

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

## Violence and Sensationalism in the Plays of Shakespeare and other Dramatists

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ELIZABETHAN ACTORS BRIEFLY CHRONICLED THE VIOLENCE OF THEIR TIMES and strove to act up to the sensational texts they performed. The speech from an ‘excellent play’ which Hamlet says he ‘chiefly loved’ was Aeneas’ tale to Dido, and ‘thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam’s slaughter’. Recounting one of the worst atrocities of the sack of Troy, it re-creates the horror of an eyewitness. Pyrrhus is

total gules, horribly trick’d  
With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons . . .  
And thus o’ersizèd with coagulate gore,  
With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus  
Old grandsire Priam seeks. (*Hamlet*, II. ii. 451–8)<sup>1</sup>

The armed soldier hesitates before killing the old and defenceless king; but then he goes to ‘work’. Christopher Marlowe caught the same moment in his *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, but his Aeneas told how a trembling Priam prayed to Pyrrhus for mercy, and

Not mov’d at all, but smiling at his tears,  
This butcher, whilst his hands were yet held up,  
Treading upon his breast, struck off his hands. (II. i. 240–2)

Soon this Pyrrhus is swinging a ‘howling’ Hecuba through ‘the empty air’ and ripping the old man open ‘from the navel to the throat at once.’

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare’s plays are quoted from the edition by Peter Alexander (London, 1951).

Shakespeare's player continues the story but soon hesitates, begins again, and then comes to a shuddering halt, his face ashen. He weeps and can say no more: Hamlet promises to hear him out later, in private.

Without staging the violent act, theatre can use words to make us weep for Hecuba, requiring us to share the sensations of those who have seen and heard the violence. This histrionic power was an inheritance from ancient tragedy, given wide currency through imitations of Seneca embellished with further images of appalling horror. What can be read today as bad examples of literary over-kill were then played on the stage to 'let blood line by line'.<sup>2</sup>

But not content with words alone, Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights went further than classical example. In their plays defenceless men, women, and children were murdered on stage in full sight of the audience. It was said to be 'some mercy when men kill with speed',<sup>3</sup> because death often came deliberately and slowly, the wound 'tented' with 'the steel that made it'<sup>4</sup> or a victim's crazed derangement prolonging the suffering. Men and women were tortured by those who seemed to relish what they did. Even a cardinal dying in his bed could hallucinate in terror and 'grin' horribly with the pangs of death. Shakespeare, called 'gentle' by those who knew him, introduced all these violent happenings in his plays and when he did not actually stage the brutality he could force his audience to witness the results of violence. Having presented the rape and mutilation of Lavinia off-stage, he soon brought her on again and wrote elegant and ingenious verses so that a by-stander could point out the more sensational and pathetic elements in the spectacle of her suffering:

Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,  
Like to a bubbling fountain stirr'd with wind,  
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips . . . (Titus, II. iv. 22-4)

Whereas Marlowe's Aeneas told of the heartless murder of Priam years after the event, Shakespeare's Macbeth, with blood still warm on his hands, speaks of what it was like to slaughter Duncan in his sleep, and he does so for an audience which has just shared the quiet and horrendous moment with Lady Macbeth, at only a little distance from the helpless victim.

It used to be said that bloodletting so common in Elizabethan and

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nashe, Preface to Robert Greene, *Menaphon* (London, 1589).

<sup>3</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (London, 1614), IV. i. 110,

<sup>4</sup> John Webster, *The White Devil* (London, 1612), V. vi. 238-9.

Jacobean tragedies was the reflection of a more primitive age than ours, when men went about the streets fully armed while vagrants and ex-soldiers terrified ordinary persons, when bear-baiting was a popular sport and punishment, even in homes, schools, or public places, would often be physically brutal and degrading. Now, however, we have come to recognise a day-by-day violence in our own time and, in the entertainments offered in television, film, theatre, and novels, we see that sensationalism is no longer old-fashioned or out of use. Our writers and artists, our television screens, our dangerous city streets, the arrests, tortures, bombings, and killings that are reported in our papers and which we sometimes witness, no longer allow us to suppose that the violence in earlier plays and earlier lives can be relegated to what is most irrelevant about the past. We understand now that a dramatist can feel morally obligated to bring violence on stage and not deflect attention from the most sensational events. Our world engenders violence and a theatre which does not deal with that will not engage with what most troubles us.

