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What is a Greek Source on the Early English Stage? Fifteen New Essays

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Tania Demetriou

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Translating Greek History into Humanist Neo-Senecan Drama: William Alexander's *Croesus* (1604)

Janice Valls-Russell

Abstract

In 1604 William Alexander (1577-1640), the future First Earl of Stirling, published *Croesus*. He included this closet drama and three others – *Darius*, *Alexandraean Tragedy* and *Julius Caesar* – in a single volume in 1607. Entitled *The Monarchicke Tragedies* and dedicated to James I of England, the volume was reprinted in 1616. The four plays were published again in 1637 with non-dramatic writings under the title *Recreations with the Muses*. This essay focuses on *Croesus*, a rare instance of the dramatization of the Lydian king's fate in spite of what has been termed its 'tragic potential'. It examines how Alexander reworks material from Greek sources, principally Herodotus' *Histories*, Plutarch's *Life of Solon* and Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, to adapt the historians' prose accounts to a dramatic format in verse. In his expansion, reorganisation and generic restructuring of the source material, which was available in Latin and vernacular translation as well as in Greek editions, Alexander crafts what we might term a Greek Senecan tragedy à la française, with the absence of violent action on stage, unity of place, long speeches, choruses, a messenger and the addition of a female character. The article closes with a brief discussion of Pierre Mousson's *Croesus liberatus* (1621), which bears resemblances to Alexander's play.

Keywords: *Croesus*; William Alexander; closet drama; chorus; Pierre Mousson

"Those famous ruines of extended states"[1]

In 1604 William Alexander (1577-1640) – a Scottish poet and courtier who followed King James VI and I to London to become "gentleman of the Princes priuie chamber"[2] and future First Earl of Stirling – published *The Tragedie of Croesus*. The play appeared in

1 William Alexander, "To his Sacred Majestie", l. 98 (Kastner and Charlton 1921, 6).

2 That is how Alexander is presented on the title page of the 1607 edition of *The Monarchicke Tragedies*.

a volume entitled *The Monarchicke Tragedies*, with an earlier play, *The Tragedie of Darius*, and was bound in some copies with a poetic cycle, *Aurora*, and *A Paraenesis to the Prince*.[3] In 1607, Alexander published a new edition of *The Monarchicke Tragedies* as a cycle of four dramas: *Croesus*, *Darius*, *The Alexandraean Tragedy* and *Julius Caesar*. Dedicated to James, like the two previous editions, this volume was reprinted in 1616. The quartet was published again in 1637 in an elegant folio entitled *Recreations with the Muses*, now dedicated to Charles I, which included a selection of Alexander's poetic writings: *Paraenesis*; *Doomes-Day*, an 11,000-line religious epic inspired by Du Bartas's *Semaines*;[4] and the first book of *Jonathan*, "An heroicke Poeme intended".[5]

Alexander seems to have written, and he certainly published, *Croesus* after *Darius*, but the plays were printed in the chronological order of events. *Croesus* thus becomes to some extent a prequel to *Darius*, which leads into *The Alexandraean Tragedy*, with the Roman tragedy of *Julius Caesar* closing the cycle.[6] In his *Paraenesis to the Prince*, Alexander insists on the useful instruction to be derived from the glories and failings of ancient rulers, as if flagging by anticipation the didactic relevance of his incipient dramatic project, which combines cautionary tales and mirrors for princes. This message he also conveys in the dedicatory poem to Charles I that opens the folio volume *Recreation with the Muses*:

> Then unto whom more justly could I give
> Those famous ruines of extended states
> (Which did the world of liberty deprive

3 *Darius* was first published in 1603 in Edinburgh by Robert Waldegrave and again, singly, in 1604. *A paraenesis to the Prince* was also published in a separate edition in 1604 in London by Richard Field. On the binding of Alexander's poetic writings with his plays, see Kastner and Charlton 1921 (vol. 1), cxciv-cxcvii; 1929 (vol. 2), xxix-xxxiii; and Mapstone 2007, 138.

4 An edition of the first four *Hours* (totalling twelve in the 1637 folio) was published in 1614, and a MS has been tentatively dated 1613.

5 That is how the poem is listed in the table of contents in the 1637 edition, sig. A3*r*.

6 The domination of Persian rule is the endpoint of *Croesus* and to some extent the starting point of *Darius*, after the death of Cyrus and unsuccessful rule of his son Cambyses (Mapstone 2007, 141).

> By force, or fraud, to reare Tyrannick seats)
> Then unto thee, who may and will not live
> Like those proud Monarchs borne to stormy fates?
> (Kastner and Charlton 1921, 97-102)

The overarching coherence emphasised by the title *Monarchicke Tragedies* and the context of publication account for a critical reception that has tended to focus on the tragedies at the expense of Alexander's other works.[7] Scholars such as Domenico Lovascio and Daniel Cadman have approached the plays from the perspective of their contribution to early modern debates about kingship and tyranny, legitimacy and usurpation, in the tradition of French humanist tragedy and British closet drama (Lovascio 2016; Cadman 2016). More specifically, discussions of *Croesus* have turned on the way the tragedy opposes contrasting visions of statecraft, Croesus' self-serving ambition and Cyrus' moderation and military skills: Cadman suggests that an astute reader tempted to associate James with Cyrus may simultaneously "observe various analogous character traits" (137) between James and Croesus, such as self-delusion and a propensity to let oneself be blinded by the flattery of those Alexander terms "Minions gallant" (*Croesus* 2827), as Croesus realises after his defeat at the hands of Cyrus.[8] This resonates with Alexander's advice to the Prince in *Paraenesis* on the importance of choosing one's counsellors wisely. *Croesus* has also been read against James's own writings on the monarchy, principally *Basilikon Doron*, attention being drawn to passages that concur with the King's own neo-Stoic vision of good governance: Astrid Stilma (2013) identifies James with the wise Solon, rather than the wilful Croesus. Solon's dismissal of Croesus' material wealth as illusory and his warnings against the uncertainties of personal and political fortune are initially shrugged off by the Lydian king, who belatedly discovers, after a number of setbacks, the truth of Solon's perceptiveness.

