

THEATRE AND HUMANISM

English Drama in the Sixteenth Century



Kent Cartwright



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English Drama in the Sixteenth Century

This book examines the hundred years of drama preceding Shakespeare in the light of a critical problem: English drama at the beginning of the sixteenth century was allegorical, didactic, and moralistic; but by the end of the century theatre was censured as emotional and even immoral. How could such a change occur? Kent Cartwright suggests that some theories of early Renaissance theatre – particularly the theory that Elizabethan plays are best seen in the tradition of morality drama – need to be reconsidered. He proposes instead that humanist drama of the sixteenth century is theatrically exciting – rather than literary, elitist, and dull as it has often been seen – and socially significant, and he attempts to integrate popular and humanist values rather than setting them against each other. Taking as examples plays by writers from Medwall and Heywood to Marlowe, Lyly, and Greene, as well as many by lesser-known dramatists, the book demonstrates the contribution of humanist drama to the theatrical vitality of the sixteenth century.

KENT CARTWRIGHT is Associate Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has published on Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, and American fiction. His previous books are *Shakespearean Tragedy and its Double: The Rhythms of Audience Response* (1991) and *Othello: New Perspectives* (1991), which he edited with Virginia Mason Vaughan.

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Introduction

English drama at the beginning of the sixteenth century registers as allegorical, didactic, and moralistic, yet by the end of the century theatre would be censured as emotional, fantasy-arousing, and even immoral. How could such a change occur? How does it happen that drama, which enters the century as a vehicle of spiritual enlightenment, becomes, by the 1590s, itself an object of emotion? To address such questions requires exploring the ways that Tudor drama engages feelings and sensibilities, the ways that it creates the Renaissance experience of being “moved”;¹ it requires exploring, that is, dramaturgy and theatrical effect. Such an inquiry will suggest that influential theories of early Renaissance theatre – particularly the theory that Elizabethan plays are viewed best through the tradition of morality drama – need reconsidering to explain theatre’s affective power. The excitement of the Tudor stage derives partly from a humanist dramaturgy that embroils feelings and emotions in the creation of meaning.

An overarching issue continues to be troubling: how to account for England’s high tide of drama in the sixteenth century. Prior to the explosion of commercial theatre in Elizabeth’s reign, plays had already taken firm hold. In the Tudor humanist educational program at grammar schools and universities, for example, students studied and performed plays to a degree difficult to explain. Critics have developed various reasons for the burgeoning of drama during the century: the pedagogical interest in classical literature; the value of playacting as academic training for eloquence; the usefulness of theatre for religious and political argument; the efficacy of spectacle in confirming power; the broad social receptiveness to theatre; the importance of representation to nascent capitalism; the capacity of drama to accommodate different traditions and interests. To such ideas, one can give

considerable assent. Yet few analyses provide an adequate understanding of certain values that pulse through Tudor drama, particularly its sense of lively play and unpredictability, manifested in linguistic exuberance, parody, physicality, virtuosic acting, and teasing enigma. A mixture of surprise and elusiveness animates Tudor theatre: the meaning of a play can be left suddenly open to an actor's choice, as in *The Foure PP* (c. 1520s); or a play can unexpectedly challenge its own stereotypes, as in *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c. 1553); or it can set confusion seductively against ideas, as in *Gallathea* (c. 1584). The seemingly spontaneous or expansive conjoins with the patterned; in humanist dramaturgy something vivid and unanticipated can arise as a formal possibility. That hospitality to the striking, surprising, and enigmatic contributes crucially to Tudor theatre's ability to engage spectatorial feelings and emotions in the midst of a complex and changing culture and can help us to understand how drama exerted its magnetism upon the age.