Rather than glossing over violence in the plays of Shakespeare or any other dramatist, passing quickly by and looking in another direction, we must pay close attention to their depiction of cruelty, pain, and unspeakable violence. We must recognise that a terrible atrocity has often been placed close to the centre of a play's action, drawing its characters into irreversible changes and affecting the final outcome more than any words. Violence must be taken into account in assessing plays, as well as the deeper niceties of character and the finer issues of abstract themes.

*The Most Lamentable Roman Tragedy of Titus Andronicus* used to be Shakespeare's most unread and unperformed play: 'one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written', according to T. S. Eliot.<sup>5</sup> But times have changed; *Titus* has now been carefully studied in numerous editions and, since Peter Brook's production at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1955, it has been revived more frequently. Every critic can see now that in this play are seeds of much that has long been admired in *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and, especially, *Othello* and *Lear*. These premonitions involve more than incidental words and images: how scenes are constructed, how silence and laughter are used, how madness can bring clarity of mind as well as pain and obscurity, how journeys off-stage contribute to the action, how alien

<sup>5</sup> Introduction, *Seneca, His Tenne Tragedies* (London and New York, 1927), p. xxvi.

characters hold their own course, how an ending can be patiently healing as well as catastrophic—all these dramaturgical devices are found driving the action forward in a play teeming with intellectual and emotional life. Could all this have happened if the writing had been seriously flawed by pandering to a public's taste for stupid violence and uninspired sensationalism?

Shakespeare did not abandon the sensationalism of *Titus* or that of the more lurid episodes in the three parts of *Henry VI*. Rather he pursued his interest in violence, and developed his use of it. Naked and undisguised, it is present on stage in later plays, and more especially in those which are commonly regarded to be at the furthest reaches of his imagination, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Critics do not sufficiently recognise this because present-day readers and audiences often do not recognise or do not see the violence. Readers do not react in horror because they pay too little attention to the stage-directions implicit in the dialogue. Nor do audiences see and react to the violence because directors stage it with busy and intrusive artistry so that it is no longer raw and ugly. Peter Brook's *Titus* represented Lavinia's torture by substituting elegant red ribbons for her blood. The last appalling scenes were rehearsed repeatedly and the text cut progressively until performances were more acceptable and not plagued by the nervous laughter which the crazed brutality had provoked in early rehearsals. Today's directors and designers follow suit and seldom allow a play by Shakespeare to be crude or harrowing. Violent scenes are rehearsed with more care than others until they become routine, tastefully designed, carefully modulated in tone, balanced in form, fluently ingenious in movement. When blood is spilt, this is exactly when and where the director decides. Designers make sure that lights are dimmed, or so tricked out with strobe effects that an audience cannot see anything for long and has difficulty in following what is happening. Shakespeare's violence becomes part of a scenic effect which generalises the particular and takes eyes and ears away from the appalling facts and from individual responsibility and suffering. I want to argue that violence in Shakespeare's plays should be staged boldly and openly, not with artistically co-ordinated care—an achievement which was unknown and would have been impossible in the theatre of his time. Played for each moment as it occurs on a platform stage without long and deeply considered rehearsals, without carefully controlled lighting, and without subtle and pervasive sound-support, violence in the great tragedies would make an indelible mark. When

we read the plays we need to activate our imaginations and ask what the text requires to be done on stage, and then allow time for all that to be carried out in our mind's eye. Then Shakespeare's sensational stagecraft might give unexpected force to both words and action.