7 Peter Auger has carried out important work on Alexander's *Doomes-Day*: see for instance Auger 2010.

8 Unless otherwise indicated, all act, scene and line references to *Croesus* are to the 1637 edition edited by Kastner and Charlton (1921, 1929). Volume 1 contains the dramatic works, volume 2 the non-dramatic works.

Overall, discussion of *Croesus* has tended to focus on the play's didactic dimension and, consequently, on the two figures that dominate the opening and closing acts, respectively Solon and Cyrus. What I am interested in exploring here instead, is Alexander's dramatic craft and the writing techniques whereby he shapes his play from episodes in Greek history which he selects from Herodotus' *Histories* (1.6-92 on Croesus and 1.93-130 on Cyrus), Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (mainly Books 6 and 7) and Plutarch's "Life of Solon" (*Parallel Histories*). The attention with which Alexander prepared the successive editions of his work, and more especially the final one, carefully revising his own text well beyond a process of anglicization that erased Scottish terms and turns of phrase to appeal to English readers, suggests a literary commitment which some of his contemporaries, such as his friend William Drummond of Hawthornden, commended.

Splicing Greek "sundrye tales"

Herodotus, Plutarch and Xenophon were available in Greek as well as in Latin and vernacular translations, which included French and English. Herodotus' *Histories* was translated into: Latin by Lorenzo Valla (published in 1494; reprinted by Henri Estienne in 1566 with an introduction which is an apology for Herodotus [against Plutarch's attacks], and reprinted again by Henri II Estienne in 1592 with parallel Greek and Latin texts);[9] French by Saliat, the first three books appearing in 1552, all nine books in 1556; Italian; and, partially, in English, by "B. R.", possibly Barnaby Rich (Books 1 and 2 were published in 1584).[10] Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* was translated into Latin (1540), French (by Jacques de Vintimille, 1542) and English (by William Barker [Bercker], 1552 [Grogan 2007, 63], all 8 books, 1567). Plutarch's *Parallel Histories* was available in translations into Latin, French (Jacques Amyot, 1559), English (North's translation of Amyot, 1579). Several of those versions were

9 I shall be quoting from the 1584 Frankfurt edition.

10 See Francesco Dall'Olio's excellent survey, in his article published in this volume, of the expanding knowledge and availability of the *Histories* in Renaissance England and, consequently, their growing popularity.

available in Scottish libraries, such as those of William Drummond of Hawthornden and James, which the King inherited in part from his mother.[11] Alexander's various works show a knowledge of French and Latin, leaving it open whether he mastered Greek. As will appear, his writing technique carries distinct traces of near-direct echoes, but overall tends to reflect a wide-ranging knowledge, with stylistic effects and imagery which seem to have been harvested from memory rather than direct consultation of volumes around him. While further research is needed, this would, with caution, seem to confirm what L.E. Kastner and H.B. Charlton wrote almost a century ago in the introduction to volume 2 of their edition of *Recreations with the Muses*:

> his habitual manner of using information derived from reading is such that it is seldom possible to determine precisely what the immediate source was. His allusions are commonly prompted by memory, not adopted directly from a text under his eye. It is impossible, for instance, to be quite certain whether he read Greek or no, though he was certainly familiar with many Greek authors whose writings were accessible both in Greek and in Latin. Consequently, his works disclose the range of his knowledge rather than the catalogue of his library. (1929, x)

What is certain is that, when he came to writing *Croesus*, Alexander knew the various Greek narratives intimately – in translation if not in Greek. Leaving aside Croesus' accession to the throne and conquests as narrated in the first section of Book 1 of Herodotus, Alexander opens his play with Solon's visit to the Lydian court,

11 Herodotus may have been available to Alexander in translation. Drummond of Hawthornden had an Italian version (Mapstone, 2007, 141n38, citing MacDonald 1971, 218). James (when James VI) had a French version (Mapstone, 2007, 141n38, citing Warner 1893, xxxiv), as well as a second one which seems to have belonged to Mary (Warner 1893, lix), in addition to a Greek copy which seems to have belonged to Mary (Warner 1893, xliii). James had two copies of Amyot's translation of Plutarch (Warner 1893, xxxiv and xl). According to Warner, James also had several copies of Xenophon in Greek and Latin, and in French (Warner 1893, xxxix). James commissioned a new translation of Xenophon from Philemon Holland for Prince Henry, but it appeared in 1632, after the Prince's death and with a dedication to Charles instead, published by Holland's son Henry (Grogan 2007, 65-6).

before tracing the king's downward trajectory through the disastrous impact of his wealth- and power-driven *hubris* on his private and public life, to hint finally at a possible form of redemption when he recalls Solon's advice. Solon thus frames the play, as a character in the first two scenes of the play and as a philosopher remembered for his wisdom in act 5. Croesus' downfall is traced first through personal tragedy – a premonitory dream, followed by the death of his son (acts 3 and 4) – then on the political plane, with his misguided decision to fight the Persians, whereupon Alexander shifts the emphasis from Croesus to Cyrus (act 5).