1

In recent decades many of sixteenth-century drama's virtues have been attributed to the influence of a lively popular theatre, as opposed to the influence of a more formal academic and humanist theatre. The argument would seem to find perfect embodiment in the comments of a particular Elizabethan dramatist. In 1592 one of the most celebrated playwrights of the English stage set forth a prefatory defense of his new tragicomedy – an impure form frequent in Renaissance drama yet divergent from the rules of Aristotle and Horace. Addressing an imagined carping critic, our playwright justifies his mongrel tragicomedy, saying, “For, just as in living, so in writing my method is somewhat free and relaxed, of a sort which pleases the learned less than the unskilled . . . For my part, I have produced this tragedy, or play, or historical narrative, or whatever it is right and proper to call it, not according to the exacting standards of the *Art of Poetry* employed as some sort of goldsmith's balance, but rather measured according to the exacting standards of popular taste, and I have poured it forth rather than composed it.” These remarks celebrate popular theatre: the assertion of a freedom and spontaneity in writing similar to lived experience; the standards of popular taste in

contrast to codified rules about form; the sense of writing as inspiration ("poured forth"), in which the poet warbles his native wood-notes wild; and finally the carefree generic vagueness, recalling the itinerant acting troupe memorialized by Polonius that is ready to play any combination of tragedy, comedy, history, and pastoral. In sum, our playwright's comments sound like the anthem of popular theatre and would seem to confirm those critics who have looked to plebeian taste and morality drama as the shaping forces of the sixteenth-century stage.

The problem with this conclusion is that the passage in question was written not by a "popular" dramatist but by the premier academic playwright of the Elizabethan age, William Gager.² The address to the critic comes as a preface to Gager's *Ulysses Redux*, a drama strictly classical in theme, adapted from Homer, composed in Latin hexameters, and performed, as the title page declares, "at Christ Church, Oxford in the presence of the academic community."³ We have here the curious case of a quintessential neo-classical, Latin, humanist academic play justified according to the tastes of "unskilled" audiences. That apparent contradiction invites a few simple observations: first, the separation that we moderns make between learned and popular drama may not have been drawn so sharply by Elizabethans, for whom the invocation of the popular may sometimes be as much a rhetorical ploy as a real distinction; more important, the humanist theatre that criticism has treated as formalistic and enervated may be far richer theatrically than we have allowed, and rich exactly in the virtues that we attribute to popular theatre.

2

Much recent Elizabethan dramatic criticism argues that the signal tradition of sixteenth-century theatre is that of the medieval morality play, which Marlowe, Shakespeare, and their contemporaries adapt with brilliant results. The "morality theory" arose as a reaction to criticism that interprets Elizabethan drama through the lens of sixteenth-century humanist learning, particularly classical strictures for dramatic construction, neo-Aristotelian poetics, humanist rhetoric, and literary formalism.⁴ In rebuttal, David Bevington's seminal *From Mankind to Marlowe* (1962) turned to the "popular," "national," and "native" tradition of morality

drama, whose influence, Bevington argues, permeates the sixteenth century from early Tudor plays to those of the University Wits.⁵ Against humanist values of “unity, correspondence, subordination, and the like,” Bevington considers morality drama to be defined by structural principles of “coordination,” “repetitive effect, multiplicity, episode, and progressive theme.”⁶ Those features reflect the limited size of professional acting companies – “four men and a boy” – and their doubling of acting parts.⁷ Complementing Bevington’s study was Robert Weimann’s materialist *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition of the Theater* (1978).⁸ Weimann emphasizes a plebeian and folk tradition of drama, which he investigates particularly in relation to the morality Vice figure. With his physicality, his topsy-turvy folk humor, and his signature ability to move between *locus* and *platea*, players and spectators, illusion and actuality, the Vice represents, for Weimann, a triumphantly vital theatrical figure. Likewise extolling the morality theory, Alan Dessen, in a series of studies, finds the theatrical conventions of Marlowe and Shakespeare deriving from the morality stage practices of the 1570s.⁹ Those and a host of related works have invoked the moralities to understand Elizabethan dramatic construction, acting, characterization, staging practice, and audience reception.

But the valorizing of morality drama has entailed not only the dismissal of humanist theatricality but also the devaluing of other medieval forms, such as the saints’ plays, civic mystery plays, and folk drama. Howard Norland has recently insisted on the complexity of the medieval dramatic inheritance, noting that if the morality was the foremost model of popular drama, its reign was during the first four Tudor decades.¹⁰ By that argument, the claim that the morality tradition held sway as a “dominant mode of popular dramatic expression for about a century” becomes less tenable than was previously thought.¹¹ From 1531 to the early 1580s, the moralities account for only twenty to twenty-five percent of identified plays.¹² Partly because they “appealed more to the intellect than to the emotions,” the moralities found their “most significant role” as they became “incorporated into the rediscovered forms of tragedy and comedy” or combined with the popular saints’ plays into the history play.¹³ In the parishes of England before 1540, furthermore, the seminal popular form may have been not Corpus Christi cycles or morality plays but folk

drama.¹⁴ Current scholarship thus makes positing morality plays as a definitive Tudor influence problematic.