Shakespeare at the height of his career was still seeking new ways to deal with violence, as if he had not yet probed far enough into its nature and consequences. The most noticeable change over the years was a growing distrust of words to do the work. In the third part of *Henry VI*, when Rutland's tutor is dragged off stage, the 'innocent child' opens his terrified eyes and immediately addresses his assassin:

So looks the pent-up lion o'er the wretch  
That trembles under his devouring paws;  
And so he walks, insulting o'er his prey,  
And so he comes, to rend his limbs asunder . . . (I. iii. 12–15)

The boy goes on to beg for his life, for time to pray, for a reason for his death. He reminds his killer that he has a son who might be slain. Then after the death-blow, he quotes Ovid's *Heroides* ironically, as his tutor might have taught him. So violence is made apparent by words, one step at a time, but in *Macbeth*, written years later, the young son of Macduff is silent when a messenger enters telling his mother to flee 'with your little ones' (IV. ii. 68). When the murderers enter, he seconds his mother's defiance recklessly—'Thou liest, thou shag-eared villain!'—and then, as a killer turns on him with 'What, you egg? / Young fry of treachery!', all is over and the boy cries out, 'He has kill'd me, mother. / Run away, I pray you.' That is all; according to the folio stage-direction the mother exits crying 'Murder!' and probably carries with her at least one more of her 'little ones'. Inchoate cries shatter the tension and a child lies dead. After the mother has run out, the last visual focus will be on the small corpse, until someone, saying nothing, drags it away. Years earlier, in *Henry VI*, the last focus had been controlled by the exultant words of Clifford directing attention to his blood-covered sword.

Desdemona is given words to speak when Shakespeare for the first and only time directs that a woman should be slowly killed on stage. The shock and pain must have stunned audiences unprepared for such a scene, even though they had been led to expect that Othello would kill her. As early as Act III he had vowed revenge (III. iii. 451–66) and,

before he fell down in a fit, he had revealed his tortured and murderous feelings. When he insulted and struck her in public, his retched-out 'Goats and monkeys!' (IV. i. 260) had foretold barbarity. Just before the final scene, a quick and brutal killing is foretold in the frenzied hatred of his short soliloquy:

Minion, your dear lies dead,  
And your unblest fate hies. Strumpet, I come.  
Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted;  
Thy bed, lust-stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted. (V. i. 33–6)

But as a trailer for the murder, all this is deceptive: Othello does not act in brutal frenzy but is charmed silent by Desdemona's beauty. He gives her time to pray and, having overcome her disbelief, he prays for her: 'Amen, with all my heart' (V. ii. 37). Then he utters some sound which is no word at all (l. 39). She reads a fatal message in his eyes and in the shaking of his 'very frame' (ll. 40–1, 46–8) but, unlike Rutland, she speaks uncomprehendingly. He still hesitates to act while pauses and repetitions indicate that they both have great difficulty in talking of what is about to happen. Only when she seems to weep for Cassio's death, does Othello act violently, but still without the decisive suddenness the audience has been led to expect. With 'Down, strumpet!' and 'Nay, an you strive—' (ll. 83, 85), a physical struggle begins and it is several lines later before he succeeds in silencing her and, as the stage-direction says, '*Smother her*'. Why smother her? Indeed why struggle at all, when it is clear by the end of the scene that on his person or hidden in the bedroom there are three weapons that could all have finished the lethal work as soon as resistance was encountered? Emilia is '*at the door*' and calls, but still Desdemona is not dead; he continues to kill her until the short words, 'So, so' (l. 92). The actor must choose whether these words are brutal or relieved, for at this point in the painfully protracted murder, Shakespeare has left the physical fact of death as the only undeniable piece of evidence about what has happened. The slowness of this killing is appalling, as are the inadequacies of speech.

After she has been left for dead, Shakespeare has Desdemona revive and speak temperately to shield her husband from his guilt. Yet one of the rare comments of a playgoer that have been recorded from Shakespeare's day tells us that this play was remembered for a physical fact, not for its moral issues or racial tensions, and not for its poetry:

Desdemona, killed by her husband, in her death moved us especially, when, as she lay in her bed, her face only implored the pity of the audience.<sup>6</sup>

