Themes
& Conventions of

ELIZABETHAN
1558 — 1603
TRAGEDY

M. C. BRADBROOK

THEMES AND CONVENTIONS
OF
ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

BY

M. C. BRADBROOK
*Fellow of Girton College and Reader in English
in the University of Cambridge
and Mistress of Girton College*

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

NOTE ON THE 1969 REPRINT

In the thirty-five years since this book was written, many of the plays have been re-edited, discussed and performed, In the modern theatre not only Shakespeare's greater and lesser works, but those of his contemporaries can be presented. At Chichester or the Mermaid Theatre an open stage is provided; the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the National Theatre have staged brilliant versions of Marlowe, Tourneur and Webster; the tragedies of Middleston and Ford have also been seen in London.

University departments of drama have arisen where the plays are studied in workshop conditions, but also in relation to their European background. Much that had once to be laboured can now be taken for granted. My plea for re-interpretation has received such reinforcement from the live theatre as could not have been anticipated thirty-five years ago.

This book may be looked on as the first part of a general history of Elizabethan drama which has been expanded in subsequent books on comedy, and on Shakespeare as poet and craftsman. As the most social of the arts, drama demands for its interpretation a wide range of skills; criticism must therefore of necessity draw on the resources of many studies.

At Cambridge, at Stratford, and in many other parts of the world, I have learnt both from my masters and my pupils. The boundaries of knowledge are being pushed forward now by such writers as George Hunter, Glynne Wickham, Clifford Leech, Anne Barton, V. A. Kolve. No perfromance that I have seen, however inadequate, has failed to give me an insight into the play that imagination could not supply. To Cambridge, and to Girton College, my debts have grown with the years; not only this book, which I wrote as a research fellow, but anything achieved since, is the fruit of that seed plot.

<div align="right">M. C. BRADBROOK</div>

Cambridge, 1969

PREFACE

In the following pages I have tried to present an apparatus of approach to the Elizabethan drama, and in particular to tragedy. The first part deals with general informing conditions, the second with the uses to which they were put by the great dramatists. Thus the full significance of the first part can only be seen through the light which it throws on the second part; and this is the explanation of an arrangement which may seem to some readers rather severely insistent upon work first and playing afterwards. The reader who is not particularly devoted to the Elizabethan period may find the first part duller than the second, while the scholar with an appetite for work may object that the first part is neither detailed nor extensive enough for him. My defence would be that I have not attempted to placate either at the expense of the other, hoping each would concede a little to the other's frailty.

It seems at the moment as if criticism of the Elizabethan drama were entering a new and brilliant phase. The body of distinguished work represented by the names of Professors Caroline Spurgeon and Wilson Knight, Mr T. S. Eliot, Mrs Woolf, Miss Elizabeth Holmes and Mr G. W. H. Rylands reveals a tendency towards a unification of the scholarly and the critical forces. I am especially indebted to the first three of these writers. Also I am under no small methodological obligation to Mr W. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and more particularly to a lecture on *Plot and Subplot in the Elizabethan Drama* which he gave to the Heretics at Cambridge in the Lent Term of 1931.

My thanks are due to Miss Enid Welsford, of Newnham College, for invigorating discussion of my work. Miss H. M. R. Murray, my former Director of Studies, has en-

couraged me throughout by her interest and advice and by many personal kindnesses.

It is difficult, though it might be salutary, for those who read in the English School at Cambridge to try to estimate how much of what they produce might fairly be labelled "All my own work". It is no less difficult for me to count up my many debts to Girton College, from the award of the Research Fellowship, which made my work possible, to those gifts whose description would only be practicable where it would also be redundant, that is, among Girtonians.

M. C. BRADBROOK

1934

CONTENTS

PART ONE

THE THEATRE

CHAPTER I

Introduction

THIS work was written as an attempt to discover how an Elizabethan would approach a tragedy by Chapman, Tourneur or Middleton. It has long been felt that Elizabethan drama was a very specialised form of art; but there has been no systematic attempt to discover what its peculiarities really were, or how far they helped or hindered the great dramatists in their work. It is hardly sufficient to make vague references to the influence of the *Commedia dell' Arte* or to compile a list of the number of times a Revenger says "Curae leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent". Something more comprehensive is needed, which would be at once an explanation and a justification. This book is meant to show that, beneath what may seem very arbitrary and trivial conventions, there was an underlying unity which makes into parts of a coherent whole, much that has seemed difficult to explain. It fixes the plot and subplot of *The Changeling* in a definite relation to each other, and reveals the structural methods of Tourneur. An attempt to understand the conventions as a whole has revolutionised my personal outlook on the Elizabethan drama.

The case is very complex and yet a single case. If any parts of the argument appear rather novel, they should be judged in relation to the rest. It is true that the development of the conventions has been only slightly indicated, but that would have required a much longer time than I could afford to give.

