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## Teaching Preston's *Cambises* in the Undergraduate Classroom

by Shiladitya Sen

Whatever success Thomas Preston's *Cambises* may have had in its own time, it has subsequently encountered near universal derision from scholars, readers, and students. The play is a virtual non-entity in the college classroom, with it being a rare student—undergraduate or graduate—who is even aware of its existence, let alone have read it. While I would not argue that *Cambises* is a literary masterpiece, I would argue, however, that it can be a useful addition to the undergraduate drama classroom. Particularly so with regard to teaching the historical development of early modern drama, especially the manner in which the Renaissance plays that students are more familiar with had their roots firmly entwined within the lesser-studied dramas that preceded them.

Some of the elements for which *Cambises* is most criticized are its “uncomfortable marriage of tragic, melodramatic and comic elements; its awkward appropriation of native morality and classical techniques; its impulse toward bombastic declamation and gratuitous sensationalism; and its episodic sequence of tableaux” (Myers 367). Nearly all of these emerge from its historical position at the cusp of early modern drama.

Published ca.1569, *Cambises* displays a fascinating mixture of the elements which appeared in earlier morality plays such as *Everyman* and those that would emerge shortly in the works of Marlowe, Kyd, Shakespeare and others. In my experience, many undergraduate students have a tendency to view individual works and literary periods in isolation, seeing them not as contextually descended from and mediated by previous (and surrounding) texts and cultural movements, but as if they leapt Athena-like into being from the foreheads of their creators. Particularly so in the case of a 'genius' like Shakespeare, who almost all undergraduates have encountered even if they know little about the early modern period or the history of drama. Explicating how the roots of a complex character like Iago lie in the earlier history of English drama requires detailed information and instruction. *Cambises*, which makes its connections to preceding drama overt, lends itself more easily to such a discussion and can usefully lay the groundwork for such contextual discussions of later, more sophisticated texts. The fact that Preston's play is new to virtually all undergraduates is a benefit in this regard, since it can be used as somewhat of a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, against which to test their preconceptions about the history and nature of Renaissance drama.

One among the elements that often confuse students when first encountering *Cambises* is the variety of names in the play's dramatis personae. The historical characters Cambises (namely Cambyses II of Persia) and his brother Smerdis (the Greek version of the Persian original Bardiya) are accompanied by figures such as the judge

Sisamnes and the counsel Praxaspes from Herodotus. In sharp contrast are the ruffian soldiers Huf, Ruf and Snuf, or the clownish countrymen, Hob and Lob, whose names smack of low English comedy. Even more surprising for most students are the allegorically named figures, such as Counsel, Small Ability and Commons' Complaint, derived from the medieval morality play. The habitual confusion of students at encountering this motley collection of characters is actually beneficial for the classroom, since it allows for discussion and analysis of precisely what assumptions about drama they are bringing to the table. If such characters seem unrealistic to them, why is that so, and what exactly do they view as realistic? What does the nature of the dramatic personae indicate about Preston's (and, presumably, his audience's) ideas about realistic characterization? Is there even a place for realism in early modern drama and, if so, how does it deviate from later conceptions of the term? What exactly did Preston and his audience expect of dramatic characters? These are all valuable questions, in my estimation, and the nature of *Cambises* naturally brings them to the fore. Engaging with them also leads inevitably to an exploration of the positioning of this play in the history of drama. I should note at this point that I consider *Cambises* best used in a class studying early modern drama, an introductory drama class reading widely across periods, or a Renaissance survey. This is particularly true for courses where students will read both a morality play and later Renaissance drama, since the aforementioned questions and discussion will be best facilitated by students previously reading a

morality play and prove most fruitful if they subsequently lead to later Elizabethan or Jacobean dramas.

