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English Tragedy before Shakespeare

The Development of Dramatic Speech

Wolfgang Clemen

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First published in English 1961, this reissue relates the problems of form and style to the development of dramatic speech in pre-Shakespearean tragedy. The work offers positive standards by which to assess the development of pre-Shakespearean drama and, by tracing certain characteristics in Elizabethan tragedy which were to have a bearing on Shakespeare's dramatic technique, helps to illuminate the foundations on which Shakespeare built his dramatic oeuvre.

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The Development of Dramatic Speech

BY WOLFGANG CLEMEN

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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ABBREVIATIONS

Alcazar	*The Battle of Alcazar*
Arraignment	*The Arraignment of Paris*
David	*David and Bethsabe*
Friar Bacon	*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*
Gismond	*Gismond of Salerne*
Gorb.	*Gorboduc*
Looking Glass	*A Looking-Glass for London and England*
Massacre	*The Massacre at Paris*
Misfortunes	*The Misfortunes of Arthur*
Oldcastle	*Sir John Oldcastle*
Orlando	*Orlando Furioso*
Span. Trag.	*The Spanish Tragedy*
Wars	*The Wars of Cyrus*
Wounds	*The Wounds of Civil War*
Anglia	*Anglia: Zeitschrift für englische Philologie*
Archiv	*Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MP	*Modern Philology*
NQ	*Notes and Queries*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
TLS	*The Times Literary Supplement*

PART ONE

I

Introduction

In this volume an attempt is made to trace the history of serious drama before Shakespeare – by which is to be understood especially the tragedy written between *Gorboduc* and Marlowe's *Edward II* – by studying it in relation to the development of the dramatic set speech. This means that an element of special importance in the structure of Elizabethan tragedy will have to be detached from its setting in the plays and analysed in some detail. It will be found, however, that what may at first sight have seemed a restricted and one-sided critical procedure necessarily leads us to examine the plays more carefully as complete works, and thus gives us a fresh and clearer insight into their character.

It is hoped that a study of this kind, embracing not only the relationship of the set speech to the other formal elements of drama, but also its structure and its forms of expression, will provide a new approach to the history of pre-Shakespearian drama, and to developments within this period of which it has so far been difficult to give a clear account. Useful as are some of the existing studies which aim at describing the nature of this body of drama as a whole, they deal with it at best in general terms, and they are not of much value when we turn to them for exact information about the structure, the forms of expression, or the style of presentation of a particular play – in other words, about the various individual points that determine both its shape and the character of its dramatic art. It has therefore been thought best to limit this inquiry and confine our attention in the first instance to one of the more tangible components of these plays, to something which is of their very stuff and substance, which is, so

to speak, the flesh and blood of drama, that is to say, the words which the characters speak in their longer unbroken speeches.

The term 'set speech' will be used for any continuous spoken passage that stands out noticeably from the general run of the dialogue by reason of its length and structure, its theme, or its significance. No attempt will be made to give an exact definition of the set speech as such, for by simplifying the forms that it may take and reducing them to an ordered scheme, any such definition would fail to do justice to their diversity. Clearly, too, we shall fall into difficulties if we try to lay down a dividing-line between the set speech and dialogue that will cover every case, for it is not always possible to differentiate them in this way. In the earliest stages of the course of development that is to be outlined in later chapters the difference between the two is obvious and unmistakable; but later the one merges into the other, and there will be occasions when it will be hard to decide whether a particular example should or should not have been included for analysis. With occasional passages, moreover, some readers will perhaps regret that what is said about the style of the set speeches could not have been supplemented by some discussion of the dialogue-technique, for in many plays the style cannot be adequately grasped if we take the set speech alone as our point of departure. But this would have demanded a fundamental widening in the scope of our study, no doubt involving some blurring of its main outlines, since the consideration of dialogue requires us to go back to different origins and different basic assumptions.