Alexander structures the play by selecting and splicing material principally from his three Greek sources. Acts 1 and 2 stage Solon's visit to the court of Croesus, where, as reported by Herodotus (1.30-3), he relates the exemplary tales of those he considered the happiest of men: not Croesus, as the king expected, but Tellus of Athens, who fathered fine sons, all of whom survived, and died a noble death defending Athens on the battlefield; and Cleobis and Biton, who were so devoted to their mother that they yoked themselves to her cart to take her to the festival of Hera and died from the effort. Plutarch's "Life of Solon" also provides material for Solon's visit, his exchange with Croesus on whom he attempts to impress the illusion of wealth and power, his ensuing dialogue with Aesop, which Alexander expands into a whole scene, also drawing on material from Plutarch's "Life of Phocion" and "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend" (*Moralia*). Herodotus provides the main material (1.34-46) for acts 3 and 4, which foreground Croesus' role as father: his relationship with his two sons, Atis and his (unnamed) dumb brother; Croesus' premonitory dream about Atis;[12] Atis' marriage; Croesus' obsessive protection of Atis; the boar hunt and the accidental death of Atis at the hands of Adrastus, a stranger to whom Croesus had provided shelter; Adrastus' suicide. In act 5 the play switches from Croesus' palace to Cyrus' camp. Herodotus is once again the main source in act 5 scene 1 for the more sensational details of Cyrus' birth, his exposure, childhood, conquests and the role of Harpagus in saving the infant Cyrus from his grandfather Astyages (1.107-30). Xenophon provides the exemplary story of

12 I follow Alexander's spelling, rather than Atys.

Cyrus' ally Abradatas and his virtuous wife Panthea (*Cyr.* 6.1.45-50; 6.3.35-7; 6.4.2-11); the death of Abradatas (*Cyr.* 7.1.29-32); and the death of Panthea (*Cyr.* 7.3.1-16).[13] Switching back to Herodotus, Alexander ends the scene with Cyrus deciding to kill Croesus, who has been taken captive. In act 5 scene 2, Croesus' dumb son cries out to save his father (*Hist.*, 1.85). Herodotus also provides the account of Croesus' defeat and his death sentence on the pyre (1.86). As he prepares to die at the stake, Croesus remembers Solon's wisdom – and his regrets, overheard by Cyrus, save him from death (Hdt. *Hist.*, 1.86-7; Plu., "Solon"). This enables Croesus to spare his city from being totally plundered (Hdt. *Hist.*, 1.88-90).

Each in their way, Herodotus and Xenophon, like Plutarch, privilege a dynamic approach to writing history, through embedded narratives, dialogues, debates and reported speech. Their rhetoric plays on the heightening of expectations, and variations. Through such diversity of effects, the story of Croesus and more especially the account of his death, all combine to provide material that lends itself to dramatic transposition. Looking at Herodotus' version, scholars such as D.N. Levin (1960) and Bernard Laurot (1995) have drawn attention to the accumulation of private and public misfortunes that befall Croesus, in punishment, as Herodotus says, for "thinking that he was the happiest man in the world" even after Solon tried to make him see things otherwise.[14] This is translated by Valla as "sperans videlicet se inter homines beatissimum esse" (Herodotus/Valla 1584, "Clio Lib. 1" 11); and interpreted by "B. R." as: he "not mistrusting, but that the lotte would have fallen to hym selfe to have exceeded all others in blessedness" (1584, fol. 8*v*). More directly, Alexander's Croesus crows, "did you ever know / A man more blest then I in all respects?" (329-30). Suggesting that Herodotus could have been influenced by his exposure to dramatists during his stay in Athens, Laurot (1995, 101-3) reads in Herodotus' account of Croesus' private misfortunes – and the tragic triangulation of Croesus, Atis and Adrastus – echoes of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, with an opening scene of citizens supplicating the king to end the pestilence that is

13 References are to Xenophon 1914, in the Loeb Classical Library.

14 Unless otherwise indicated, as when I quote from Valla or "B. R.", references to Herodotus are to Waterfield's translation (Herodotus 1998).

destroying the city, and the Chorus' comment on Oedipus' reversal of fortune (1524-30), and *Antigone*, where Creon's lament that he has killed his son unwillingly is glossed by the Chorus' comment on wisdom and happiness (1339-53).[15] Adrastus' accidental killing of Atis, Laurot suggests, may recall Eurytion's similarly accidental death at the hands of Peleus during the hunt for the Calydonian boar, as told in the Meleager tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides (Laurot 1995, 102). One may go one step further and remember that Peleus' story is similar to that of Adrastus in that he is the unwilling author of two deaths: he kills his brother Phocus (accidentally or deliberately, according to different sources), flees, is purified by Eurytion, whom he accidentally kills (Apollod., *The Library* 3.12.6-7, 3.13.2; A.R., *Argonautica*, 1.90-3).[16]

Alert to the tragic potential of the Lydian king's trajectory, Alexander heightens effects by emphasising some events, drawing on all three historians or choosing between their various versions. Where Herodotus claims (1.95) to have sought – in "B. R."'s translation – "to set downe . . . a playne and euident truth" while knowing that accounts are "found to vary in three sundrye tales" (1584, fol. 32v), Alexander reassembles the "sundrye tales" of his three authors, respecting some narrative sequences and reorganising others. He introduces his reader/auditor/spectator[17] to Adrastus, the stranger who arrives at the Lydian court after accidentally killing his brother and is offered "Sanctuary" (1223) in the court of Croesus. A sense of impending danger is introduced by Adrastus' name and its possible association with Adrasteia, a byname for Nemesis (Dillery

15 All references to Sophocles are to Sophocles, 1924, in the Loeb Classical Library.

16 References are to Apollodorus 1921 and Apollonius Rhodius 2009, both in the Loeb Classical Library.

17 The attention Alexander paid to the publication of his plays, which he revised between editions, suggests a self-fashioning as an author. The appeal of the drama format does not necessarily signify that the plays were performed, nor does it exclude that possibility, even though no record of any performance seems to have been currently identified (Wiggins, 2011- [vol. 5], 95-7). As Silvia Bigliazzi reminds us in her introduction to "'Well staged Syllables': From Classical to Early Modern Metres in Drama", "the realm of early modern drama . . . does not always mean the stage" (Bigliazzi 2021a, 6).

2019, 34), the goddess of retribution,[18] as well as by the report of his unvoluntary killing of his own brother which caused him to flee his land and seek shelter at the court of Croesus; the premonitory tension further builds up when Croesus, having failed to persuade Atis to stay away from a hunt for a monstrous boar, asks Adrastus to watch over him. The reader expects the worst when, later, in a much-expanded sequence, Adrastus gives free rein to his sense of guilt and despair, before the "Chorus of some country-men", listed among "The Persons Names who Speake" (Kastner and Charlton 1921, 11) reveals the death of Atis, chorically leading into the voicing of his loss by Croesus: only then are the circumstances of the accidental death of Atis at Adrastus' hands revealed. The scene thus builds up a sense of dramatic tension and expectancy, which reaches a new climax when Adrastus' suicide is reported by the same Chorus (1567-78).

