

Richard HILLMAN, « “No debate, please, we’re British”:
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« Theta IX, Théâtre Tudor », 2010, pp. 113-128
mis en ligne en mai 2011, <<https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/theta/theta9>>.

Theta IX

est publié par le Centre d’Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,
dirigé par Philippe VENDRIX,
Université François-Rabelais de Tours, CNRS/UMR 6576

Responsables scientifiques

Richard HILLMAN, André LASCOMBES & Pauline RUBERRY-BLANC

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Date de création

Mai 2011

“No debate, please, we’re British”: Circumventing and Reinventing Politics on the Early English Stage

Richard HILLMAN

Université François-Rabelais de Tours/CESR-CNRS

Let me begin (as is not necessarily my wont) with a Bible reading, Psalm 85:10: “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Authorised Version). The verse is the inspiration, and the authorisation, of a venerable exegetical tradition of debate between the divine attributes, figured as God’s Daughters—a tradition which the French miracle plays pervasively exploit by bringing Justice and Miséricorde on stage. By curious contrast, however, such debate is extant on the English side only in *The Castle of Perseverance*, which probably would have brought the kitchen sink on stage (well before John Osborne had the idea) if edifying dialogue could have been invented for it. The scarcity of such debate in the surviving English medieval drama may, of course, be due to the vagaries of textual transmission, but it happens to herald a more thoroughly documentable parting of the ways in the drama of the sixteenth century. That divergence is my subject here.

The French Humanist dramatic tradition regularly brings the heavenly abstractions in question down to earth and attaches them to contrary interlocutors in concrete political situations. This is to fuse medieval practice with the classical inheritance, as it was then interpreted. The procedure is so routine that Gillian Jondorf, in

Robert Garnier and the Themes of Political Tragedy in the Sixteenth Century, perspicaciously identifies the “clémence / rigueur” debate as a standard recurrent feature—certainly ideological, but also rhetorical, the equivalent of the hummable tune one waits for in opera. (Presumably, in a way that tends to elude modern tastes, the choice of stichomythia as the usual medium had something to do with hummability.) The ultimate model was the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, where the philosopher reads a lesson in leniency to his rather resistant pupil Nero—a lesson that will finally prove to be, one might say, thoroughly in vain.

Aesthetic appeal may go some distance towards explaining why these debates do not lead to conclusive resolutions, any more than they do in the scholastic tradition, or in that modern descendent, the debating society, which itself is not without theatrical affinity. The device’s popularity, however, is surely more than aesthetic, and it likewise seems merely glib to cite the stereotypical French fondness for abstraction and theory, intellectual thrust and counter-thrust. More pertinent is the fact that such debate turns on political situations which, however distanced, most of the time, by their antique or biblical settings, had obvious topical application in a country torn by religious civil warfare. Particularly insistent as an echo of contemporary political discourse is the problematic juxtaposition of the human impulse to vengeance with the divine prerogative, as in Garnier’s *Porcie* (1568) and *Cornélie* (1574). (That Thomas Kyd translated the latter work is hardly surprising from this point of view.) In *Porcie*, at least, human vengeance is pretty clearly depicted as the mainspring of the infinitely self-reproducing human tragedy. Even Brutus’ aggrieved widow wishes that Julius Caesar had not been killed, for the sake of “le commun repos [general tranquillity]” (l. 554), although she implicitly leaves room for vindictive divine intervention—a position made explicit by the philosophising Cicero at the outset of *Cornélie*. And so the medieval privileging of celestial solutions to human impasses is indirectly brought to bear once again.

So it is directly, in fact, in one truly exceptional play (my personal favourite) that proves the rule, not least by serving up a conclusive resolution. François de Chantelouve’s *La tragédie de feu Gaspard de Coligny* (1574) stands out for combining Humanist trappings with medieval dramatic devices and an explicitly topical subject, the St. Bartholomew’s massacre. That glorious triumph of divine justice is celebrated with such unabashed enthusiasm that Jondorf, in her study of the French “Dramatic Word” published some thirty years after her work on Garnier, explicitly refused to deal with the play because she was so “repelled” by its poli-

tics (p. 5)—a persuasive recommendation of its interest, in my perhaps perverse view. (Indeed, if we applied rigour and not mercy to the political correctness of our textual heritage, we might find ourselves with precious little to write about.) In any case, in Chantelouve’s propaganda piece, the Dramatic Word is filtered through two distinct “clémence / rigueur” debates involving the tender-hearted Charles IX and his more pragmatic Council (impersonated by a single character), which of course the King, being far from a tyrant—as is precisely the point—inevitably heeds. At the outset, after some to-ing and fro-ing, Charles takes the calculated risk of giving the diabolical Admiral a chance to prove his peaceful intentions. Later, however, once the evidence of Coligny’s murderous conspiracy is manifest, the same interlocuteurs resolve on punishment, with the Council using the argument that a king must enact his function as God’s deputy by denying mercy to the incorrigible and applying justice without pity:

Dieu pardonne à celuy qui se repend ainsin.
 Il vous aprend de faire, & le meschant sans f’in [sic]
 Il damne, vous monstrant qu’à l’obstiné rebelle
 Devez aussi donner punition cruelle;
 Que si vous plaignez plus un meschant indonté
 Que nostre sang & Dieu, alors la Pieté,
 De vostre Sceptre un plant, sera boule-versée,
 Et l’autre (lequel est Justice) renversée.

[. . . God pardons one who his offences would mend—
 So he teaches you—and the evil without end
 He damns, showing you that rebellious intent,
 Persisted in, deserves a cruel punishment.
 But if you give a man of hard iniquity
 More grace than to our blood and God, then piety,
 One tender off-shoot of your sceptre, shall be blighted,
 And the other, which is justice, thoroughly spited.]

(Chantelouve, ed. Cameron, ll. 1095–1102 [Act V]; trans. Hillman)

Lest we doubt the Council’s estimation of divine judgement in this case, the dice have already been dramatically loaded by way of a supernatural intervention, in which God’s decision to eliminate the reprobate by inciting him to reveal his true nature to the King is authoritatively reported. (The ironic result, incidentally, whether intended or not, is to show the arch-Calvinist hoist with his own predestinarian petar.)

As I have suggested, all this debating in the French tradition ultimately bears on the question of who was and who was not a tyrant, including the especially tricky point of deciding when what might look like tyrannical behaviour to human eyes might be justified by higher imperatives. Such issues were obviously of pressing concern in the highly charged politico-religious climate—witness the plethora of controversial pamphlets dealing with them, some of which, notably those produced by the so-called monarcho-machs, move well beyond propaganda to stand as innovatory treatises in political science. (An especially notable instance is the *Vindiciae contra tyrannos: sive, De principis in populum, populi in principes, legitima potestae* [1579], which claims as its author one “Stephanus Junius Brutus” and is variously attributed to Philippe de Mornay, Théodore de Bèze or Hubert Languet.) What is striking from my limited point of view here is simply that while these were urgent and weighty (not to say heady) questions, with which the English also had every reason to be preoccupied—and demonstrably were, as Greg Walker and others have abundantly shown—their theatre eschews bringing them into the open.

“Open” is the operative word. There is hardly any lack, as we know, of indirect approaches to the staging of political morality in England. But when it comes to tyranny in particular, formal or even semi-formal debate—indeed, explicit discussion of any kind—would seem to be excluded. Rather, various mechanisms of deferral and displacement prevail, beginning with the very beginnings of secular theatre. From this point of view, even the most mordant social satire—that of Sir David Lindsay, for instance, to shift the ground northward for a moment—may be counted as evasive. Where tyranny is actually depicted, as it lavishly is from *Cambises* to *Richard III* and beyond, it is distanced by extremity verging on caricature—not debatable, hence safely out of discursive reach. More broadly, it is personalised—a practice supported by English drama’s relative penchant for characterisation—and to this extent abstracted from the political arena. This is a technique that *Macbeth* practices so smoothly as nearly to give the illusion, by way of the protagonist’s *conscientious* debating within himself, that the stakes are somehow actually political; the fitfully remorseful Claudius provides another instance.

By the same token, in those relatively rare English instances where a debate structure as such is introduced into the dramatic form, that is, with characters presenting an argument for divergent intellectual positions on an issue, the political content again tends to be, at most, indirect. A case in point is

the encounter between Polixenes and Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*—a telling case because Polixenes would make, at the moment, a credible prospective tyrant, who will shortly be launching characteristic threats against the supposed shepherdess and her family. But instead of giving us, say, a formal exchange of views on *clémence* versus *rigueur* between him and the compassionate counsellor Camillo (an obvious potential interlocutor), Shakespeare shifts the ground from ideology to comparative horticulture. (I realise there is a connection, but that is precisely the point.)