However, these distinctions are of less concern than the much more important question whether the set speeches in pre-Shakespearian drama stand out clearly enough and are an important enough phenomenon to warrant close study in connexion with the whole process of dramatic development at this time, and as a key to that process. This question can certainly be answered in the affirmative. For set speeches are an absolutely fundamental ingredient of pre-Shakespearian tragedy; they are the main pillars, indeed the very foundations of the play, and upon these foundations the whole building is designed. With the lapse of time they gradually occupy a less and less commanding position; nevertheless, the tradition of the dramatic set speech persists, and it has not yet entirely lost its

force even in Shakespearian tragedy, where it occasionally makes its presence felt in the use of certain types of speech which, as will be suggested in Chapter 3, are among the characteristic set-speech types of pre-Shakespearian drama.[1]

There seems therefore to be every good reason for making a systematic study of the set speech in early Elizabethan tragedy. For this tragedy takes its very life from the exalted language in which the set speeches are couched. These speeches are extremely important for other reasons as well. In the first place, they are the sole medium by which the characters are presented and their states of mind and motives for action revealed; by their means, moreover, the dramatic import of the play is made clear, and the course of its action is unfolded. In these speeches is incorporated everything that later – in the realistic drama, and to some extent already in Shakespeare – is expressed by a whole variety of other methods: by means of gesture and movement about the stage, by means of eloquent silences, of misunderstanding, and of inarticulate utterance, by means of a significant reaction on the part of one of the characters in a particular situation, and by means of directly presented action and counteraction. In the rhetorical drama – and pre-Shakespearian drama is to a very large extent rhetorical drama – all these things are translated into words, into high-sounding speech. The characters in these plays must represent with their tongues alone everything that later on is conveyed to the audience in the various other ways already mentioned – though of course it has at all times been one of the paradoxical laws of drama that its characters should be allowed to say much more than they would in real life. However, the one-sidedness of this early rhetorical verse-drama is not without its positive aspects, in so far as the idea of 'eloquence', which played so great a part in the whole period under review, now acquires a new and deeper import. Instead of merely fulfilling its outward function as a polished, highly adorned and effective technique of oratory, eloquence comes to mean the ability to communicate by the medium of words alone a wide variety of man's deepest emotions. This ability we find in Shakespeare, but we should not find it had not the playwrights

[1] Cf. Milton Boone Kennedy, *The Oration in Shakespeare*, Chapel Hill, 1942.

who preceded him already contributed to dramatic verse that wealth of expression and of effect the potentialities of which were to be completely realized only after their time. Marlowe already must have been fully alive to these possibilities. It is reasonable to say, therefore, that the realistic drama, showing as it does an awareness that words are only a partial means of self-expression, was in a certain sense responsible for the impoverishment of the language of drama as a vehicle for expression, and for the decay of the art that had allowed, and indeed demanded, the complete expression of thought and emotion.

If then the set speech is of such central importance as an instrument of dramatic expression, it must be possible to learn a good deal from it about the style of the play as a whole, and about anything that is distinctive in the way in which its theme is presented and developed. This study will therefore deal not only with the structure, the style, and the movement of thought of the set speeches, but also with their function in the larger context of the whole play, with the way in which they are fitted into the framework of act and scene. An attempt will also be made to show what light these speeches shed on the total dramatic content, how far they serve the dramatist as a means of instructing his audience, and what part they play in the revelation of character. However, our first concern must be with the relationship of the speech to its immediate context, and to the other party in the exchange of which it forms a part. Other important matters to be discussed are the relationship between set speech and dialogue, the frequency with which the speeches occur, and the space they occupy in the play – in other words, the way in which they are used in building up its fabric. Consideration of these points in any particular play will bring us a step nearer to an understanding of its inner form, its thematic texture.

In these questions our attention is directed to the inner mechanism of the play and the relations that its various components bear to one another. Now this mechanism is itself part of a constant process of evolution. This is manifested in various ways. Thus developments of fundamental importance to drama come about when, for example, a stilted and disconnected dialogue between speakers who stand side by side and address one another without any real inner contact is

replaced by a direct and closely interwoven means of communication between them; or again, when genuinely *dramatic* speech replaces a mere set speech – itself no more than rhetorical 'insertion' that lacks close connexion with the situation as a whole – and is integrated in a variety of ways with the action, the characterization, and the thematic structure of the play. In watching these things happen we can participate in that internal process of growth which is constantly modifying dramatic forms and carrying them to higher stages of development. In this sense the history of dramatic form is not a matter of externals, but rather the crystallization of the active processes of change that are taking place, not only within individual plays, but in the whole historical sequence of plays of the same type – in what is usually called the history of drama.

