MEDIEVAL DRAMA IN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

Abstract: The English cycles of Corpus Christi plays continued to be acted well into the reign of Elizabeth I, and Shakespeare almost certainly had some acquaintance with them. They offered a form of drama radically at odds with the prescriptions laid down by Aristotle, Horace and their humanist followers, comparable in its independence to that recommended on commercial grounds by Lope de Vega. Shakespeare not only adopted many of his theatrical principles from the cycle plays, but also derived an explicit theory of drama from their model of stagecraft to rival the humanists': a theory he spells out in the Prologue to *Henry V*. This "apology for the stage" was taken up in similar terms in the introductory poem of Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors*, so called in response to the attack on English stage practices in Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*. **Keywords:** William Shakespeare, dramatic theory, English medieval drama, Spanish medieval drama.

Resumen: Los misterios ingleses del Corpus Christi siguieron representándose bien entrado el reinado de Isabel I, y Shakespeare sabía de ellos casi con total seguridad. Ofrecían una forma de drama radicalmente opuesta a las prescripciones de Aristóteles, Horacio y sus seguidores humanistas y comparable en su independencia a la que Lope de Vega recomendaba por motivos comerciales. Shakespeare no sólo adoptó muchos de sus principios dramáticos de los misterios medievales, sino que también extrajo una teoría dramática explícita a partir del modelo de técnica teatral de éstos, que rivalizaba con la de los humanistas: una teoría que expone en el Prólogo de *Enrique V*. Esta "apología de la escena" reaparece en similares términos en el poema introductorio de la *Apología de los actores* de Thomas Heywood, así llamada por responder al ataque a las prácticas escénicas inglesas en la *Apología de la poesía* de Sir Philip Sidney. **Palabras clave:** William Shakespeare, teoría dramática, drama medieval inglés, drama medieval español.

The Elizabethan age might seem too late a period to interest SELIM or its associated conference, but this paper is intended as a reminder that the Middle Ages did not end as early as we commonly like to think, and that medievalists are in many respects uniquely placed to contribute to the criticism and scholarship on Renaissance literature. It is too easy to assume that there was some kind of divide between the medieval and the early modern; indeed, the two terms we use for the later period both insist on such a divide in different ways. "Renaissance" emphasises the rebirth of the Classics, a renewal of the long-past; "early modern" suggests the birth of the modern age, a prediction of the future, as if it were only then that our

own world begins. Both terms carry with them an implication that there was nothing in the Middle Ages of any value, in keeping with the familiar phenomenon that "medieval" is more often used as a term of insult than to designate a time period. It is a practice that goes back, indeed, to the humanists, who promoted such a derogatory attitude towards the Middle Ages in order to suggest that their own ideas were more innovative than they actually were; and since humanism has dominated education almost ever since, those ideas have become embedded in many modern ways of thinking (Lewis 1954: 1–56, 1955; Aers 1992; and many others). This paper, however, will argue the opposite, specifically with reference to Elizabethan drama. The greatest drama in English, I believe, including Shakespeare's, is grounded in the medieval; so an understanding of its medieval context can bring things to the study of Shakespeare that lie outside the early modernists' field of vision.

A quick historical survey of what was happening in drama in late medieval and sixteenth-century England is necessary to explain what that context was. There is a common assumption that there was a sharp break between the two forms at the Reformation: that pre-Reformation drama was Catholic and religious, while post-Reformation drama, under the pressure of disapproval from the stricter Calvinist wing of the Church of England, was secular. To an extent, that is indeed true; but it is also an over-simplification that ignores a great deal of what was going on. Medieval drama survived for much longer than we tend to assume. Some dramatic genres, such as the saints' plays, did indeed die out along with the cults of the saints they celebrated, and have left very little surviving evidence: only one, *Mary Magdalene*, survives in anything like full-scale dramatic form, though that, interestingly, operates through a stagecraft remarkably close to that of Shakespeare's *Pericles*. Moralities, the allegorical plays that segued into interludes in the course of the sixteenth century, were a late medieval development and reached their peak in the early Tudor age; they were still being acted, and actively remembered, until late in the century,

