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Chaucer and Shakespeare on Tragedy

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My aim in this essay is to consider what Chaucer and Shakespeare meant by the word 'tragedy'. Most modern discussions of tragedy are based on a number of false or questionable assumptions. Mistaken or oversimplified interpretations of Aristotle are often applied to plays or other literary works of all ages, and sometimes these works are judged by anciently or modernly developed criteria of tragedy, as if such criteria were current knowledge at the time the literature was produced. I do not wish to deny the usefulness of taking one's own notion of tragedy or the tragic spirit and seeing whether or how often it is verified in various ages, so long as one does not impute such an idea to those ages without sound reason. But I believe it important and even essential to find out what conceptions of tragedy were current and operative at any given period.

To begin with the 'medieval heritage of Elizabethan tragedy', to use Willard Farnham's famous phrase,¹ there is a consensus that the history of tragedy in the Middle Ages is fairly straightforward. Even so accomplished a medievalist as Dieter Mehl can say that tragedy has been one of the most long-lived of all literary genres, which 'in spite of many variations in form and substance, has proved remarkably consistent'.² The truth is that tragedy as a dramatic or narrative genre has had quite a fitful existence. In the Middle Ages the very word *tragedia* and its vernacular equivalents was a rarity; it did not even appear in English until Chaucer introduced it. To those who knew the word, it meant quite different things. One of Chaucer's contemporaries, the surgeon John Arderne, seemed to think of it as a synonym for 'book', since he recommended drawing on 'the Bible and other tragedies' for humorous stories. A similar conclusion was drawn by a fifteenth-century reader of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, namely, the translator of the rules of Richard Whittington's Hospital. He addressed his pamphlet, which he produced in 1442, in the same way that Chaucer addressed his poem: 'Go, litel boke, go, litel tragedie'.

A later author, who compiled a continuation for the monastic chronicle of Croyland in 1485, treats *tragedia* as a synonym for 'chapter'.³

Better informed users of the term usually took it to designate an obsolete literary or dramatic form once practised in ancient Rome or Greece. It was very uncommon to apply it to recently written works, and almost unheard of for any author to think of himself as a writer of tragedies; it was even rarer to call an event 'a tragedy' or to use the adjective 'tragic' about anything, whether in life or literature. For all practical purposes, Chaucer was the one who discovered tragedy as a usable modern genre. He was the very first author of tragedies in any European vernacular, if we exclude Dante's unimitated notion in the *De vulgari eloquentia* that his lyric poems were in the genre of tragedy.⁴

Where did Chaucer learn of tragedy as an active genre? The accepted scholarly view, of course, is that he was not original, but rather that he found the theory and practice ready-made for him in Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, which Boccaccio first released near the end of his life, around 1373.⁵ For instance, Willard Farnham in the above-noted study says that 'Chaucer adds nothing important to Boccaccio's conception of tragedy' (p. 131). Throughout his treatment of Boccaccio, Farnham speaks in terms of tragedy, and he concludes his chapter by saying, 'Thus Boccaccio momentarily sees tragedy in the grand manner: for a tragic character there are lines of cause and effect having to do with individual choice', and so on (pp. 127–28). But much later Farnham makes an admission that has been overlooked by most of his readers, namely, that 'Boccaccio did not write his stories of the fall of princes in order to illustrate any learned medieval theory of tragedy' (p. 171).

I maintain that Boccaccio never shows any awareness of the medieval practice of tragedy, let alone a medieval theory of tragedy.⁶ He did not take tragedy to be a modern category, but only an ancient one, reserved for works in dialogue form to be produced on the stage. In other words, he did not consider even classical works in narrative form to fall under the designation of tragedy, and he certainly did not consider any of the episodes of his own *De casibus* to be tragedies. He uses the term tragedy only in its dramatic sense, specifically to refer to the plays of Euripides and the debased stage productions of Nero.⁷ His description of the latter shows that he regarded ancient tragedies in the same way that he thought of ancient comedies, as recited by one person while others pantomimed the action. This is a conception based ultimately on Book 18 of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*.⁸ Boccaccio knew the written form that tragedies took from his acquaintance with Seneca's plays, on which he had drawn in an earlier work.⁹