It is very necessary to approach the Elizabethan drama without any of the preconceptions about the nature of drama

which are drawn from reading Ibsen, Shaw, Racine, Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is necessary to regain the particular angle (even the particular limitations) of the Elizabethan point of view. The unity of their conventions was not at all like the unity of the Rules or of a strictly formulated code. (It is impossible to say how far they were conscious of the unity themselves: it seems obvious that Chapman and Jonson were particularly conscious, whereas Marston, for instance, swam with the stream.) The reader must not approach the drama with the *a priori* conviction that Jonson's plays are shapely and Chapman's shapeless, because the shape of Jonson's plays is immediately perceptible to him. Perhaps his consciousness of the shape of Jonson's might be modified by a realisation of the shape of Chapman's.

If this seems to imply a kind of critical anarchy, it can at least be urged that it finally produces order. The present system, which begins with orderly judgments, too often ends in critical anarchy.

The crucial question is the nature of Elizabethan dramatic speech, and the chapter on it forms the keystone of my argument. It was because he misunderstood the technique of the Elizabethans' dialogue that William Archer could misunderstand their whole dramatic structure. *The Old Drama and the New* has been more often attacked than refuted. Archer's attitude may seem absurd, but it is the logical outcome of the normal attitude towards Elizabethan drama, which implies that the technique, even when successful, is "primitive".

Expository speech is still stigmatised as undramatic.

Writing in 1890 Alfred Hennequin criticized many of the best plays for containing passages of this sort. In 1909 Archibald Henderson claimed it as the greatest innovation of the leading modern dramatists that they had succeeded in identifying action and exposition. The discredit into which the soliloquy and aside

had fallen—until reclaimed to new uses by Eugene O'Neill—was largely due to the fact that they were generally employed to convey information, a method which critics, from the first century B.C. on, have objected to. The German scholar Kilian called it "a lame makeshift", and Brander Matthews denounced it as "false in psychology" and "primitive in dramaturgy". "Inartistic" is the mildest adjective applied to it.[1]

Brander Matthews can write in the following strain:

Iago and Richard III when they are alone on the stage talk straight to the spectators, to the gallants on their threepenny stools and to the groundlings standing in the yard. Both of these bold, bad characters unbosom themselves in soliloquy, revealing their dark designs and letting us see into their black hearts.[2]

This facetious rallying of Shakespeare seems unwise. *Othello* wants not Eugene O'Neill to support it: if the Elizabethans wrote great drama, it is only by taking nine-teenth-century standards of dramaturgy as absolute, that it can be called primitive in any sense.

It may be added that "marvels of construction" can be produced by anyone who will take a little pains. William Archer noted this, but it did not lead him to suspect his own standards. He admits that "any good competent writer" can produce plays which are "better" than those of the greater Elizabethans.

It may seem unnecessary to defend the seventeenth century against this kind of attack; but there is too often a tendency to think that the Elizabethans were less dramatic than modern playwrights, but made up for it by being more poetic. It must be insisted upon that poetic drama may have a con-struction as efficient as, and far more complex than, prose drama and that to condemn it (or to acquiesce in condemnation by excusing it) is to betray the duty of a critic. The only way to gain recognition for Elizabethan methods of construction

[1] Doris Fenton, *The Extra Dramatic Moment in Elizabethan Plays before 1616*, p. 87. Pennsylvania, 1930. [2] *Ibid.* p. 92.

is to analyse and formulate them, and give them an independent status.

A great deal of preliminary work has already been done. There are innumerable monographs on different and isolated conventions: these give a body of support to any attempt at generalisation. It remains to see these little idiosyncracies in relation to each other, for whilst each of them, considered separately, may be only arbitrary and curious, in conjunction they form a body of conventions which constitutes the Elizabethan stage tradition.

A convention may be defined as an agreement between writers and readers, whereby the artist is allowed to limit and simplify his material in order to secure greater concentration through a control of the distribution of emphasis. Conventions which are acknowledged have usually been erected into a system of Rules. The neo-classic conventions, which were largely the creation of Renaissance critics, were considered to have the authority of the Ancients and to constitute the only right method of making plays: they were prescribed not as a convenience but as a duty. The value of such a system of Rules is that it imposes consistency, and only allows one set of conventions at a time.

The Elizabethan conventions have never been acknowledged because·they were not formulated (except in so far as a parody implied a convention to be parodied). The neo-classic creed was the orthodox one: though the dramatists did not adhere to it, they could not construct an alternative one. It might have been possible to distort the Rules until they fitted contemporary practice, but Elizabethan criticism was not sufficiently advanced for so large an undertaking.