In the course of this book there will be some discussion not only of the development of dramatic forms, but also of the 'mode of expression' in pre-Shakespearian drama. This term has been chosen to suggest something more than a mere formal analysis of style, something that includes also the meaning that is brought out by means of the various stylistic devices. By style is generally understood only the 'how' of presentation, the technique of language by which a particular content of thought is clothed in words. Moreover, the 'devices' of style, especially those that turn up again and again as established stylistic artifices and 'figures', are very often removed from their context and considered as something existing in their own right. The extraordinary wealth of rhetorical figures still employed by Shakespeare,[1] and the influence of the academic exercises in rhetoric upon style as a whole, an influence that resulted from the dominant position of rhetoric throughout the period, do seem to suggest, indeed, that our first step should be to diagnose and classify the rhetorical figures that are so constant a phenomenon in the plays. But this kind of stylistic analysis, which can so easily degenerate into a more or less mechanical process of assembling and cataloguing, ought to be only one of several approaches to the texts, and we should never forget that the various figures that are used derive both their function and their effect from their relationship with the mean-

[1] See, e.g., Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, New York, 1947.

ing that is expressed in any particular passage. The reader's attention will only occasionally therefore be drawn to the rhetorical figures which as a matter of course occur more frequently in the set speeches than anywhere else. For our first concern must be with the train of thought or the theme that underlies each of the various speeches under review, and the manner in which this content of thought is expressed.

It will be seen that the subject-matter and the themes that make up the content of these speeches are very often of a highly conventional nature. This is especially true of the 'type' speeches, the basic forms of which are enumerated in Chapter 3. These are speeches that are bound up with recurrent themes and recurrent emotional situations: laments for the dead, challenges, speeches of triumph over enemies, warnings against an imprudent action, and the like. As is shown in the final chapters of this book, where the lament is used for illustration, there is a stock of conventional formulas associated with the 'type' speech, an assortment of recurring ideas and themes and characteristic turns of phrase which are constantly met with, and which are always available for use when such a 'typical' situation presents itself.

However, these constant factors are blended with the variations in style which are due to gradually changing purposes, and with the individual impulse that lies behind the work of the various playwrights. For though pre-Shakespearian drama may at first sight appear to be dominated by convention, though innumerable passages give a stiff and stereotyped effect, thickly studded as they are with clichés, yet even here we find the clash between what merely conforms to type and what is due to the individual playwright's urge for expression. The 'typical' form of language with which an utterance was invested had at one time been the expression of a distinctive way of thought, of a distinctive attitude. With the lapse of years this association ceased to exist, and a particular form of utterance could be passed on from hand to hand, and taken into service again when the underlying way of thought that had once stamped this form as something individual had long since passed into oblivion, and was certainly not present in the consciousness of the writer.

It is of course the lesser playwrights, the mere craftsmen and the imitators, who write without any further concern for the forms which they have been able to take over from others and which have won the favour and acceptance of the audience. This is to a certain extent true even of the major playwrights. For what we have in Elizabethan drama is always a product of the reciprocal influence of the audience and the playwright on each other. The author's own individual urge for expression can develop only when he makes use of forms and conventions that have already been accepted by the audience and that have in a sense come to be looked for in every new play. This is certainly the case with the set speeches. Yet again and again, even in the pre-Shakespearian drama, we find places where the accepted patterns of speech are superseded, where the existing vehicles of language and style obviously no longer suffice for the expression of the author's intention. When this occurs we shall of course have to decide how far such departures are to be attributed to the playwright's own creative powers, and how far they may be due to other causes, such as, for example, the influence of other types of drama.