but they gradually changed form. Plays with a *dramatis personae* of personifications rather than people transmuted into pageants, royal entries and court masques (all themselves medieval in origin), and enjoyed a vibrant afterlife down to the Civil War. Moral interludes evolved or were absorbed into full-scale plays: plays such as Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, with its protagonist despatched to hell; or Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), in which a junior devil fresh out of hell finds himself completely outclassed by the sharp practices of contemporary London; or the structure showing a man pulled between figures representing good and evil, as with Prince Hal between Falstaff and the Lord Chief Justice, or Othello between Desdemona and Iago (whose associations with angel and devil are as close as is possible short of making them supernatural) (Bevington 1962; Spivack 1958). The major form of medieval drama, however, was the mystery plays, still referred to by the Elizabethans as the Corpus Christi plays even after the feast of Corpus Christi had been abolished. These were the great play cycles of Biblical drama performed annually in a number of major towns and cities across England; and for those we have abundant surviving Elizabethan evidence, showing them in a form unaltered or only slightly altered from their medieval origins. In terms of texts, four near-complete cycles survive, plus a number of isolated individual plays recorded independently of the cycles that once contained them. There are records indicating that perhaps as many as fourteen cycles once existed, and that number may still not give a full picture.[1] It is these plays on which I shall be focusing in this paper.

At their fullest, the Corpus Christi plays showed cosmic history from the fall of Lucifer and the creation of Man through to the Last Judgement. There were also widespread shorter variants, such as cycles devoted to the New Testament only, or with a concentration on the events of the Passion. They were a

[1] For a full listing of records, including dates of last performance, see *REED* (1979–).

kind of drama that encompassed God and the devils, patriarchs and sinners, kings and shepherds, all inhabiting the same stage; and they refused to believe that anything was unstageable, whether heaven, or Noah's flood, or the Crucifixion, or the Last Judgement. The full versions in particular were marked by their extraordinarily ambitious scope. They were the English equivalent of the great dramatic religious festivals of ancient Athens, except that rather than new plays being written every year, the texts were traditional, and were revised or rewritten only intermittently. In impulse and origin they were religious, but they brought spectators from miles around, and gave a generous economic boost to the towns that hosted them. The plays were presumably written by clerics (all are anonymous), but they were usually performed by the various trade guilds under the aegis of the city rather than the Church. Initially inspired by the processions of the feast of Corpus Christi, which had been instituted in 1264, the play cycles emerged in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. After the Reformation, they were still not invariably regarded as Catholic, many Protestants valuing them as adjuncts to Biblical teaching. One new Passion play was composed in Elizabeth's reign by the Protestant master of Shrewsbury School, and performed several times in the 1560s; it was presented outdoors, as the civic plays were, and played to crowds numbering thousands.[2] The years of its performance coincided with the young Philip Sidney's attendance at the school, and since it was acted by the schoolboys, it is not impossible that he was one of them—a strange thought given his later comments on drama in his *Apology for Poetry*. Performances of the cycles did not stop with the Reformation, and indeed most of the texts that survive do so in sixteenth-century copies (all in manuscript: none reached print, initially probably because the cities wanted to keep control over

[2] Its school origins might suggest a play on the humanist model, but its acting outdoors and the large numbers of people attending point strongly towards a more popular model based on the staging of the Corpus Christi plays.

performances, later because of the censorship of pre-Reformation material). Many Elizabethan churchmen disapproved of them on religious grounds, because they portrayed God and Christ on stage, and because they did not limit themselves to the strict text of the Bible; the government disapproved of them on grounds of public order, since they were the occasion for bringing together large numbers of people who might then be incited to riot (though there is no record of any riot associated with them). Strenuous efforts were therefore made to suppress them, usually against the wishes of the towns themselves. Norwich tried to keep on the right side of the new theology by providing its cycle with a new Protestant-friendly prologue in 1565. Chester had extensively revised its plays in the 1530s, and adaptations continued to be made after the Reformation, though the last performance of the full cycle took place in 1575. There was, however, an individual performance of its Shepherds' pageant for the Earl of Derby and his son Ferdinando Lord Strange when they visited the town in 1578: noblemen who had a particular interest in drama, the father keeping a company of players in the 1570s and 80s, his son becoming one of the patron of one of the leading London theatre companies in the late 80s until his death in 1594. Further evidence of interest in the Chester cycle at the end of the century is supplied by the fact that it is the only cycle to survive in more than one copy; and all six manuscripts, full or fragmentary, date from after 1590, in the great decade of Elizabethan drama.