In act 5, Alexander draws on the episodes connected with Cyrus from Herodotus, whose account of his childhood he prefers to Xenophon's. Whereas Xenophon depicts a mutually affectionate, enriching relationship between Cyrus and his maternal grandfather Astyages, the latter, according to Herodotus, orders one of his trusted followers, Harpagus, to kill the infant at birth (1.108ff.); on discovering that he has disobeyed and spared young Cyrus, he has Harpagus' son killed and served to him at a banquet (1.119). Alexander once again rethreads the sequence, placing Harpagus' dramatic accounts of Cyrus' childhood and of his own son's death *before*, rather than *after*, Croesus' capture. Alexander then turns to Xenophon for another embedded story, the death of Cyrus' ally Abradatas (*Cyr.* 7.1.29-32) and the suicide of his loyal wife Panthea (*Cyr.* 7.3.1-16), which is narrated by Cyrus in two successive speeches, whereas they are separated by Croesus' capture in *Cyropaedia*. Alexander then reverts to Herodotus for the story of Croesus' capture, imminent death on the pyre and Cyrus' last-minute decision to spare him after hearing him invoke Solon.

18 Cooper's entry for Nemesis mentions that "She is called also Adrastia, of Adrastus, the king, that first constituted to hir a temple", and he also has a sub-entry for "Adrastia nemesis": "The euill lucke of Adrastus: which may be vsed where prowde men be beaten, and as wee say in Englishe, Pryde will haue a fall" (Cooper, 1578). I should like to thank Carla Suthren for drawing my attention to this.

This process of selection and reorganisation of sequences invites amplifications that underscore a didactic intentionality, offsetting Solon's cautionary advice, Croesus' destructive self-delusion and Cyrus' leadership, and build up a dramatic sense of pathos. Alexander's generic reprocessing of the Greek historical material reflects an ability to read, cull and create across sources. Such a favouring of multiple affiliations rather than a single, literary allegiance might have had a disenfranchising effect on the author, with the risk of disparateness or even of a Janus-like play gazing in two opposite directions through an unresolved tension between the equally strong figures of Croesus and Cyrus. Alexander, nevertheless, avoids this through a tightly controlled structuring of the play which he achieves by moulding the material into Senecan shape – a method he opts for with his other plays.

Senecan Trappings

Refashioning non-Senecan material to a Senecan "format", often with a didactic purpose, was not unusual at the time. Biblical stories like those of Jephthah and Mariam were moulded into a classical format recalling the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca by George Buchanan and Elizabeth Cary respectively five decades apart. Oriental tales received similar treatment in plays such as Fulke Greville's *Mustapha*. Alexander's approach similarly follows the model favoured by sixteenth-century French dramatists such as Robert Garnier, whose tragedies, translated into English, contributed to the shaping of the "overtly political, anti-court" plays (Sauer 2006, 84) which were representative of the closet drama associated with the Sidney-Pembroke circle (Phillips 1948-49; Lamb 1981). The "generic features include[d] the trappings of Italianate Senecanism" (Sauer 2006, 84) rather than the conventions of revenge tragedy that were so successful on the London stage and in France, where, alongside French humanist drama, a "théâtre de la cruauté" of French and Latin plays enjoyed a similar vogue before being quashed by neo-classical restraint (Biet 2006). Harpagus may be served his son at a banquet in *Croesus*, but this occurs at a safe, diachronic distance, mediated by a narrated episode in an

unperformed past. Alexander's *Croesus* is no *Titus Andronicus*.

Just as Biblical subjects could be refashioned to the format of classical drama, the matter of Greek histories could also be shaped into Senecan or neo-Senecan drama. Incompatible as the choice of the austere French humanist or closet drama formats might seem given the amplitude of Herodotus' and Xenophon's historical accounts, the stories (*logoi*) embedded within wider-ranging histories are sufficiently compact and self-contained to lend themselves to this processing, providing the play's characters in turn with material for speeches in which they may relate at length inset narratives which mirror features of the main dramatic action. Yet, it must be acknowledged that relatively few dramatists in France or Britain appear to have turned to those Greek historians: records exist of one or two lost university plays that were performed at St. John's College, Oxford in the 1560s and 1590s (Wiggins 2011- [vol. 2], 17-18). Other 'Persian plays' include: Thomas Preston's tragedy *Cambises* (printed 1569) and Richard Farrant's *The Warres of Cyrus* (printed 1594), discussed in this volume by Francesco Dall'Olio and the latter by Silvia Bigliazzi; Jacques de la Taille's *Daire et Alexandre* (1562, published 1573), which Alexander seems to have known when writing *Darius*; Guersens's *Panthée* (1571); Samuel Daniel's *Philotas* (1600-1604).

Alexander's hybridisation of the Greek historical sources through Seneca may be discerned in its main structuring features and the play's verse. Located in Sardis, the seat of Croesus' palace in the earlier scenes and the city conquered by Cyrus in the later ones, *Croesus* respects the Senecan unity of place. The tragedy is divided in 5 acts, each composed of one or two scenes featuring no more than two or three characters, with long speeches and occasional stichomythic exchanges; each act is rounded off with a chorus. Action occurs offstage and is reported by the characters or, occasionally, one of the play's two choruses ("Chorus of some country-men" and "Chorus of all the Lydians", both listed among "the Persons Names who Speake"). The Greek historians' prose is refashioned into alternately rhyming pentameters. Except for the choruses which intervene in a scene and speak in pentameters like the other characters, Alexander uses trimeters for the choruses which round off the scenes and offer a broader, more philosophical

comment on the action: the verse patterns, in 12-line stanzas, with ababcdcd rhymes and a rhyming pair of closing lines, and their visual layout, further emphasise the separate, dramatic function of these choruses, to which I shall be returning.[19]

