

A 'Learned Tragedy' at Trinity?

By J. R. ELLIOTT

SUMMARY

The publication of the Loseley Manuscripts by Albert Feuillerat in 1914 revealed the performance, or intended performance, of a 'learned Tragedy' in Oxford during the reign of Queen Mary. While Feuillerat assigned the play to New College, closer study of the documentary sources suggests that the venue may rather have been Trinity College, which took a greater interest in drama at this time than did New College.

In 1914 Albert Feuillerat published a short note entitled 'Performance of a Tragedy at New College, Oxford, in the Time of Queen Mary.'¹ The evidence on which he based this attribution was a letter from three members of the Privy Council to the Master of the Revels asking for a loan of costumes in order 'to set forth a learned Tragedy' in Oxford. The full text of the letter (with spelling modernised) is as follows:

After our most hearty commendations, whereas the fellows and scholars of the new College in Oxford intend this Christmas to set forth a learned Tragedy to the glory of god and increase of learning & for the more decent setting forth of the same have made suit hither to borrow out of the Revels certain suits of apparel as be here underneath mentioned, these be heartily to require you the more at the contemplation of these our letters to satisfy the said fellows and scholars of their so honest a request, putting in lawful and sufficient sureties for the same to be redelivered with convenient speed. And so fare ye most heartily well. From the Court the 19th of December

*Your loving Friends,
Robert Rochester John Bourne
Francis Englefyld*

*Three suits of Apparel for Three kings
A garment to wear upon harness
two suits of Apparel for two dukes
for six Councillors six garments furnished
for one queen one suit, and three gentlewomen furnished
for one young prince one suit
six plumes or more if you can
one fair mask viz. six maskers and four torch bearers furnished²*

The letter, it will be noted, bears only the date 19 December, with no year given. It must, however, as Feuillerat said, have been written before 28 November, 1557, when one of its signers, Sir Robert Rochester, died. Feuillerat failed to point out that Rochester was

¹ *Modern Language Review*, ix (1914), 96-7

² The text has been printed in Albert Feuillerat, ed., *Documents Relating to the Revels at Court in the Time of King Edward VI and Queen Mary (The Loseley Manuscripts)* (1914), 250. The MS is currently in the Surrey Record Office, L.M. 41. 14 (8). I have modernized spelling but retained the original punctuation and capitalization.

appointed to his position as Controller of the Household, the title he is given in the endorsement on the back of the letter, in March 1555.³ This means that the letter can only have been written in December of either 1555 or 1556, a fact which, taken together with the curious wording of the letter, may point to a venue other than New College for the 'learned Tragedy'.

When Mary's councillors referred to 'the new College in Oxford', it is possible that they meant, not New College, but a *new* college whose name they were either not sure of or which might not yet mean anything to the Master of the Revels, Sir Thomas Cawarden. In 1555 there was no such new college, but in 1556 there was. Trinity College formally admitted its first members in May 1556, and a bursar's account surviving in the College archives shows operating expenses beginning on 25 March of that year. In December 1556, Trinity would have just completed its first Michaelmas term. A year later St. John's could make the same claim, but by that time Sir Robert Rochester was dead, leaving Trinity as the only candidate for Oxford's 'new' college.

The likelihood that Trinity, rather than New College, was the producer of the 'learned Tragedy' is increased by the fact that the New College bursar's rolls contain not a single mention of payments for plays at this time, or indeed for any year between 1552 and 1642, though these accounts survive virtually complete and were kept in great detail.⁴ At Trinity, on the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that drama was a regular feature of College life in its early years, though it was to be eclipsed in that field later in the century by its neighbour, St. John's. Trinity's accounts for the years 1558, 1559, and 1560 are now lost, but in the late 18th century Thomas Warton, a fellow of the College, claimed that he had seen them and that one of them (he thought for the year 1559) contained an entry for a lavish Christmas entertainment which included the performance of a Latin comedy by Terence.⁵

Pro apparatu in comoedia Andriae, vii l. ix s. iv d.

Pro prandio Principis Natalicii eodem tempore, xiii s. ix d.

Pro refectone praefectorum et doctorum magis illustrium cum Bursariis prandentium tempore comoediae, iv l. vii d.

(For furnishings in the comedy of Andria £7 9s. 4d.

For the dinner of the Christmas Prince at the same time, 13s. 9d.

For the entertainment of the Heads and most eminent doctors dining with the Bursars at the time of the comedy £4 7d.)