Other towns too kept their cycles going. York gave its last performance in 1569, though there were still hopes for a revival in 1580. It had been proud enough of its civic drama to present its Creed play, a kind of mini cycle, to Richard III. Coventry took equal pride in its cycle, though it may have restricted itself to the New Testament; selected plays were regularly presented to visiting royalty, to Margaret of Anjou, Richard III, Henry VII, and to Elizabeth herself when she visited the city in 1566. Its last peformance took place in 1579, but one guild kept its pageant

wagon until the 1630s, just in case. Coventry was within easy reach of Stratford-on-Avon, and in 1579 Shakespeare was fifteen: there is very strong circumstantial evidence that he saw them (Cooper 2010: 49–71). Other towns further from the seat of government managed to continue their plays for longer: Newcastle intermittently to 1589; Cornwall, which had its own biblical plays, to 1602; Kendal, in the Lake District, into the reign of James I, perhaps as late as 1612. Preston also continued late, and a pageant wagon figures in a will of 1638. Their afterlife depended less on redundant wagons, however, than on people's memories. As late as 1644, two years after the Puritans had finally enforced the closure of the London theatres and brought the great age of early modern drama to an end, an old man in the Lake District, questioned about his knowledge of Jesus Christ by a visiting preacher, replied, "Oh Sir, I think I heard of that man you speake of, once in a play at Kendall, called Corpus Christi play, where there was a man on a tree, and blood ran down" (*REED: Cumberland, Westmoreland,* 1986: 219). Nor were all these plays and memories mere relics. We therefore need to think of the reign of Elizabeth not only in terms of its great drama for the public stage, but in terms of the overlap of that with performances and memories of this other tradition: a tradition still very much alive in the early decades of her reign, and retained for much longer in the minds and memories of later playgoers. London did not have a cycle of its own, but it did have a huge number of immigrants in the late sixteenth century from the rest of England, and so from areas where these plays were a vibrant tradition.

That is the kind of background that we need to have in mind when we look at the drama written for the public stage under Elizabeth, and to the kinds of comments made about it. What the commentators wanted was drama of the Classical kind in which they had been educated, or neo-Latin plays that followed the same model. What they saw on stage was something very different. In his *Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney famously condemned as "gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies,

nor right comedies; mingling kings and clowns … with neither decency nor discretion" (Sidney 2004: 46). In 1591, John Florio, tutor in Italian to the English aristocracy, made the same point in his English-Italian phrasebook designed to assist speakers of either language to make intelligent, or at least polite, conversation in the other. It consists of a number of model conversations designed to explain the strange ways of the English to the Italians, and one of the exchanges runs as follows (Florio 1591: 23):

> H. The plaies that they plaie in England, are not right comedies.
> T. Yet they doo nothing else but plaie every daye.
> H. Yea but they are neither right comedies, nor right tragedies.
> G. How would you name them then?
> H. Representations of histories, without any decorum.

Sidney's *Apology* was not published until 1595,[3] some fifteen years after he had written it; but although Florio had links with the Sidney circle that might have allowed him to read it in manuscript, the idea he expresses was commonplace. The assumption underlying the exchange is that Italians would find the plays presented on the English public stage not just odd, but improper, wrong: everything that is the opposite of that repeated "right." These "histories" (by which he means not so much historical plays, though these had begun to appear in the theatres, but stories, dramatised narratives) did not follow "decorum," the more technical rhetorical term for what Sidney designates as "decency" and "discretion:" those rules demanding consistency of genre, plot and style and strict limitations on time and place such as were supposed to be followed by "right" comedies and tragedies. Derived from Greek roots in Aristotle's *Poetics* and from Latin in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, confirmed by the practice of those Greek plays known to the more educated Elizabethans and of Seneca's more widely known Latin drama, these

[3] The work was printed twice, once as the *Apology for Poetry* and once as *The Defence of Poesie*. Since Thomas Heywood seems to have it in mind under the former title, as described below, I have used that.

"unities" were repeated and strengthened by a series of humanist critics and theorists writing in most of the languages of Europe, not least the authoritative Latin. The discomfort they express with the Shakespearean kind of drama still has clear echoes after the Restoration, in Dryden (who described Shakespeare's plays as disorderly), in Dr Johnson in the eighteenth century, and indeed for many later critics. It is this discomfort that led, for instance, to the twentieth-century invention of the category of "problem plays," to take in the plays that were most evidently "neither right comedies, nor right tragedies."