Chaucer, then, did not get his idea of tragedy from Boccaccio. Moreover, he had never heard of Seneca's tragedies, did not know Isidore's account, and had not the least idea of the theatrical nature and traditions of tragedy. Furthermore, he did not know Horace's *Ars poetica* — men of letters in both England and France had stopped reading Horace long before Chaucer's time — and there is no mention of tragedy in his favourite classical works, Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*. His only certain source was Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, where Philosophy envisages Fortune as asking, 'Quid tragoediarum clamor aliud deflet nisi indiscreto ictu Fortunam felicia regna vertentem?' Chaucer translates it in his *Boece* as, 'What other thyng bywaylen the crynges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune, that with an unwar strook overturneth the realmes of greet nobleye?'¹⁰ The purport of Fortune's question is that tragedy deals with disasters which fall unexpectedly on the innocent as well as the guilty. But in the commentary on Boethius written by the learned Oxford scholar Nicholas Trevet at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the subject of tragedy is restricted to evil protagonists. Trevet first draws on Isidore's Book 18, defining tragedy as a mournful poem of the ancient deeds and crimes of wicked kings, and then he repeats the definition that William of Conches gave in his commentary on Boethius: 'A tragedy is a poem dealing with great iniquities, which begins in prosperity and ends in adversity.'¹¹ This will not be the last time we see the tendency to confine an open-ended concept of tragedy to stories of the wicked who receive a deserved come-uppance.

However, the explanation of tragedy that Chaucer gives effects a reversal of this confinement and restores the Boethian sense. It does so in a very simple way: it omits the Isidorian material and excises the 'great iniquities', leaving only a very general definition: 'Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchednesse.' Chaucerians have uniformly supposed that Chaucer in his glosses is drawing directly on Trevet; it would follow that Chaucer himself was responsible for this brilliant restoration of Boethius's meaning. But I have suggested that Chaucer was actually drawing not on Trevet's complete commentary but rather on excerpts from the commentary which he found in the margins and interlinear spaces of his copy of the *Consolation*.¹² Therefore it is the glossator who deserves the credit for modifying Trevet's comment on tragedy, if I am right; and if I am right, the credit for my suggestion should go largely to Walter Skeat. Skeat recognized that the text of Boethius in the manuscript which John Croucher gave to Cambridge University shortly after Chaucer's death 'fairly represents the very recension which Chaucer used. It abounds with side-notes and glosses, all in

Latin; and the glosses correspond to those in Chaucer's version.¹³ Skeat is clearly right in concluding that Chaucer's explanatory words and phrases 'are seldom original: they are usually translated or adapted from some of the Latin glosses and notes with which MS C abounds' (p. xlvi).

Skeat was writing in 1900 or earlier, and therefore before Kate Petersen argued in 1903 that Trevet was a direct source for Chaucer.¹⁴ But the first example that Skeat gives to show Chaucer's dependence on his glossator shows as well that the glossator is an intermediary between Chaucer and Trevet's commentary.¹⁵ It never entered Skeat's mind to suppose that Chaucer himself was the person responsible for compiling the Latin glosses and writing the Latin paraphrases of his text, for he considered Chaucer, as Ben Jonson did Shakespeare, to be a man of small Latin. He quotes with approval H. F. Stewart's opinion that Chaucer's translation 'is not that of an inexperienced Latin scholar, but rather of one who was no Latin scholar at all' (p. xxii). I agree with Skeat's implicit disqualification of Chaucer as his own glossator. Whatever facility he had or would acquire in business Latin in his government jobs, it did not carry over to his learned pursuits. There is no evidence that Chaucer ever indulged in the sort of scholarly annotations that came so easily to his friend John Gower.

How then are we to account for the fact that Chaucer's translation contains a great many Trevet-based glosses that are not in the Croucher Latin text? There are two obvious possibilities: either all of the glosses that Chaucer used were in his copy of Boethius, and some of them were omitted by the Croucher scribe; or Chaucer took some of his glosses directly from Trevet. Let me suggest a third possibility: the person responsible for the Croucher glosses actively collaborated with Chaucer and, after having lightly glossed his copy of Boethius, continued to supply him with other glosses while he was working on his translation. I suggest further that Chaucer copied some of these new Latin glosses on the margins of his translation and that the Croucher scribe passed them on. The Croucher manuscript gives not only the annotated text of Boethius but also supplies, after each prose and metre, Chaucer's translation, which is also occasionally furnished with Latin glosses; and it can be shown that Chaucer draws directly on at least one of these glosses to make explanatory comments in his own English text.¹⁶ The fittest candidate for such a Chaucerian collaborator is the 'philosophical Strode' whom Chaucer invited, along with 'moral Gower', to correct his tragedy, *Troilus and Criseyde*.¹⁷ Strode may have been at least partially responsible for Chaucer's decision to make the Boethian additions to Books 4 and 5.¹⁸