The morality thesis has profited from some blurring of the term *popular*. Used to mean "native" by some and "plebeian" by others, and also connoting "broadly appealing," *popular* acquires an aura of approval and tends to triumph *de facto* in any set of opposing binaries, such as "popular versus humanist" or "popular versus elite" or "popular versus learned." Native dramaturgy, however, can show its spirit through innovations on forms that are imported and classical; audiences for plebeian drama might include aristocrats;¹⁵ and the appealing repertoires of the sixteenth century contain works of humanist provenance. Thus, as the term *popular* conflates differences, it institutes a questionable category.¹⁶ For Bevington, "popular" correlates with "indigenous" but contrasts with "elite," even though the appeal of the "popular" crosses class boundaries. The implication here is that "elite" (i.e., humanist) drama cannot attract broad audiences; accordingly, "popular" would exclude by definition the possibility of an exciting humanist theatricality.¹⁷ In addition, the notion that morality drama radiates a certain plebeian or native consciousness squares awkwardly with the apparent mixture of learned and folk elements in a prototypical morality play such as *Mankind*: "If it was *for* the folk the play was certainly not *by* the folk, and one is tempted to see it as the Shrovetide *jeu d'esprit* of a group of Cambridge clerks."¹⁸ The morality theory stumbles, as well, on certain of its claims. Repetitive effect and multiplicity of detail, for example, cannot be ascribed exclusively to morality dramaturgy, as Doran's discussion of "multiple unity" and humanist *copia* suggests.¹⁹ Nor is the practice of alternating different sets of characters scene by scene exclusive to morality drama, for Terence and Plautus often rely on competing lines of character and action. Likewise, Senecan tragedy can undertake an exploration of emotional states suggestive of the "coordinated" dramaturgical structure of the morality tradition.²⁰ Indeed, Seneca demonstrates how congenial humanist drama can be to exploratory and cumulative effects as well as to climactic ones. While Bevington rightly points to the appearance of the rounded human character in morality drama, that emergence can be seen in the light of Tudor humanism and its dramaturgical influence, not just in terms of a new interest in chronicle

history (itself encouraged by humanism). For the development in drama of realistic human representations, in fact, the morality theory accounts rather poorly. While the critical emphasis on doubling in the moralities constitutes a significant insight, doubling can also operate in nonmorality plays, such as *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, which derives from the world of humanist academics. (Terence, the ancient dramatist most often used as a Renaissance model, seems also to have employed doubling.) Finally, in claiming that the stage romances of the 1570s belong exclusively to the morality tradition, the morality theory oversteps.²¹ While romances such as *Clyomon and Clamydes* (c. 1570) contain Vice-like figures and episodic action, those plays also unfold humanist themes, values, and characterizations. To state these objections differently, the distance between the moralities and humanist drama is not nearly so great as the morality theory proposes.

Most important, the morality theory elides humanist theatricality. It does so by discussing humanist drama in terms of classical models, five-act structures, Aristotelian unities, and intellectual and philosophical themes.²² Contained by such terms, humanist drama becomes something arid, literary, elitist, and rule-bound – incapable of the liveliness, energy, expansiveness, and high theatricality that Bevington, Weimann, and others associate with popular morality drama. Although those critics would do justice to humanist plays, a certain privileging of the popular seeps in: “Nor did the writers of school or courtly plays reject the *humor and freedom* of indigenous drama . . . England’s glory came ultimately from the fact that its courtly drama could *borrow life and vitality* from its humble brother” (emphasis mine).²³ To put that argument less circumspectly, popular theatricality redeems humanist artificiality and dullness. Likewise, Weimann portrays humanist dramaturgy as concerned with the unities and the rules of five-act structure in his suggestion that Elizabethan playmaking reached its zenith when popular theatrical energy finally converged with humanist unity and coherence. According to Weimann, the history of the sixteenth-century stage is the ever-expanding introduction into humanist, courtly, and Reformation plays of popular morality dramaturgy: vice characters, psychomachia, folk language, and audience address.²⁴ “In this way,” Weimann summarizes, “the learned tradition of rhetoric and the humanist concern for form and symmetry were accommodated,