Sidney and Florio do however share another important word too, though neither apparently notices it—as we still tend not to: for what English wrote and acted were *plays*, the standard term used to describe the vernacular English theatre for centuries. Plays that were not right comedies or tragedies could still emphatically be right *plays*, just as the Corpus Christi plays had been. "Play" remained the basic word for everything to do with drama throughout the sixteenth century: the one Old English-derived word in a flood of imported Classical terminology. "Tragedy" and "comedy," ultimately Greek but which had entered the European vernaculars by way of Latin, had been used in England since the later fourteenth century, but both were used to describe narrative forms, and they were assimilated to vernacular drama only slowly and awkwardly through the 1570s and 80s. To a degree, the humanist critics and the early playgoers did not even share a vocabulary; they used what were superficially the same words in different senses, and had very different literary models in mind when they used them. So it is scarcely surprising that the humanists had great trouble with plays that did not fit their own definitions and classifications, for *plays* brought none of those Classicising assumptions of definition or limitation with them.

Right tragedies and comedies, to Sidney and Florio and their fellow humanists, demonstrated their rightness by adherence to a fixed set of rules. Horace's *Ars Poetica* had been known

throughout the Middle Ages, and hence also his prescriptions as to the appropriate style to use for speakers of different ranks, the maximum number of speaking characters, and so on; but there is very little evidence that those had much bothered actual medieval playwrights, including those writing in Latin. The rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* around 1500 did however set both humanist drama and humanist theory off on a different track, and humanist commentaries on the text rapidly turned both generic distinctions and what we know as the Aristotelian unities into something much fiercer than what the *Poetics* actually says. Aristotle describes and analyses the practices—in particular, what he reckoned to be the best practices—of the drama of his day. The humanist commentaries on the text, in particular the widely disseminated *Poetices Libri Septem* of Julius-Caesar Scaliger (1561) and the influential Italian translation and commentary of Ludovico Castelvetro (1570), turn those descriptions into prescriptions, tightening them up and adding more. Thus plays not only came in two sorts, tragedies or comedies; but tragedies were about the life of a high-ranking man of distinctly bad character who comes to a deservedly nasty end, composed in high-style verse; and comedies were about middle or low class characters, written in prose. The action should be single, that is there should be no subplots or mixing of genres; the time of the action should be limited to a single day, or, preferably, the time the play took to perform; and, in an addition to Aristotle (though widely observed in Classical plays themselves), the stage should represent a single place. The commentators also set rigid limits to the number of characters, or speaking characters, on stage at once; and although violent actions were regarded as the very substance of tragedy (murder, parricide, incest and so on), they all took place off stage, and were reported by means of a messenger. The emphasis given by the Elizabethan stage, as on the medieval, on *acting the action* rather than describing it, is entirely absent.

Those rules became something of a mantra in sixteenth-century poetic handbooks and in the more casual comments made on

drama. They were so strongly insisted on because the unities in particular appeared to be founded on reason; and that brought with it the assumption, sometimes explicit, that anything else was an assault on reason, and therefore to be deplored. The imagination by contrast was untrustworthy, anti-rational. Castelvetro indeed based his principles on the belief that audiences were incapable of understanding anything other than the most naturalistic of presentations, anything other than a direct transposition of real life onto the stage: the imagination was not only a danger but an impossibility (Castelvetro 1570; Weinberg 1961: 502–511). Sidney's reading in both Aristotle and the commentators is evident in the detail of his complaints about the English public drama, his ideas of what a right tragedy or comedy should look like;[4] and Florio is only one of many other humanist-trained theorists who took the same line.

That account may just seem to be repeating what has been known ever since Shakespeare wrote his plays, that he broke the neo-Classical rules. His approach to playwriting, however, can profitably also be placed both in the context of medieval drama, and of what was happening to plays on the continent of Europe. German drama, like English, resisted the imposition of humanist rules (Benjamin 1998: 48–61); but seventeenth-century French drama famously took them up with grand commitment, even though—or perhaps because—France had had a particularly extravagant earlier tradition of vernacular religious theatre. In contrast to the concise secular plays, interludes and *sotties* and *farces*, French Passion plays might last for days, or even weeks; their average length was 10,000 lines, the longest over 50,000, and at their most generous they might have hundreds of speaking roles. They were performed down to the 1540s; unlike the English Corpus Christi plays, a number

[4] For a forceful argument that Sidney knew the *Poetics* itself as well as its commentators (a position that has often been doubted), see Lazarus 2013. On his humanist sources, see Sidney 2004: lvii.