The surviving accounts from Trinity for this period reveal more of the same, though in less detail: a 'spectacle' in 1565 on the Feast of the Trinity; a Christmas play in 1579; another Christmas play in 1585.⁶ These were, so far as we can tell, secular entertainments. Trinity was, however, at the time of its founding an avowedly Catholic establishment,

³ F. M. Powicke and E. B. Fryde, *Handbook of British Chronology* (1961), 93.

⁴ R. E. Alton, ed., 'The Academic Drama in Oxford: Extracts from the Records of Four Colleges', *Malone Society Collections*, v (1959), 29-95.

⁵ Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry*, ii (1778), 380. Frederick S. Boas has argued that this citation may have been one of Warton's notorious 'fabrications' (*University Drama in the Tudor Age*, 8). Boas does not mention, however, that the first volume of the Trinity College Bursar's accounts, as it is now comprised, was not bound until 1799. Thus Warton's crime may have been simply that of borrowing the accounts for 1558-1560 and failing to return them. On Warton's 'fabrications', see H. E. D. Blakiston, *Trinity College*, 53.

⁶ Full transcriptions of these entries will be given in my forthcoming *Records of Early English Drama: Oxford University*, to be published by the University of Toronto Press.

proclaiming in its statutes its adherence to the orthodox faith, and the councillors' claim that the tragedy would be performed 'to the glory of god' may have been calculated to remind Queen Mary's Master of the Revels of this fact.

Whichever Oxford college staged this play, we should of course like to know what it was. Despite its dedication to 'the glory of god', it is unlikely to have been a Biblical play, since the Queen herself had recently discouraged such works as tending to inflame religious controversy.⁷ The phrase 'learned Tragedy' suggests, perhaps, a play on a classical subject, possibly in emulation of Christ Church's annual performances at Christmas of two comedies and two tragedies, acted in Latin and Greek, a practice authorized two years before.⁸ The phrase might, however, equally well describe an English history play like *Gorboduc*, performed before Queen Elizabeth in 1562. The cast needing to be outfitted for the occasion – three kings, two dukes, six councillors, one queen, three gentlewomen, and a young prince – certainly smacks of a vernacular mirror-history, be it in *Gorboduc*'s or King Cambises's vein. It is tempting to think that the 'one queen' might have been the heroine of the piece, though if that were so, we might expect more to have been made of it in the appeal to Queen Mary's court.

The cast list does not fit any surviving play of the period, though these are few in number. Nor can it be connected with any plays known to have been lost. If performed, the tragedy would have been something of a rarity, since the most popular form of drama for court and university audiences was the 'show' or the 'mask',⁹ which may account for the introduction of a 'fair mask' into (or at the end of) our 'learned Tragedy'. Several un-named tragedies are mentioned as having been performed at Magdalen College between 1548 and 1557, though we do not know who wrote them.¹⁰ In 1556 the only known Oxford playwright, if he can be called that, was Jasper Heywood, fellow of Merton College, who had, however, not yet begun his famous translations of Seneca. In 1558, having been expelled from Merton, Heywood was nominated by Cardinal Pole for a fellowship at Trinity, but migrated to All Souls instead. In 1557 he is said by Anthony Wood to have served as Christmas Prince at Merton (or King of the Beans, as Merton called the office), in which capacity he would have been in charge of selecting the holiday entertainments.¹¹ But there is nothing to connect him with Trinity before 1558, or to suggest that even a newly-founded college would have gone outside its own precincts to find a Christmas Prince.

The cast list suggests one further difficulty in connecting this play with Trinity. At least five of the parts (the queen, the three gentlewomen, and the young prince) require boy actors. New College, with its 16 choristers, might seem to have been in a better position to fill these parts than Trinity, which had none. It has been noted, however, that during the first 50 years of its existence Trinity frequently admitted boys as commoners who were no more than 10 or 12 years old. One commoner even entered at the age of 8.¹²

The precise nature of this play may never be known. Indeed it may never even have been performed. The 19th of December is a rather late date to be requesting furnishings for a Christmas play from the Revels Office, which would be busy with its own forthcoming court entertainments. There is no evidence that the furnishings requested were ever sent, and no expenses are recorded for such an item in the Trinity bursar's account for 1556–7,

⁷ Virginia C. Gildersleeve, *Government Regulation of the Elizabethan Drama*, 6–7.

⁸ Boas, *op. cit.* note 5, 7.

⁹ Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama*, revised by S. Schoenbaum (1964), 30–37.

¹⁰ Alton, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss, i (1813), 456, 665.

¹² *V. C. H. Oxon.* iii, 245.

which survives in full. Trinity's 'learned Tragedy' – if indeed it was Trinity's – thus remains a tantalizing near-contribution to the history of Oxford drama.

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