Along the same lines, in what must be the most prominent example (both an early and a distinctive one) of the English debating on stage in a vigorous, sustained, and self-conscious way, the controversy concerns—the weather. John Heywood's exuberant comedy is a send-up of a number of things, doubtless including late-medieval scholastic practice, and it ostentatiously sends up Jupiter himself, if only by placing him above and beyond debate as a solipsistic and pretentious judge (“we ourselfe shal joy in our owne glory” [185]), who can finally only reaffirm the free-market *status quo*: all sorts of weather for all sorts of consumers of meteorological products. In so far as he cannot reconcile the competing claims of his petitioners, his distance from the God who presides over the mystical union of Justice and Mercy is highlighted, hence his affinity (if any reminder were needed) with the flesh-and-blood presiding genius of the English court of the 1530s. In this context, the combined absurdity and necessity of debating the weather, as opposed to politics, surely becomes part of Heywood's subtle art.

I hope I haven't given the impression of supposing that the French early modern theatre is more politically daring and engaged than the English. Just in case I have, I turn now to putting the contrary argument. The first point in line is that the debates on the French side, however encoded with more-or-less decipherable material messages, remain formulaic and anodyne, thanks largely to the omnipresence of the CM-factor (“CM” for “celestial mystery”). True, they evoke the issues of the day, but they also keep their distance and renounce, by subordinating, human solution-seeking. Such renunciation is regularly abetted by the reflex assumption of the nation's collective punishment for sinfulness—an ecumenical attitude, amply documented in non-dramatic forms, which is also not alien to English thinking, whether or not it is taken to extend to the Big Tillyardian Picture.

Even this common ground, however, helps us to delineate differing national dramatic landscapes. As early, and in such an emblematic exercise, as *Gorboduc*,

expressions of humanity punished by the divine for its failings and crimes tend in English to take on greater specificity, on the one hand, less Christian certainty, on the other:

These are the plagues, when murder is the mean
To make new heirs unto the royal crown.
Thus wreak the gods when that the mothers wrath
Naught but the blood of her own child may swage. (Sackville and Norton, V.ii.238-41)

Thus when, across the Second Tetralogy, we see the blood of English manuring the ground, it is not as clear as Tillyard would have us think whether the Bishop of Carlisle's prophecy is being fulfilled, or whether, in the sphere of politics as in other natural arenas, the human worm is simply doing his kind.

Such a movement from external to internal determinism—from *Gorboduc en route* ultimately to *The Wild Duck*, as it were—offers a view of what also happens to the motif of political debate when it crosses the Channel. English plays talk about and represent politics all the time, of course, even if they rarely debate political issues. And in the few instances I can think of where the debate structure as such is deployed or evoked in a political context—they all happen to be Shakespearean, but doubtless colleagues can add to my list—that context dominates and complicates the meaning. It does so to the point where debate tends to shade into argument and conflict—a related but a different matter (and one which happens to be the very heart of drama). Paradigmatic in this respect is the case of the disguised Henry V debating royal responsibility with the common soldier Williams (*H5*, IV.i.134 ff.) only until anger further clouds the already murky issue.

We may also think of the exchange between the King and his councillor Warwick in Act Three, Scene One (45 ff.) of *Henry IV, Part 2*. The abstract issue at hand is the nature of prophecy, and behind it lurks the vast question of determinism vs. free will: do we make history or does history make us? The concrete case of the late Richard II's prediction of Northumberland's double treachery casts a very particular shadow, however—one that deepens Henry's despondency and brings the metaphysical ambiguity interpretatively down to earth: the problem of the mechanisms of history energises Shakespeare's finely poised ambiguity about the relative claims of Richard and Bullingbrook. The debate, then, is ultimately less about counselling and statecraft than about cheering up a king whose defeatism threatens his supporters, and on this level the carrying power of Warwick's argument is notably limited. He insists on Richard's sheer

perspicacity (“might create a perfect guess” [87])) as the cause of his accurate prediction, but the King responds to the expression “necessary form” (87) by sinking into a deterministic gloom that his stoical resolution only sets off: “Are these things then necessities? / Then let us meet them like necessities” (92-93). Here is another instance, then, of a non-debate whose citation of debate form effectively calls attention to highly charged questions of theme and character.