Othello too, as he realises what he has done, expresses himself in terrible physical action: he lies down and roars (see l. 201), and then, after all the torrents of words, he lets out a sustained and culminating wail: 'O Desdemona! Dead! Desdemona! Dead! O! O!' (l. 284). Later he does have a long death-speech, summing up his life for those who wait to take him off prisoner to Venice, and it is justly famous for its commanding dignity; but as he compares himself to a 'base' Judean or Indian, and to a 'malignant' Turk, he also, against all habit and training, loses physical control and weeps. Finally, his true feelings are expressed unmistakably in action. In Shakespeare's source, the 'Ensign' and 'Moor' had pulled down one of the house's rafters and crushed Desdemona beneath it; Othello also exerts all his strength but, taking himself as a dog by the throat, destroys himself instantly. The text indicates that his action overwhelms everything that has been said. After an appalled silence,<sup>7</sup> Lodovico and Gratiano mark this change unmistakably: 'O bloody period!—All that is spoke is marr'd'. Othello then kisses, or strives to kiss, Desdemona's corpse; and adds a very few simple, bitter, and loving words. Then, for those present on stage, he and she become an 'object [which so] poisons sight,' that it must be hid (ll. 367–8). If readers do not give themselves enough time to imagine what happens as well as what is said, or if the long delay and brutal action are not harshly and boldly represented on stage, Shakespeare's presentation of violence will be under-rated and his text itself misrepresented.

Shakespeare's earlier tragic lovers kill themselves using many words. Romeo is able to reflect on his own reactions:

How oft when men are at the point of death  
Have they been merry! Which their keepers call  
A lightning before death. O, how may I  
Call this a lightning? . . .

(V. iii. 88 ff.)

Juliet supports her own decisive actions with far fewer words, but they are incisive and highly strung with conspicuous wordplay. It is almost as if Shakespeare did not wish the physical and emotional reality of teenage suicide to be experienced directly by the audience. Subse-

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in G. Tillotson, 'Othello and *The Alchemist* at Oxford', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 July, 1933.

<sup>7</sup> Indicated by the incomplete verse-line, 359.

quently the families enter and express their grief in many words, as if the dramatist thought that this might compensate for having poeticised the violence.

Incoherent and physical reaction to violence is almost the rule in *King Lear*. The suffering of Gloucester is prolonged, unremitting, and often silent. His interrogation and blinding are carried out by Regan and Cornwall with a precise verbal marking of physical brutality which is reminiscent of the much earlier *Titus Andronicus*: 'Upon these eyes of thine, I'll set my foot' and 'Out vile jelly! / Where is thy lustre now?' (III. vii. 67, 82–3). They provoke Gloucester's defiance and condemnation, but when he is finally thrust out of doors the blinded man is silent. Finding Edgar to guide him to Dover, he does not recognise his son's voice and so stumbles forward uncertainly, even when supported and shown the way; he is at anyone's mercy, and when he meets Lear, whom he recognises by his voice, he cannot communicate with him. Eventually, after crying out 'Alack, alack the day!' (IV. vi. 182), he briefly begs to be killed by Oswald. When this crisis is over he does speak at greater length, envying the king for being mad:

. . . how stiff is my vile sense,  
That I stand up, and have ingenious feeling  
Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distract;  
So should my thoughts be sever'd from my griefs,  
And woes by wrong imaginations lose  
The knowledge of themselves. (IV. vii. 279–84)

When drums foretell battle he submits without words to being led away, and we can only guess at his feelings and 'imagination's'. When first brought before Regan and Cornwall, Gloucester had seen himself as 'tied to the stake' like a bear which has to 'stand the course' of being baited by fierce dogs trained for the job (III. vii. 53, 57): now, in the last battle, he is like one of the blind bears who were kept as more special attractions, to be tied to a stake and then whipped<sup>8</sup>—only Gloucester remains motionless of his own free will by the tree or shrub to which he has been led. Edgar tells him to 'pray that the right may thrive' (V. ii. 1–2) and then leaves. Now all that happens is '*Alarm and retreat within*', and even that will be in sound only if the noise of battle is heard from off stage as the Folio text directs. As the action of the entire play hangs in the balance, all that the audience is shown is a worn-out

<sup>8</sup> See Hentzner's *Itinerary* (1598); quoted, translated from the Latin, in Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (London, 1801), ed. J. C. Cox (1903), p. 206.



old man, who can see nothing and do nothing, and does not even understand who has brought him to where he is. Does Gloucester react at all as the sound of battle rises and dies away? We do not know, because Shakespeare has withheld all further words and stage-directions. All we are shown is the long-suffering body and sightless eyes.

