We have already seen the ‘Marlowe clap of thunder’ school exemplified. A contrasting school saw a more evolutionary process. Eloquence acquired a deeper meaning: “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 a variety of man’s deepest emotions. This ability we find in ‘Shakespeare’, but we should not find it had not the playwrights who preceded him [i.e. the author(s) of the plays listed in the next but one paragraph below] already contributed to dramatic verse that wealth of expression and of effect the potentialities of which were to be completely realised only after their time.”

To begin with, Gorboduc 1562 demonstrates that the stage entirely relies on rhetoric, consisting of monologues, soliloquies and set speeches, reporting action elsewhere and reaction to it, with an ultimate didactic purpose, rather than being a drama of entertainment illustrating conflict and action between the characters. Gismond of Salerne 1567 is a romantic comedy in the footsteps of Gorboduc. The beginnings of a freer or more realistic style may be seen in Gascoigne’s Jocasta 1565. Thomas Preston’s Cambises c.1562 represents a hybrid between the ‘pure’ style of Gorboduc and the rough dramas of the touring morality plays with their appeal to popular taste; in Cambises, “Everything is cruder and clumsier,” there is a “relish for coarse jests and violence of expression and graceless stage effects.”

Wolfgang Clemen in a chapter headed ‘Popular Drama and History Plays’ (before ‘Shakespeare’ as he sees it) comments on this Cambises, and also on an anonymous play Jack Straw, dated to 1592 but probably much earlier and “much less impressive than Famous Victories.” The remainder of Clemen’s chapter treats of this play and of four other ‘anonymous’ plays, namely, The Troublesome Raigne of King John, The True Tragedie of Richard the Third, Thomas of Woodstock and King Leir and his Three Daughters. Clemen demonstrates that these plays (and he could have added Edmund Ironside and Edward III, and possibly The First Part of Sir John Oldcastle – see Chapter 2 n.24) are the steps by which drama in England evolved into the glory of ‘Shakespeare’, “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.” He does not consider whether these plays were ‘Shakespeare’s’ apprentice efforts by which he taught himself (there could be no English mentors for him) the groundblocks of his art. He is nevertheless profoundly impressed by the strides away from the earlier crudities both in writing and presentation which these plays represent in that evolution, so that it is logical for his readers to see them as such apprentice efforts of a writer teaching himself without exemplars and feeling towards the mature works we find in the ‘Shakespeare’ canon.

The ‘orthodox’ critic is confronted with, to him (but not to me), a paradox. At every stage in ‘Shakespeare’s’ early and middle plays there are conventional usages, forms of style, literary artifices, et cetera, which have origins and parallels in ‘pre-Shakesperian drama’, which make it appear them to be merely an evolutionary phenomenon. Clemen notes that this would be an entirely wrong conclusion, “we constantly feel that we are in
the presence of something entirely new and unexpected, something that belongs to him alone… One of the distinctive features of Shakespeare’s development is his constant modification of the existing dramatic kinds and of the styles of expression that lay ready to hand.” The paradox is an illusion if you discard all those authors and works which Clemen thinks are pre-‘Shakespeare’, but which are post-Revolution (i.e. Marlowe etc.), and consider only those (perhaps juvenile or experimental) works referred to in the previous paragraph.

Of course individually, especially if dated to be contemporaneous with the ‘orthodox’ Shakespeare of the 1590s, these works are correctly not highly rated artistically: put in as a group as forerunners to the ‘orthodox’ canon, they are immensely significant for the development of drama, since they have no predecessors worthy of the name. They are important foundation elements of Shakespeare’s Revolution. If the seven plays mentioned earlier are Shakespeare’s early efforts, they are not particularly like the more finished article (but there is nothing more similar – even remotely so), however much they may resemble it in terms of plot, use of vernacular and naturalism, and rejection of the Seneca-Gorboduc school. It is tempting to suggest that the young author Oxford realised their deficiencies, and sought additional inspiration from foreign sources, whence he profited to such an extent he was able to rewrite his earlier plays and begin his career as the “best for comedies”\(^\text{127}\); this is precisely how his life developed, as we have seen.

NOTES

(Methuen, London 1967) pp.25, 192ff and 290

128. “Graceless stage effects “ sent up by Falstaff – I Henry IV, II, v, ll. 381-390