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# *Ulysses Redux* (1591) and *Nero* (1601): *Tragedia Nova*

Stephanie Allen

Two early modern university plays, *Ulysses Redux* (1591) and *Nero* (1601) by the Oxford contemporaries William Gager and Matthew Gwinne, testify to a tradition of self-conscious experimentation with the possibilities of mixed genres on the academic stage. Gager and Gwinne published their plays under the generic label *tragedia nova*, a lucid designator that signals their revision of the structure, sensibility and outlook of classical tragedy against the context of Italian poetics and responses to Aristotle. Gager's *Ulysses Redux* engages the tragicomic theory presented in the *Pastor fido* (1590) and *Il verrato* (1588) of Giovanni Battista Guarini, but infuses Italian tragicomedy with grotesque violence, and a *de casibus* emphasis on cyclicity and human frailty. Gwinne's *Nero* follows the same narrative pattern as Gager's play, and repeats many of the earlier playwright's innovations, but in its proliferation and exaggeration of Senecan devices pushes tragicomedy into the realm of parody. By writing *tragedia nova*, both Gager and Gwinne participate in a process of acute theorisation on the nature and purposes of a mixed genre. Their dramatic writings may thus appear innovative, experimental vehicles of contemporary research, challenging the received understanding of academic drama as conservative, derivative pedagogical projects.

A 1584 entry in Oxford University's *Register of Congregation and Convocation* records a peevish letter sent to the University by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Chancellor of the University. Conveying the Queen's irritation at a series of "abuses" that had taken place at the University, Dudley complained of the dangerous disruption professional theatre com-

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panies presented to the academic population: large gatherings of people were spreading sickness, encouraging the younger students to spend more money than they could afford, and endangering the scholars' morals by making them spectators of the "manye lewde and euill sportes" depicted on the stage. Dudley instructed the University to ban drama from its precinct, and threatened that any students caught in attendance at plays would be punished or imprisoned. Explicitly exempt from this decree, however, were the "tragedies commodies & other shewes of exercises of learninge in that kinde" written and performed by the students and scholars of the University; the production and performance of these "commendable and greate funderances of learninge" should not just be continued, but in fact increased (*REED*: Oxford 195). Modern scholarship has tended to reproduce the distinction Dudley makes between haughty, pedagogical academic drama on one hand, and the subversive energies of the professional theatre on the other. In a reversal of Dudley's hierarchy, however, this has been to the detriment of university drama, which is repeatedly dismissed as derivative, turgidly rhetorical or simply poor.

One reason that university drama may appear predictable and derivative is that it has been considered primarily as an extension of classroom exercises in rhetoric, one crystallisation of a tradition of humanist dramatic pedagogy with its roots in Erasmus and Vives – and with aims and interests quite separate from the drama of the popular stage. Frederick Boas, for example, concluded his seminal study of academic drama with the assertion that: "(The university stage) continued . . . to fulfil two distinct though allied educational functions; it was a handmaid both to scholarship and to rhetoric"; but this conclusion encompassed the idea of the inferior artistic quality of university plays, conveyed everywhere in his book (Boas 349). More recently, Philip Ford and Andrew Taylor stated that "(university plays) offered the opportunity to put into practice the final two divisions of rhetoric, *memoria* and *proutiatio* or *actio*, but they also delivered stories with a clearly moral message . . ." (Ford and Taylor 7), while the contributors to Jonathan Walker and Paul D. Streufert's volume *Early Modern Academic Drama* all place pedagogy and university politics at the centre of their studies. In fact, in his essay in the volume, Eric Leonidas pointedly opposes the purposeful, experiential knowledge demonstrated in the Inns of Court revels to the "traditional rhetorical practices" and "recitation" of the academic drama performed at other educational institutions (Leonidas 115-116). Modern scholars rarely make the explicit assertions of inferiority found everywhere in the work of the early twentieth century critics, but the nar-

rowly-conceived pedagogical paradigm that defines and limits their interest in university drama reinforces a conception of the genre as dull and inferior.

The simplistic pedagogical view has undoubtedly been valuable in clarifying the official purpose and aims of academic drama; but it is beginning to look reductive, based on an uncritical acceptance of the polemic of early modern defenders of the tradition, though the terms of their defence, as “exercises of learning” have become the grounds for their condemnation. Lynn Enterline’s recent book, which explores *actio* as the porous boundary between academic stage and classroom, has challenged the idea that classroom roots necessarily spring into uninteresting plants, for much of what we admire in Shakespeare may be traced to the exercises of the Tudor classroom. What is more, the documentary evidence collected in the Oxford volumes of the *Records of Early English Drama* facilitates the comparison of better-known performed or printed academic plays with those that exist only in manuscript, and speculation about the contents of those that have been lost. Contrary to expectations, these records testify to a huge variation within a tradition that encompasses plays as diverse as Leonard Hutten’s *Bellum Grammaticale* (1581), a burlesque comedy that takes as its characters the Latin parts of speech; Matthew Gwinne’s *Nero* (1603), a sprawling, 5,000-line dramatisation of the iniquity and excess at the court of the Roman emperor Nero, or Thomas Goffe’s *Orestes* (1613–1618), in continual dialogue with professional plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Spanish Tragedy*. In these plays, what might be identified as pedagogical or didactic elements vie for prominence with, and are everywhere destabilised by, a ubiquitous satiric or parodic spirit. Frequently, in fact, one senses that the methods of dramatic pedagogy have become the butt of the joke: for example, in the deliberately heavy-handed incorporation of the rules of Latin grammar into Hutten’s *Bellum Grammaticale*.<sup>1</sup> Developing our understanding of academic drama therefore requires that we interrogate and refine our sense of the interests at its centre, and particularly of its own attitude to its ostensible pedagogical concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the humour in Hutten’s play arises from its characters’ comically laboured rehearsals of Latin grammatical rules, such as where \_, a \_, addresses his master Amo, the king of the verbs: “ut si Poeta comparetur / cum viribus tuis, nihil est. Nam que sunt superbissima ex / nominibus tantum habent sex singulares satellites, et totidem / plurales” (If the Poet is matched against your powers, he’s nothing. For even the proudest of the nouns have only six singular servants and the same number of plural ones) (Hutten, *Bellum Grammaticale* 41; translation Dana F. Sutton).



The relationship between two plays by the Oxford playwrights William Gager and Matthew Gwinne begins to suggest the terms of this reconsideration, indicating the special status of the university stage as a site not just for education, but also for experiment and innovation. Documentary evidence suggests the value of reading the two playwrights' work together: as contemporaries at Oxford, Gwinne and Gager worked together on a number of specifically dramatic projects. Both were on the committee that prepared the entertainment for Elizabeth's last-minute progress to Oxford in 1592 (Shenk 20), and they wrote dedicatory poetry for each other's plays— finally, both Dana Sutton and James Binns identify clear references in the epistle to *Nero* to Gager's part in the controversy over the propriety of academic drama that dragged through the 1590s at Oxford (Binns, "Seneca and Neo-Latin Tragedy"; Gwinne).