This reliance on physical action was extraordinary and risky, as three considerations show. First, we know that the whipping of a blind bear in Paris Garden, not far from the Globe Theatre, was:

performed by five or six men standing circularly with whips, which they exercise upon him without any mercy, as he cannot escape because of his chain; he defends himself with all his force and skill, throwing down all that come within his reach and are not active enough to get out of it, and tearing the whips out of their hands, and breaking them.<sup>9</sup>

No one approaches to whip Gloucester and this blind victim provides no entertainment. So what does this audience think, or do?

Secondly, consider productions of *King Lear* in present-day theatres where the hunched figure of Gloucester sits in a carefully chosen place, carefully cross-lit. Lights dim progressively, and a vast backcloth may redden to represent the off-stage battle; or perhaps carefully drilled soldiers with implements of war cross and recross in front of Gloucester; and all this time, appropriate music and semi-realistic sound will work on our minds with changing rhythm, pitch, and volume. The audience will sit in the dark, their eyes and ears controlled completely by the play's director working with a team of highly trained technicians. Then consider in contrast a performance at the Globe Theatre where the light on stage could not be changed or the sounds of battle orchestrated for maximum effect and meaning, and where all was what it happened to be as the play was revived for that one day only. The audience members, in the same light as the stage, were free to withdraw attention, move around (many were standing), and talk among themselves. The actor playing Gloucester had nothing to help him attract attention and not a word to say, as he sat alone with his eyes shut; he could have had only the vaguest idea of how long it would be before Edgar returned. The elaborate speeches of *Titus Andronicus*, holding the sufferer still and controlling the audience's thoughts, and the pyrotechnics of Pyrrhus's speech in *Hamlet*, are both missing. So too are the searching words of Romeo or Juliet, which simultaneously presented and veiled the horror of teenage suicide. Gloucester gains or loses

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

attention because he is there, victim of violence and of his son's inability to speak to him of his presence and his love. The audience would have paid attention to Gloucester or not as they chose, and would have understood for themselves, or not. One might come to feel very alone, sitting in an audience which did not see what you saw, or did not care; then suffering would seem to exist in a disregarding world. If one sat in audience equally moved by what was silent on stage, then you might wonder if some words had been forgotten or if no words were the only possible response. Shakespeare has presented the consequences of violence so that the audience has to shoulder responsibility for its own reactions.

Thirdly, we should remember how mutilated old men are shown on television or film. Briefly they fill the screen in arresting and horrific images, and then disappear before attention can flag, leaving no trace behind; and that effect is created, not as part of the continuous performance of a play, but as something cunningly arranged, for that moment, by make-up artist, costume designer and fitter, the people in charge of set, lights, and sound, and, most significantly, by cameramen and editor. The result is no more than a few seconds of overwhelming horror or pathos, instead of being one part of a sustained performance by an actor who in some real ways has been living in the role. In the theatre, an actor represents the lived experience of violence, rather than achieving, with other people's help or hindrance, a moment or two of sensational effect.

The death of Gloucester is off-stage, but a little later Edgar tells how he revealed himself to his father:

I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last  
Told him my pilgrimage. But his flaw'd heart—  
Alack, too weak the conflict to support!—  
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,  
Burst smilingly. (V. iii. 195–9)

The words are unsensational; rhythms hesitant and delicate; yet the line of thought is sustained until a new idea is introduced on 'pilgrimage'. This word relates the whole story of Gloucester and his son to traditional ideas about the course of human life. The word has not been heard before in the play, but in this context when the audience's mind is free from any on-going action, the single word might be able to shift

perspective and draw events together. It could suggest that Gloucester had no longer resisted 'further' travel (see his words at V. ii. 8) or that Edgar is putting the best face on the 'fault' of not revealing himself to his father earlier; or it could encourage an audience to think for itself and be ready to believe that what it has witnessed has had some purpose or some purging effect. The single, unsensational word is not prescriptive, but it could act as a mental lever to lift the story of Gloucester into a different context and encourage revaluation.