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After finding out about tragedy from Boethius, Chaucer tried his hand at the genre himself, by following the example of the series of stories contained in the *De casibus*. For though the author (whom Chaucer seems to have thought was Petrarch) did not call these stories tragedies, Chaucer identified them as such on the basis of his glossator's definition. Whether or not Chaucer was aware of what his glossator had done in rescuing Boethian tragedy from the dour restraints that Trevet had placed on it, Chaucer did the same for the *De casibus*. The *De casibus* contains as many undeserved downfalls as deserved overthrows; but, according to his preface, Boccaccio intended to concentrate exclusively on the latter. He says he wishes to describe the disasters that have befallen high-ranking men and women and to construe these disasters as sent by God because of their vicious way of life (p. 25). This preface, which modern theorists of 'de casibus tragedy' have unaccountably ignored, was deliberately or indeliberately set aside by Chaucer. At the beginning of his set of short tragedies, which he was later to give to the Monk in the *Canterbury Tales*, he draws both on Fortune's question and on his glossator's definition:

I wol biwaille, in manere of tragedie,
The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,
And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
To brynge hem out of hir adversitee. (ll. 1991–94)

He continues to point to Fortune's role when he goes on in this first stanza to say that no one can stop her when she decides to leave. It is not a question of merit or demerit; it is simply that one's luck has run out. But the next lesson that Chaucer draws is:

Lat no man truste on blynd Prosperitee;
Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde. (ll. 1997–98)

There is something more here than the idea that misfortune is always simply a matter of bad luck: otherwise, why 'beware'? What good will it do to take the blindfold away from the eyes of Prosperity? The answer is that sometimes falls can be prevented by alertness and by right action. This is borne out in several of the examples which Chaucer narrates. While some protagonists do not cause their falls (Zenobia, Alexander), some do bring disaster on themselves, whether by

foolishness (Samson, Croesus) or by wickedness (Nero, Holofernes); and sometimes the wicked fall by divine punishment (Balthasar, Antiochus).

At the end of his series, after telling of the death of Croesus, Chaucer turns Fortune's rhetorical question into a declarative statement:

Tragedies noon oother maner thyng
Ne kan in syngyng crie ne biwaille
But that Fortune alwey wole assaille
With unwar strook the regnes that been proude. (ll. 2761–64)

We are not to think that Fortune has suddenly become moralistic in singling out the proud. 'Regnes that been proude' does service here for Boethius's *felicia regna*, which Chaucer earlier translated as 'realmes of grete nobleye'. Pride need not indicate a vice. There is a neutral or even positive kind of pride, such as that of a proud horse or a superb castle. One can belong to a proud estate and still be virtuous. But probably Chaucer means to emphasize at this point that those who are sinfully proud (like Antiochus) or foolishly proud (like Croesus) are particularly prone to misfortune, because he concludes by saying:

For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
And covere hire brighte face with a clowde. (ll. 2765–66)

But the fact remains, illustrated by some of the offered examples, such as that of Zenobia, who was neither foolish nor sinful, that misfortune can come even to those who are alert to, and wary of, the dangers of prosperity.

Later, Chaucer wrote an extended tragedy, the *Troilus*, and still later, when he incorporated his early series into the *Canterbury Tales*, he wrote a frame for the Monk in which he gave yet another definition. At the end, Chaucer originally had the Host interrupt the Monk's tragedies with a complaint that they were putting him to sleep, because they were not 'wel reported'. This is as close as we get to a statement from Chaucer on what distinguishes a good tragedy from a bad: it must be well told, so that it interests and moves the listener. The Host's reaction to the sad tale of Virginia, told by the Physician, seems to be the kind of effect sought for. However, in what I take to be Chaucer's final version of the Monk's Epilogue, that contained in the Ellesmere manuscript, it is the Knight who interrupts the Monk, not because his tales are boring, but because they are too affecting and depressing, and therefore not proper for the kind of entertainment he seeks. The Host asserts his

agreement with this assessment, but then launches into his original judgment that the stories have not held his attention.

So there we have Chaucer's invention of tragedy. He not only introduced the word tragedy into the English language, but he was also the first person to write tragedies in a post-classical vernacular language; and his definition and example were influential. His tragic masterpiece, *Troilus and Criseyde*, inspired both Henryson and Shakespeare (and others); but, even more important, John Lydgate followed Chaucer's lead in considering the stories of Boccaccio's *De casibus* to be tragedies, when he composed the *Fall of Princes*; Lydgate in turn was imitated by the authors of the *Mirror for Magistrates*. Neither of these works contains great tragedies, but they pass on Chaucer's idea of tragedy, and I maintain that it was this idea to which Shakespeare was chiefly heir.

