficult for us to imagine the stark, powerful tragedy of *Gorboduc* as part of such revelry. But *Gorboduc* demonstrates the

dangers of misrule on a national level by enacting the annihilation that resulted from the bad choices of an ancient British king. Part of the shock of *Gorboduc* for its contemporaries must have come from its startling innovations: it was, so far as we know, the first English play to use blank verse instead of rhyme, and the first to use dumbshows. Each of the play's five acts begins with a mute visualization of the essential meaning of the act that follows it. The technique is reminiscent of early English plays, in that, like the earlier Vices and prologues, the dumb shows of *Gorboduc* serve to create a space for performance, focus the audience's attention upon it, and suggest directions for interpretation. But *Gorboduc*'s dumbshows do not so much seduce the audience into participation as stun them into silent horror. The first depicts six wild men dressed in leaves who try to break a "fagot of small sticks," but do not succeed. Then they draw out one stick at a time, and easily dismantle it. In the main action of the first act, Gorboduc resolves to divide his kingdom between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex, during his own lifetime, so that their strength can be occupied and he can guide them while going into semi-retirement. His counselors disagree among themselves about the wisdom of his action, but the dumbshow has already shown a truth Gorboduc himself does not see. Act Two is preceded by a dumb show of a king offered wine in a glass, which he refuses, and wine in a golden goblet, which he drinks. The wine in the goblet contained poison, and the king falls dead. So, during the second act, Gorboduc's two sons Ferrex and Porrex, both invested with their halves of the kingdom, "drink" bad counsel and plot each other's deaths. Act Three begins with a dumbshow of mourners; in that act Gorboduc learns that his younger son Porrex has murdered Ferrex. And so things continue from bad to worse: Gorboduc's Queen, outraged at Porrex's killing of her favorite son, murders Porrex; the angry people rise up and kill Gorboduc and his Queen, and by act Five there is war of all against all; the land is desolate, famine-ridden, and consumed by fire. The moral of all this? According to the final speech of the play, the fate of Gorboduc shows the vital importance of Parliament's declaring an order of succession so that modern England will not share the fate of Gorboduc's ancient Britain. But we can get more specific than that, because *Gorboduc* adds elements that are not in the play's chronicle sources. In *Gorboduc*, Porrex, the younger brother who kills his sibling, is the brother who held a kingdom from the Humber northward – he is therefore associated with the territory of sixteenth-century Scotland. Similarly, in the last act of the play, Fergus, Duke of Albany, looks down upon the waste of England and resolves to seize the throne. Albany was traditionally a Scottish title. *Gorboduc* warned Queen, Council, and Parliament of the importance of creating an order of succes-

sion in the event of Elizabeth's death. A few months before *Gorboduc*, she had told the Scots ambassador that such a move would be folly of the highest order: "Think you that I could love my winding-sheet?"⁷ But further, with its portrayal of menacing Scots, *Gorboduc* was advising Elizabeth herself to remove the name of Mary Queen of Scots from the line of the English succession and thereby cancel out the horrific vision of Catholic Scottish engulfment of a vulnerable Protestant England. This vitally interesting play deserves more attention than can be afforded it here. Suffice it to say that *Gorboduc* offered Elizabeth advice that was probably most unwelcome. As our brief survey of early Tudor drama has suggested, it was the frequent plight of Tudor monarchs to be entertained with dramatic performances that showed the consequences of their mistakes and offered advice for good rule. But *Gorboduc* also does something that earlier plays discussed here did not – through the sheer terror of its visual images of dissolution, it awed its audiences into a submissive silence that made them spectators rather than co-creators of the action. If, as suggested earlier, the development of fixed stages eventually taught audiences to sit mutely and watch, ignored by the play itself, then *Gorboduc* was a step along the way.

NOTES

- 1 See John Orrell's essay on "The Theaters" in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Kastan, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 102–12. For subsequent references to texts referred to by author's name in my chapter, readers are referred to the "Further reading" section at the end.
- 2 See John M. Wasson, "The English Church as Theatrical Space," in *New History*, eds. Cox and Kastan, pp. 25–37; and Richard Dutton, "Censorship," in *New History*, eds. Cox and Kastan, pp. 287–304.
- 3 See Dutton, "Censorship."
- 4 See Theresa M. Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1–42.
- 5 I am indebted to Mary Beth Rose's chapter in progress on Elizabeth I in a forthcoming book tentatively entitled *Versions of the Heroic*.
- 6 See David Wallace, "'Whan She Translated Was': A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 156–215.
- 7 "Queen Elizabeth's Conversations with the Scottish Ambassador. William Maitland, Laird of Lethington, September and October, 1561," cited from *Speeches, Letters, Verses, and Prayers of Queen Elizabeth I*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Speech 4.

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