were printed, continuing into the seventeenth century (Runnalls 1995). Castelvetro's own comments were likewise made against the background of Italian vernacular theatre very different from the neohumanist drama that followed. The Italian *sacre rapprezentationi* were the approximate equivalent of the English mystery plays or saints' plays, though usually more concise; the more recently invented *commedia dell'arte*, improvised plays based on stereotype characters, was in some ways more similar to music-hall than to formal drama, and was even less likely to appeal to a critic trained in the Classics. The strength of neo-Classical influences in Italy went so far as to include the imitation of ancient theatre design: Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (begun 1580) supplies for its stage a wide flat frontage with depth largely confined to *trompe l'oeil* scenic effects in a fixed street design, perfect for staging Roman comedy or tragedies set in front of a palace, but incapable of any fluidity of place: even indoor scenes become almost impossible. The stage design itself, in other words, sets strict limits on the kind of plays that could be acted there. It may have seemed too restrictive even at the time: when the man who had completed the building after Palladio's death, Vincenzo Scamozzi, came to design his own Teatro all'Antica in Mantua just a few years later, he designed a stage with greater depth and somewhat more potential for multiplicity of place, though the full freedom assumed by the London public stages would still be hard to reproduce here.

The situation in Spain was in many ways simpler. Religious drama before the Reconquista was largely limited to Castile, though few play texts survive, and the records of others are so patchy as to suggest that many more may have been lost (Stern 1996: 1–24).[5] The brief twelfth-century *Auto de los Reyes Magos* is a precious but rare survival almost without a context. By the later Middle Ages there was a certain amount of dramatic activity

[5] For an indication of the dissemination of medieval religious drama across Europe down to 1700, including in Spain, see Muir 1995: 270–287.

connected with Corpus Christi, but that often took the form of processional pageants of religious images or tableaux rather than the performances found in England—though they too may have their origins in such processions. *Autos*, which were often connected with the feast of Corpus Christi, seem to have been played in a number of Castilian towns, though the relationship between spectacle and performance is not always clear. Although there had never been any strong tradition of civic drama, nor anything on the scale of the cycle plays, there was a large measure of continuity between medieval and early modern theatre in Spain compared with most continental European countries (Muir 1995: 158–159; Stern 1996: 201–203; Surtz 1979: 9–13). Some early plays, most famously the Elche Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin first performed in 1370, indeed survive in unbroken tradition to this day, a feature shared outside Spain only with the Oberammergau Passion Play, and that had a later start, in 1620. There was thus already a newly-developed form of drama that had no necessary connection with humanist principles, and it clearly had strong audience support. It was on this basis that Lope de Vega spelled out his own reasons for rejecting the official rules, and for offering his audiences a different kind of drama, in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* of 1609. These reasons were frankly commercial and pragmatic rather than a matter of principle—and indeed the fact that the *Arte nuevo* was directed to the Academia de Madrid indicates his wish to keep in with the humanists even while offering something very different on stage. The *Arte* is his own Apology for Poetry, but written in frank acknowledgement that although he knows how plays should officially be written, he is not going to do anything of that kind. The principles of Aristotle and the practice of Plautus and Terence are not going to bring in an income. He is going to give his audiences what they will pay for, and that is not neo-Classical regulation. Golden Age Spanish drama is indeed premised on just such a rejection. The very title of Calderón's *Gran Teatro del*

Mundo is an indication that the playwrights had larger ambitions in mind.

English playwrights for the public stage similarly disregarded humanist calls for discipline and regulation, but they did not generally write so explicitly about what they were doing and why. For Shakespeare, however, that rejection of the neo-Classical unities in favour of a multiplicity of times and places and characters and plots, Sicily and Bohemia and kings and shepherds and pursuing bears within a single play, was, I believe, not only grounded, but consciously and deliberately grounded, on an alternative theory of drama that was itself derived from an earlier practice of drama: the medieval drama found in the cycle plays. Lope de Vega had limited himself to a model of practice without claiming any alternative theory for it; Shakespeare went a large step further. Commercial considerations no doubt came into play as well, and many Elizabethan dramatists mention their hopes of pleasing their audiences; but the theoretical deliberateness of Shakespeare's move is demonstrated by how closely what he writes is a counter-model to what the humanists were writing. He asserts the total freedom of the stage in direct opposition to any imitation of literal naturalism, carried through in full complicity with the imagination of the audience.

He had not started out like that: his initial ambitions towards authorship seem to have been very much on the Classical model. His narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* suggest that he initially set out to make a name for himself on the Ovidian model; *Titus Andronicus* adds a strong measure of Senecan tragic violence to Ovid's story of Philomel, and his familiarity with Plautus is on show in the *Comedy of Errors*—the one play of his that contains the classicizing term "comedy" as part of its title, and which was performed before the classically-trained lawyers and students at the Inns of Court. Increasingly, however, he moved towards the much more ambitious tradition of English drama exemplified by the Corpus Christi plays: plays

that dealt with all humankind, so had no social division into the binaries of comedy and tragedy; that were written entirely in verse; and that showed a cheerful disregard for the plausibilities of staging, let alone the unities. It was a form of drama that relied absolutely on the imaginative complicity of the audience to supply what was missing.

