

Charles I, Cromwell and Cicero (A Response to Dale B. J. Randall)

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Professor Randall has performed a signal service by drawing the scholarly community's attention to the drama entitled *The Tragedy of that Famous Roman Orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero*, which was published in London in 1651. This is clearly an important text, certainly for historians and possibly for literary scholars. Professor Randall's discussion of the text is full of lively suggestion and invites agreement. I have been asked to comment on his contribution from the point of view of a historian who is a specialist in the period of the English Civil War. I have only had the time and opportunity to read the drama and to consider Randall's reading in the light of my own. Far more work could and should be done to establish authorship and to decode what Randall sees as a close modelling of the events in Rome (as the Republic gave way to the Empire) upon the events in England in the late 1640s and early 1650s. Randall has whetted the appetite.

I would begin simply by observing that the *form* of *Marcus Tullius Cicero* is distinctly odd. After all (and this is a point Randall should have made) the theatres were closed by the Puritan-Parliamentarians throughout the civil wars and Interregnum (1642-60). That this explicitly anti-royalist piece of writing takes the form of a play therefore needs sustained analysis. For while many works in play form were published during this period, this work seems to be unique. According to my calculation from the information given in W. W. Greg's authoritative *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration* (4 vols., 1939-59), the number of such publications in play-form printed in the years around 1651 were as follows:

1648	=	8
1649	=	10
1650	=	1

1651	=	11
1652	=	7
1653	=	17

They fall into several categories: the first is tracts on political thought couched in the form of socratic dialogue; a second is of burlesque or farce, which are for the most part crude and unsophisticated, with such titles as *The Committee-Man Curried* (1647) or *The Jovial Crew or the World Turned Ranter* (1651). Both these genres are generally short works aimed at a popular readership—typically 4-10 leaves in length. The other main categories are either new translations of Greek and Roman plays (examples in these years include a version of Sophocles' *Electra* or of Seneca's *Hippolytus*) or are printings or reprintings of pre-war works, such as Abraham Cowley's *The Guardian*, John Tatham's *The Distracted State* or a series of plays by William Cartwright, "late Proctor of Oxford University." What is curious about *Marcus Tullius Cicero* is that it is a full-length piece of dramatic writing laid out as though it had been staged. This must raise the question as to whether it was in fact written, or substantially written, before the closing of the theatres in 1642, and published (almost certainly with embellishments) because it could be so readily adapted to the political circumstances of 1650-51.

This is not just an idle speculation. The most serious lapse in Professor Randall's essay is his failure to address fully the significance of the near-contemporary attribution of the authorship of *Marcus Tullius Cicero* to Fulke Greville, 1st Lord Brooke (1544-1628), distinguished poet, playwright and stoic philosopher. Randall notes this attribution in his footnote 3, but his dismissal of the suggestion is rather cavalier. It has been accepted not only by Donald Wing in his *Short Title Catalogue of Books printed in . . . 1641-1700* (3 vols., 1945-51) both under the title and under author (and note that the editors of the revised edition (1981) have not changed the ascription), but also by G. K. Fortescue in his *Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers and Manuscripts Collected by George Thomason, 1640-1661* (2 vols., 1908), vol. 1, 829. Furthermore, although Randall says that it has been "discredited or ignored" by students of Brooke, none of those authorities have offered grounds for their rejection of what is a solid near-contemporary attribution.

I have not had time to undertake the detailed work necessary to give a clear lead on this matter. All I can say is that we know that Brooke destroyed much of his writing at the time of his involvement on the fringes of the Earl of Essex's conspiracy in 1601; and that amongst the works then destroyed was a drama on the theme of Antony and Cleopatra. We can readily see that Brooke's other writings are full of admiration for the Roman stoics. A reading of the play does not rule *Marcus Tullius Cicero* out at all as the work of Brooke. It is therefore unfortunate indeed that Professor Randall addresses this issue only in so oblique and casual a way. It may well destroy completely the case he is seeking to build up for seeing the play as the product of events following the execution of Charles I.

But let us for the moment recognize that nothing is certain, that the ascription to Brooke is false and that any apparent links between the play and the events of 1650-51 were more than bits and pieces grafted on to an earlier play. Then we have to admit that the contexts within which this 1651 play came to be written can be much more fully developed than they are by Professor Randall.