Through Seneca, Alexander reaches back to the Greek dramatists. He draws on the conventions of supplication and lamentation that travelled from Greek drama and epic into Seneca and Virgil, for his innovative creation of the female character, Caelia, Atis' wife. The Greek texts merely refer to Atis' marriage and Ctesias, in the excerpts from his *Persica* bound with Valla's translation in the 1584 Frankfurt edition, refers to Atis' mother, who jumped to her death from the top of a wall on learning of his death (Herodotus/Valla 1584, "Ex Ctesiae Persicis" 562). But Alexander's Caelia, Andromache-like, tries – and fails – to persuade Atis to stay away from the boar-hunt (1261-84) and speaks a long complaint after her husband's death. The only female character in the play, she is confined to the conventional role of a loyal wife unwilling to survive the death of her husband; this role is taken up in the second half of the play by Panthea. Albeit not on stage, she is a powerful affective presence who seems to break out of Cyrus' narrative and challenge his ability to control events by committing suicide, in spite of his attempt to have "releev'd / [her] of a portion of her woes" (2415-16). The fate of Caelia is refracted in that of Panthea and their bereavement engages the two women in a silent dialogue across the play.

In addition to the structuring of the play and balance between characters and choruses, Alexander's expansions of the Greek narratives (the play totals 2972 lines) take two neo-Senecan directions, as in sixteenth-century French drama: an elevation of judgement, in keeping with the idea that theatre was meant to be instructive, and a heightening of pathos. Thus, Plutarch's brief reference to a conversation between Solon and Aesop after the unsuccessful meeting with Croesus is expanded into a complete scene (2.2) between the austere Athenian and the more pragmatic

19 For a wide-ranging exploration of the reception of classical meters by early modern English and Scottish translators and dramatists, see Bigliazzi 2021.

courtier. The scene combines lengthy dialogues and a stichomythic exchange modelled on Plutarch which begins as follows: "Aesope Who come to Court, must with Kings faults comport. / Solon Who come to Court should truth to Kings report" (503-18). The scene picks up and expands some of the arguments on self-delusion and flattery Solon had previously advanced in his conversation with Croesus and this continuity between the two scenes casts light on Alexander's writing technique: the Greek precedent seems to be echoed in the caution Atreus' assistant voices in Seneca's *Thyestes* – "When fear compels them to praise, fear also turns them into enemies. But one who seeks the tribute of sincere support will want praise from the heart rather than the tongue" (*Thy.* 207-10).[20] Reaching for Plutarch's "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend", Alexander simultaneously turns from "The Life of Solon" to "The Life of Phocion": "They who do freely speake, no treason thinke, / One cannot both your friend and flatterer be" (*Croesus* 381-2) carries an echo of "Antipater . . . can not haue me his friende, and flatterer both" (Plu. 1579, 810). Alexander also found ready-made phrases in collections such as "Mimi publiani, that is to saye, quicke and sentenciouse verses or meters of Publius" [Publilius Syrus] which existed in various forms, including the collection Richard Taverner translated and appended to his collection of Erasmus' *Adages*:[21] one such instance is to be found in "Fortuna vitrea est, quae cum splendet, frangitur" (Erasmus 1539, C4*r*), which becomes: "Ah, ah, our lives are fraile, doe what we can, / And like the brittle glass, break whils't they glance" (363-4). This culling of phrases across a range of texts and genres (inevitably, Alexander also remembers

20 All references to Seneca's tragedies are to Seneca 2018, in the Loeb Classical Library. On the editions available in the Renaissance before 1661, see Ker and Winston (2012, 279-88), Bigliazzi (2021b, 149-50) and Valls-Russell (2020, 28).

21 Signatures for "Mimi Publiani" begin again at A1, after H8. The phrase was a popular one, to be found also, for instance, in Augustine, "ut vitrea laetitia comparetur fragiliter splendida, cui timeatur horribilius ne repente frangatur": "any joy they know is like the glitter of brittle glass, which inspires the fatal thought that it may suddenly be shattered" (Augustine 1957-1972, 4.3).

his Bible)[22] builds a rich fabric of sententiae which invite further quotation and application; materialised as such on the page with commonplace marks, they draw attention to the didactic purpose of Alexander's project and enhance its classical distinction.[23]

Such sententiae frequently round off individual histories, as when Solon's reference to the brittleness of Fortune expounds on his celebration of those "happy children", Cleobis and Biton and their "happy mother" (361, 359). Alert to the affective potential of the Greek stories, Alexander heightens their pathos by expanding expressions of fear, dread or guilt. His Croesus expresses the concern for Atis already voiced in Herodotus by relating in vivid detail a premonitory dream and by providing instructions to keep all sharp instruments out of his range. Similarly, Adrastus' guilt after accidentally killing Atis is couched in a long speech which plays out the imagery of horror one finds in plays such as Seneca's *Thyestes*, or spoken by the ghost of Thyestes in *Agamemnon*; equally, the Senecan vein seems to have been the obvious choice when it comes to recounting Harpagus' experience of being fed his own son, which evidently brings to mind both *Thyestes* and the ghost in *Agamemnon*. Some of Alexander's pentameters replicate the Senecan swift-paced sense of urgency with their cascades of monosyllabic nouns and verbs: "I burn'd, freez'd, doubted, hop'd, despair'd, liv'd, dy'd" (873) – see for instance *Medea*: "NURSE . . . haeret minatur aestuat queritur gemit" (390, "she hesitates, threatens, fumes, laments, groans"); and "MEDEA abdico eiuro abnuo" (507, "I disown them, forswear them, repudiate them"). The imagery conveys fated trajectories of characters being hurtled down labyrinths towards their inescapable doom:

> ADRASTUS Can Heaven behold one stand to staine these times,
> Yet to the Stygian streames not headlong hurld?
> And can th'earth beare one burden'd with such crimes,

22 Solon's "Who think themselves most wise, are greatest fools" (297), signalled by commonplace marks, is a direct echo of Romans 1:22, "When they professed themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Geneva Bible).