Shakespeare never wrote a *Poetics* of his own, a treatise offering a defence of his own kind of theatre; and we tend to assume that he did not have any theory, only an unconsidered practice. There has long been an unspoken (even subconscious) assumption that "plays," as distinct from those Classical terms of theatre, drama, comedy or tragedy, cannot be theorized. Those classicizing assumptions, indeed, were written into the first major act of criticism on Shakespeare, and one of the most misleading: the First Folio, with its division of his plays from the title page forwards into comedies, histories, and tragedies—a division made even though three of the histories (*Henry VI* Part 3, *Richard II* and *Richard III*) had actually been titled as tragedies when they were first written and published[6]—though the creation of a separate section for the histories does perhaps acknowledge what Florio was hinting at in his model conversation, that there could be a non-classical genre of "play" that subsumes history itself. In fact, however, Shakespeare did write an Apology for the Stage parallel to Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*; and like Sidney's, it was at least as much a manifesto as a defence. It is perhaps no accident, too, that he wrote it as the Prologue to one of his histories, *Henry V*—a play that makes no claim at all to being either comedy or tragedy, and which shows a magnificent disregard for any humanist limitations. The Prologue had been the point in Latin comedy where Terence had introduced himself as author, and where medieval playwrights had introduced the audience to the play; here Shakespeare's "we" represents a combination of

[6] *Henry VI* Part 3 was originally "The Tragedy of Richard Duke of York."

author and actors, the whole company—an inclusive term. It is an apology in both senses, the Elizabethan meaning of "defence" as well as its modern meaning: hence his plea, "O pardon, gentles all" (line 8 below). Elizabethan playwrights were not above flattering their whole audience by addressing them as "gentles," but there seems to be a suggestion here of something more specific: that the apology is addressed to the educated sector of his audience, those who might most need a defence of this "history without any decorum." *Henry V* was probably written for the "wooden O" of the newly built Globe, in 1599; and it is appropriate that the manifesto should be written for this new theatre, whose "unworthy scaffold" can none the less represent the whole world: the globe, as its name implies, that can hold as much time and space as the play demands.

> O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
> The brightest heaven of invention:
> A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
> And monarchs to behold the swelling scene [...]
>   But pardon, gentles all,
> The flat unraised spirits that have dared
> On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth   10
> So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
> The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> O, pardon: since a crooked figure may   15
> Attest in little place a million,
> And let us, ciphers to this great account,
> On your imaginary forces work.
> Suppose within the girdle of these walls
> Are now confined two mighty monarchies,   20
> Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
> The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.
> Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
> Into a thousand parts divide one man,
> And make imaginary puissance.   25
> Think when we talk of horses, that you see them

> Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth;
> For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
> Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
> Turning the accomplishment of many years 30
> Into an hour-glass—for the which supply,
> Admit me Chorus to this history;
> Who Prologue-like your humble patience pray
> Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

Here, humanist literalism (that the stage should represent a single stage-sized place) is given its *reductio ad absurdum* by the idea that acting *Henry V* would need the space of an entire kingdom, or rather two. Instead, the whole dramatic illusion depends not on rules but on "your thoughts:" that imagination ruled so firmly and decisively out of order by Castelvetro. The audience's imagination is now in full complicity with the playwright and the actors; it can fill the stage with absent horses, carry you here and there, jump o'er times, and explode those classical unities into something else altogether.

There are, however, some lines in the speech (13–18) that need more annotation than they have been given; for the "cipher," the zero, the nought, suggests another possibility in that wooden O. Suppose you read it not as a "wooden O," but a "wooden nought:" Elizabethan print did not distinguish between them, so they look identical on the page. The zero was a comparatively recent import into England, Roman numerals having remained standard until well into the sixteenth century, and the idea of it fascinated Shakespeare and various of his contemporaries. In the Middle Ages and up until the late sixteenth century, the circle had symbolized infinity, or everything. All four surviving Corpus Christi cycles open with God declaring, "Ego sum alpha et O:" not just the beginning and the end, but all eternity. Now, however, it could symbolize nothing—as Shakespeare uses it in *Richard II* and *King Lear*. But if you take an empty circle, a nought, and paint on it a map of the world, then you have everything, as John Donne notes in his "A Valediction: Of Weeping:"

> On a round ball
> A workman, that hath copies by, can lay
> An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
> And quickly make that, which was nothing, all,
> So doth each tear,
> Which thee doth wear,
> A globe, yea world, by that impression grow.