Firstly, and least importantly, he does not cite any of the work of recent years which examines the "political" content of plays in the 1620s and 1630s, and the uses of typography—the modelling of past events so as to allow oblique comment on the present. (A list of major studies of this kind are given as Appendix A). Secondly, and more importantly, there is no reference at all to the greatest single political debate of 1651, the debate over the binding nature of the Engagement (the solemn undertaking to uphold the Republic demanded of all adult males). This was the issue which generated dozens of tracts and some of most subtle pens and powerful minds of the period, most notably the preface to Hobbes' *Leviathan* if not *Leviathan* itself; and the poetry of Andrew Marvell. It seems to me unlikely that a reading of *Marcus Tullius Cicero* in the light of that debate would be fruitless. (A guide to the historiography of the Engagement Controversy is given as Appendix B.) Thirdly and crucially, Randall makes no reference to, nor makes use of, the work of historians like John Pocock, Blair Worden and Jonathan Scott upon classical republican thought in the 1650s. Recognition of the

importance of this work would remove some of his bemusement and greatly assist him in placing the play into a very precise set of concerns in 1650-51 (the essay by Worden in *History and Imagination* is especially important; for a list of key works, see Appendix C).

Professor Randall is keen to stress the Senecan quality of the drama; and a first reading makes me endorse that. He is not quite so keen to spell out the implications of that. The point he never quite gets round to demonstrating, although it is implied at several points in his essay, is that underlying the hatred of royal tyranny and of military upstarts, which *Marcus Tullius Cicero* certainly displays, is a positive piece of advocacy: aristocratic constitutionalism—that tradition that sees the ancient nobility as the protectors of national interest and civil liberties against both foreign enemies and overmighty kings. As Randall points out several times, the word “patrician” is liberally applied to Cicero and his values look very much like those of an Algernon Sidney or a Henry Neville. I would suggest that an awareness of the anti-democratic, fundamentally aristocratic nature of the English republican tradition in the 1640s and 1650s would have afforded the key to unlock the deeper purposes of this play.

Thus I would suggest that while indeed it could be that Julius Caesar, Octavian Caesar and Marcus Antonius are (in the conception of the play’s author or adaptor) types for Charles I, Charles II and Cromwell, as Professor Randall suggests, we need not be so negative as he is that we have “to draw a blank in trying to identify a specific English Cicero from 1650-1651.” Let us look at some more parallels. A band of conspirators (*Brutus, Cassius et alii* in Ancient Rome; the Regicides in 1649) struck down the tyrannical Caesar/Charles I. But their attempt to settle a popular republic is disrupted by the naked ambition of the youthful blood-heir (Octavius/Charles II) and brilliant general (Antonius/Cromwell). Meanwhile a group of incorruptible patricians who stayed aloof from the assassination/Regicide but who represent the older values of a political society under a rule of law and civility, and a disdain for religious fanaticism of all sorts (Cicero and his patrician group/the addressees of the play) decide whether or not to abandon their stoic refusal to get dragged into the hurly-burly of power politics and to make their

own bid to take power to preserve ancient liberties. There is, of course, a group in 1650-51 who fulfil the Cicero role perfectly. I am thinking of that group of English peers who had attempted to prevent civil war in 1641-42 by seizing power, who had fought against Charles but withdrawn into an aloof neutrality in 1648-49 as the machiavels and religious fanatics had determined to destroy him, and who now stood alarmedly by as Charles II and Cromwell slugged it out with the prize for either increasingly looking likely to be his personal dictatorship. (For this dimension see the article by J. S. A. Adamson, "The Baronial Context of the English Civil War," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 40 [1990] and his forthcoming book on the Parliamentary Peerage in the 1640s.) In the 40s B.C., the play tells us, Cicero was too hamstrung by his own political prissiness to wrest control from the warring generals. It could end like that again. But just as the preachers of the monthly Fast Sermons used the Old Testament trials and tribulations of the Israelites not to predict outcomes, but to suggest the choices God gives and the consequences of right and wrong choices, so in 1651, the author or adaptor of *Marcus Tullius Cicero* may not have been foretelling the fate of a contemporary Cicero, but offering to that contemporary Cicero some false choices. Do nothing, the playwright says, and the tyranny of a new Augustus or a new Mark Anthony is assured; be insufficiently machiavellian and you will end up as Cicero did (and as the peerage, with the abolition of the House of Lords, metaphorically had been) mutilated and silenced; but come out fighting and deploying all your skills and resources, and you can effect a very different outcome: you can safeguard ancient liberties.