However, no convention of speech will have an enduring life once the ideas which originally lay behind it have to any considerable extent been modified. While recognizing the long currency and the force of certain effects that are due to conformity with type and convention, we have also, when dealing with pre-Shakespearian drama, to reckon with that other literary law, operating below the surface, according to which form and content strive towards a final harmony. In a negative sense, the exaggerated use of conventional devices of language and form may also be taken as an indication that this process of integration is at work. In this case we may be reasonably certain that the conventional formulas were taken over as mere empty shells, and were used solely for their power to raise the pitch of an utterance by their associations. However, in the course of time any form of overstatement and exaggeration becomes wearisome, even in a period so enthusiastically attached to every form of exuberance, of heightened effect and extravagance, as the Elizabethan age.

Another purpose of this book, then, is to contribute something to our knowledge of type-qualities in pre-Shakespearian drama; in

this respect it aims at supplementing the important work of M. C. Bradbrook, L. L. Schücking,[1] and others, who have written full-length studies of the type-qualities that occur in Elizabethan drama as a whole. It is particularly necessary that the pre-Shakespearian period of this drama should be studied in this way, not only for our better understanding of the forms and techniques that are characteristic of the plays then being produced, but also because it is in these forms and techniques that Shakespeare's plays have their roots. Shakespeare's work is everywhere pervaded by conventional and stereotyped elements inherited from the past, always associated, however, with the new elements that are the product of his own remarkable creative urge. In the clash between convention and originality lies much of the secret of his art. At every stage of his work we can watch new forms growing out of old, and from the mixture of types and conventions that he took over from his predecessors and their reciprocal influence on one another he fashions something entirely new and entirely different. This is tantamount to saying, of course, that in Shakespeare the basic forms are no longer to be found in their purity, even where the subject of this book, the set speech, is concerned.

To get to know these forms and conventions as pure and unmixed types, we must look for them in pre-Shakespearian drama. Here we shall find them as they were before in Shakespeare they were outgrown by better things, or changed into something different and adapted to new settings. Any attention we can give to the material that lay behind Shakespeare – and often enough we shall be dealing with somewhat primitive material – will make us more fully alive to the uniqueness of Shakespeare's own achievement; we shall appreciate more thoroughly his ability to employ even primitive conventions in the composition of his plays without prejudice to their total artistic effect, and the brilliance with which he extended and reshaped and gave new life to the dramatic art-forms of his predecessors and his contemporaries.[2]

[1] M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1935; L. L. Schücking, *Shakespeare und der Tragödienstil seiner Zeit*, Berne, 1947.

[2] Cf., among others, L. L. Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays*, London, 1922; E. E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, New York,

The conventional devices of style and expression which give pre-Shakespearian drama a character so essentially its own stand out most obviously in plays by the dramatists of the second and third ranks, the mere craftsmen who, having no marked talents of their own, have nevertheless applied themselves to authorship as to a technique that can be learnt. This is probably true, however, of the art and literature of every age; we can learn more about the styles and tastes of an age from the work of the mediocre performers, the lesser spirits of the time, than from the few great masterpieces created by the men of genius. In approaching subjects like those dealt with in this book, the literary historian must therefore give some of his time to works that do not amount to much by purely artistic standards. For the importance of these minor productions lies not only in what they tell us about the transmission of dramatic conventions and their hardening into standardized commonplaces, or about the continuity of dramatic styles; there are also times when they do more than the polished and successful masterpieces to explain the special technical problems with which the playwrights of the age had to contend.

Our study of the plays opens with *Gorboduc* and carries through to Shakespeare's immediate predecessors and early contemporaries, Marlowe, Peele, and Greene. Thus it deals at first with the set speech in English classical plays of the Senecan tradition; then, keeping pace with subsequent developments in pre-Shakespearian drama, it gradually extends its scope to cover finally the so-called romantic plays that verge on tragi-comedy, and it also includes the chronicle plays. Comedy has been deliberately excluded, as have any plays written earlier than *Gorboduc*, in order to concentrate attention on a limited number of developments which follow a more or less consistent course and which can be grasped as a whole. The plays singled out for special analysis have been chosen from the many dramatic works of this period because they seem to illustrate most clearly the developments under consideration.

