Introduction

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In 1797 William Richardson, writing about Hamlet, declared, 'We find nothing in music or painting so inconsistent as the dissonant mixture of sentiments and emotions so frequent in English tragedy'.¹ This was never truer than of the tragedies of the early modern English stage. On one level, these might seem to follow a fairly standard formula: there is a hero (most famously Hamlet, Othello, Lear), who will be caught between noble aspirations and a fundamental weakness; there is a heroine (Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia) who is innocent but is nevertheless doomed to suffer and die; there is a villain (Claudius, Iago, Edmund - though there are other candidates too in *King Lear*) who precipitates the catastrophe but will ultimately be detected and expelled from the community; and there are repercussions not only for individuals but for society as a whole ('something is rotten in the state of Denmark'). And yet even this crude and schematic account of three of Shakespeare's 'great tragedies' fails to account for the fourth, Macbeth, and has nothing at all to say to many other great tragic plays of the period such as Webster's The Duchess of Malfi (where the heroine is far more important than the purely nominal hero), the anonymous Arden of Faversham (which concerns an individual household rather than the state), or Ford's The Broken Heart, which does not have a villain.

Rather than trying to identify any single or simple formula for early modern English tragedy, this collection of essays recognises its astonishing diversity. Tragedy is the most versatile of Renaissance literary genres. The pinnacle of tragic drama in the period, *Hamlet*, has become the most famous play and indeed arguably the most famous work of literature of any genre ever to have been written; tragedies of the period which deal with historical figures such as Julius Caesar or Richard III have made definitive contributions to the general perception of those personages. The emotional range of the genre is also astonishing: *King Lear* so moved Dr Johnson that he could not bear to reread it until he had to edit it, whereas some revenge tragedies contain moments of wild and weird wit or humour which make them funnier than many comedies of the period, as when the villain of Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* accidentally knocks out his own brains while trying to behead his nephew, or the wicked Duke Lussurioso in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* keeps seeming to die and then popping back up again.² Renaissance tragedy as a whole enables exploration of issues ranging from gender to race to the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, taking in plenty of others on the way. It provides us with the first English play published by a woman, Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, and the first dramatic representations of the lives of actual ordinary Englishmen and women, in the shape of domestic tragedies such as *Arden of Faversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*.

This collection of newly commissioned essays, which mixes perspectives from emerging scholars with those of established ones, explores the full range and versatility of Renaissance tragedy as a literary genre. Its modus operandi is by case study, so that each chapter will offer not only a definition of a particular kind of Renaissance tragedy but also new research into a particularly noteworthy or influential example of that genre. One of our key aims has been to offer a critical account of the extraordinary variety of material that falls into the broad category of Renaissance tragedy. With this aim in mind, the collection examines the work of as wide a range of dramatists as possible. We start with Christopher Marlowe, whose innovations in blank verse writing were so instrumental in shaping what we recognise as Renaissance tragedy. We then move on to George Peele, whose career as a poet, dramatist and pageant-maker cuts across the main literary genres of the period as well as the civic and commercial plaving spaces of Elizabethan London and beyond, and whose body of work provides fascinating insights into the social, theatrical and political networks of the period, including those of patrons, playing companies and printers. Next come Fulke Greville, who helped develop the unique and specialised genre of closet drama; Henry Chettle, the man who arguably first introduced the note of the grotesque, and Thomas Middleton, who developed that and injected irony and comedy; the anonymous author (possibly Robert Yarington) of Two Lamentable Tragedies, who contributed to the subgenre of domestic tragedy; Ben Jonson, whose Roman tragedies combined neo-classical conventions with intricate historical detail to bring incisive and provocative political analysis onto the popular stage; John Webster and John Fletcher, who pioneered the concept of the female tragic hero; John Ford, who offered a consciously nostalgic and yet at the same time revisionist view of historical tragedy; and James Shirley, who offers one of the latest examples of the genre.