Before I 'prove' this thesis, I would like to point out that competing views of tragedy in Shakespeare's England seem to have been few and limited in scope. It would have been fairly common knowledge from Horace's *Art of Poetry* that high style and strong emotions were proper to tragedy. Aristotle's *Poetics* was in the air, doubtless entirely as filtered through his Italian commentators, but it was invoked mainly for questions of form rather than of content.¹⁹ There was some knowledge of classical tragedies, particularly those of Seneca in the Latin original and the English translation; but what sort of definition of tragedy would they yield? One could no doubt make out a case for Isidore's idea that tragedy was a poem of lament about the crimes of wicked kings. They also fit William of Conches's definition, in that they are about great iniquities and they end in adversity (except for the coda to *Hercules Oetaeus*, and also, one might say, *Medea*, where the wicked villainess triumphs); but one cannot say that they begin in prosperity. The action is disastrous from start to finish.

The most important new voices readily available, after having been lost to sight during the Middle Ages, were those of the late antique grammarians, Evanthius and Diomedes. Evanthius's treatise *De fabula* was particularly influential, disguised as the introduction to Aelius Donatus's commentary on Terence, and it was often to be found in editions of the comedies.²⁰ It was undoubtedly known to Shakespeare, since Hamlet in his discourse to the actors draws on Donatus's own remarks on comedy, which immediately followed *De fabula* in the commentary.²¹

Evanthius–Donatus explains tragedy as having imposing characters, great fears, and disastrous endings, but tranquil beginnings. This and the similar explanation of Diomedes could easily be taken to harmonize with Chaucer's

definition, but they could just as easily be used to support Trevet's specification of criminous protagonists who pay for their crimes.

One Elizabethan theorist, William Webbe, who published his *Discourse of English Poetrie* in 1596,²² seems to take his Donatus in a Chaucerian sense, when he says that the great personages of classical tragedy suffered 'most miserable calamities and dreadful chances which increased worse and worse till they came to the most woeful plight that might be devised' (p. 249). The same is true of George Puttenham in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589),²³ when he says that the ancient tragical poets 'set forth the doleful falls of infortunate and afflicted princes' (p. 27). But Puttenham shows his true views later when he defines tragedy as a form of reprehensive poetry (p. 32) and says that its practitioners used to to lay open the 'infamous life and tyrannies' of those who had fallen from high estate, and to reproach their wickedness (p. 35). Thomas Lodge in his *Defence of Poetry* (1579)²⁴ draws on Donatus to say that the original tragic poets wrote poems of praise and thanks to God, whereas the debased later poets wrote of 'the sour fortune of many exiles, the miserable fall of hapless princes, the ruinous decay of many countries' (p. 80). He clearly interprets their motivation to be satirical rather than sympathetic.²⁵

Philip Sidney, in his *Apology for Poetry*, written around 1583,²⁶ applies the reprehensive purpose to modern as well as to ancient tragedy; he praises 'the high and excellent tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors', and so on (p. 177). His disciple Sir John Harington in his preface to his translation of *Orlando Furioso* (1591)²⁷ does the same: tragical poetry represents 'only the cruel and lawless proceedings of princes, moving nothing but pity or detestation'; and Thomas Legge's *Richard III* is an admirable example (pp. 209–10). Both Sidney and Harington appeal to Aristotle's *Poetics* at times, but Aristotle did not think highly of what they considered to be the ideal tragedy. He concedes that stories of bad men coming to bad ends might satisfy one's 'philanthropy' or sense of poetic justice; but they do not arouse the emotions proper to tragedy (ch. 13).

What, then, of Shakespeare? I have shown elsewhere that Shakespeare in his history plays systematically resisted the almost universal tendency of historiographers to draw heavy-handed lessons from events: he 'unmoralised the moralisers'.²⁸ I think it likely, *a priori*, that he would do the same in the realm of tragedy, and would object specifically to the tyranny of poetic justice that seemed to rule over his more academic contemporaries. Of all his plays that are called

tragedies in the early editions, including the *Tragedy of Richard II* and the *Tragedy of Richard III*, only two, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, fit the pattern called for by the theorists. But since the titles of his plays could in many instances be the work of editors or printers rather than of Shakespeare himself, I propose to test his understanding of tragedy by seeing how his characters use the term as a metaphor (sometimes plainly a theatrical metaphor) to characterize events. Such uses had clearly become commonplace by Shakespeare's day.