23 On the use of printed commonplace marking and on how "these typographical symbols were 'translated' from classical works into English vernacular drama", see Carla Suthren (2020). The universal advice on which stanzas close in *Paraenesis* is similar to the sententiousness in *Croesus*.

> As may provoke the wrath of all the world?
> Why sends not Iove, to have my course confin'd,
> A death-denouncing flash of rumbling Thunder?
> Else (roaring terrour) clouds of circling winde,
> By violence to teare me all a sunder?
> What corner yet unknowne from men remoov'd,
> Both burn'd with rage and freezing in despayre,
> Shall I goe now possesse, to be approv'd,
> Where none but monsters like my self repaire?
> (1375-86)

Elsewhere, leaving it to the reader to recognise such patterns of Senecan rhetoric and imagery, Alexander "erases" acknowledgements of indebtedness that must have appeared as too explicit: a reference to the Scythian Shepheard who served the Medes "Thiestes courses", feeding parents on their "Infants flesh" in the 1607 edition, becomes "prodigious meats" (1716) in the 1637 edition.

This image resurfaces in expanded form in the later account of Astyages feeding Harpagus his son in punishment for not having carried out the king's orders to kill the infant Cyrus. This is one instance of the several replications of patterns and situations that resonate across the play: action and narratives of earlier events record losses of loved ones; Adrastus and Croesus express a parallel sense of guilt in act 4 scene 1; as Croesus and Harpagus discover, gods and tyrants strike at those they would punish through their children ("Croesus . . . ah! They knew no death could grieve me soe", 1505); the "Sanctuary" offered to strangers by Croesus and, as he recalls, by his own father, anticipates Cyrus' reprieve of Croesus – who in turn urges clemency for his city. It is through the studied rhetorical effects of the characters' speeches that such affective echoes and connections solicit the imagination since nothing is enacted on stage. And yet, in the scene that follows the death of Atis, the action seems to burst out of the containing rhetoric through the momentary intrusion of the chorus. Most of the time, Alexander's chorus closes each act with a succession of rhyming stanzas in a pattern similar to that used by French humanist dramatists such as La Péruse (Caigny 2011, 130). Throughout the play, the chorus picks up and expands in lyrical terms the universalising judgements

provided in the sententiae, inviting contemplation of the fallibility and precariousness of human existence. At the end of act 1, for instance, the chorus is used to establish the causality Herodotus traces between Croesus' inability to heed Solon's advice and the troubles that ensue. The separate status of the choral ode, 'outside' the main dramatic framework, is signalled on the page, as mentioned earlier, by trimeter lines and visually reinforced by being printed in an italic font in the 1637 folio edition.

On occasion, though, the chorus also appears inside a scene, addressing other characters or commenting on words and action from within, speaking in pentameters that are not typographically differentiated from the rest of the dialogue. The "Chorus of countrymen" interacts with Croesus in act 3 scene 2. By pleading with him to send them Atis to kill the boar, it acts not as a commentator but as the instrument of Fortune which drives the action forward. In act 4 scene 1, the chorus sees its role shift to that of witness even while remaining within the scene; it names what has remained unnamed, the young man's death, and goes on to describe Croesus' body language, his torn robes, the way he gazes from Adrastus to the corpse:

> CHORUS O how the king is mov'd at Atis death!
> His face the portrait of a passion beares,
> With bended eyes, crost armes, and quivering breath,
> His princely Robe he desperately teares;
> Loe, with a silent pittie-pleading looke,
> Which shewes with sorrow mixt a high disdaine,
> He (whilst his soule seemes to dissolve in smoke)
> Straies twixt the corpes, and him who hath it slain.
> (1427-34)

The evocative rhetoric composes a tableau set in an ambivalent space which it behoves the reader to locate: Croesus could actually be displaying his bereavement on stage or moving from the stage to the place off stage where one may imagine the body of Atis to be lying (the doubt resurfaces at line 1553). The effect is similar to the way the chorus and Theseus seem to be contemplating and describing in detail Hippolytus's dismembered body in Seneca's *Phaedra* (1244ff.).[24]

24 Like his *sententiae*, Seneca's choruses appealed greatly to early modern

Later in the same scene, the discovery that Atis has been killed by Adrastus leaves Croesus at a loss: "Croesus Is this? Is this?". The chorus completes the line: "He would say the reward" – that is to say "Is this the reward" for having sheltered Adrastus? (1446). And it is left to the chorus to describe Adrastus' suicide.

In act 5 scene 2 (2479-772) the chorus once again relinquishes its liminality to exchange, in its traditional classical role, with the Nuntius, speaking from the perspective of the Lydian people: "And is our Soveraigne slaine? . . . And must we yeeld to that proud Strangers will?" (2491, 2494). After the Nuntius' long account, the chorus concludes with lamentations:

> Chorus O wretched people! O unhappy King!
> Our joyes are spoyl'd, his happinesse expir'd,
> And no new chance can any comfort bring,
> Where destinies to ruine have conspir'd . . .
> (2765-8)

The interaction between the Nuntius and the chorus of all the Lydians recalls similar, briefer, Senecan moments, in *Medea*, when the chorus questions the messenger bringing the news of Creon and Creusa's deaths at the beginning of act 5 (879-87); and in *Phaedra*, when the chorus questions the Nurse in act 2 (358-9, 404-5). But then the chorus steps out of the action again and back into its liminal space, with a final choral ode which encapsulates the message of the play before elevating its gaze to offer a poetic, emblematic conceit. Introduced by a reminder that only the experience of reading "practis'd volumes penned by deeds" can teach us "How things below inconstant be" (2890-2), each of the stanzas is composed like an emblem, organised around a mythological or allegorical motif: the frosts that threaten the promises of April when Ceres ranges freely;[25] the vine rich in promise holding out hopes to Bacchus

English readers and dramatists, providing matter for learned phrases and meditative thought as well as models. His plays also provided dramatic structures and moments such as the one referred to here in *Phaedra*, which, incidentally, was one of Shakespeare's favourite plays, according to Burrow (2013, 178).