Both Gager's *Ulysses Redux* (1592) and Gwinne's *Nero* (1603) were published under the generic label *tragedia nova*, a lucid designator that, as I will argue, signals their interest and investment in contemporary poetics and critical debates. Recent scholarship on Gager and Gwinne has gestured toward the importance of this label, but has stopped short of attempting to define it: James Binns, for example, comments that "the prefaces to (Gwinne's) *tragedia nova*, *Nero* . . . and his comedy, *Vertumnus*, are full of interest" (Binns, *Intellectual Culture* 133), while Sarah Dewar-Watson opens her discussion of Gager's Aristotelianism with the observation that "On the title page of the printed text, Gager styles his version a 'Tragedia Nova'" (Dewar-Watson 24). This essay will therefore seek to define *tragedia nova*, through an investigation of the similarities in sensibility, purpose and form that link two plays so outwardly different as Gager's tragicomic adaptation of Books XIII-XXIV of Homer's *Odyssey*, and Gwinne's 5,000-line chronicle play on the reign of the despot emperor Nero. Working from the premise that academic drama could be a vehicle for the reception, exploration and communication of critical ideas, I will argue that, by writing *tragedia nova*, both Gager and Gwinne participate in a process of acute theorisation on the nature and purposes of a mixed genre, shaped by an engagement with Aristotle's *Poetics* mediated by contemporary Italian critical theory. Their dramatic writings may thus appear innovative, experimental vehicles of contemporary research, rather than conservative pedagogical projects.

I. Tragicomedy in *Ulysses Redux*

William Gager, 1555-1622, was a poet, scholar, clergyman and the best-known Oxford playwright of the Elizabethan period. His *Ulysses Redux* transforms the narrative of the final books of the *Odyssey* into a five-act tragicomic play. It opens upon Ulysses washed up on the beach of his homeland, Ithaca, where he meets the goddess Minerva. The goddess changes his appearance into that of an old beggar, and engineers a meeting with his son, Telemachus. After revealing his identity to Telemachus, Ulysses returns to his palace, where a gang of suitors have gathered, diminishing the king's fortune and competing to marry his faithful wife Penelope. Ulysses lives among the suitors in disguise while he plots his revenge, which is vividly enacted in the play's final act. Before the eyes of the audience, the king slaughters the young men, and executes the treacherous members of his own household who have allowed and aided them.

Two lively prologues to *Ulysses Redux* introduce the experiments in genre that characterise Gager's project. The first, addressed "Ad Criticum," conjures to the stage a stock carping critic, who attacks the play for breaching the rules of generic *decorum*. The play cannot be a tragedy, the critic rails:

Quia, inquis, et materiae quadam mendicitate peccet, dictioneque plerumque comica est; et risum in Iro movet, quod in tragaedia nefas est, atque adeo piaculum; et vere tragico affectu vacat (quis enim aut procorum, id est hominum improborum interitu suspiret, aut meretricularum suspensio illachrymetur?). Postremo, quia laetum habet exitum. (Gager 22)

Because, you say, it offends in the poverty of its plot, and its language is mainly comic- and it raises laughs against Iris, which is forbidden in tragedy, and is even a sin. And really, it lacks tragic *pathos* (for who is going to weep either at the destruction of the Suitors, who are wicked men, or the hanging of the little whores?). Finally, because it has a happy ending.

As we will see, Gager's imagined detractor here rehearses a specific set of criticisms, recently levelled at a controversial tragicomic dramatist. The Prologue answers his opponent with a studied carelessness that everywhere disguises sophisticated critical specifications. Equivocating upon the question of what to call his "sive tragediam, sive fabulam, sive narrationem historicam, sive quicquid eam dici ius fasque est" (tragedy, or fairy-tale, or historical story, or whatever it is right and proper to call it), Gager anticipates the whimsical Polonian catalogue of "tragedy,

comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral” that would speak for Shakespeare’s fascination with genre some years later. He agrees that there might be truth in the attack, since he writes according to a “slightly freer and more relaxed [paulo liberior ac pene dissolutior] method,” and dismisses questions of generic propriety as inconsequential nit-picking, superfluous to the crucial demand that a play entertain its audience: “emoriar si amem lites, saltem criticas, id est futlies, id est tuas, critice” (I will die before I enjoy a squabble, or at least, a squabble to do with criticism, which is to say a pointless one – which is to say one of yours, critic). But both these claims are exposed as false throughout Gager’s prologues, where bombast and aggression mask a point-for-point refutation of the charges levelled at the text, and elaborate theorising on the nature and purpose of a dramatic form that mixes elements from comedy and tragedy.

Gager identifies the model for his mixed form in the Homeric source-text, everywhere emphasising his faith to the original: “mihi vero, quoad licuit, Homeri vestigiis insistere, nunquamque a boni senis quasi latere discedere, religio fuit” (It was certainly my obligation, as much I was able, to follow in Homer’s footsteps, and, as it were, never to leave the good old man’s side). The *Odyssey* is explicitly identified with a complex plot and low register; the man who carps at “the lowliness of my plot and diction” [materiae dictionesque humilitatem], Gager asserts, does not criticise him, but rather Homer himself (Gager 22). Indeed, the Greek poet emerges from Gager’s prologue as a master of the tragicomic mode. Though this view of Homer is unfamiliar to his modern reader, precedents for it stretch back far beyond the Renaissance: the *scholia* of antiquity comment on several scenes they find tragicomic in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, including Andromache laughing through her tears when her son fears Hector in his helmet, and Eurycleia’s half-tearful, half-happy discovery of Odysseus’s scar. Aristotle, meanwhile, viewed Homer as both a tragic and a comic poet, capable of mixing grave and amusing elements (Epps 26).

By the time of the Renaissance, this notion of Homer’s poems as generically hybrid, pervaded by elements from comedy, had separated into two distinct strands; both of which, I would argue, are present in Gager’s prologues. The first, drawing on pseudo-Homeric texts like the *Margites*, *Cercopes* and *The Battle of Frogs and Mice*, and the narrative shared by Book 9 of the *Odyssey* and Euripides’s satyr-play *Cyclops*, observed ironic, satirical qualities to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Wolfe 162). The second strand of interpretation of Homeric comedy available to Gager, more

relevant to Gager's project, formed alongside the rehabilitation of Aristotle's *Poetics* at the turn of the sixteenth century, and the reconsideration of the sanctioned genres against its dictates. Sarah Dewar-Watson discusses how the *Poetics*, newly available in the Latin translation of Valla (1498) or the first authoritative Greek version, the Aldine edition of 1508, challenged a critical orthodoxy, based on the flawed attempts of Aquinas and, later, Averroes to reconstruct Aristotle's text, that tragedy must end in calamity, a *turbulentia ultima*, and because of this must be diametrically opposed to comedy (Dewar-Watson 15-16). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle made a heavily qualified suggestion that a second type of tragedy, with a happy ending, could exist. His model for this form was Homer's *Odyssey*:

Second is the kind of composition which is said by some to be the best, that is, one that has a double composition like the *Odyssey*, and which ends with opposite fortunes for good and bad characters. It is held to be the best, because of the weakness of the audience, since poets follow that audience, and write according to what pleases them. But this is not the pleasure proper to tragedy, but rather to comedy (. . .). (Epps 26).