It was nevertheless impossible that writers who worked at the speed of these dramatists should not evolve a convention. They relied partly on the Senecal tradition (which derived from the Italians) and on the practice of greater dramatists like Kyd and Marlowe. In this way a body of

incidents, types, tags grew up upon which anyone could draw. Such a body of common material is of little value in itself. It saves the writer's time but also tends to make his work lifeless and mechanical. Those dramatists who used it in an unenlightened way produced shapeless and incoherent plays.

But in the hands of the greater writers the stock material formed a true convention. The Revenge plays have in common a certain "criticism of life", and the common form is only a convenience for expressing it. The imagery and idiom of these plays is the means by which the convention is unified and made poetic. The essential structure of Elizabethan drama lies not in the narrative or the characters but in the words. The greatest poets are also the greatest dramatists. Through their unique interest in word play and word patterns of all kinds the Elizabethans were especially fitted to build their drama on words.

The lesser writers, who could not unify their plays through speech, relied upon spectacle and the coarsest stimulants of melodrama and farce. Since the observance of their conventions was purely pragmatical, there was nothing to prevent the combination of several conventions in one play (as in Dekker's *The Honest Whore*). A structure which was purely poetic offered nothing to the lesser dramatists, whereas our contemporary dramaturgy is equally useful to the mediocre writer and the good one.

The raw material for studying the conventions can be found only in the plays themselves. Since the greater dramatists often borrowed from lesser ones to build up their personal conventions, the whole of the drama must be considered.

Finally, the way in which the dramatists built up their plays may be most easily elucidated by a comparison with contemporary non-dramatic literature. Some consideration of the influence of other arts is helpful also. The mental habits of the age were very different from ours and, in some respects, much closer to those of the Middle Ages; par-

ticularly in the taste for allegory and the attitude towards
rhetoric. The less important the dramatist, the more essential
it is to see his play primarily as Elizabethan literature, and
only secondly as a play. The Elizabethan drama has been so
often compared with the drama of the Restoration or the
nineteenth century that to approach it in its relation to
Euphues, the *Arcadia* and *The Faery Queene* might at least
have the justification of novelty. There is the further induce-
ment that, without forgetting the distinctive qualities of the
dramatic *genre*, it is easier to judge writers who worked in
an age when the *Arcadia* and *The Faery Queene* were not
regarded as stilted or complex or unusual, but as normal
literary productions, by reference to such works, and not
by reference to the works of writers for whom Browning
and Meredith were normal and typical.

An equally necessary proviso is that the plays of Shake-
speare should be, as far as possible, excluded from the mind
when the lesser Elizabethans are being considered. Shake-
speare can be judged by nineteenth-century standards (or
any other dramatic standards, for that matter) without suf-
fering an eclipse. He is so different from his contemporaries,
particularly in the matter of characterisation, that it is unfair
to judge them by him. Spenser and not Shakespeare was
the typical Elizabethan poet, and the Spenserian standards
are much safer to apply to the dramatists. To approach
Shakespeare through his contemporaries is enlightening, but
to approach his contemporaries through him is to set up
false preconceptions. The difficulty is that everyone knows
Shakespeare's plays the best of all, and a conscious effort to
set them aside is not often made. It is very salutary to take
three or four mediocre plays (say Day's *Humour out of
Breath*, one of Heywood's plays of adventure, Yarrington's
Two Lamentable Tragedies and a chronicle history), and to
realise that the Elizabethan public would regard such plays
as the norm and judge other writers accordingly.

CHAPTER II

Conventions of Presentation and Acting

I. LOCALITY

THE form of the Elizabethan theatre is so well known that it is not necessary to describe it in detail. The projecting main stage was backed by an inner stage, the "study" (in private theatres the "canopy" or "trophey") closed with a curtain (the "arras" or "traverse"). Above was a balcony, also curtained. There were three or more doors to the main stage, with windows over the side doors; and in the public theatres a third storey, the "top" or "turret". In the private theatres the upper stage was smaller; it was known as "the music room". The stage was provided with several kinds of traps, and with machines for descent from above, called "thrones".

The chief characteristic of the Elizabethan stage was its neutrality and its corresponding virtue, flexibility. There was no inevitable scenic background, or any other localising factor, such as a Chorus provides.

It followed that far more weight attached itself to the persons and movements of the actors. In short or unimportant scenes no indication of place is given, either by properties or by the speech of the actors, and no place need be assumed. It is the result of oversight rather than a deliberate device: the author was not compelled to locate his characters and, for a short scene between first and second gentlemen, there was no need to do so.

The scenes of a comedy were often located vaguely within a given town; and the short scenes of battle plays could all be covered by a general label.[1] It is uncertain whether the

[1] *Alphonsus of Aragon*, 2. 1, 2: the last three acts of *Edward III*.

entrance of a fresh set of combatants meant a change of place or not.