J. V. Cunningham has already undertaken such a study, with very interesting results.²⁹ But whereas Cunningham concentrates on the nature of the disaster (usually violent death) and the character of the antagonist or perpetrator of the deeds which are called tragedies, I wish to look at the persons who actually suffer or experience the tragedies. In *1 Henry VI*, Talbot calls the death in battle of the noble Salisbury a woeful tragedy (I. 4. 77). In *3 Henry VI* there is a similar application of the term: loss suffered by 'our side' (the side of right) is a tragedy (II. 3. 27). But in *Henry V*, the Black Prince is said to have 'played a tragedy' which resulted in the enemy's defeat (I. 2. 106). In *2 Henry VI* the death of 'the good Duke Humphrey' is referred to as a suspicious tragedy (III. 2. 194); earlier Humphrey calls his projected death 'the prologue to their play', saying that even the death of thousands more 'will not conclude their plotted tragedy' (III. 1. 151-53). The account of the death of Henry VI's young son, Prince Edward, is a 'tragic history' (V. 6. 28). In *Titus Andronicus* it is not the career of the guilty that is termed tragedy but rather the murder of an innocent man, Bassanius (II. 3. 265), and the rapes and murders of innocent girls (IV. 1. 60), likened to 'the tragic tale of Philomel' (IV. 1. 47). In *Richard III*, however, the deserved downfall of the wicked is characterized as a tragedy or tragical by Hastings (III. 2. 59) and by Margaret (IV. 4. 7), each referring to enemies. In the same play, suicide as a culpable deed of despair is called 'an act of tragic violence' (II. 2. 39); whereas the suicide of Pyramus in the play in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is called tragical (V. 1. 66), could easily be taken as devoid of culpability, as could that of his analogue Romeo. In *Othello*, both the murder of Desdemona and the suicide of Othello are tragic (V. 2. 363). In *Phoenix and Turtle*, even a virtuous and tranquil death following upon a virtuous life is called a 'tragic scene' (I. 52).

We have in these works of Shakespeare, then, the modern everyday idea of tragedy, the range of which can be tested by considering the applications of the expression, 'What a tragedy!' We will find, I think, that we use the word of irreversible disasters and misfortunes which come in all forms and for all sorts of causes and often against all hope and expectation. Cunningham points out that the

meanings of tragedy which he finds in Shakespeare's characters are 'generally Elizabethan' (p. 50), and the same holds for the range of meanings which I have described. The same range can even be seen in Sidney's *Arcadia*, where he is not concerned to advocate an academic view of tragedy.³⁰ There is one reference to the fall of a wicked man who brings down others with him (oA, l. 162) and several to the innocent coming to a bad end (nA, ll. 150, 533, 557). The word 'tragedy' or 'tragical' is used to characterize great troubles for the guiltless (oA, l. 84 = nA, l. 218), sadness in general (oA, l. 150), misfortunes (oA, l. 238), undeserved suffering (nA, l. 104), weird or unexpected events (oA, l. 244), and, on a lighter level, the woes of a lover (oA, l. 105 = nA, l. 328) and trivial concerns (oA, l. 234). Tragedies are spoken of as plays with a mournful setting (nA, ll. 261, 280), or containing miseries (nA, l. 126), or having a sad ending (oA, l. 311).³¹

Since Shakespeare's time the word tragedy has been 'promoted', that is, restricted to the superlative or topgrade end of the denotative field. The same thing has happened to other words, like 'poetry', 'quality', 'breeding', 'parts', and, quite recently, 'tenure'.³² Or, to put it another way, 'tragedy' is elliptical for 'quality tragedy' ('quality' being elliptical for 'highest-quality'). Stephen Orgel has shown that this elevated status was in effect for tragedy at least by the time of Thomas Rymer, who speaks of 'the sacred name of tragedy'.³³ Orgel argues that the same thing happened to 'comedy', but here his case is not convincing; so far as I can see, no other literary or dramatic genre besides tragedy has received such treatment or suffered similar consequences.

For purists of Rymer's sort, for whom nothing but the best will do, the kind of global scope given to tragedy in the Elizabethan age is a debasement of the word. But for the rest of us it remains the very essence of our notion of tragedy; and it is more common for our tragic sense to be stimulated by the sight of suffering innocence than by the sight of suffering guilt. This sense corresponds precisely to Chaucer's wide-open idea of tragedy — a story that goes from prosperity to adversity — but expanded to include the events themselves as well as literary or dramatic presentations of the events.