In the sixteenth century, Aristotle's distinction between the two types of tragedy was taken up by Italian poetic theorists attempting to find classical precedent for a new dramatic form gaining in popularity on the vernacular stage. Scholars including Giovanni Battista Pigna, Carlo Lenozi and Gerardus Vossius commented on comic or romance elements in the *Odyssey* (Weinberg 1.445 and 2.824), while Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio used the passage from Aristotle and the precedent of Homer to sanction the mix of comic and tragic in his own dramatic creations. In his essay *On the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies* (1543) Giraldi Cinthio looked to the *Poetics* to claim the necessity of *tragedia di lieto fin* or *tragedia mista*, "tragedy with a happy ending" or "mixed tragedy," agreeing with Aristotle that a tempered, softened form was more pleasing to the tastes of an audience than tragic terror: this type of tragedy is "in its nature more pleasing to the spectators because it ends in happiness." It was in conformity with the custom of his times and as a concession to his spectators, Cinthio argued, that he composed his own tragedies with happy endings: *Atile*, *Selene*, *Antivalomeni* and others (Gilbert 219-220). Like Aristotle, Cinthio located the origin of *tragedia di lieto fin* in the *Odyssey*. The *Poetics* refuted the contemporary critical fashion for reading the *Odyssey* as a fundamentally comic text; and in fact, Cinthio concludes, "Critics fell into this error because they were of the



opinion that there cannot be a tragedy which ends happily” (Gilbert 224).

A tradition of French and Italian plays that transformed the narrative of the *Odyssey* into the stuff of dramatic tragicomedy, including Giovanni Falungi’s *Ulixè Patiente* (ca. 1535), Giambattista della Porta’s *La Penelope* (1591), J. G. Durval’s *Les Travaux d’Ulysse, Tragedie tirée d’Homere* (1631), and Charles Boyer’s *Ulysse dans l’Isle de Circe* (1649), suggest the pervasiveness of Cinthios reading of Homer. In an essay on the early modern reception of the character of Penelope, Tania Demetriou makes a significant case for Gager’s contact with this Italian tragicomic tradition via Giambattista della Porta’s *La Penelope*, a play whose attention is focused, primarily, on its heroine’s battle to preserve her faith to her absent husband. Demetriou finds a number of direct verbal and interpretive echoes of della Porta’s play in *Ulysses Redux*, suggesting the “direct influence” of the Italian tragicomedy upon the Latin university play (Demetriou 12).

Here, I would like to suggest a second possible point of contact between Gager and the Italian tragicomic tradition: the debate surrounding the *Pastor Fido* of the scholar Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538-1612). Guarini composed *Il Pastor Fido*, a pastoral tragicomedy, between 1580 and 1585, and it circulated widely in manuscript upon its completion before publication in 1590. Debate about the work’s tragicomic form began in earnest long before its publication; Bernard Weinberg records letters and publications by the scholars Lionardo Salviati, Giason Denores and Ciro Spontone, criticising the work both overtly and obliquely, as early as October 1586 (Weinberg 2.1074). The interest the play held in English academic circles, meanwhile, is suggested by the performance of a Latin translation, *Pastor fidus*, at Cambridge sometime between 1602 and 1605 (Norland 505). In 1588, Guarini published an anonymous reply to his critics, under the title of *Il Verrato*. Much more than a polemical treatise, the work is a detailed guide to the nature and purpose of tragicomedy. Though Guarini went on to defend his play in print twice more, in 1593 and 1601, the date of the first performance of *Ulysses Redux*, in February 1592, limits Gager’s possible knowledge of Guarini’s work and the controversy surrounding it to the *Pastor Fido* itself, and the first *Verrato*.

## II. William Gager and Giovanni Battista Guarini

Guarini's play and treatise address the same questions as those that Gager's prologues place at the centre of his programme of *tragedia nova*. Briefly, the *Verrato* centres on the argument that tragedy in its ancient moulds is no longer necessary or desirable for a modern audience. The passions of pity and fear are taught and controlled by the words of scripture, and the only kind of tragic actions now acceptable are those which give pleasure. Guarini asks: "Che bisogno habbiam noi hoggi di purgar il terrore, & la commiserazione con le Tragiche viste? hauendo i precette fantassimi della nostra relligione, che ce l'insegna con la parola Evangelica?" (What need have we of purging terror and pity through tragic sights today, since we have the sacred word of our religion, which teaches us to do this through the word of the Gospel?)<sup>2</sup> (Guarini 29). The poet's imagination must be free to invent new forms in response to changing contexts and sensibilities.

Crucial to Guarini's vision for tragicomedy is a sense of the genre as an organic whole, a new creation born out of two ancient genres, but subject to its own rules, operating according to a different world-view, and with a clearly-defined and separate moral purpose. When tragedy and comedy are brought together, they engage in a process of mutual redefinition, each tempering the now-inappropriate excesses of the other, but leaving untouched the "precetti universali," innate poetic rules drawn from nature that cannot be changed (Guarini 13). Tragicomedy works as follows:

prende dall'una le persone grandi, non l'azione; la favola verisimile ma non vera; gli affetti mossi, ma rintuntazzi; il diletto non la mestizia; il pericolo non la morte. Dall'altra il riso non dissoluto, le piaceuolezze modeste, il nodo finto, il riuolgimento felice, & sopra tutto l'ordine Comico. Le quali parti in questa guisa corrette, vorrei sapere, perche non possano star insieme in vna fauola sola, quand'elle massimamente sono condite col lor decoro, & con le uqualita del costume che lor conuengono.

It takes from one the great persons, but not the action, the plot which is verisimilar, but not true, the passions which are aroused but blunted, pleasure but not sadness, danger but not death. From the other, laughter which is not dissolute, moderate pleasures, a fictional plot, a happy reversal, and above all the comic order. I should like to know why these parts, corrected

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<sup>2</sup> This translation is from Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism* 2.1074. Unless indicated, all translations will be from this volume.



in this manner, should not be able to exist together in a single plot when they are seasoned to the maximum with their proper decorum and with the qualities of character which are appropriate to them. (Guarini 17; Weinberg 2.1080)

Tragicomedy, then, emerges from Guarini's definition as a bright, polished form that eschews tragic *catharsis* in favour of the pleasures of a complex plot. Throughout the two prologues to *Ulysses Redux*, Gager's critical specifications correspond repeatedly and closely to the theory of tragicomedy espoused in the *Verrato*: the prologues are profuse with references to the most distinctive features of Guarinian tragicomedy, clues to prepare the learned audience to expect an engagement with the Italian theorist.