1933; S. L. Bethell, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, London, 1944; Henri Fluchère, *Shakespeare, Dramaturge élisabéthain*, Paris, 1948 (trans. Guy Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Elizabethans*, London, 1953); Hardin Craig, *An Interpretation of Shakespeare*, New York, 1948.

In the second section of the book the functions and techniques of the set speech are examined within the bounds of single plays and with reference to the work of individual playwrights. In the third section the stress falls on the comparative analysis of passages exemplifying one and the same type of speech; in this way an attempt is made to cut a cross-section through the development of style and modes of expression as it applies to a single motif, that of lament.

It is hoped, finally, that the book may bring out the possibilities that lie in the detailed study of a single component of drama. It will at the same time reveal the limitations of such a method. A complete account of the development of pre-Shakespearian drama will require several further studies representing other lines of approach, culminating perhaps in a single comprehensive treatment of the subject.

2

The Set Speech in Renaissance Drama and Contemporary Theory

The over-riding importance attached to the set speech in the serious drama of England before Shakespeare's time is a characteristic of European drama as a whole in the Renaissance period. Some recapitulation of general developments in the literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries will enable us to see this phenomenon in a clearer perspective. Many of the relevant facts can of course be only lightly touched on here.

A number of informative books have already been written about the significance of rhetoric in its bearings on all the literary kinds, and the important place allotted to rhetorical studies in school and university education, in poetic theory, and indeed in the common culture of the western world.[1] There is therefore no need in the present work to enter on the question of the relationship between the rhetorical theory of the Renaissance and of the ancients, or to show how a kind of amalgam was made of the literary theory of Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian, or to consider how far the rhetorical tradition of the middle ages continued to be operative at the Renaissance, or what was associated with the idea of rhetoric by the scholars of medieval and Renaissance times.[2] We should bear in mind, however, that during the middle ages it was normal 'to con-

[1] E.g., Charles Sears Baldwin, in *Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice*, ed. D. L. Clark, New York, 1939; Donald Leman Clark, *Rhetoric and Poetry in the Renaissance*, New York, 1922; Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, New York, 1947; W. G. Crane, *Wit and Rhetoric in the Renaissance*, New York, 1937; J. H. W. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Renascence*, London, 1947.

[2] See esp. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask, London, 1953, Chap. 4, 'Rhetoric', and Chap. 8, 'Poetry and Rhetoric'.

ceive of poetry as a species of eloquence', and to speak of 'the dominion of rhetoric over poetry'; these generalizations are still applicable to a major part of Renaissance poetry, just as the influence of the ancient conception that poetry and prose both come under the wider heading of 'discourse'[1] also makes itself felt in Renaissance literature in general. Although Aristotle's *Poetics* were being freshly and critically examined, most of the literary theorists of the sixteenth century continued to identify poetic theory with rhetorical theory, or thought of them as interchangeable, and this is only one of many indications of the supremacy enjoyed by rhetoric during the Renaissance. The recovery of Cicero's *De Oratore*, the classic exposition of the high claims of eloquence as an art based on an all-round cultivation of the spirit, and infinitely superior to any merely manual skill,[2] may have been one of the reasons for the extraordinary esteem in which rhetoric was held right down to the English Renaissance. And although in England some voices were raised against the authority of Cicero and in disparagement of the arts of rhetoric,[3] this was an exceptional attitude; the majority would have subscribed to Cicero's proposition, 'Est enim finitimus oratori poeta'.[4] In the narrower sense rhetoric is the art of applying to oratory a system of instruction in the use of decorative figures of speech, of structural devices, and of various types of style; in its actual operation it goes beyond its true province, and it became an all-important factor in the conception of poetry. The point was reached where all the poetic kinds were included under the general head of the art of eloquence; poetry was felt, by its skilful handling of the resources of language, to have exactly the same effect on the reader or hearer as highly-wrought oratory. An exaggerated value came to be placed on style for its own sake, and this in its turn led to the neglect of the claims of composition in the wider sense of the term.[5]

As far as the development of tragedy in England is concerned,

[1] Curtius, op. cit., pp. 145, 148, 147.