If these are fruitful hypotheses, one would begin to look to the likes of the Earls of Manchester and Northumberland or Viscount Say and Sele as the audience for this play. It is to their circles that I would go for authors and literary promoters.

Ironically these names too lead us back to Fulk Greville, Lord Brooke. Greville's lifetime hero and the friend of his early manhood was Sir Philip Sidney, with whom he served in the Netherlands. Philip was the great Protestant champion, whose life and death represented the commitment of the English nobility and gentry to a

code of knightly honour in the cause of God. Greville was the man who prepared Sidney's *Arcadia* for posthumous publication. He also wrote a *Life of Sir Philip Sidney* which was (suggestively) first published in 1652. In the 1640s the principal inheritors of the Sidney legend included his descendant Algernon Sidney, one of the leading 'classical republicans' of the 1650s. Brooke's son and heir, Robert, 2nd Lord Brooke, was, until his death in battle during the civil war, the closest political ally of the Viscount Saye and Sele. All roads from this play, it seems, lead to the same circles.

Much of what I have written is, given constraints of time upon me, pure speculation. I have done no more than suggest that there is more to be discovered about this intriguing unplayed play. If others who read Professor Randall are similarly challenged to see further into the play than he has, it is a tribute to his pioneering work, not a rebuke to it for falling short of the mark.

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APPENDIX A

The following is a list of the major works published in recent years that examine the relationship between the theatre and politics in the period up to and into the civil wars. The much more extensive and specific writing on this subject can be discovered from the bibliographies and footnotes of these seminal works:

- Butler, Martin. *Theatre and Crisis, 1632-1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
 Heinemann, Margot. *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980.
 Patterson, Annabel. *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984.
 Sharpe, Kevin. *Criticism and Compliment: The Politics of Literature in the England of Charles I*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
 --- and Steven N. Zwicker, eds. *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.

APPENDIX B

This is a list of the major studies of the Engagement Controversy, the debate about the nature of political obligation which was raging at the time of the appearance of *The Tragedy of . . . Marcus Tullius Cicero*.

- Burgess, Glenn. "Usurpation, Obligation and Obedience in the Engagement Controversy." *Historical Journal* 29 (1986): 515-36.
- Judson, Margaret Atwood. *From Tradition to Political Reality: A Study of the Ideas Set Forth in Support of the Commonwealth Government in England 1649-1653*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1980.
- Knachel, Philip A. Introduction. *The Case of the Commonwealth of England, Stated*. By Marchamont Nedham. Ed. P. A. Knachel. Folger Documents of Tudor and Stuart Civilization. Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1969. ix-xlii.
- Pocock, J. G. A. *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of the English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Skinner, Quentin. "The Ideological Context of Hobbes' Political Theory." *Historical Journal* 9 (1966): 286-317.
- . "Thomas Hobbes et la défense du pouvoir 'de facto.'" *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 98 (1973): 131-54.
- . "Conquest and Consent." *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement 1646-1660*. Ed. G. E. Aylmer. Rev. ed. London: Macmillan, 1974. 79-98.
- Tuck, R. *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979.
- Wallace, J. M. *Destiny His Choice: The Loyalism of Andrew Marvell*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968.

APPENDIX C

This is a list of the most important works on the classical republican thinkers of the mid-seventeenth century.

- Fink, Z. S. *The Classical Republicans: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in 17th Century England*. 2nd ed. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1962.
- Pocock, J. G. A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1975.
- . Introduction. *The Political Works of James Harrington*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977. 1-152.
- Raab, Felix. *The English Face of Machiavelli*. London: RKP, 1964.
- Scott, Jonathan. *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623-1677*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Skinner, Quentin. "History and Ideology in the English Revolution." *Historical Journal* 8 (1965): 151-178.
- Worden, Blair. "Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution." *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*. Ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden. London: Gerald Duckworth, 1981. 182-200.
- . "The Commonwealth Kidney of Algernon Sidney." *Journal of British Studies* 24 (1985): 1-40.