First, Gager rehearses Guarini's claim that a mixed form pleases its audience more than the stark horrors of tragedy, stating that his method will not please the learned [*doctissimis*] so much as the unskilled [*imperitis*], and predicting that the critic will be scandalised at his play's composition, since it was composed not according to the standard of the *Ars Poetica*, but rather to suit popular taste. Second, Gager's critic complains that the play lacks "tragico affectu", and that it has a happy ending (Gager 22). Here he echoes Guarini, who had banished *pathos* from the tragicomic universe, stating its fundamental incompatibility with laughter, and had specified a happy ending (Guarini 29). Both authors find classical precedent for tragicomedy in the large number of Greek and Roman tragedies with happy endings: Guarini calls on the authority of Aristotle and the precedent of Euripides and Sophocles (Guarini 14v). Gager finds comic elements in a catalogue of classical works: Homer's *Odyssey* is joined by the whole Euripidean corpus as well as selected plays of Sophocles and Seneca (Gager 22).

Gager echoes the terms of Guarini's discussion of the "ordine comico," the tragicomic plot constructed out of multiple trials, twists, revelations and marvels. Guarini located the all-important pleasure of tragicomedy in this plot, opposing the genre to tragedy, whose pleasure lies in the emotions it raises through the imitation of action (Guarini 17). This distinction reappears in Gager's prologue "Ad Academicos" as the speaker demands the attention of his audience, since "toto filo pendet historico magis, / rebusque gestis, quam gravi affectu altius exaggerato" ([it] rather depends on the thread of the story, and the things that are done, rather than on grave and deeply exaggerated *pathos*). In a final reference to Guarini, who was vehemently criticised for mixing high and low characters and language, Gager contends throughout both prologues that his play will transform tragedy by modifying its diction,

and infusing it with a “lower” register traditionally associated with comedy. Ulysses is described in the address to academics as “prope pedestre dolens / sermone” (grieving in an almost everyday language), and “ponet ampullas miser” (discard[ing] tragic bombast). Gager’s language is explicitly opposed to that of his tragic predecessors: “nihil audietis grande, nil Sophoclis stilo / Senecaeve scriptum” (You will hear nothing grand, nothing written in the style of Seneca or Sophocles) (Gager 30).

In two prominent and programmatic prologues, then, Gager makes repeated reference to the defining features of Guarini’s tragicomic project. But, as I will show, Gager engages Guarini only to challenge and ultimately revise the Italian scholar’s definition of tragicomedy; and it is by means of the re-evaluation of the bright, polished certainties of the *Pastor fido* and *Verrato* that Gager constructs his darker, more brutal and primitive *tragedia nova*, a model for Gwinne to adopt and adapt in his turn. In the next part of this essay I will first identify Gager’s most important borrowings from and alterations to Guarini in *Ulysses Redux*, before turning to consider the role of Matthew Gwinne’s *Nero* in clarifying our understanding of *tragedia nova*.

### III. *Ulysses Redux*: Guarinian Tragicomedy?

Most fundamentally, Gager modifies the providential shape of tragicomedy.<sup>3</sup> *Il Pastor fido* asserted a relationship between the certainties of the Christian faith and the structure of tragicomic narrative: the *ordine comico*, or complex plot about which tragicomedy is structured, subject-

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth distinguishing the tragicomedy created by Guarini and modified by Gager and Gwinne from an earlier tradition of tragicomedy developed by the Protestant writers Foxe, Grimald and Kirchmeyer, and discussed by Andreas Höfele as a response to a perceived need to adapt the classical authors, especially Terence, to Christian ends (127). This tradition was represented on the Oxford stage in 1541-2 by Nicholas Grimald’s *Christus Redivivus, comoedia tragica, sacra & nova*: for a thorough discussion see Elisabeth Dutton and my article “Seeing and Recognizing in the Sacred and New: The Latin Scriptural Plays of Nicholas Grimald” (forthcoming). Briefly, despite the outward similarities between the two traditions (most obviously, the identification of tragicomic redemption with the workings of Christian providence), they are subtly different in their purpose and concerns. The Protestant tragicomedy, closer to medieval religious drama in subject matter and dramaturgy, employs new Roman comic poetics as an innovation in staging Biblical narrative. Though it is heavily stylised, and set in an unfamiliar pastoral world, Guarini’s Christian allegory is comparable to this earlier tradition; but, as I will argue, the self-conscious and reflexive experiments in genre of Gager and Gwinne everywhere undermine any straightforward providential teleology, and resist moralising interpretation.

ing its characters to trials, reversals of fortune and miracles, is enabled and ultimately resolved by a beneficent divine providence that ensures resolution and redemption at the play's end. In a classic essay on Guarini, Arthur Kirsch perceives the Augustinian motif of the *felix culpa* as a central structuring conceit in his play. According to Kirsch, Guarini mapped his tragicomic plot onto "the great paradox of Christian experience" (Kirsch 11; see also Clubb 125-153), that joy and redemption can occur not just through suffering, but in part as a result of it. The wonder and delight that Guarini's plot elicits from its audience are thus intimately linked to the assurance of Providence: seemingly desperate situations resolve into order and joy, and there are happy endings for even the play's immoral characters.

Gager invokes this providential frame only to recast it as a source of tension and ambiguity, replacing it with a scheme of retributive justice and moral didacticism inherited from humanist tragedy. Ulysses, whose triumph over his opponents is forecast from the play's opening and lent divine sanction by the goddess Minerva, is so persistently described in a register of light and wonder that his homecoming gestures toward the Christian allegory of the *Pastor fido*. The Chorus, for example, beg him "lucem patriae, dux Ithacensis, / restituat tuæ" (O Ithacan leader, bring back the light to your country) or name him "Ithacæ lumen, patriæque parens" (the light of Ithaca and father of the country) (Gager 50). The king's happy ending, however, explicitly depends on his good nature: Minerva tells Ulysses that she champions him "namque me miseret tui / tam dura passi, tamque prudentis viri" (for I pity you, having suffered so much, such a wise man) (Gager 38). Gager applies providential redemption only partially and selectively: in Ithaca, transgressions are more grave, deliberate and persistent than in the green world of Arcadia, and divine favour must be won by virtue. Ulysses's victory entails the vivid depiction of the consequences of sin, as the suitors are brutally murdered onstage. As the king says, setting about this slaughter, "proinde vobis merita perniciæ adest" (so then, your destruction is deservedly at hand) (Gager 126).