[2] Cf. Fr. Klingner, 'Cicero', in *Römische Geisteswelt*, Wiesbaden, 1952, Vol. I.

[3] E.g., John Jewel, Praelector of Humanity or Rhetoric at Oxford. Cf. Atkins, op. cit., p. 71.

[4] *De Oratore*, I. 70.

[5] On the influence of rhetoric on Elizabethan drama see Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama*, Madison, 1954, Chap. 2.

all this is of the highest significance. When Seneca's plays began to exert their influence, the ground was already very thoroughly prepared for the reception of this exceptionally powerful germinating agent, the strength of which can no longer be fully grasped today. For in these plays English playwrights were confronted with a form of drama which more than any other depends for its effects on the use of the set speech, developed at great length and embellished with all the resources of art. In these plays rhetoric was to be seen functioning within its own proper sphere, the formal speech; in these plays, too, were to be found all three 'kinds' of eloquence, the *genus iudiciale*, the *genus deliberativum*, and the *genus demonstrativum*[1] – terms which are explained in Chapter 3. Thus in serious drama the set speech came to be one of the most important places for the exercise of the arts of speech as they are comprehended in the arts of rhetoric. The 'occasional' speech, in particular the panegyric and the encomium, was revived in the Renaissance as a literary *genre* in its own right, but though it flourished in other literatures, it is not often found in England. However, in the English prose romances of the sixteenth century every opportunity is seized for the introduction of a set speech of one type or another. The episodic, discursive structure of these romances corresponds in many respects to the structure of early Elizabethan drama, and it was therefore quite natural that similar tendencies should manifest themselves in the plays of the period.[2] Thus the practical exploitation of the arts of language which it was the object of the favourite handbook of rhetoric of the time, Sir Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), to inculcate, and which was given a fresh impulse after 1570 by the appearance of the English translation of the speeches of Demosthenes, became a matter of some importance in the domain of the drama. The theatre could therefore with some justification be described as the 'Academy of Speech', and with equal justification references could be made to the close connexion between the rostrum and the

[1] The three divisions of rhetoric, or kinds of speech, laid down by Quintilian, following Aristotle. See Chap. 3, p. 49.

[2] Cf. Kennedy, *The Oration in Shakespeare*, Chap. VII, 'Elizabethan Oratory'. Kennedy gives examples of set speeches in Elizabethan prose romances on p. 166.

stage.[1] In view of the heightened rhetorical consciousness of the period and the rhetorical education that every writer had been put through in his schooldays, it is not at all surprising that it is possible to trace step by step the influence of formal rhetoric on the design, the structure, and the embellishment of the set speeches in the contemporary drama. Every playwright, when he wished to introduce a set speech into his play, must have had in mind several prescribed patterns which he could follow.

However, as will be shown by illustration and analysis in later chapters, the dominating role of the set speech and counter-speech in the early days of English tragedy is only one side of a more comprehensive picture in which the conception of drama and the technique of drama are seen to be interrelated. For hand in hand with it went a specific form of dramatic representation in which events were explained or described in retrospect instead of being directly exhibited on the stage. Retrospective reports and soliloquies, deliberations on things to be done in the future, emotional speeches reflecting a character's state of mind in response to a situation, detailed discussions of the pros and cons of a course of action, these are the normal methods employed; it is not the immediate event, not life lived in the present moment, that are put before us, but what has gone before and what is still to come, while anything truly dramatic, anything that gives a sense of immediacy and actuality, seems almost to be outlawed from the drama. The result of all this is an indirect and oblique dramatic style, one which is to a large degree regulated by the narrative methods of the epic.[2] Action is pondered over, action is spoken about, but of itself it is not represented, or at most in snippets. It is a far cry from the inertia of this procession of massive, sluggishly-moving monologues and dialogues to the liveliness and variety of Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies. It is difficult to think of any dramatic style that could be further removed from true drama than that of the English classical tragedies written on the pattern of Seneca. And it might seem at first sight that there

[1] Cf. H. Gauger, *Die Kunst der politischen Rede in England*, Tübingen, 1952, p. 5.