Vestiges of the older method of continuous staging (*décor simultané*) remain in a few plays of Lyly and Peele, such as *The Arraignment of Paris* and *The Old Wives' Tale*.[1] Marston apologises for the "entrances" in *Sophonisba* because "it was given after the fashion of the private stages". This might explain how in the fourth act the characters go from a bedroom to a wood and back again without in each case leaving the stage.

The private and the common stages could not have been very different, from the ease with which they pirated one another's plays. But Marston's plays, in particular, seem to indicate that two places could be shown at once: there are further instances in *Antonio's Revenge* and *The Fawne*.

In the "split" scene properties were set on the inner stage to indicate a fixed locality, and when the curtains were drawn the characters remaining on the main stage from the last scene were attracted into the new setting. Conversely, if the curtains were closed the characters left on the forestage were delocalised. The first kind of split scene occurs in *Bussy D'Ambois*, 4. 2, and *The White Devil*, 4. 3; the second in *The Massacre at Paris*, Scene 5, and *Othello*, 1. 3.

It is clear that the actors were the really important means of locating the scene. They were not set against a background real or imaginary; the audience did not visualise a setting for them. Shakespeare is misleading in this respect because he nearly always suggests a background for his characters, but no other writer did it with such consistency.

It was quite permissible for a character to bring his locality with him. In *The Devil's Charter* Lucrezia Borgia brings in her chair and sets it down like any humbler character: there are the notorious directions about thrusting out beds,[2]

---

[1] *Vide* Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, III, pp. 48, 135–42.
[2] *Ibid.* pp. 66, 113.

though the idea that the royal chair of state was lowered by a pulley on to the stage has been dispelled.

There is one definite method of showing that the place is changed by the movement of the actors. When a character announces his intention of going somewhere, and then goes out at one side of the stage and comes in at the other, it is assumed that he has finished his journey. The two doors often indicated two localities.[1] ¿

Besides the split scene, there are reminiscences of continuous setting in processional scenes and extended scenes. In processional scenes the characters walk about the stage, and are imagined to be travelling for quite a distance. Instances are *The Play of Stukeley*, Scene 1; *Romeo and Juliet*, 1. 4; *Merchant of Venice*, 5. 1; *Arden of Feversham*, 3. 5; *A Warning for Fair Women*, Act 2, ll. 476–96; *The Witch of Edmonton*, 3. 2. The march of the army round the stage is one of the commonest spectacles.

Processional scenes merge into extended scenes. In Roman plays the senate often sit above while the lower stage represents the street. In *Titus Andronicus*, 1. 1, the tomb of the Andronici is shown below and the senate sit on the upper stage.[2] Places further apart may be shown, such as a street with several houses or two opposing camps.[3] In *Eastward Hoe*, 4. 1, the butcher climbs a post and describes a distant scene of shipwreck offstage, and there is a similar scene in *The Captives*. The most notorious case occurs in a dumb show at the end of *The Three English Brothers*.

The sense of exact place is blurred in early plays by the figures of the induction. The presenters were in one definite locality, in *The Taming of the Shrew* (the Lord's house); the play was in another (Padua and the country round), but also

---

[1] *The Gull's Horn Book*, ed. McKerrow, p. 41.
[2] Chambers, *op. cit.* p. 58.
[3] *Soliman and Perseda*, 2. 1; *Arden of Feversham*, 1. 1; *The Fawne*, 4. 1; *Catiline*, 5. 6. *Vide* Chambers, *op. cit.* pp. 54, 99, 117.

in the Lord's house where it was being witnessed as a play. Conjuring produced something of the same effect, when Friar Bacon showed the Oxford scholars their fathers in Fressingfield or the Conjuror revealed the death of his wife to Brachiano.

The presence of allegorical figures, for whom time and place are irrelevant, and the confusion between induction and play in *The Old Wives' Tale*, *James IV* and other early dramas, even though they were not consciously felt by authors or audience, would help to establish a vague and unlocated scene. Of course these devices were rejected later, but not for their effects upon localisation.

It is also doubtful how far each scene was a unit. If there were no scenic pauses, the transference from one scene to another would be very much slurred over. In the second act of *Charlemagne*, the place shifts from Paris to Ganelon's country house during a series of short unlocated scenes, so that it is impossible to say exactly at what point the change is effected.

It was not the habit of the audience to visualise precisely (as the choruses to *Henry V* rather suggest), or unlocated and split scenes would have puzzled them. The author was not always conscious of implications of locality. In *King Leir*, Scene 24, and *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, Scene 3, banquets are brought on in the middle of an open desert. This could hardly have happened if the audience filled in the background for themselves.

On the early stage title boards were used with the name of the place painted on them. This custom may have survived in the private theatres for a short time.[1] A scene will often begin with some flat declaration of place, such as "Well, this is the forest of Arden".

There were certain properties which localised both generally and particularly. Tables, stools and a "state" indicated

[1] Chambers, *op. cit.* pp. 126, 154.