

work and speak altogether in common words. Now in all these three kinds, the oration is much commended and appeareth notable when we keep us still to that style which we first professed, and use such words as seem for that kind of writing most convenient. Yea, if we mind to increase or diminish, to be in a heat or to use moderation, to speak pleasantly or gravely, to be sharp or soft, to talk lordly or to speak finely, to wax ancient or familiar—which all are comprehended under one of the other three—we must ever make our words apt and agreeable to that kind of style which we first began to use. For as French hoods do not become lords, so Parliament robes are unfitting for ladies. Comeliness,\* therefore, must ever be used, and all things observed that are most meet for every cause, if we look by attempts to have our desire.

## Alexander Neville, Tragedy and God's judgements (1563)

ALEXANDER NEVILLE (1544–1614) took his Cambridge BA in 1560, and was secretary successively to three archbishops of Canterbury (Parker, Grindal, and Whitgift). He also wrote several Latin theological treatises.

TEXT. *The Lamentable Tragedie of Oedipus the Sonne of Laius Kyng of Thebes out of Seneca*, published on 28 April 1563, included (in a revised text) in Thomas Newton (ed.), *Seneca his Tenne Tragedies Translated into Englysh* (1581); repr. in 2 vols. (London, 1927), with an important preface by T. S. Eliot, also published as 'Seneca in Elizabethan translation' in his *Selected Essays* (London, 1932, etc.). Neville was one of several writers whose translation of Seneca influenced early English tragedy.

Behold here before thy face (good Reader) the most lamentable tragedy of that most unfortunate Prince Oedipus, for thy profit rudely\* translated. Wonder not at the grossness of the style, neither yet account the inventor's diligence disgraced by the translator's negligence; who, though that he hath sometimes boldly presumed to err from his author, roving at random where he list, adding and subtracting at pleasure, yet let not that engender disdainful suspicion within thy learned breast.

Mark thou rather what is meant by the whole course of the history, and frame thy life free from such mischiefs, wherewith the world at this present is universally overwhelmed, the wrathful vengeance of God provoked, the body plagued, the mind and conscience in midst of deep devouring dangers most terribly assaulted—in such sort that I abhor to write, and even at the thought thereof I tremble and quake for very inward grief and fear of mind, assuredly persuading myself that the right high and immortal God will never leave such horrible and detestable crimes unpunished. As in this present tragedy, and so forth in the process of the whole history, thou mayst right well perceive, wherein thou shalt see a very express and lively image of the inconstant change of fickle fortune in the person of a Prince of passing fame and renown, midst whole floods of earthly bliss, by mere

misfortune (nay rather by the deep hidden secret judgements of God)<sup>1</sup> piteously plunged in most extreme miseries. The whole realm for his sake in strangest guise grievously plagued; besides the apparent destruction of the nobility, the general death and spoil of the communalty, the miserable transformed face of the city, with an infinite number of mischiefs more which I pass over unrehearsed. Only wish I all men by this tragical history (for to that intent was it written) to beware of sin, the end whereof is shameful and miserable, as in the most unfortunate fall of this unhappy Prince right plainly appeareth. Who by inward grip of fearful consuming conscience wretchedly tormented, beholding the lamentable state of his vile infected realms, wasted by the burning rage of privy\* spoiling\* pestilence, finds himself in tract of time to be the only plague and misery of the almost quite destroyed city.

Whereupon calling together his priests and prophets, and asking counsel of the gods by them, for present remedy in those evils where-with the realm was then universally overflowed, answer was made that the plague should never cease till king Laius' death were thoroughly revenged, and the bloody murderer driven into perpetual exile. Which answer received, Oedipus, far more curious in bolting out\* the truth than careful of his own estate, suddenly slides into an innumerable company of dreadful miseries. For as soon as he had once the perfect view of his own detestable deeds and wicked misdemeanour cast before his eyes, together with the unnatural killing of his father Laius, the incestuous marriage of his mother Jocasta, the preposterous\* order of his ill misguided life, with a hundred more like mischiefs, which chaste and undefiled ears abhor to hear: fretting fury, common enemy and tormentor to corrupted consciences pricking him forward, all inflamed with frenzy and boiling in inward heat of vile infected mind, he rooteth out his wretched eyes unnaturally, bereaveth his mother her life<sup>2</sup> (though earnestly requested thereto) beastly, and in the end in most basest kind of slavery, banished, dieth miserably. Leaving behind him unto all posterities a dreadful example of God's horrible vengeance for sin.

<sup>1</sup> Neville imposes a Christian scheme on to Seneca's version of Sophocles, in which Oedipus' murder of the man who assaulted him (his own father, as he cannot know) is a coincidence, to which no design attaches. The fact that Oedipus acknowledges his responsibility for the deed by blinding himself is, rather, a triumphant demonstration of human ethics.

<sup>2</sup> But in Seneca (as in Sophocles) Jocasta kills herself.

Such like terrors as these requireth this our present age, wherein vice hath chiefest place, and virtue, put to flight, lies as an abject,\* languishing in great extremity. For the which cause, so much the rather have I suffered this my base translated tragedy to be published, from his author in word and verse somewhat transformed, though in sense little altered, and yet oftentimes rudely increased with mine own simple invention; more rashly (I confess) than wisely, wishing to please all, to offend none. But whereas no man lives so uprightly whom slandering tongues leave undefamed, I refer myself to the judgement of the wisest, little esteeming the prejudicial mouths of such carping merchants which suffer no men's doings almost to escape undefiled. In fine, I beseech all together (if so it might be) to bear with my rudeness, and consider the grossness of our own country language, which can by no means aspire to the high lofty Latinist's style. Mine only intent was to exhort men to embrace virtue and shun vice, according to that of the right famous and excellent poet Virgil:<sup>3</sup>

*Discite justitiam moniti, et non temnere divos.*

This obtained, I hold myself thoroughly contented. In the mean season I end, wishing all men to shun sin, the plain (but most perilous) pathway to perfect infelicity.

<sup>3</sup> *Aen.* 6. 620, the warning given in Hades by Phlegyas: 'Be warned; learn ye to be just and not to slight the gods!'