What may seem most surprising is who is *not* here, or at any rate here as only one author among many: Shakespeare. We hope to offer a deliberate corrective to the tendency to view Renaissance tragedy predominantly through a Shakespearean lens by considering him as one of a number of practitioners who contributed to the period's engagement with this fascinating and fluid genre. Shakespeare has dominated discussions of Renaissance drama, but we need to question just how representative he is of the rich and diverse range of tragedies that appeared on the Renaissance stage. There are a number of sub-genres of tragedy – biblical tragedy and closet drama, for example – in which Shakespeare did not engage and there were also many sub-genres in which the nature of his influence was interrogated. The chapters in this collection also respond to the growth in interest in non-Shakespearean plays driven by the development of such critical and theoretical currents as new historicism, cultural materialism and feminism, as well as the recent re-emergence of repertory studies. A consequence of this has been that the range of Renaissance plays which have been the objects of critical attention has considerably expanded and raised important questions about canonicity. These developments are reflected in the diverse range of plays and authors our contributors find of interest, producing original critical readings of individual plays which show how interventions in these sub-genres can be mapped onto debates surrounding numerous important issues, including national identity, the nature of divine authority, early modern youth culture, gender and ethics, as well as questions relating to sovereignty and political intervention. The chapters also highlight the rich range of styles adopted by the early modern tragic dramatists and show how opportunely the genre as a whole is positioned for speaking truth to power. Collectively, these essays reassess the various sub-genres of Renaissance tragedy in ways which respond to the radical changes that have affected the critical landscape over the last few decades.

In stressing the diversity and flexibility of early modern tragedies, we believe we are echoing an approach to the genre that many early modern playwrights and audience members would have shared. A familiar startingpoint in discussions of tragedy has been the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action; however, they appear to have had very little bearing on the composition of tragedies during the early modern period. One notable voice of regret about the declining influence of classical models of tragedy comes from Sir Philip Sidney in his Apology for Poetry. While he offers qualified praise for Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's Gorboduc, one of the formative English tragedies, Sidney goes on to lament that, in spite of its 'notable morality' and 'stately speeches and well-sounding phrases', the play is 'faulty both in place and time'.³ Sidney also goes on to complain further about the impact of the departure from the unities of time and place, as well as the lack of decorum in contemporary tragedy, caused by 'mingling kings and clowns' and resulting in a kind of 'mongrel tragi-comedy'.⁴ Such views, however, hardly seem to be representative of wider contemporary attitudes towards tragedy. As Janette Dillon helpfully reminds us, an important caveat to bear in mind regarding Aristotle is that his comments on tragedy in the Poetics were 'describing the Greek tragedy of the fifth century BCE, not

prescribing what tragedy should be'.⁵ As the chapters in this volume show, early modern dramatists saw tragedy not as a fixed template to be followed, or as a set of constraints upon their creativity, but as a framework in which to undertake bold and dynamic experiments with genre.

Another frequently cited element of Aristotle's theories of tragedy relates to the characterisation of the tragic protagonist, particularly the extent to which they embody the features of hamartia and catharsis. Again, though, early modern tragedies tend to complicate, or offer a range of views upon, the degree to which individuals are responsible for their own tragic downfalls. The question of how far the tragic events can be attributed to some kind of external agency - the gods, providence, fortune or the fates - is one that is frequently interrogated in early modern tragedy. One of the foundational tragedies of the early modern English stage, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish* Tragedy, has a framing device whereby the on-stage action is witnessed by the character of Don Andrea and the allegorical figure of Revenge, who engineers the earthly action of the main plot. Hamlet registers his confidence in the 'special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (V.ii.191-2), or a guiding agency determining human events. A similar assertion about the power of fate and the limited agency is famously voiced in John Webster's tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi, in which Bosola states that 'We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and banded / Which way please them' (V.iv.56-7). Even in the pioneering domestic tragedy, Arden of Faversham, a play largely driven by questions of land, local politics and marital strife, there are still hints of a providential agency influencing events. The majority of the action in Arden consists of a series of instances in which the protagonist unwittingly escapes repeated attempts on his life instigated by his wife and her lover, including narrowly avoiding eating a poisoned broth and evading plans put in place by two hired assassins, named Black Will and Shakebag, whose efforts are thwarted when, in one attempt, Black Will is rendered unconscious before being able to strike the fatal blow and, in another, the two assassins lose their quarry in the fog. After Arden is eventually killed at the end of the play, further evidence of providential intervention is offered by the fact that Arden's spilled blood resists all attempts to be cleaned from the floor and that the corpse continues to bleed whenever his wife, Alice Arden, comes into proximity of it, thereby highlighting her role in his death.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* also interrogates the role of providence or fate in its highlighting of the distinct set of values held by Gloucester and his illegitimate son, Edmund. After reading the forged letter implying that his elder legitimate son, Edgar, is plotting against him, Gloucester reflects that the 'late eclipses of the sun and moon portend no good to us' and that, under such signs, 'Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked twixt son and father' (I.ii.94–100). While Gloucester attributes the events of the play to a kind of cosmic determinism, Edmund goes on, in private, to dismiss such

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an outlook as the 'excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars' (I.ii.108–11). According to Edmund, such faith in cosmic determinism leads to a ludicrous degree of self-deception and the failure of the individual to take responsibility for their own actions and shortcoming: 'An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star!' (I.ii.115–17). This is an idea taken up by a number of later dramatists, sometimes in ways complicated by explicit or implicit reference to the theology of predestination. Early modern tragedy, then, offers an ultimately ambivalent view on the potential of human agency and the extent of the influence exerted by fate, fortune or providence.