25 Alexander returns to Ceres and the uncertainty of "Husbands Hopes" as an image of spiritual rebirth in *Doomes-day*, "The fourth Houre", stanza 28, line 1 (Kastner 1929, 116).

which are destroyed by a storm; the race through a forest, where "brambles doe our steppes beguile", and "balles of gold" (2938, 2941), conflating memories of the myths of Daphne and Atalanta; the tragedy of Croesus, public and private, deprived of his wealth, son, and country; and, finally, the fate of "we the Lydians", who gave themselves a monarchy "but knew not how" (2964), and find themselves reduced to bondage. Each stanza ends with the line "No perfect blisse before the end", an inescapable, knell-like reminder of Solon's warning at the beginning of the play, "None can be throughly blest before the end" (394), which the chorus explicitly acknowledges in its closing lines: "O, it is true that *Solon* said! While as he yet doth breath extend, / No man is blest; behold the end" (2970-2). The repetitions and play on "blisse" and "blest" throughout that final choral ode follow a pattern similar to the repetitions Valla used in the account of Solon's meeting with Croesus to contrast their perceptions, opposing "beati . . . fortunati", "beatus . . . fortunatus" (Herodotus/Valla 1584, "Clio Lib. 1" 13); and the chorus thus picks up and expands Solon's closing line in his final address to Croesus, "Many are fortunate, but few are blest" (426), which recalls Valla's "prius tamẽ quàm ad obitum pervenerit, ne quaquam beatus apellandus, sed fortunatus" (Herodotus/Valla 1584, "Clio Lib. 1" 13).

Croesus' belated enlightenment is thus amplified by the chorus in its final lamentation, which also reads like an expansion of the final lines of Sophocles' chorus at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, "So that one should wait to see the final day and should call none among mortals fortunate, till he has crossed the bourne of life without suffering grief" (1528-30). Here, indeed, is a tragic ending to a cautionary tale told by Greek historians and remoulded into a Senecan format which itself owes much to the Greek dramatists' models while drawing on a lyrical format that may be traced back to the poetry of the French Pléiade (Caigny 2011, 130-1). Yet the pathos one senses already in sections of the source texts, reworked by a rhetoric that borrows its tropes principally from Seneca, composes a network of affective echoes that complicates readings of Croesus. Gradually, a more complex figure emerges than the ruler single-mindedly intent on wealth and ambition who has travelled down through posterity. Alexander's play traces his journey from arrogant impatience at Solon's caution, through concern and grief

for his son, then a blind belief that conquests will offset his private loss, to last-minute clear-sightedness. His magnanimity towards Adrastus is the first step on the path to self-awareness and concern for his city, as if he were heeding Seneca's advice to Nero that a capacity for mercy signals the difference between a wise king and a tyrant (Clem. 1.11-12).[26]

This shift in the fate of a Midas-like Croesus, "that world-bewitched man / Who makes his gold his god" (167-8), and his gradual self-knowledge which finally makes "his judgement with his fortune eaven" (170) invite a tentative reassessment of the very format of the play. Greek in content, Senecan in structure, moral concerns and dramatic tone, the play is inflected on occasions with Ovidian and Petrarchan motifs (as in the account of the hunt for the boar and the love story Alexander attributes to Adrastus). The pathos of a fate like Panthea's owes at least as much to the sensibility of Ovid's *Heroides* as to Seneca's unrelenting drive of fate – and her death is a definitive rebuttal of Cyrus' "fine lesson in neo-Stoicism" (Mazouer 2002, 227, discussing Guersens's play).

"A Tragick entry to a Comicke end?"

So: is this play a tragedy, as indicated in the successive editions, or does this confluence of styles, contained within a structural formality, result in a more hybrid genre, some kind of austere tragicomedy? The fates that pursue Adrastus, driving him to love in vain and kill his brother by mistake before killing the son of his protector just as accidentally, certainly seem to cast him, as he acknowledges, as "a tragicke actor for a bloudy stage" (978). Albeit that he has lost his own son, Harpagus, in contrast, sees himself, he tells Cyrus, as "an actor in your Tragick-Comicke course" (2166): condemned to die as an infant (this should have been his "Tragedies last act", 2284), spared and humbly reared by a herdsman before being recognised as the heir to the throne and imposing himself as a conqueror, Cyrus admits to remembering little of his earlier years, and is eager to hear Harpagus "mixe . . . old griefes new joys among, /

26 References are to Seneca 1928, in the Loeb Classical Library.

And call afflicted infancy to minde" (2173-4): the affective elements of his biography, the tribute to the healing role of memory and the very act of reminiscing, meet the prerequisites of tragicomedy. Croesus too balances past loss against survival in bondage in terms of musings on dramatic genre, "As if misfortunes past had only been / A Tragick entry to a Comick end" (2863-4), the "Comick end" being here understood as a form of distancing, a philosophical becalming after the buffets of Fortune and self-induced blindness, which he seems to have attained. And he concludes with a resolve to cultivate neo-Stoic fortitude, balancing "pleasures past" and his "(now) hapless state":

> My memory to my distracted spright
> Of all my troubles shall present a scroule,
> Of which, while as th'accounts I go to cast,
> When numbring my misfortunes all of late,
> I will looke backe upon my pleasures past,
> And by them balance my (now) hapless state.
> (2883-8)

Whether a tragedy or an unsmiling tragicomedy in which Croesus' inglorious descent crosses Cyrus' heroic ascension, references to the dramatic genre suggest a shift away from an allegiance to any form of historical 'truth' or 'accuracy', the reliability of which Herodotus already queried by acknowledging that there existed multiple versions of the same story. Plutarch too recognised (in his account of Solon's life as in some of his other "lives") that one day some might legitimately question the veracity of what he writes – though not its fame or interest:

> And as for the meeting & talke betwext him & king *Croesus,* I know there are that by distãce of time will proue it but a fable, & deuised of pleasure: but for my parte I will not reiect, nor cõndemne so famous an historie, receiued & approued by so many graue testimonies. (Plu. trans. North 1579, 102)

Writing for a king who had undergone personal loss, with the deaths of two children between 1600 and 1602,[27] and entrusted with

27 Robert, the third son of James and Anne (18 January 1602 – 27 May 1602),

the task of counselling a young heir to the throne who would die in turn in 1612, Alexander chose from the Greek histories one of their memorable kings, whom he draped in Senecan robes and granted a very narrow window of ultimate redemption. In his play – as in his later religious epic, *Doomes-Daye*, where stanza 61 in "The Seventh Hour" recalls how Croesus was finally able "By misery to finde his folly mov'd, / When Fortune's dreames were vanish'd all away" (Kastner 1929, 216) – Alexander seems to resist the undertow of utter pessimism by favouring a degree of neo-Stoic humility achieved at the cost of personal loss and after a long journey, of the kind Shakespeare used to redeem a figure like Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*.

Croesus liberatus: a Coda

Well-chronicled by the Greek historians, Croesus' reign and private misfortunes seem to have held singularly little appeal for early modern dramatists in Britain and France. While Alexander's play seems to be the only British, early modern attempt to dramatise the life of the Lydian king, no earlier or contemporary French tragedy centred on Croesus seems to have been recorded and later European instances seem almost as scant.[28] One exception is a college drama written in Latin, *Tragoedia Croesus liberatus*, by the French Jesuit author Pierre Mousson (Petrus Mussonius), for the Jesuit Collège Henri IV, at La Flèche, which was founded in 1603. Mousson published his *Croesus* in 1621 with what in many respects may be read as a sequel, *Tragoedia Cyrus Punitus*, and two

and Margaret, their second daughter (24 December 1598 – March 1600). Henry was born on 19 February 1594 and died on 6 November 1612.

28 The story of Croesus inspired two operas, one by Antonio Draghi on a libretto by Niccolo Manoto, another by Reinhard Keiser on a libretto by Lukas von Postel (based on Manoto's): the two operas were performed, respectively, in Vienna in 1678 and Hamburg in 1711. "Croesus", *Opéra baroque*, https://operabaroque.fr/KEISER_CROESUS.htm (accessed 27 December 2022). Rieks (2000, 90-1) notes that in 1680 Louis Ferrier staged his *Adraste* in Paris, for which he seemed to have a knowledge of Mousson's play and of an anonymous Jesuit play, *Adrastus* (1679).

other plays, *Pompeius Magnus* and *Darius Proditus* – all four having been written between 1606 and 1612 (Rieks 2000, 30). The title page indicates that they were written to be performed, or at the very least publicly read: "Dati in Theatrum Collegij Regij Henrici Magni". And the paratexts include a dedication "ad Actores meos" (Rieks 2000, 101). After an opening monologue by Croesus who congratulates himself on being the happiest of men, the play stages his encounter with Solon, who tells the two exemplary stories (Tellus of Athens; Cleobis and Biton). Croesus dismisses Solon (there is no exchange between Solon and Aesop). In act 2, Croesus has a prophetic dream about Atis whom he shelters from all dangers. Absyrtus seeks Croesus' protection, which the king grants him, having celebrated Atis' marriage. Act 3 has the countrymen ask for help to fight the boar. Croesus yields to Atis' request to lead the hunt and places him under Adrastus' protection. Act 4 opens with Atis' wife Ariena expressing her fears. Croesus learns of Atis' death and initially wishes to kill Adrastus. Ariena wishes she were dead too. Croesus spares Adrastus who kills himself. In a closing tableau, which brings together on stage the lamenting Ariena, Croesus and Cyaxares, Mousson indulges in what must have been perceived as a moment of dramatic sensationalism in the spirit of the "théâtre de la cruauté" by staging Adrastus' suicide. In act 5 Croesus turns his thoughts to military action. His dumb son warns him against a Persian attack. Cyrus condemns Croesus to death but then spares him after hearing him speak of Solon and the play ends on Cyrus ordering that the pyre be dismantled. Mousson leaves out Harpagus' account of Cyrus' childhood, which he uses in his Cyrus play. The tragedy, 1461 lines long, without choruses, is shorter than Alexander's.

What emerges from this brief summary is that the structure is tantalisingly similar to Alexander's play – ironically so when one considers that this play had a Jesuit educational agenda far removed from Alexander's humanist and protestant background. Educational approaches, though, were not dissimilar, and the Jesuit colleges were modelled on the humanist colleges such as the Collège de Guyenne, in Bordeaux (Rieks 2000, 23), where George Buchanan's students included Michel de Montaigne, who performed in his master's productions. Although structured very much as a neo-Senecan closet drama, Mousson's play provides grisly details of Atis' death, in the

best Senecan tradition.[29] Simultaneously, as the title indicates, his approach explores Croesus' journey towards redemption through self-knowledge, allowing, as in Alexander's play, for some form of final release. Rieks traces similarities and differences between Alexander's and Mousson's versions of Croesus and Darius, noting how some details were not in the Greek source texts (such as the role of Atis' wife, who is given lines to speak in the two versions of *Croesus*); he contends that the "congruence of themes, motifs, plot, characters and configurations cannot be fully accounted for by the exclusive use of Herodotus as a common source" (Rieks 2000, 90).

More cautiously, and even if Mousson knew Alexander's work, the proximity between the two plays may reflect not so much a direct debt as a convergence of sensibilities that owe much to the influence of Senecan drama, in the structuring of the plot and the addition of a female figure of lamentation, as well as to the dramatic potential of the *logoi* that break through generic constraints. Migrating from the world of histories to that of the theatre, the stories of Croesus, Atis, Adrastus and Harpagus form bridges between authors writing for different readerships and audiences in different languages and fashioned by different philosophical and religious mindframes. So doing, they move beyond the status of sources to become a paradigm of the resilience with which narratives from a distant elsewhere reinvent and actualise themselves.

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