Chaucer's is the best definition of tragedy that I know of. It does not complicate matters by limiting it to a particular form or content or by insisting on *qualitative* criteria. It leaves the door open to various kinds of tragedy (dramatic or narrative), to tragedies of Fortune, tragedies of betrayal, and tragedies of retribution; and to good tragedies and bad tragedies. According to Chaucer, a tragedy is good if it is skillfully composed. What could be more reasonable than that? Skillfulness of narrative, depth of characterization, and sympathy or empathy can be achieved in all

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kinds of sad or disastrous stories. The greatest tragedy from this point of view is one that evokes the deepest sensation of loss and dereliction. We can be grateful, I think, that Shakespeare was heir to Chaucer's idea and that he felt free to choose a variety of stories as models for his tragedies. It would have been too bad if he had been restricted, say, to the horror-story model of Seneca's tragedies, or even to the kind of stories that Aristotle in one of his chapters designates as the best for tragedies. It is a common mistake nowadays to believe that Aristotle himself elevated tragedy as a genre by limiting it to this kind of story. Nothing could be further from the truth. Aristotle's general understanding of tragedy is even broader than Chaucer's: it encompasses every story with 'spudaeen' or serious events and characters, even those with happy endings. One third of Euripides's tragedies ended happily, and it would be foolish to think that Aristotle, scientist that he was, excluded them from the category of tragedy, or that he excluded plays which did not live up to his ideals of emotional effectiveness — including those that featured unrepentant and triumphant parricides, like *Electra* and *Medea*, and repentant and absolved parricides, like the *Oresteia* and *Oedipus in Colonus*. In fact, Aristotle's criteria of effectiveness are notoriously unclear. Just after giving best marks to the story of a great but not entirely good man, like Oedipus or Thyestes, who falls because of some sin, or at least for missing his aim somehow (ch. 13), Aristotle comes up with another schema in which this kind of story takes, at best, second place. First-class honours go instead to the sort of story in which a person is about to kill a kinsman, but desists when discovering the kinship; and he gives Euripides's *Iphigenia among the Taurians* as an example (ch. 14). Later on, he notes that the *Odyssey* as well as the *Iliad* has an admirable plot for tragedy (chs 23–24).³⁴

By late antiquity, the pleasant ending had been pretty much excluded from the recognizable limits of tragedy, at least in the writings of theorists. Evanthius cites only the *Iliad* as a model of tragedy, while recommending the *Odyssey* as a model of comedy. When Chaucer revived tragedy and set it on a new course, he had the great good fortune to hit upon an idea of tragedy which encompassed the downfall of both the innocent and the guilty. This, as I have shown, became the popular notion of tragedy, one that is shared by Shakespeare's characters, and it has remained so to this day. Since it was Chaucer who gave the idea its effective start on the road to popularity, and since Chaucer also wrote the first great tragedy of modern times, the story of the innocent Troilus, it might not be too much to think of Chaucer as the father of modern tragedy, and of Shakespeare as the chief beneficiary and greatest developer of his bequest.

NOTES

- 1 Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley, 1936).
- 2 Dieter Mehl, *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 1.
- 3 See my essay, 'The Croyland Chronicle Tragedies', *The Ricardian*, 7.99 (December, 1987), 498–515, for the Croyland author and for the hospital pamphlet; the latter is edited by Jean Imray, *The Charity of Richard Whittington* (London, 1968), pp. 109–21. For John Arderne, see my study, 'The Non-Tragedy of Arthur', in *Medieval Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell*, edited by Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 92–114, especially p. 93. For Dante, see my forthcoming monograph, *Tragedy and Comedy from Dante to Pseudo-Dante*, University of California Publications in Modern Philology, where I argue against Dante's authorship of the *Epistle to Cangrande* (see note 6, below). Dante viewed tragedy in terms only of high style and noble subject matter, not of plot movement or change of mood.
- 4 See 'Non-Tragedy', pp. 94–95, for the handful of Latin authors who anticipated Chaucer in calling their compositions tragedies.
- 5 See Vittorio Zaccaria, 'Le due redazioni del *De casibus*', *Studi sul Boccaccio*, 10 (1977–78), 1–26, especially 25.
- 6 Boccaccio was familiar with the dictionary definitions employed by commentators on Dante. See 'Dating the Accessus Section of the Pseudo-Dantean *Epistle to Cangrande*', *Lectura Dantis* (University of Virginia), 2 (Spring, 1988), 93–102, a preprint of chapter 2 of my monograph referred to in note 3, above. Boccaccio considered Dante's characterization of his great poem as a comedy to be a figurative usage, to describe its movement from horror to joy; presumably he would have considered any labelling of a narrative as a tragedy to be figurative as well. He may also have known about the discussions of Albertino Mussato and the other 'Senecans of Padua'. See my 'Aristotle–Averroes–Alcmanus on Tragedy: The Influence of the *Poetics* on the Latin Middle Ages', *Viator*, 10 (1979), 161–209, especially 186–200. Mussato actually drew on William of Moerbeke's new translation of the *Poetics*, but only for minor matters (see pp. 188–89).
- 7 Boccaccio, *De casibus*, Books 4 and 7. See the facsimile edition of the early version (the one used by Premierfait and passed on in French to Lydgate) edited by Louis Brewer Hall

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(Gainesville, Florida, 1962), pp. 64, 176. See note 10, below, for his use of tragedy as a dramatic metaphor.