however crudely, to the practical requirements of popular theatre with its greater capacity for action, spectacle, and low comedy.²⁵ Thus do efforts to make room for humanist plays in accounts of sixteenth-century drama end up confirming their deficient theatricality. But the interpretation of humanist drama as literary and readerly lacks the subtlety to differentiate Fulke Greville's closet drama *Mustapha* (pub. 1609) from the theatrically engaging *Gammer Gurton's Needle* or *Roister Doister* (c. 1553) or *Damon and Pithias* (1564) – all of which exude “action, spectacle, and low comedy.” Some morality theorizing even confines humanist drama to the “élite” plays associated with Sir Thomas More early in the century.²⁶ To similar effect, the investigation of stage conventions at the commercial playhouses tends to leave out dramaturgical practices, including those by humanist playwrights, from decades before the 1570s, even though, to take one example, a seminal property of the commercial stage, the mirror, makes its first active appearance in the academic *Wit and Science* in the 1530s. In such ways a lively humanist theatricality – from Henrician plays to school and university drama to Inns of Court shows to works of the University Wits – tends to vanish.

What I have argued so far might give the impression that I wish to privilege the “humanist tradition” at the expense of the “morality tradition.” Not so. The work of Bevington, Weimann, Dessen, and others on morality theatre constitutes a luminous contribution of twentieth-century scholarship to the understanding of Tudor drama. I would, however, redress the devaluing of humanist dramaturgy, a side-effect of the morality thesis perhaps not fully intended. To a large extent, of course, the morality theorists have only perpetuated the argument-by-opposites inherited from their predecessors, who dismiss the popular tradition in favor of classically influenced drama. But even if one were to contend that humanist drama ought to be preferred once again over the morality tradition – a proposition that I do not believe – the case would not be worth making, for it would merely preserve a formulaic, binarial, see-saw criticism.²⁷ Instead, I propose that humanist dramaturgy be explored for its own theatrical experiments, innovations, discoveries, and virtues. Such an effort will reveal in humanist theatre qualities of performance, structure, characterization, and auditorial experience that parallel or complement the theatrical virtuositities prized by the morality theory.

The contention risks overemphasis, obliging one to bear in mind the argument that a great virtue of early Tudor drama is its capacity to absorb and refashion a range of influences. A new sense of humanist dramaturgy, then, will help criticism move away from the binarial model itself and toward a conception of Tudor drama's triumphant mingling, balancing, and negotiating of sources and interests.

3

Any examination of humanist dramaturgy must consider a second-generation attack on humanism that reformulates the earlier "popular versus humanist" binary: the charge of "essentialism" leveled by cultural materialism and new historicism. "[M]aterialist theory," one proponent says, "rejects . . . the humanist belief in a unified, autonomous self" – that is, an "essential" self of unchanging human characteristics.²⁸ According to this critique, essentialism coalesced in "sixteenth-century Christianity and its stoic and humanist derivatives" and stresses such qualities as man's reason, his soul's immortality, and his free will.²⁹ That essentialist humanist model presumably receives a radical "interrogation" in Renaissance tragedy, which draws on "estimates of human nature which were largely outside, or even in opposition to, these dominant forms and their internal strains."³⁰ Another influential critique of humanism sees Renaissance tragedy as indeterminate in meaning because it expresses a transition between a medieval conception of the self and a post-Enlightenment, liberal humanist one.³¹ The hero of the medieval moralities is "a transitory configuration of fragments, of states of being over which he has only the most minimal control."³² By contrast, "Liberal humanism proposes that the subject is the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history[,] . . . [u]nified, knowing and autonomous."³³ Here Renaissance drama expresses the unresolved contest for meaning between two views of humankind, the fragmented being of the medieval moralities and the autonomous, empirical individual. But that Foucauldian distinction between two epistemes may be overdrawn, for, argues Norland, saints' plays attest to the possibility of heroic human endeavor, and both the saints' and mystery plays evoke a medieval belief in human efficacy at odds with the moralities' view

of feckless mankind.³⁴ The complex dramatic representations of humans in the mysteries and saints' plays, along with the historical belatedness of the moralities, cast doubt on any neat medieval episteme and the resulting binarial opposition of the medieval to the humanist.