Here, in the Prologue, Shakespeare plays both on that idea, of how the circle or the globe could be all or nothing, and also on the capacity of the zero, the cipher, the nothing, to multiply up. The standard gloss on the "crooked figure" (15), if it is glossed at all, is as a circle. But "crooked" does not mean circular: it means just what it says, crooked or hooked. "Figure" is Shakespeare's term for a number other than nought, as in the reference in *Lear* to "an O without a figure:"[7] the opposite phenomenon to what is being described here. The obvious "crooked figure" is the figure one: the upright line with its little hook on the top. Add a series of noughts, and you can turn it into a thousand or a million; and similarly the speaking actor, the single upright figure like a figure one, can turn into a thousand. By the addition of *nothing*, the one man can become a whole army, "imaginary puissance." It is another way for not just a poet but the playwright to make substance of "airy nothing," as Theseus puts it in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.6), and a way of multiplying Classical unity into a million sparkling shards. And if you can do that, you can equally imagine that the stage has the same freedom of time and place as we accord to the cinema or television screen: it can show whatever it likes, and Shakespeare can rely on his audience to go with him wherever he takes them. That, then, is what he proceeds to do, both in terms of time and space, and in what gets staged, including the entire battle of Agincourt. The Prologue is not just a *defence* of his own stage practice, but a grand assertion of its superiority over humanist limits.

[7] I.4.174–175 in Stanley and Wells's edition of the Folio text.

The inclusiveness, the "allness," of this kind of theatre is reflected in the term "theatre" itself. Again, it was a comparatively new import into English: the terms that had been used earlier were "playhouse," or, for an outdoor venue, "gameplace." "Theatre" was most commonly used in the sixteenth century for a moral anatomy of the world, a display-case for everything (as in Calderón's *Gran Teatro del Mundo*). Ortelius entitled his great atlas *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, which was Englished as *Abraham Ortelius his epitome of the Theater of the worlde*. The term covered what in medieval Latin had been called a *summa*, a gathering together of the sum of everything, the whole world, or the kind of *summa* of life invoked by John Alday in 1566 homiletic *Theatrum mundi, the Theatre or rule of the world, wherein may be sene the running race and course of everye mans life*. It was only after James Burbage named his new building the Theatre in 1576 that the term caught on to mean a purpose-built playhouse; and the idea of the *theatrum mundi* was carried through in the naming of the Globe, with its supposed motto (it is recorded only later) of "Totus mundus agit histrionem." It is commonly paraphrased into the Shakespearean "All the world's a stage" (from *As You Like It* 2.7.139), though a more accurate translation might be "Everyone (compare the French *tout le monde*) plays a part." The phrase is itself a medieval one, borrowed from the twelfth-century *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury (where "exerceat" is used instead of "agit;" Curtius 1953: 138–141). The work was printed and widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and counted Ben Jonson among its readers. So the idea that the world is a "wide and universal theatre" (*AYLI* 2.7.137) is a thoroughly medieval concept, though it was one eagerly adopted by the early modern stage.

The idea is given one of its fullest developments in Thomas Heywood's prefatory poem to his *Apology for Actors* of 1612: another rare statement of dramatic theory by a practising playwright, and one whose title suggests that it should be read in tandem with, or as a response to, Sidney's *Apology*. Heywood works explicitly with that concept of the theatre both as playhouse and as world, but to

produce a theory that is the opposite of the neohumanist theory of drama.

The Author to his Booke
The world's a Theater, the earth a Stage,
Which God, and nature doth with Actors fill,
Kings haue their entrance in due equipage,
And some their parts play well and others ill. [...]
This plaies an honest man, and that a knaue
A gentle person, this, and he a clowne,
One man is ragged, and another braue.
All men haue parts, and each man acts his owne.
She a chaste Lady acteth all her life,
A wanton Curtezan another playes.
This, couets marriage loue, that, nuptial strife,
Both in continuall action spend their dayes.
Some Citizens, some Soldiers, borne to aduenter,
Sheepheards and Sea-men; then our play's begun,
When we are borne, and to the world first enter,
And all finde *Exits* when their parts are done.
If then the world a Theater present,
As by the roundnesse it appeares most fit,
Built with starre-galleries of hye ascent,
In which *Iehoue* doth as spectator sit.
And chiefe determiner to'applaud the best,
And their indeuours crowne with more then merit.
But by their euill actions doomes the rest,
To end disgrac't whilst others praise inherit.
He that denyes then Theaters should be,
He may as well deny a world to me.