Of all the features of the parent-genre tragedy, Guarini was most explicit in banishing 'the terrible' from his tragicomic universe. This included depictions of bloodshed or death, flatly rejected as incongruous with the aesthetic of the genre: a tragicomic narrative should bring its characters into danger without actually harming them (Guarini 17v-18v). Gager's final act, by contrast, is horrifyingly bloody: the suitors are murdered onstage; Ulysses demands savagely that the swineheard Melanthius be butchered and fed to the dogs; the serving-woman Melantho is

dragged onstage by a noose tied around her neck, and prepares for certain death in convulsions of grief (Gager 132; 136). This re-introduction of violence and bloodshed reifies the ambivalence that pervades the final act of *Ulysses Redux*, in which Gager's audience views the play's outcome with an uneasy double vision. The audience's understanding of Ulysses's revenge as just is cemented by the king's repeated assertions to this effect, articulating the moral of his own story: "ut cuncta posteritas sciat / bonos manere gratiam, paenam malos" (may all posterity know that gratitude awaits good men, and punishment the wicked) (Gager 134). But simultaneously, even those characters sympathetic to Ulysses reflect our sense that the revenge is too harsh, shocking, and unrelenting. Amphinomus begs for mercy on the grounds that he has not taken part in any act of wrongdoing; but despite conceding that "multi . . . te sceleris putem / esse innocentem" (I might think you to be innocent of many evils) (Gager 129), Ulysses executes him nonetheless. Philaetius, ordered to execute the treacherous serving-woman Melantho, wishes "miseri tui / utinam liceret!" (If only I could take pity on you!) (Gager 136).

Gager's characters thus conspire with the flouted expectations of the tragicomic genre to emphasise the scholar's revisions to that model. Providential optimism in *Ulysses Redux* is always in tension with a moralising emphasis upon cause-and-effect that owes something to the *De casibus* tradition of tragic narrative. In tracing the *parabola* of the rise and fall of great and terrible men, and collapsing the great princes and tyrants of history and classical mythology into rhetorical *exempla*, Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustri*, and the tragic tradition it speaks to, have a levelling effect, emphasising the vulnerability of humankind and the cyclical nature of their miseries. Irresolution and cyclicity are also inherent in Homeric epic, of course, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* sit within a web of interconnecting myths whose threads stretch across the classical canon of poetry and drama.

This emphasis upon cyclicity can be detected in the darkened final scene of *Ulysses Redux*, which depicts Ulysses's victory as muted and inconclusive. All the elements of the joyful finale of the *Pastor fido* are present: the happy *denouement* is enabled by the Guarinian "credible miracle" of Ulysses's accurate description of the bed-chamber; the faithful lovers are united, and their union restores safety and order throughout their world; the characters declare and perform the emotional affect of events: "praeclara coniunx, ecquis est flendi modus?" (Most exemplary wife, is there a limit to our tears?) (Gager 144). But this happiness is explicitly transient. The king's final lines do not forecast joy and re-



demption, but rather troubles to come worse than those he has already endured:

et nos procorum gravior a patribus manet  
 procella, non dum navis ad portum appulit.  
 remedia nos, Telemache, meditemur malo. (Gager 144)

And a graver storm is brewing for us from the suitors' fathers, our ship has not yet reached the port. Telemachus, let us think of a remedy to this evil.

The *De casibus* tradition thus surfaces to offer an alternative to Guarinian optimism and harmony: Gager hints at a future in which the dynamics of the play will be reversed, and Ulysses will be recast as sinner, and forced to atone for the slaughter we have witnessed. *Tragedia nova* begins to take shape as a version of Guarinian tragicomedy darkened in the places where it meets humanist tragic forms, its moderation and polish rejected and replaced with a drive towards the messy reality of fortune, moral didacticism and a desire to portray the stark extremes of horror and joy. As he qualifies its providentialism, Gager rejects the specification in the *Verrato* that the architectonic end of a genre born out of tragedy and comedy is purely comical; *tragedia nova* is tragicomic, with all the room for ambivalence and incongruity that word implies, all the way through (Guarini 29v; see also Weinberg 2.1080-1090).

Implied by this redefinition of the architectonic end of tragicomedy, and his incorporation of extremes where Guarini had stressed "temperamento" and "temperatura," is Gager's comfort with a charge of generic monstrosity that Guarini had fought to deny (Weinberg 2.1082). Giason Denores, Guarini's most vehement critic, attacked pastoral tragicomedy on the basis of its indecorous mix of the high and low characters proper to pure tragedy and comedy respectively, and the different plots and registers that those characters necessarily introduced. Denores condemned a mixed form as a "questo mostruoso, & disproportionato componimento, misto di due contrarie attion, & qualita di persone" (a monstrous and disproportionate composition, made up of two contrary actions and types of persons) (qtd. in Guarini 15). In doing so, he drew upon an old set of stereotypes for denigrating the new creations of artists that saw the imagination's products as monstrous.

Early modern models of cognition viewed the creative, artistic imagination with great suspicion. Writers on human physiology, inheriting a tradition from Aristotle and his scholastic interpreters, agreed on the process by which the imagination fashioned new products: it divided up the visual "images" of the world it had gathered by means of the five

senses, and rejoined them in new combinations that never existed in nature. Pierre de la Primaudaye described this process of selection, anatomisation and reconfiguration, whereby the imagination “taketh what pleaseth it” and “addeth thereunto or diminisheth, changeth and rechangeth, mingleth and unmingleth, so that it cutteth asunder and seweth up again, as it listeth” (Primaudaye 155). If not properly controlled, this creative process could produce nightmarish new products, Frankenstein’s monsters sewn from opposite and inharmonious parts. As Puttenham had it, a disordered soul “doth breed *Chimeres* & monsters in mans imaginations” (Puttenham 29). In Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy* (1595), the power to combine and create anew elevated the poet to near-divine status; but he too numbered the monstrous among the imagination’s potential products, which included “heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies and such like” (Sidney 248).

In the prologue to his allegorical comedy *Midas*, published in the same year as *Ulysses Redux* and first performed before Queen Elizabeth on Twelfth Night, 1590 (Chambers 3.416), John Lyly demonstrated the applicability of this theory to the dramatic genres. He wryly explained that his play’s dual plot and incorporation of elements from different genres reflected and embodied a disordered world: “If wee present a mingle-mangle,” he asserted, “our fault is to be excused, because the whole worlde is become an Hodge-podge.” Lyly elaborated upon the nature of this “Hodge-podge” elsewhere in the prologue, describing a world in which the senses are subject to an onslaught of stimulation, and satiety is always giving way to contempt; where men of all trades, whether merchants, musicians or playwrights, must constantly create new products to respond to the ever-changing tastes of their customers: “there must be sallets for the Italian, picktooths for the Spaniard, pots for the German, porridge for the Englishman” (Sidney 153). As the quotation implies, the catalyst for this universal disorder is the convergence of foreign influences upon England, confusing and trivialising even as they beautify and enrich.