From a Marxist perspective, essentialism implies an idealized, static concept of a homogeneous self located outside history and social experience. While Renaissance humanism does invoke a sense of human nature – for example, in the premise that reason is a distinguishing feature of mankind – anti-essentialism makes something of a hobgoblin of that view by overidealizing it.³⁵ Humanist thinkers such as Erasmus and More reject what they consider the stultifying idealizations and abstractions of scholasticism. To that end, the humanists argue that people could speak about God only “metaphorically . . . and of invisible things only through the visible things of this world.”³⁶ Knowledge of reality, they claimed, is bounded by material experience and mediated by language.³⁷ Erasmus, More, and their colleagues emphasize a person as a social and historical being – not some ideal, ahistorical phantasme – and make historical contextualization and philology central to their exegetical work. In the *Ciceronianus*, for example, Erasmus lampoons linguistic anachronisms resulting from an orator's idealization of Ciceronian style; in the “Letter to Martin Dorp,” he defends his own New Testament translation and commentary against scholastic criticism of its historical and philological grounding. Likewise, Erasmus typically reorients controversies toward questions of the lived life and extols the exemplary careers of Socrates, Cicero, Paul, Jerome, and, of course, Christ – as he does in the *Antibarbarorum liber*, the *Moriae encomium*, and the *Enchiridion militis christiani*, for example. Similarly, one cannot read Erasmus's educational writings without feeling his revulsion at the brutalizing of children and his sensitivity, compassion, and innovative playfulness toward children as learners. Erasmus consistently rejects theological hair-splitting so as to attend to the immediate, even pragmatic, exigencies of living a pious, ethical, and useful life – the kind of attitude that made him refuse to jump instantly on the anti-Luther bandwagon. And Erasmus, of course, writes with wit, energy, ironic understatement, and sly parody. Terms such as *idealist* and *essentialist* utterly miss the Erasmian ethos, so central to English humanism, as such terms similarly miss the

historical and social consciousness of his fellow humanists More, Colet, and Elyot.³⁸

If we approach the Renaissance as not just a transitional phase caught between two philosophical paradigms or epistemes but a complex culture with its own integrity, the anti-essentialist critique further weakens. The opposition between the (allegedly medieval) view of human beings as rudderless and the (allegedly liberal humanist) image of them as autonomous could then be understood to reflect creative tensions at the heart of sixteenth-century humanism itself, which posits a dynamic, unstable relationship between human potential and performance. Rejecting the idea of a dominant orthodox ideology and a marginalized subversiveness, Debora Shuger has recently envisioned the Renaissance in terms of an ideology that was itself pluralistic and contradictory: “radical questioning, alternate voices, and perception of contradiction manifest themselves *within* supposedly orthodox texts.”³⁹ Where the epistemic or Marxist critiques interpret Renaissance drama as indeterminate in meaning or as “subversive,” Shuger sees the pluralistic habits of thought of the English Renaissance itself. A central “problematic” then becomes the “placement of boundaries.” Shuger describes a dialectic between a “sacramental/analogical” thinking that “tends to deny rigid boundaries; nothing is simply itself, but things are signs of other things and one thing may be inside another,” and a more rationalistic thought that distinguishes rigorously between “conceptual and national territories.”⁴⁰ The problem of boundaries and their “thickness” suggests why the term *essentialism*, as it fences off and idealizes a supposedly humanist self, distorts Renaissance habits of thought. Humanist educators, for example, could contemplate a human “essence,” but one that is inchoate, corruptible or improveable, requiring a kind of performance to be fully realized – an essentialism with permeable boundaries. Richard Mulcaster, writing in *Positions* (1581), offers one example of this neo-Aristotelian contrast between potential and performance. After finding in Plato, Xeno, and Aristotle agreement that “nature” has given women “vertues” equivalent with those of men, Mulcaster proceeds:

That as naturally euery one hath some good assigned him, whervnto he is to aspire, and not to cease vntill he haue obtained it, onlesse he will by his owne negligence reiect that benefit, which the munificence of