Such questions regarding the role of providence in early modern tragedy have been the subject of much critical discussion and were at the centre of one of the most influential and provocative studies of early modern tragedy from the last few decades, one to which we owe a debt but which we seek to build upon rather than simply to echo. First appearing in 1984, Ionathan Dollimore's book, Radical Tragedy, marked a significant departure from readings of early modern drama that stressed the plays' emphases upon such ideas as providence and natural law by setting out to challenge critical assumptions that a fundamental advocacy of such premises as 'order', 'tradition', the 'human condition' and 'character' provided the bases for these plays.⁶ Rather, Dollimore sees the tragedies of the period as offering an interrogation of the ways in which these kinds of ideas were harnessed as the ideological underpinnings for state power. Ideas of providence, according to Dollimore, 'aimed to provide a metaphysical ratification of the existing social order'.⁷ For Dollimore, tragedy was a fundamental part of a theatrical culture in which '[institutions of state] and their ideological legitimation were subjected to sceptical, interrogative and subversive representations'.8 Dollimore's book is part of a group of late twentieth-century studies that highlight early modern tragic drama's potential to challenge political orthodoxies and ideas of social order; other studies developed in this vein include Dympna Callaghan's work emphasising the roles of female characters in exposing the fragility of patriarchal power.9

A number of studies have also highlighted the ways in which tragedy poses fundamental questions about identity and subjectivity, the most influential of which is arguably Catherine Belsey's book, *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985). Like Dollimore, Belsey takes to task assumptions inherent in liberal humanist criticism, particularly the notion that the values which inform it are 'both natural and universal'.¹⁰ Instead her focus is upon the ways in which tragedy is one of a number of spaces 'from which to begin an analysis of what it means to be a person, a man or a woman, at a specific historical moment' and the ways in which ideas of subjectivity and individuality are 'discursively produced' and 'constrained by the range of subject-positions' permitted by the prevailing discourses of that given historical moment.¹¹ Subjectivity and identity are also at the centre of Michael Neill's *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, which probes tragedy's role in the shaping and 'reinvention' of cultural understandings of death and mortality. Neill highlights that tragedy consistently offered a resistance to 'the notion of death as an arbitrary cancellation of meaning' and a 'force of undifferentiation' and that its frequent 'displays of agony, despair, and ferocious self-assertion ... provided audiences with a way of vicariously confronting the implications of their own mortality, by compelling them to rehearse and re-rehearse the encounter with death'.¹²

Two recent studies have placed different emphases at the centre of their analyses. The first, by Paul Hammond, sees tragedy enacting a process of estrangement whereby the protagonist becomes alienated or displaced from the space they had considered their home: according to Hammond, such dislocations 'translate the central figure of the drama into new modes of being, and into new, only half-comprehensible languages', resulting in 'a decomposition of the self, a deformation which may sometimes render that figure sublimely heroic, but is also liable to make him estranged and fractured'.13 Focusing on Shakespeare, Paul A. Kottman applies the term 'tragic conditions', rather than 'tragedy', to a variety of Shakespearean plays, suggesting that such conditions are not exclusively confined to what we would most readily define as the tragic genre. For Kottman, the principal driver in these 'tragic conditions' is disinheritance or the rupturing of the relationships that provide the bedrock for society. The 'tragic conditions' arise from a play's dramatisation of 'the fate of protagonists whose lives are conditioned by authoritative social bonds - kinship ties, civic relations, economic dependencies, political allegiances - that end up unravelling irreparably', leaving them in a situation in which they can 'neither inherit nor bequeath a livable or desirable form of sociality'.¹⁴ Such an idea complicates traditional notions of genre (especially as two of the chapters in the study focus upon, respectively, a comedy in the form of As You Like It, and The Tempest, a play usually grouped with Shakespeare's late romances), as these tragic conditions do not necessarily feature exclusively in plays that would normally be classified, on the whole, as tragic.