Sketched by the pen of Lyly, for whom the profusion of witty invention was a constant source of delight and the subject of his most celebrated work, such a vignette is palpably ironic. But however insincerely, his characterisation of a mixed form as the emblem and product of worldly disorder, a “mingle-mangle” that forces opposite elements into discordant relationships, rehearses a commonplace of early modern poetic criticism most famously articulated by Sidney. In the *Defence*, Sidney railed against “that mungrell Tragy-comedie,” which indecorously “match(ed) hornpipes and funerals” (Sidney 248). In a prologue written



for *Meleager* upon its publication in 1593, eleven years after the play was first composed, and, suggestively, only a year after *Ulysses Redux* was performed and printed, Gager too drew on this stereotype. In selecting from the available endings for the tale of the proud king Oeneus, Gager stated, he had excluded the transformation of Meleager's sisters into birds, "ne omnis haec fabula in catastrophē potius prodigiosam, quam in exitum, effectumque vere tragicum quasi in piscem certe, *turpiter atram desinat in volucrem, mulier formosa superne*" (Lest this play should end with a freakish catastrophe rather than in disaster, and with real tragic effect, like a type of fish which filthily ends as a dark bird, being a beautiful woman above) (Gager 1.40). The three writers thus demonstrate a stock early modern response to a new profusion of generically-mixed poetic and dramatic forms; one which sought to cast them as careless, foreign and scandalously discordant affronts to classical generic orthodoxies.

*Ulysses Redux* reifies generic monstrosity in its aesthetic, plot and characters. His grotesque bird-woman can usefully be read as an analogue for the contradictions inherent in the character of Ulysses, in whom Gager appears to take up as a challenge the criticism Denores had levelled at Guarini, that it is impossible that diametrical opposites of plot and language "possono esser congiunte in uno istesso corpo, ne in una istessa compositione" (can be joined in one single body, or in one single composition) (Guarini 24v). Gager's prologue to academics flaunts the contradictions Ulysses embodies: he is a noble king accustomed to tragic buskins [cothurnis], but in the play is transformed into a beggar and an old man [mendiculus / senexque]. The king is the centre and emblem of an aesthetic of monstrosity that pervades the play, and frequently subverts or darkens moments of distinctively Guarinian wonder. When in Act IV the band of suitors are unable to string Ulysses's bow, they describe the disguised king's ability to shoot as a "novi . . . monstri" (Gager 106). While Guarini's characters forgive one another in the final scene of the *Pastor fido*, Ulysses instead creates a monster of his treacherous servant Melanthius, ordering that the boy's lips, nose and ears be hacked off, his entrails be given to the dogs to eat, and the skin of the "frightful man" [immanis viri] be flayed (Gager 132). The grotesquely creative power of the king's imagination is laboured at the play's end, as he expresses a bloody desire to feast his eyes upon a scene of slaughter and the broken bodies of the suitors, painting repeated verbal pictures of the butchery he will later enact. For example, in the soliloquy that opens Act IV:

praegestit animus latera transfixos humi  
 videre stratos. aspicere mensas libet  
 tabo fluentes, aspicere pateras libet verebro madentes (Gager 98)

My spirit is so eager to see them laid out, their sides transfixed to the ground. It pleases me to see the tables running with gore, to see the plates dripping with brains.

Ulysses's monstrosity is perhaps most interesting in its relationship with his *mendicitas*, or state of itinerant poverty or beggarliness. The adjective *medicus* and its derivatives are applied to Ulysses nineteen times throughout the play, and transferred to the work itself in the first prologue, where Gager's imagined critic complains that it "quadam mendicite peccet" (offends in a certain poverty) (Gager 22). The word appears rarely in Classical Latin, but took on a specific significance in the thirteenth century, when it became associated with the orders of mendicant friars who travelled Western Europe, preaching and begging. The word is fascinating in its application both to Ulysses and, more broadly, to *tragedia nova*, implying Gager's sense of his project as one of bringing to England something not just foreign, but also pitiful and denigrated.

Gary Schmidt opens his study of hybrid literary forms in the Renaissance with the observation of a "general rule that saw cultural mingling and mixture as equivalent to contamination" (Schmidt 3), and hybrid genres as the symbol of that contamination, witnessed by the quotation from Lyly with which I opened. Schmidt draws on a range of modern anthropological and mythographical works to argue that the trickster-figure in myth and literature is the semi-human analogue of this contamination, describing the "inherent paradoxes of hybrid trickster-figures as mediators and subversive culture-heroes" (Schmidt 24). For Schmidt, trickster figures are created and defined at the borders where different genres and cultures meet; they are always hybrid, or in the terms of my essay, monstrous, marked with the scars of what has been left behind even as they express the creative joy and optimism of the new.

Though of course, we must be wary of too firm an imposition of twentieth century mythography onto early modern academic drama, I believe that Ulysses's multi-layered monstrosity, endless resource and marginalisation conspire to identify him with the trickster hero as defined by Schmidt. His Atreus-like tragic wrath and gruesome appetites, and his metatheatrical identification with the unfolding of plot as he is decorated in epithets of craftsmanship like "ingenuus faber" or "fraudum artifex" (Gager 34) identify him with an ancient tragic tradi-

tion that the redemptive philosophy of Christianity has rendered unnecessary, and which has come to look excessive, brutal and crude. But his wretched *mendicitas* implies that the new form that has washed up on the shores of England to take the place of ancient tragedy is somehow lacking in dignity; as Gager himself asserts in the prologue: “nihil audietis grande.” Gager’s answer to Guarini’s contention that Scripture has replaced the role of tragedy in controlling the passions is muted and ambivalent. But on another level, a monstrous Ulysses is also a symbol for the “optimism and creative joy” that Ted Hughes associates with the trickster-figure and the new genres into which he is inscribed (Scammell 243). In the figure of the trickster, the monstrosity of a mixed form denigrated in criticism of vernacular drama and poetry is recast as a source of productive tension and inspiration. By means of anti-Horatian hybridity, I believe, Gager flaunts his cheerful sense of *tragedia nova* as a genre pervaded by contradiction, incongruity and even unease in defiance of classical strictures; a fittingly experimental product of the academic stage, where established rules and hierarchies can be challenged and redefined and the *Ars Poetica* can be ignored altogether in the name of innovation.

#### IV. Matthew Gwinne’s *Nero: nova monstra*

Gwinne’s *Nero* was written and published in 1603 but, a caustic dedication hints, rejected for performance on the university stage (Gwinne 3). Displaying Gager’s generic label, *tragedia nova*, on his title-page, Gwinne situated his play in the tradition created by his forebear; his selective reproduction, adaptation, and extension of the features of *Ulysses Redux* therefore develop our sense of what constitutes the genre. *Nero* follows *Ulysses* in parading its author’s interest in generic mingling, in locating the source of its quirks of plot and aesthetic in the *persona* of its titular character, in imposing a providential narrative upon a classical tale, and in infusing tragedy with happiness and comedy: thus, it reinforces my sense that those features are central to understanding what Gager meant by *tragedia nova*. Where Gwinne adds to Gager is in his depiction of the grotesque and his play’s generic monstrosity, coherent with his Neroian sources and depicted as congruent with the nature of the character at the centre of his play.