⁸ See my 'Tragedy and the Performance of Tragedy in Late Roman Antiquity', *Traditio*, 35 (1979), 21–44, especially 22–25.

⁹ Mario Serafini, 'Le tragedie di Seneca nella *Fiammetta* del Boccaccio', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, 126 (1949), 195–205.

¹⁰ *Boece*, Book 2, prose 2, cited from the edition of Ralph Hanna and Traugott Lawler in *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, third edition (Boston, 1987), p. 409. At one point early in the *De casibus*, Book 1, 'Adversus nimiam credulitatem' (p. 38), Boccaccio may be drawing, at least indirectly, on this passage in Boethius, when he says that *infinite clamitant tragedie*, 'countless tragedies keep shouting', the disasters caused by credulity. This figurative usage is in keeping with his dramatic understanding of tragedy. In the passage on Euripides cited above, he speaks of the *tragediarum clamores ingentes*, 'great shouts of tragedies'.

¹¹ For details, see 'Non-Tragedy', p. 95.

¹² 'Non-Tragedy', pp. 95–96.

¹³ *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by Walter W. Skeat, second edition, 7 vols (Oxford, 1899–1907), II, xxxviii. Compare Hanna and Lawler, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1004: 'Like C², which contains an abbreviated copy of Trivet but other glosses as well, Chaucer's Latin text gave an eclectic annotation of Boethius.'

¹⁴ Kate O. Petersen, 'Chaucer and Trivet', *PMLA*, 18 (1903), 173–93; see Hanna and Lawler, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1004.

¹⁵ Skeat, pp. xxxviii–xxxix, citing Book 3, Metre 11, ll. 13–14. Trevet has the short glosses quoted by Skeat, except that he has *latenter contentus* instead of the *latenter conditus* of Croucher. Trevet's final gloss is: *quasi diceret nisi hoc esset, non iudicaretis recta quantumcumque ordinate interrogati*, 'as if to say, unless this were so, you would not judge right things, no matter how clearly you might be asked'. Instead of this, Croucher has a summary sidenote: *Nisi radix veritatis latentis conditus vigeret in abscondito mentis, homo non iudicaret recta quantumcumque ordinata interrogata*, 'Unless a root of hidden truth flourished, preserved in the depths of the mind, man would not judge right things no matter how clearly they be asked.' Chaucer has: 'This to

seyne, how schulde men deme the sothe of any thing that were axid, yif ther nere a rote of sothfastnesse that were yploungid and hyd in the naturel principles, the whiche sothfastnesse lyvede within the depnesse of the thought?' (Hanna and Lawler, p. 436). The Trevet text is quoted from the unpublished edition of the late Edmund T. Silk, *Nicholas Trevet on Boethius* (available on microfilm from Mrs Eleanor Silk, 75 Auburn Street, New Haven, CT 06511), p. 476, and the Croucher text from Silk's Yale Ph.D. dissertation (1930), *Cambridge Manuscript li 3. 21 and the Relation of Chaucer's 'Boethius' to Trivet and Jean de Meung* (released in 1970 for on-demand reproduction from Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan), p. 340.

16 The gloss comes at the beginning of Metre 4 in Book 3: *Quamvis Nero fuerat odiosus populo, magnum dominium habuit et contulit aliis dignitates propter vicia donantis deturpatas*, 'Although Nero was hateful to the people, he had great lordship and gave to others dignities that were defiled because of the vices of the giver' (Silk, p. 268). Chaucer draws on it for two comments: 'This is to seyn that, al was he byhated of alle folk, yit this wikkide Nero hadde gret lordschipe'; and ' "unworschipful seetes" he clepeth here, for that Nero, that was so wikkide, yaf tho dignytees.' Hanna and Lawler overlook the Croucher gloss, and for Chaucer's second gloss they cite Trevet's: *ex hoc quod ab indigno dabantur*, 'from the fact that they were given by an unworthy person', while noting a closer correspondance with William of Conches's: '*indecoras' autem vocat eas quia ab illo dabantur qui easdem dignitates dehonestabat*, 'but he calls them *indecoras* because they were given by him who dishonoured those same dignities.' A. J. Minnis, ' "Glosynge Is a Glorious Thyng": Chaucer at Work on the *Boece*', in *The Medieval Boethius: Studies in the Vernacular Translations of De consolazione Philosophiae*, edited by A. J. Minnis (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 106–24, lists this passage of Chaucer's translation as among those containing elements from versions of the commentary of Remigius of Auxerre incorporated into the 'second redaction' or expanded version of Conches's commentary (p. 118). He suggests that Chaucer's copy of Boethius contained a number of Remigian glosses of this kind, but believes that Chaucer took all of his Trevetian glosses directly from Trevet; he does not consider evidence that the glosses recorded in Croucher were intermediary between Trevet and Chaucer (see p. 122).