[2] For some essential differences between the dramatic and the epic styles, cf. Emil Staiger, *Grundbegriffe der Poetik*, Zürich, 1951.

was nothing here that could lead to what we understand by true drama. Yet the transition was brought about, and in the process more was handed on than may at first be apparent.

The transition from the rhetorical tragedy of the early period to the Shakespearian type of drama is bound up with the most striking and impressive developments in form that English drama has undergone in the whole of its history. It is the purpose of the chapters that follow to trace this development primarily in terms of the set speech. As the story unfolds, we shall see how the formal set speech gradually becomes possessed of dramatic life; and it will emerge no less clearly that the weight and the splendour and the verbal artistry of the rhetorical set speech were handed on as a priceless legacy to Shakespearian tragedy. For what in a very special sense puts Shakespearian tragedy in a class of its own in the drama of the world is the fact that it derives its power no less from its rhetorical and poetic artistry and its sublime eloquence than from its representation of dramatic action reflecting real life in all its variety and complexity. Seneca was not merely someone who hindered the free development of English tragedy into a genuinely dramatic *genre*. By his example he also endorsed and reinforced the already existing tendency to express whatever has emotional potentialities in speeches of a heightened poetic quality. He was one of the generating forces that led not only to the rolling splendour of the verse of *Tamburlaine*, but also to the sublime apostrophes of Lear. It was Shakespeare's own special achievement that he brought about the fusion of the fast-moving, closely-packed drama of action with the tradition of the rhetorical tragedy which was dependent for its effects on the power of the spoken word, of eloquence. This he could not have done had it not been that for several decades the heroes of the Elizabethan stage had been in the habit of expressing their deeply-felt desires, emotions, and imaginings in the rhetorical language of the formal set speech.

A glance at the development of serious drama in France and Italy in the sixteenth century will be enough to show us that this coalition of two dramatic techniques originally diametrically opposed to each other was one of those happy conjunctions that are peculiar to the history of English drama. In these countries the

transition from the rigid formality of the classical conventions to the liveliness of a drama of action did not come about until a very late period, and then was only partially carried through. For in France this evolutionary process leads, not to a Shakespeare, but to Racine, who represents the set-speech form of tragedy at its very highest. No such peaks were scaled in Italy; on the contrary, the development of Italian drama, from Trissino to Tasso, shows how extremely difficult it was to get out of the rut of a dramatic technique which was firmly based on exposition, retrospective narration, and the analysis of emotion. There are so many parallels and similarities between this sixteenth-century Italian tragedy and the contemporary English tragedy that they can surely not be put down entirely to a common influence proceeding from Seneca; some kind of influence of the Italian upon the English must also be assumed.[1] This relationship, which has so far been little explored, would be nothing out of the ordinary at a time when England was receiving so many different types of stimulus from Italy, and not only in the way of themes and subject-matter.

The characteristic handling of the set speech by the Italian dramatists throws some light on its development in England. Already in Trissino, who quite deliberately took Euripides and not Seneca as his model,[2] a great deal more space is given to retrospective narration, description, and introspection, all in the form of set speeches, than was ever the case in Euripides. In the famous *Sofonisba*, the first 'regular' tragedy, four-fifths of the play is narrated in soliloquies, duologues, and choral lyrics.[3] The choric mourning-song of Euripidean tragedy, the *Kommos*, is continually expanded by the Italian playwrights, in whose hands it assumes proportions far beyond those of its Greek models.[4] Thus the tendency towards the

[1] In his article, 'The Influence of Italian on Early Elizabethan Drama', *Mod. Phil.* IV, 1906, J. W. Cunliffe comes to the conclusion that in the earlier periods of Elizabethan drama the influence was very slight.

[2] On Italian imitations of Seneca in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries see Wilhelm Cloetta, *Die Anfänge der Renaissancetragödie*, Halle, 1892, esp. pp. 51 ff., 85 ff., 190 ff.

[3] Cf. here, and later, Emilio Bertana, *La Tragedia* (*Storia dei Generi Letterari Italiani*), Milan, n.d., Chaps. II and III.