Like Gager, Gwinne uses two inventive prologues to introduce the generic play that defines his work. The first takes the form of a dumb-show, in which Gwinne uses the pageantry of tragedy to manipulate

audience expectation. Accompanied by “musica . . . tragica,, Nemesis takes the stage accompanied by three furies; together, the goddesses proceed to four thrones, installing themselves “quasi praeses tragaediae” (as if presiding over the tragedy) where they remain throughout, vivid and foreboding presences. Valeria Messalina, the adulterous wife of Claudius, evokes a raving Bacchante as she leads the chorus in a dance across the stage, wearing tragic slippers, shaking a thyrsus, her hair hanging loose down her back. Her lover follows, his head wreathed in ivy. It is at the end of the second prologue that Gwinne introduces a departure from the tragic mode:

(. . .) Sed nec in scena silet  
Xiphilinus ista, nec tacet Tacitus; nec est  
Tranquillus hic tranquillus: historicos putes  
Fieri poetas. (I.57)

But Xiphilinus is not silent on the stage, and Tacitus is not quiet, or Tranquillus calm: you might think that historians had become poets.

To be clear, Gwinne’s innovation in *Nero* is not in putting history on the stage, nor is it marrying tragedy and history. The play was written after the vogue for chronicle plays in the popular theatre, which had begun on the academic stage, with the great success of the *Richardus Tertius* of the Cambridge playwright Thomas Legge (1579); and both popular and academic chronicle plays drew on narratives and devices from mythological tragedy. Gwinne’s departure from the conventions of the genre lies in the inclusivity and consequent amorphousness of his play, which until its final scenes faithfully dramatises the account in Tacitus’s *Annales* (XIII-XVI) of the end of Claudius’s reign and most of Nero’s career as emperor, using Suetonius’s *Life of Nero*, Dio Cassius’s *History*, and the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* as secondary sources. Notes in the margins of the printed play direct Gwinne’s reader to the relevant classical authorities, and the scholar flaunts his play’s bookishness in the dedication to Egerton: “ego tantummodo modos feci: ineptus tibicen in comoedia” (I, a foolish piper in the comedy, merely made the measures). Echoing Gager, then, Gwinne characterises his task in creating the play as one of selection, arrangement and decoration. But it is difficult to discern any dramatic logic or organising principle in the tragedy’s structure; it is a sprawling, unwieldy piece that flouts dramatic convention throughout. It is over 5,000 lines long in total; the final Act is over 2,000 lines, twice the length of the average Senecan tragedy. Over eighty characters oc-



cupy the stage at different points, some walking on to participate in a single scene before disappearing from the action entirely. Structure, character and plot appear to be subordinated to the purposes of history rather than poetry.

But despite the playful claims of the prefatory material, *Nero* cannot be classified as staged history; its inclusivity and faith to Tacitus are everywhere in conflict with an impulse towards what I would call blackly comic Senecan hypertragedy. Binns does not comment on the grim humour that characterises *Nero*, but does usefully draw attention to the play's assault on sensibility in defining Gwinne as "trying to out-Seneca Seneca" (Binns, "Seneca and Neoclassical Tragedy" 228). For *Nero* heightens and exaggerates the already-stark world of Senecan tragedy, reproducing its distinguishing elements so many times over that the narrative framework creaks under their weight: the play swarms with ghosts, who open each act and appear repeatedly to strike fear into the living characters; passages of stichomythia are occasionally protracted to exchanges reaching seventy lines; *sententiae* are profuse. In a departure from Senecan convention, though, Gwinne positively revels in staging the lurid sex and violence detailed in his historical sources, especially Tacitus. Characters are beaten, stabbed, clubbed, poisoned, strangled and even stomped to death before the eyes of the audience; Nero engages in perverse sex acts with individuals ranging from his step-brother Britannicus to his mother; he demands that a young catamite be castrated and dressed up as a woman, to be his "wife" after the death of Poppea (V.viii.4262-5). For Binns, Gwinne's dramatic endeavour is akin to that of the director of a modern horror movie, in "lovingly reproducing" the clichés of an old genre (Binns, "Seneca and Neoclassical Tragedy" 228); but this analysis does not quite explain the distinctly parodic feel that *Nero*'s drive to exaggeration, acceleration and excess creates.

Another comparison with modern cinema might offer a different perspective. In a recent essay, Emma Smith applied the insights of cinematic genre studies to early modern revenge tragedy. Twentieth century film critics developed a narrative of the development of cinematic genres, according to which, as examples of popular and profitable genres proliferate, "both film-makers and audience grow increasingly self-conscious regarding the genre's formal qualities and its initial social function." As Smith summarises, film genres pass through:

(. . .) a period of experiment during which conventions become established, then a classic stage when these established conventions are mutually understood by film artists and audiences. This point of equilibrium turns towards saturation, into an age of refinement during which the form is embellished

with formal or stylistic details, and finally a baroque . . . stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the “substance” or “content” of the work. (Smith 30)

The early modern genre onto which Smith maps this narrative is revenge tragedy, though she observes that the genre is already self-conscious in its adaptation of the structural and thematic apparatus of classical mythological tragedy. The exaggerated and amplified Senecan devices and themes in *Nero* at once belong to the final, reflexive stage of this teleology, even as they become the components of a genre that is new and distinct. The treasured but faded apparatus of popular neo-Senecan tragedy – its ghosts and murders, the dark energy of its rhetorical descriptions – is revived in burlesque form and placed at the centre of *tragedia nova*, in Gwinne’s hands a heightened and exaggerated tragic narrative that everywhere shades into parody.

*Nero* follows *Ulysses Redux* in its qualified infusion of happiness into tragedy, both in the form of grim humour and in the ultimately positive outcome. Just as in Gager’s play, the happy ending is identified with the workings of providence; but Gwinne’s providential frame is loose and frail, striking his reader as the perfunctory rehearsal of a convention. The lusts of Messalina, the audience hears in the prologue, have placed the Roman court and state under a curse that works itself out in the “peritura magna” (great slaughter) (II.vii.1090) that escalates and gathers momentum throughout the play, with the despot Nero at its centre. The curse fizzles out in the moment of Nero’s death, depicted in the play’s final scene, and Nemesis asserts in the epilogue that “tam mali finis bonus” (a good end has been affixed to so much evil) (Epilogue 4994). Nemesis’s declaration puts Gwinne’s reader in mind of the paradox of the *felix culpa*; and indeed, though it is palpably looser, the play follows the same, basically tragicomic shape as *Ulysses Redux*, with suffering and depravity followed by a positive outcome and the restoration of peace. Just as in *Ulysses*, Gwinne drops hints to align the “good end” with Christianity; there is an abrupt shift in the play’s final lines, spoken by a chorus of Furies, from a pagan divine scheme to a monotheistic one:

Hinc liberandi subditi.  
Opem precentur *numina*.  
Sic magna stabunt, *maximo*  
Si fulciantur *numini*  
Sic munientur principes,  
Si muniantur *numini*.