Individual sub-genres of early modern tragedy also continue to be the subject of study in a range of analyses; to take revenge tragedy as just one example, the sub-genre has been analysed in a series of recent monographs through a diverse range of lenses, including the relationship between revenge and law, the genre's engagement with contemporary economic debates, and considerations of this mode of tragedy in the light of changing cultural views of commemoration during the Reformation.¹⁵ This case in point highlights the diverse and innovative ways in which scholars continue to approach early modern tragedy, as in Goran Stanivukovic and John H. Cameron's *Tragedies of the English Renaissance: An Introduction*, which reads early modern tragedy specifically in relation to London.¹⁶ In its reach beyond the limits of

the traditional tragic canon, in its alertness to the capacity of tragedy to both contest and reinscribe dominant discourses, in its interest in tragedy's constructions of varying kinds of identity, in its recognition of the fluidity of generic boundaries, and in its focus on genre as a concept with political and historical as well as aesthetic implications, this collection builds upon these recent and influential critical interventions, producing new readings which continue to highlight the dynamic and multivalent nature of early modern tragedy.

The first two chapters focus on the ways in which Renaissance tragedy interrogates some of the pieties of the age. In the first, Andrew Duxfield reads Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great as a provocative example of the *de casibus* tradition, in which we see the fall of prominent figures who have previously enjoyed the benefit of great fortune, in the process demonstrating to the reader the arbitrariness of earthly success and failure, and teaching that the material world should be held in contempt. In the second, Annaliese Connolly takes Peele's David and Bethsabe as an exemplar of biblical tragedy and argues that it complicates the traditional picture of David's reign in order to scrutinise providential monarchy as a model of kingship, in the process tackling other topical issues such as the responsibilities of the monarch to govern and receive advice. We then move to chapters on two plays which offer contrasting perspectives on the interface between public and private. Daniel Cadman argues that Fulke Greville's closet tragedy Mustapha shares common ground with the so-called Turk plays which were enjoying considerable popularity in the commercial theatres and explores the potential for multivocality through the choruses in which a variety of social groups and institutions of the Ottoman Empire are represented. Mustapha raises questions about the nature of tragic heroism and engages in a number of debates provoked by the political crises it dramatises, while at the same time exhibiting Greville's awareness of the limitations of political engagement imposed upon him by his Calvinist outlook and exploring the potential opportunities and limitations for the tragic genre as a locus for political comment and generic experiments. Alisa Manninen (the only contributor to write on Shakespeare) reads Macbeth as a representative of tragedy of state and argues that the state itself is one of the victims, perhaps the victim of the tragedy, with its corruption expressed and furthered by the destructive actions of the characters. Although Macbeth reflects on the general concerns of tragedies of state, its interest in depicting both the presence of the supernatural and human psychology, two potentially contradictory aims, leads to a particularly intensive questioning of what is natural or unnatural in the state. Mustapha and Macbeth may appear poles apart, but both raise the question of how societies should be governed and whether it is ever legitimate to resist a tyrannical ruler.

Domestic tragedy is often taken to be the antithesis of tragedy of state. However, in the fifth chapter, on *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, Lisa Hopkins and Gemma Leggott argue that domestic tragedy, on the face of it the simplest and most unpretentious of tragic forms, is in fact potentially one of the most ambiguous, for almost every aspect of domestic tragedies is typically susceptible of being read on more than one level. At the same time as the genre foregrounds the private house, it also calls into question how private it truly is; moreover, though one plot of Two Lamentable Tragedies is set in Italy and the other in England, they mirror each other in so many ways that we are in effect asked not only what difference there is between the two countries, but to what extent Italy may serve in Renaissance drama as a transparent proxy for England. The next chapter stays in Italy but moves back in time as John Curran takes Jonson's Sejanus as an example of Roman plays. Jonson intended his rendering of Sejanus's rise and fall as a complete realisation of tragedy's requirements, but Curran argues that the play, as a study in tragic theory and practice, illustrates the double-sidedness endemic to Roman tragedies: the evils of ambition and tyranny are exposed, yet at the same time the latter emerges as a cure for the former.