While other characters in *Cambises* might be useful in the above regard, most effective of all is the character of greatest complexity—the Vice, Ambidexter. Like the rest of the play, Ambidexter stands between periods and identities, half an allegorical personification and half a villain with complex characterization. Similarly, he connects the two plots of the play, linking the corrupt royal world of Cambises and Smerdis to that of low humor found in the ruffians and bumpkins. Ambidexter moves seamlessly between these worlds and even into that beyond the stage, being the one character who constantly addresses the audience, as on his first appearance:

Ha, my name, my name would you so fain knowe?  
Yea iwis shall ye, and that with all speed:  
I haue forgot it therefore I cannot showe,  
A, A, now I haue it, I haue it in deed.  
My name is Ambidexter I signifie one,  
That with bothe hands finely can play:  
Now with king Cambices and by and by gone,  
Thus doo I run this and that way (2.146-152)

In courses which study *Cambises* in conjunction with the earlier moralities and later Renaissance drama, students can see the direct line of descent from the earlier Vice to Ambidexter and then through him to figures such as Edmund in *King Lear*, similarly walking the stage and speaking to the audience before beguiling Edgar and Gloucester. Ambidexter provides a richly concrete example of the gradual development and shifts

in early modern drama, a microcosm of what *Cambises* as a whole can be used to achieve in the classroom.

An additional subject that Ambidexter's interactions with the audience raise is that of metatheater, specifically the early modern drama's propensity for explicitly conveying to the audience an awareness of the performance as fictive and performative. As implied in the earlier reference to realism and student preconceptions, in my experience, most undergraduates find the idea of metatheatricality unexpected and strange. Resultantly, many of them also find it utterly fascinating and introducing them to the concept can lead to productive discussion and critical engagement. Considering the ubiquity of metatheatrical material in early modern drama, a keen awareness of it is important, potentially leading students to view such plays with an awareness of historical context and a sense of the difference between their modern perspectives and those which Elizabethan playgoers would have shared. With most students not being trained in the subject, they are better able to perceive metatheatrical material when it is as obvious as in *Cambises*, which lays the foundation for deciphering later, subtler uses of the technique. Analysis of how the play's Prologue and Epilogue function is also useful to this end. Additionally, for courses which place emphasis on awareness of staging practices and the physical spaces these plays were written for, as mine usually do, characters such as Ambidexter are priceless, since their lines tend to make explicit the need to consider such issues. Where does Ambidexter stand when speaking to the

audience and not to other characters? How does he move? How do choices in these areas affect the play's performance and perception by an audience? Questions such as these can lead to active discussion and better critical study of Renaissance drama.

Ambidexter reflects the double nature of *Cambises* in additional areas. Partly due to his ancestry, there is "undeniably an element of the grotesquely comic in the characteristics and actions of the Vice, but there is also much that is serious" (Wentersdorf 56). He brawls on stage with the ruffians and is beaten off by Meretrix, and also crows over the dying Cambises at the play's end. Here, ironically, in the mixing of dramatic genres that Philip Sidney bemoans in *The Defence of Poesy*, we find the combination of entertainment and education which Sidney praised poetry for achieving. The combination is, of course, unsurprising in early modern drama and "Preston, as a man of the theater ... would seek to please his audience as well as to teach his lesson" (Fishman 202). Like Sidney, undergraduate students sometimes have difficulty navigating such shifts in genre and tone. Here too, *Cambises* (as indicated in its title, "A lamentable tragedy *mixed ful of pleasant mirth*") stands usefully between the monotone seriousness (with slight comic touches) of *Everyman* and the more complicated interweavings in later Renaissance theatre. Analysis of this "most interesting and successful of hybrid morality-history plays" (Myers 367) in this regard can fruitfully prepare students for continued awareness of such elements in other drama.

The above suggestions and areas are only a few that can be used with *Cambises* in the classroom, but it would take a longer essay to delineate all such possibilities. A few critics, such as Eugene D. Hill (in "The First Elizabethan Tragedy: A Contextual Reading of *Cambises*."), have provided creative arguments for why the play is more complex and richer than it seems at first and would reward greater critical study. Even without venturing that far, *Cambises* can certainly be a successful addition to the undergraduate drama classroom. Standing squarely between the morality play and what students commonly think of as Renaissance drama, Preston's play is an excellent tool for conveying a sense of the history and development of early modern theatre in England, while raising student awareness of issues of performance which are valuable in all study of theater.

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