The use of debate structure as a characterising device, rather than a means of subsuming character into ideology, also makes a point of contrast between English and French practice. Here, once the notion of debate within the self is admitted into the picture, examples on the English side become legion, and are certainly not confined to Shakespeare. Indeed, the pattern goes back at least as far as (again) John Heywood, whose ineffectual Johan Johan debates inconclusively with himself about beating his wife. To continue with Richard II, however, the king he once was never debated anything—a sign, in retrospect, of absolutist investment of the private self in the public, the body politic’s hegemony over the body natural (and most impolitic). Notoriously, Richard’s unique soliloquy, which opens the fifth act of his tragedy, stages the emergence of a complex subjectivity, and it does so by way of an inner debate that, not just with regard to Scripture, but in multiple inward fashion, sets “the word itself / Against the word” (*R2*, V.i.13-14). Such debating matches the beginning and ending soliloquies of Faustus, whose starting point, ironically, is his contempt for scholastic exercises (“Is to dispute well logic’s chiefest end?” [Marlowe, I.i.8]) and whose final inner debate over his last chance for salvation even more ironically refashions his subjectivity in the form of a damned soul. In the case of the uncrowned Richard, openness to self-questioning is discursively signalled during the deposition scene in the presence of Bullingbrook, as Richard renounces direct response (the question being, “Are you contented to resign the crown?” [*R2*, IV.i.200])—an invitation to debate if there ever was one) in favour of solipsistic ambivalence: “Ay, no, no ay” (201).

It seems useful to bring this modest survey to an explicitly comparative conclusion by setting side-by-side a French and an English play that stage the same historical event. Garnier’s *Porcie* takes as its main occasion for debating the relative claims of *clémence* and *rigueur* the proscription organised by the Triumvirs following the assassination of Julius Caesar. The philosopher Arée is charged with putting the case for mercy, in opposition, notably, to Octave César, whose discourse with regard to his enemies perfectly illustrates the human propensity

for self-righteously fusing vengeance with justice: “Nulle vengeance peut égaler leur offense [No vengeance can match their offence]” (l. 844). Arée’s argument is based on the CM-factor (the gods would expend all their thunder—apparently a non-renewable resource—if they punished all offenders), but his position is later echoed in terms of Aristotelian ethics by Marc Antoine, who finds vengeance repugnant to his “magnanime cœur [magnanimous heart]” [l. 1233]). The debate thereby makes a particularly intriguing response to, and deviation from, Plutarch, who, in the *Life of Cicero*, insists that the Triumvirs had at least their cruelty in common:

Such place tooke wrath in them, as they regarded no kindred nor blood: and to speak more properly, they shewed that no brute or sauage beast is so cruell as man, if with his licentiousnes he haue liberty to execute his will. (p. 880)

Indeed, Antony’s vindictive cruelty towards Cicero, whom Octavius had sought to save, is singled out by Plutarch. His order that the slain orator’s head and hands be set up in public view elicits reprobation: “This was a fearefull and horrible sight vnto the *Romaines*, who thought they saw not *Ciceroes* face, but an image of *Antonius* life and disposition” (p. 882). Incidentally, the narrative concludes with evidence (effectively underlined by the translation) that the CM-factor is hardly an exclusive Christian prerogative: “So Gods iustice made the extreame reuenge and punishment of *Antonius* to fall into the house of *Cicero*” (p. 882).

In aligning Marc Antoine, however partially, with the case for mercy, Garnier, it seems, felt the need to provide an example of relative clemency in the wielding of power. He was perhaps already anticipating the sympathetically tragic capacities with which he would later endow Antoine, as opposed to Octave César, in his third and final Roman play, *Marc Antoine* (1578). He was also doubtless counting on, and perhaps countering—good Catholic and loyal monarchist as he was—the heavily loaded application of this episode from Roman history promulgated by French Protestants. For at the head of the faction that had provoked the first civil war in 1562 by their extreme persecutions were three intransigent advocates of Catholic exclusivism who, putting their differences aside, had joined together in highly symbolic fashion at Easter 1561: François, Duke of Guise; the Constable, Anne de Montmorency; and Jacques d’Albon, maréchal de Saint-André. They were re- (or de-)christened the “Triumvirs” by the Huguenots, on the grounds that, as Louis de Bourbon, Prince of Condé, put it, they resembled “Auguste, Marc Antoine et Lépide, quand par leur Triumvirat

meschant et infâme ils suvertirent les loix et la République Romaine [Augustus, Marc Antony, and Lepidus, when by their wicked and contemptible Triumvirat they subverted the laws and the Roman republic]” (cited Jouanna *et al.*, eds., p. 113). The name stuck and passed into widespread use. Now Garnier himself had stigmatised the Roman Triumvirs in his first published work, the 1567 *Hymne de la Monarchie*, citing the ravages of “ces trois Tyrans, ces Tygres affamés [these three tyrants, these famished tigers]” (Chardon, ed., p. 266 [sig. Ci^v]) as an instance of the cruelty to which the rule of “quelque doux Prince”—Charles IX, to take a far-from-random instance—is infinitely preferable. But he was hardly likely to leave the door open to a militantly Protestant and republican reading of his play. In the dramatic context, the “clémence / rigueur” debate functions, like the partial softening of Antoine, at once to signal and to muffle political engagement.