No Theater, no world

The world is a theatre created by God, where "all men have parts, and each man acts his own:" parts that encompass all classes and walks of life from kings to clowns and shepherds—there is no discrimination here by genre, and the comprehensiveness of the cast list is the very point. The play described here, moreover, represents the totality of human life, not just that of an individual. The frame of the world itself is the wooden O of the playhouse, "as by the roundnesse it appeares most fit;" and God acts as

spectator—or rather, He is the only one who does not act, for he is real, not a role-player: He *is* spectator, critic and judge. Together, those things amount to being an exact replication of the model of the cycle plays. The final couplet drives the point home, and Heywood adds too the succinct summary in the marginal note, "No Theater, no world." The totality of human experience and the public drama are reciprocal analogies for each other. "Play" to Heywood as to the Middle Ages offers a total drama, recalling the cycles that embraced Eden and the Crucifixion and damnation and bliss, and that encompasses all earthly space and time, all of humankind. Transposed to Shakespeare's secular stage, theatre can embrace within a single play all the estates of society from prince to gravedigger, gods to brothel-keepers; everything that plays havoc not only with the unities of time and space and action, but with the principles of generic purity, of "right comedies" opposed to "right tragedies," and where the judgement is not only God's, as the ultimate spectator, but the audience's too.

Heywood makes divine judgement, the ethics of human life *sub specie aeternitatis*, the very point of drama. It had been the work that medieval drama very explicitly did, but it is now claimed for early modern drama too, just as Aristotle had seen the work that tragedy did as the catharsis of pity and fear. Shakespeare, in the Prologue to *Henry V*, locates the work of drama elsewhere: in the imagination that had so scared Castelvetro. In his conception, plays enlarge the imagination to the size of world. Shakespeare makes that totality of theatre, the "summa" of the world, integral—indeed essential—to his idea of drama, in ways that were inherited from the basic and necessary multiplicity of the cycle plays. And "play," again, is the operative word, as in the last line of the Prologue, when the audience is entreated "Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our *play*." Here, the spectators' response is entirely secular: the judgement invoked is not an analogy for Doomsday, as in Heywood. It may be ethical, but it is not eternal—it is secular, not religious. Shakespeare, however, was not always as secular as

we tend to think. Surprisingly often (though it is perhaps not so surprising given the intense religiosity of the age in which he lived), he comments on the ultimate destination of characters after their deaths. Perhaps the most famous is Mistress Quickly's remark on the deceased Falstaff, "He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom" (*Henry V* 2.3.9–10); but that is not just a parody of unlearned beliefs about judgement, it is Shakespeare's parody of his own practices too. He almost always indicates the ultimate destination of the souls of all the significant characters who die in those plays of his that have Christian settings. Often it is done in a single line, as in Hal on Hotspur, "Take thy praise with thee to heaven," or Horatio on Hamlet, "Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." Sometimes it amounts to a discussion, as happens over the destination of Wolsey's soul in *Henry VIII*, a play in which Katherine of Aragon is also given a staged vision of her own entry into Heaven. Such comments are included even if it is suggested that the earthly judgement may be wrong: Falstaff's companions predict hell for him, and Mistress Quickly does at least provide a kind of alternative. Othello sees himself as damned, but the audience are not required to accept his conviction, and especially when he is set alongside the devil Iago. It is, however, always a significant issue: that is, characters' lives are completed in the same ways that both the cycle plays and Heywood indicate.

The Act against the abuses of players of 1603, which forbade the speaking of the name of God on stage, restricted that practice, but it did not stop it; and what are traditionally (if incorrectly) seen as Shakespeare's last lines for the stage return to it. This is the close of the Epilogue to the *Tempest*, where Prospero does not so much step out of role as subsume the roles of both actor and playwright into himself.

> My ending is despair
> Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.

As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.
(Epilogue, 15–20)

They are lines that bring together humankind's hope for divine mercy at the Last Judgement, with the not-yet-forgotten Catholic power of the living to contribute to that mercy through indulgences; and also the judgement of the audience, who at least for the purposes of this play, sit in the place of God.

Helen Cooper
Magdalene College, Cambridge

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Received 01 May 2014; *accepted* 05 Jul 2014