[4] E.g., in the *Scilla* of De Cesari.

expansion of the set speech and the amplification of its emotional content is quite apparent in the Italian dramatists even when they are consciously and deliberately following the Euripidean pattern. It is also characteristic of these Italian Euripideans that what they most signally failed to learn from their master should have been the simple naturalness of his diction and his pregnant phraseology.[1] In his famous *Treatise on the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies* (1554)[2] Giraldi Cinthio had expressly condemned simple diction as being inappropriate to the dignity of drama, and he had also on these grounds classed Seneca as superior to Euripides. Even earlier than this, however, dramatic style may be seen to have been developing in the direction of artificiality, affectation, and diffuseness, even when, as is the case with Trissino, there are very few instances of specifically rhetorical adornment. It is true that in his *Rosmunda* Trissino's successor Rucellai in several passages places sequences of rapid dialogue side by side with the more elaborate speeches; but even here what he is giving us is not dialogue in the true sense, but a clumsy imitation of stichomythia which in fact is merely a continuation of the sophisticated and formalized diction of the speech proper. Rucellai's *Oreste* is a free adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and it is therefore possible to trace with some particularity the twist towards the rhetorical and the sententious that has been given to Euripides' language and to observe the greatly increased length and prolixity of the speeches.

In Giraldi Cinthio the set speech is consciously 'dignified' and adorned with rhetorical figures; it is made into a kind of show-piece, and at the same time becomes the predominating medium of the drama. Indeed, all too many opportunities are taken of introducing set speeches and soliloquies. Without any regard to dramatic requirements or dramatic propriety, the characters are brought on the stage in little groups, usually in twos and threes (in so far as it is not a matter of 'one-man episodes'), and spout diffuse and endless

[1] Cf. G. Toffanin, *Il Cinquecento* (*Storia Letteraria d'Italia*), Milan, 1941, p. 515. In this connexion Toffanin differentiates two dramatic movements, one influenced more strongly by Seneca, the other by Euripides.

[2] *Discorsi intorno al comporre dei Romanzi, delle Comedie e delle Tragedie*, Venice, 1554.

set speeches filled with hollow-sounding emotional commonplaces. At the same time Cinthio, like his successors, makes increasing use of a well-tried expedient; even when his characters are not actually soliloquizing, he makes them on every possible occasion report their feelings and thoughts in some detail. He supplies them with confidants to whom they may open their hearts or confide their histories.[1] Thus there is a profusion of nurses, servants, waiting-women, and the like, usually nameless minor characters whose chief function is to be the recipients of confidences; nor must we forget the counsellors, who in the same way are made to assume the role of confidants and who respond with sage and moral counsels – which of course provides further opportunities for long set speeches. Characters of this type are far more extensively used in sixteenth-century Italian tragedy than was ever the way with Seneca; indeed, though they are no more than the merest ciphers, they are the figures it could least well dispense with.

However, while all these narrations and deliberations and counsellings and self-revelations are proceeding, the action is left completely at a standstill. An illustration of this is seen in Cinthio's *Altile*, where almost two whole acts go by before the so-called plot shows any signs of beginning. The second act of his *Arrenopia* opens with three soliloquies in a row, each of them marked as a separate scene, and it is only in the fourth scene that we are given a duologue, followed in the fifth scene, however, by yet another soliloquy. Cinthio differs from Seneca, of course, in that he makes more happen on the stage. The gruesome deeds and the horrors are no longer solely reported, as in Seneca; they are actually performed. But the set-speech technique is little affected by this innovation. Dramatic incidents are not yet at this stage conceived of as an amalgam of speech and action; it is something indeed that they should actually be represented, but they are hemmed in on either side by formal speeches of commentary and description, and

[1] In this way it was possible to avoid the excessive use of monologues, which were explicitly discouraged by the literary theorists. 'Dialogue' with confidants was a substitute for the 'forbidden' monologue in the classical plays of the period. Cf. Max J. Wolff, 'Die Theorie der italienischen Tragödie im 16. Jahrhundert', *Archiv*, LXVI, 1912, p. 351.