By contrast, the brief proscription sequence that opens Act Four of *Julius Caesar* makes one of the most chilling scenes in Shakespeare, especially as it follows the grotesque display of the mob’s irrational cruelty towards Cinna the poet. The dramatist pulls no punches in developing Plutarch’s picture (and borrowing his examples) of the Triumvirs as respecting “no kindred nor blood”. Indeed, Octavius’ historical defence of Cicero is omitted, so as to leave all three demonstrating their *rigueur* not only mercilessly, but ostentatiously:

Antony. These many then shall die, their names are prick’d.
Octavius. Your brother too must die; consent you, Lepidus?
Lepidus. I do consent—
Octavius. Prick him down, Antony.
Lepidus. Upon condition Publius shall not live,
 Who is your sister’s son, Mark Antony.
Antony. He shall not live; look, with a spot I damn him. (*JC*, IV.i.1-6)

They do so, self-discreditingly, not merely in the spirit (*mutatis mutandis*) of boys engaged in a pissing-contest, but in the cause of sealing an alliance whose dissolution is already in the cards displayed at the end of the scene, when Antony and Octavius discuss the elimination of their partner, with Antony pressing the point. The fulfilment must wait for *Antony and Cleopatra*, where, ironically, Antony is himself menaced by the initiative taken by Caesar, who offers the excuse that “Lepidus was grown too cruel” (*Ant.*, III.vi.32). This casual dropping of the second shoe, with its rare passing mention of cruelty, is very much to the point. Typically, it is precisely on condition of withholding commentary and reflection in the abstract that ruthlessness is allowed to make its impression as the stock-in-trade

of political behaviour, if not of human nature in general, as Plutarch comes close to claiming. And even within *Julius Caesar*, the Triumvirs have no monopoly. Their cynicism may be counterbalanced by Brutus' republican idealism, but however the latter takes on the tinge of mercy, it remains deeply impregnated with a concern for appearances ("Our course will seem too bloody" [*JC*, II.i.162]) and a consciousness of manipulative signification: "Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers" (166). These ambivalences, too, are allowed to flourish by the absence of debate about the place of bloodshed on the political stage, and they foreground the fact that even Brutus' self-conscious debate within himself over the killing of Caesar turns, self-deceptively, on a foregone conclusion: "It must be by his death . . ." (II.i.10). And so, once again, debate structure comes into its own as a device for characterisation.

That it so seldom rises (or sinks) in the English drama to the level of the abstractly political may, of course, have something to do with the greater centralisation and efficacy of the censorship, hence with the self-censorship that theatrical companies practised habitually, if not uniformly. Obviously, both stage and book production in France as well attracted the anxious interest of authorities, and *privilèges* had to be obtained, but the centres of production were far more numerous, the mechanisms of authority more scattered and divided, if not virtually non-existent in various places during the more anarchic moments of the civil wars. Yet Garnier, at least during the period of his active dramatic career, was very much the king's man, and this points back to the essentially anodyne nature of political debate in his work. A comparison might be made with the Stuart court masque, where ideological positions are certainly foregrounded, but hardly with the intention of fostering real debate about them—on the contrary. Whether, as seems likely, the English public-stage tendency to forego debate resulted from (self-)censorship, it is arguably linked to the development of alternative, less direct but potentially far more subversive forms of political commentary: circumlocutions, in fact, that produced some of the most ingenious, resourceful and powerful dramatic practices of the age.

Still, on the premise that I've earned the right to indulge in a touch of national stereotyping after all, I also find it tempting to take the eschewing of debate between the claims of Mercy and Justice as testimony to the famous British spirit of empiricism. After all, the cosmic smooching of these contraries, while straightforward enough doctrinally, remains stubbornly resistant to common sense, not to mention human imitation. In what it must endlessly amuse God

to hear us call the “real world”, the two are endlessly opposed. Choices are constantly being made by both kings and clowns between versions of letting the Other live and putting him/it to death, a choice that it usually suits us to present in terms of deserved punishment or gracious pardon—whether it’s a question of our stepping on a pesky bug or of somebody bigger finding us pesky enough to step on. This is a tough lesson so integral to the mechanisms of English drama that no censorship could ever have hoped to expunge it—except that applied by Parliament in 1642.

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