Sic protegentur *subditi*

Si protegantur *numini* (Epilogue 4994; emphases mine)

Hence subjects are to be freed, but may they pray for help from *the gods*

Thus great things may endure, if they are supported by *the great god*.

Thus princes may be defended, if they are defended by *the god*.

Thus the oppressed may be protected, if they are protected by *the god*.

In *Ulysses*, the application of the redemptive philosophy of Christianity to classical tragedy leads to contradiction and ambiguity; Christian morality established a standard of behaviour that the hero could not maintain, and the play's end implied punishment to come. In *Nero*, redemption appears almost as an afterthought or convenient device: banishing the heavenly gods from the action of the play and installing the Furies as rulers, Gwinne creates Rome under Messalina's curse as a topsy-turvy world outside the normal rules of morality and decorum: as Seneca commits Octavia to exile, he laments privately that "testare fugiens exules tecum deos" (as you flee, you may witness that the gods have joined you in exile) (IV.v.2731). The assurance of a didactic, Christian end in which tyranny is justly punished exempts *Nero* from the charge habitually levelled at Senecan tragedy, of being too pagan and immoral, and becomes a convenient catch-all scheme that allows Gwinne to direct his energy to the site of his real interest: depicting in lurid, grotesque detail the depravity of the reign of the despot emperor Nero.

Divorced from the certainties of a providential scheme, or even the affirmation of beneficent gods of the sort one finds in *Ulysses*, death and ubiquitous corruption become levelling forces in *Nero*, undermining and implicating even the play's "good" characters in its knot of dissolution and Senecan *nefas*. The ghost of Britannicus, for example, a child and early victim of Nero's debauched sexual appetites and lust for power, is refused entry to the abodes of the blessed on the grounds that: "sedes beatae non manent stupri reos; / matura te mors sustulit, stupro prius / pollutum ab illo" (The abodes of the blessed aren't for the depraved; a timely death took you away, who had first been corrupted by that debauched sex act) (III.i.1311-2). The evil that centres on Nero infects all of the play's characters, contributing to a pervasive sense of universal transgression and suffering heightened and pronounced from *Ulysses Redux*, and similarly understandable in terms of the *De casibus* tradition.

Most distinctively, Gwinne amplifies Gager's metapoetic aesthetic of monstrosity, raising horror and disorder to the level of a theme in *Nero* as it finds expression in a number of different forms and testifies to the centrality of generic monstrosity to *tragedia nova*. Bodies monstrous in

the sense implied by Denores pervade; Octavia identifies the hypocrisy inherent in Seneca's position as both philosopher and flattering courtier by imagining Nero's adviser as monster: "monstrum est philosophicus aulicus" (a philosophical courtier is a monstrosity) (IV.v.2719). After Poppea's death, Nero makes orders that violate two bodies: Poppea's corpse should not be cremated, as was the custom for Roman women, but rather stuffed with spices "more regnum" (like a king); her rotting flesh, Nero predicts, will smell sweeter than any spice (V.viii.4255). A few lines later, he orders that Poppea be remembered in another way:

Ideoque similem, quam potest illi puer,  
Sporum exercari, et ducere uxorem volo.  
Pythagorae, ut uxor, ipse me subduam meo. (V.viii.4264-5)

So that he resemble (Poppea) as much as a boy can, I want to castrate Sporus, and to regard him as my wife. I shall also submit myself to Pythagoras as though his wife.

Nero's unchecked imagination is endlessly, nightmarishly creative; his transgression of boundaries and creation of new monsters is at once repulsive and comically nonchalant. In a parallel manifestation of the play's monstrosity, the emperor's moral depravity is written onto his own nauseating body – as Epaphroditus comments upon his death, "Defecit, expiravit: en oculi rigent, / Extant in oris squallidi horrendum modum" (He has grown weak, he has died; look at the staring eyes, bulging terribly from his filthy face) (V.xiii.4790).

Gwinne toys with generic monstrosity of the sort flaunted by Gager, as the play's ghastly horrors are everywhere juxtaposed with comedy; in the final scene, Nero, having heard of a conspiracy against him by Vindex, girds himself up into tower of tragic wrath, promising that if the official finds fault with his emperor when positively disposed, "milvium, imo aquilam feret. / Feret leonem, mite qui non fert pecus" (He will bear me as a kite, no, as an eagle. He will bear me as a lion, who cannot bear me as a lamb) (V.xi.4535-6). But this vision of great anger is comically deflated: Nero's real grievance with Vindex, he continues, is that the deputy insulted his skill on the lyre – and the emperor continues to demand, child-like, that his servant Epaphroditus praise his musical skill (V.xi.4814-5). Gwinne's marginal notes direct his reader to the *Apocolocyntosis* of Seneca only twice, at lines I.i.86 and II.iii.724, where direct references to the treatise work to satirise Claudius; but much of the spirit of that lampoon, with its satire upon the grotesque body of the

dead emperor as the physical manifestation of his depraved soul,<sup>4</sup> and its parodic deployment of tragedy,<sup>5</sup> is absorbed into *Nero*.

*Nero* thus pushes the tendency of *Ulysses* towards comic deflation and blunt brutality firmly into the realm of satire. Its heightened aesthetic of monstrosity, reified in the gruesome productivity of the emperor's mind, conveys the creative tension produced in the places where classical genres are brought together in outrageous new configurations. Alongside Gager's *Ulysses Redux*, finally, the play poses more questions than it answers. Comparison with the "comedia tragica, sacra et nova" of Nicholas Grimald, for example, suggests that experiment with genre might be at the centre of the work of more than one generation of Oxford playwrights. In accommodating comic elements in tragedy, moreover, Gager and Gwinne anticipate the fashions of the popular stage, and, especially when considered alongside later writers such as Thomas Goffe, invite exploration of the interactions between the two traditions. This becomes all-the-more interesting when one considers that in writing and publishing *tragedia nova*, Gager and Gwinne participated in the development and refinement of ideas of literary composition and theory that were not part of the standard university curriculum, but rather taking place in professional works such as Sidney's *Defence*. The *tragedia nova* of Gager and Gwinne, finally, is characterised by an uncompromising spirit of experiment, an interest in the new and unruly far removed from the sense of conservative tedium that a narrow pedagogical approach perpetuates.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, where Claudius parodies the death of Virgil's Dido, defecating as Clotho cuts the thread of his life; "vae me, puto, concavi me" (4.3). The Saturnalian spirit of the play, and its inclusion of a character called Petronius who quotes occasional lines from the *Satyricon* furthermore suggests another example of Neronian satire – but from the quotations he chooses, it is unclear whether Gwinne might have had access to a manuscript of Petronius's little-known *Satyricon*, or whether he knew it only in fragments.

<sup>5</sup> In the *Apocolocyntosis*, for example, a cowardly Hercules feigns menace by adoption of the register and meter of tragedy; "et quo terribilior esset, tragicus fit et ait (. . .)" (And so that he might become more terrible, he made himself tragic).

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