17 On Strode's identity, see the note on *Troilus*, v. 1856–59, in Stephen A. Barney's edition in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1058.

18 On the nature of these and other additions, I agree strongly with Charles A. Owen, Jr, '*Troilus and Criseyde: The Question of Chaucer's Revisions*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 9 (1987), 155–72.

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19 See the discussion by G. Gregory Smith, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1904; reprinted, London, 1937), I, lxxiii–lxxiv; and see Virgil K. Whitaker, *The Mirror up to Nature: The Techniques of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (San Marino, California, 1965), pp. 50–54.

20 A recent edition is that of Giovanni Cupaiuolo: *Evanzio, 'De fabula'* (Naples, 1979). The attribution of this treatise to Evanthius was first made in Lindenbrog's edition of the comedies of Terence (Paris, 1602), p. 622 (Cupaiuolo, p. 7, note 3). Evanthius-Donatus was also filtered to Englishmen through Scaliger; see Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, p. lxxvi, note 7. See also Paul Sellin, 'Sources of Julius Caesar Scaliger's *Poetices libri septem* as a Guide to Renaissance Poetics', in *Actes du Colloque International organisé pour . . . la naissance de Jules-César Scaliger*, Recueil des travaux de la Société Académique d'Agen, 3rd series, 6 (Agen, 1986), 75–84.

21 *Hamlet*, III. 2. 24–27 ('to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature', etc.). See A. Philip McMahon, 'Seven Questions on Aristotelian Definitions of Tragedy and Comedy', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 40 (1929), 97–198, especially p. 190. For Shakespeare's plays, I use the line numbering that was established by the Globe edition and Bartlett's concordance, as followed, for instance, in the edition of W. A. Neilson and C. J. Hill (1942), and I enter a protest against the recent practice of editors' following their own numbering, without regard to the previous hard-won uniformity. Scholars of the Bible, Plato, and Aristotle have managed to produce new textual readings and concordances without disturbing the Stephanus and Bekker numbering of verses and lines.

22 William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie, 1586*, in Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, 226–302.

23 Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, II, 1–193.

24 Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, 61–86.

25 Lodge gives an explanation, which he attributes to the Flemish satirist Jodocus Badius, of why the form was called *tragoedia*, or 'goat-song'; the actors were rewarded with a goatskin filled with wine (I, 80). Puttenham gives three possible reasons: (1) because the buskins were made of goatskin; or (2) because the best players were rewarded with a goat; or (3) because a goat was sacrificed to the god Pan, king of all the gods of the woods (II, 36). Webbe says that the name comes from the actor's practice of slaying and offering a goat to their goddess when he began to play his part (p. 248).

- 26 Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, 148–207. The *Apology* was first printed in 1595.
- 27 Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, II, 194–222.
- 28 *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970), especially pp. 304–06.
- 29 J. V. Cunningham, *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*, first published by the University of Denver Press in 1951 and reprinted in several different forms. I use it as it appears in his *Collected Essays* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 1–129. His examination of 'tragedy' in Shakespeare's plays occurs on pp. 45–50 of the section on 'The Donatan Tradition'.
- 30 For the old *Arcadia* (oA), I use *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1985), and for the new *Arcadia* (nA), *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, edited by Maurice Evans (New York, 1977).
- 31 There are also a couple of simple comparisons to acting in a tragedy (nA, 132, 233) and one reference to a real drama: 'playing well the part of a king in a tragedy at Athens' (nA, 234). I thank my colleague Ronald Levao for collecting all of the above-cited *loci* from both versions of Sidney's work.
- 32 Note expressions like 'not poetry but mere verse'; 'person of quality', 'quality education'; 'woman of breeding'; 'man of parts'. 'Tenure' in the sense of 'permanent tenure' is identified in the *Supplement to the OED* as 'originally and chiefly U.S.', with the earliest citation from Vladimir Nabokov's 1957 novel *Pnin*: the narrator refers properly to 'life tenure', but Pnin himself speaks of 'getting tenure' after being an assistant professor for nine years. No doubt earlier instances of the usage could easily be found.
- 33 Stephen Orgel, 'Shakespeare and the Kinds of Drama', *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1979–80), 107–23, especially 110.
- 34 For a recent treatment of these matters, see Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1986), especially pp. 202–37, 253–85, and also his translation and commentary, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London and Chapel Hill, 1987).