The following chapters collectively reveal the slipperiness of generic distinctions. Gabriel Rieger focuses on Middleton's The Revenger's Tragedy and reads it in relation to satiric tragedy, which is defined by a philosophy whereby folly, vice and corruption are exposed and subjected to rhetorical attack. This philosophy provides the genre with its distinctive energy, an energy which has the potential to register as subversive: the satirist must possess an intimate knowledge of vice in order to condemn it, and yet he must retain at least the appearance of integrity. This tension is particularly pronounced in The Revenger's Tragedy, in which Vindice, the satirist-figure of the tragedy, disguises himself as a bawd and works towards the ruin of his own family in the pursuit of his vengeance. The Revenger's Tragedy is of course also an example of revenge tragedy, but Derek Dunne chooses Chettle's The Tragedy of Hoffman as his specimen of that genre and argues that revenge tragedies offer subtle and sophisticated commentaries on their society at a time of unprecedented upheaval. The traditional image of the solitary revenger embodied by Hamlet is misleading: far from being an isolated figure, the revenger is often shown as a radical agent of communal political action. Hoffman also raises questions of considerable complexity from a legal standpoint, reminding us of the importance of young men from the Inns of Court among the audiences for early modern plays. Finally Webster's The White Devil has several characteristics of revenge tragedy, but Paul Frazer reads it as grotesque tragedy, a genre which to modern sensibilities may sit uncomfortably against the sober tenets of tragedy. The White Devil plays relentlessly with polarities of life and death, virtue and sin, settledness and motion in a sophisticated dramatisation that persistently probes the border between laughter and horror. Frazer argues that through these dichotomies, Webster's ambiguous play undertakes a chaotic enquiry into the disorientating soteriological directions potentially open to the early modern subject in Jacobean England.

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The last three chapters move forward in time, but the plays they discuss all register strong awareness of the past as well as responding to the present. Domenico Lovascio examines Fletcher and Massinger's The False One as an example of what later came to be called 'she-tragedy'. The False One focuses on Cleopatra, a figure of compelling interest to a number of writers of the period, but takes what at the time was a unique perspective by dramatising her relationship with Caesar rather than with Antony. Lovascio maps the play's luxury-loving Cleopatra onto contemporary anxieties regarding both the passivity of James I's foreign policy and the potential influence of luxury goods being imported from the new world, yet also suggests that The False One is striking in that it is Cleopatra who in the end ensures that Caesar rediscovers his martial nobility; the play ultimately implies that love and masculine virtue might not be so incompatible after all. In the penultimate chapter, Sarah Dewar-Watson takes John Ford's Perkin Warbeck as an example of historical tragedy. Perkin Warbeck self-consciously addresses a lacuna in Shakespeare's account of Tudor history, but Ford's play is notably called not after a king (as Shakespeare's histories are) but after a man who would be king. It thus sets up a tension between historical priorities (in the narrative of the Tudor succession, Warbeck's story is firmly subordinated and marginalised) and dramatic priorities, in which Warbeck is a compelling protagonist, and prises apart the elements of historical tragedy which Shakespeare so successfully synthesises. Ford revises Shakespeare's writing of English history to formulate a retrospective on Shakespeare's histories, and to show how the plays are themselves subject to the processes of historical revisionism which they dramatise. Finally Jessica Dyson examines James Shirley's *The Traitor* as an example of Caroline tragedy, which sidelines the desires of the monarch in favour of exploring the madness of tyrannical passions more broadly, still suggesting a need for political reform but casting its net wider than the King alone. Dyson reads The Traitor as appearing, at first, to follow the conventions of earlier tragedy where the Duke's uncontrolled desire leads to deaths and revenge; however, the Duke's desires are never fulfilled and prove ultimately irrelevant to the plot. For Dyson, such revision of the revenge tragedy plot highlights a transition evident within Caroline tragedy which erodes the idea of a central, divine or semi-divine controlling authority to a fragmented and failing power. Tragedy, which began by asking delicate questions about power, thus ends with a full-on challenge to it.

Notes

- 1 William Richardson, cited in John Lee, 'The Critical Backstory', in Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (eds), *Hamlet: A Critical Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 15–52 (p. 24).
- 2 A good account of this is to be found in Nicholas Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979).

- 3 Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973; reprinted 1984), p. 134.
- 4 Ibid., p. 135.
- 5 Janette Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2. Our emphases.
- 6 Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) (first published 1984), p. 3.
- 7 Ibid., p. 87.
- 8 Ibid., p. 4.
- 9 See Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 10 Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen 1985), p. 7.
- 11 Ibid., p. 5.
- 12 Michael Neill, Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 31.
- 13 Paul Hammond, *The Strangeness of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.
- 14 Paul A. Kottman, *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), pp. 3–4.
- 15 See, respectively, Derek Dunne, Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Linda Woodbridge, English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Thomas Rist, Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). For an analysis of the broader historical development of this genre, see John Kerrigan, Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
- 16 Goran Stanivukovic and John H. Cameron, *Tragedies of the English Renaissance: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).