This reference to a pilgrimage draws on a part of the inheritance of Elizabethan tragedy which was at least as important as the classical tradition mediated through Seneca. Reading the scriptures aloud, delivering sermons, and performing plays were all ways of re-enacting the story of the Old and New Testaments and as such provided example to dramatists who wished to reflect the violence of the times. Until the last few decades of the sixteenth century, various kinds of death, torture, and suffering were presented on stage in the highly popular mystery plays. Their audiences saw people like themselves acting the violent killing of Abel by Cain, the scourging of Christ and his crucifixion, and the multiple martyrdoms of saints. In the Massacre of the Innocents, Herod's knights slaughter one new-born baby after another, deliberately and with slow pleasure or mockery. Blood flows and the mothers cry, roar, curse, lament, fight back, and call for vengeance, like the victims of atrocities in Elizabethan secular dramas:

Alas, my bab, myn innocent,    my fleshly get! For sorow  
That God me derly sent,    of bales who may me borow?  
Thy body is all to-rent!    I cry, both euen and morow,  
Veniance for thi blod thus spent:    'out!' I cry, and 'horow!'<sup>10</sup>

As they fall on the ground, the old trots are told to get up, 'Or by Cokys dere bonys / I make you go wyghtly!' Scenes of such violence were acceptable when presented as part of the whole story of God's dealing with mankind. They were provided with various verbal signposts—such as the anachronistic reference to God's bones in this quotation—and with symbolic actions and stage-properties. Angels, devils, prophets, saints, and God himself were brought on stage, or above or below the stage, to watch, comment, or interact. Any violence might therefore become acceptable by being seen in a wider and more considered perspective than that provided by its immediate context.

<sup>10</sup> *Magnus Herodes*, ll. 388–91; *The Wakefield Pageants in the Townley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester, 1958), p. 74.

Elizabethan dramatists profited from this example. In Marlowe's *Faustus*, the Good and Bad Angels are only part of the intellectual setting for the horror of Faustus' entry to hell; besides calling on the horses of the night to run slowly, he also sees the stars that reigned at his 'nativity' and 'Christ's blood' streaming in the firmament. In *Edward II*, before the king is forced to resign his crown and is then tortured and hideously murdered, Marlowe brings on 'a mower', seen at first as

A gloomy fellow in a mead below;  
'A gave a long look after us my lord . . . (IV. vi. 29–30)

So Time is calling for Edward, as he does for Everyman. For the murderer of the last scene, Marlowe invented Lightborn: Edward never hears this name, but the audience has had it marked clearly for them, so that mankind's first innocence may be lodged somewhere in their minds during the final tense and then elaborately brutal confrontation.

The Ferryman in the anonymous *Arden of Feversham* (c. 1591–2), who appears out of a 'mystical' and 'smoky' mist, speaks with the authority of a Charon, offering prophecies and a prompting to see the moment over against the challenge of death and punishment for sin. 'He looks as if his house were afire, or some of his friends dead', he says of a man with a deceiving wife, speaking to Arden who is in just that situation. Again, 'I hope to see him one day hanged upon a hill', he says of Black Will (xi. 13–4 and xii. 38) who is due for such a fate. Yet, like the rest of the play, the Ferry episode is set in everyday surroundings and not at the entrance to Hades on the shores of the Styx.

John Webster used strong symbolic markers as his tragedies draw to a close, some pagan or folk in origin, some Christian. Just before the end of *The White Devil* (1612), Bracciano's Ghost appears with a 'pot of lily-flowers with a skull in't' and he throws earth on Flamineo and shows him the skull. Lilies were—as Ben Jonson had it—'special hiroglyphics of loveliness',<sup>11</sup> but to that are added the symbolic earth and skull. Flamineo knows that the appearance is 'fatal' for him. In *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1614), Bosola brings on stage 'coffin, cords and a bell' and calls himself 'the common bellman' sent to condemned persons before they are hanged; the whole parade is like a masque, intended to bring the Duchess 'By degrees to mortifica-

<sup>11</sup> *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), marginalia f: Ben Jonson, edd. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, vii (Oxford, 1941), 188.

tion'(IV. ii. 173–7). But the strongest symbolic marker in this play is created when Webster, altering his sources, has the Duchess escape to the shrine of Our Lady of Loretto. Two pilgrims are marvelling at the 'goodly shrine', as in Caravaggio's painting of the Virgin's appearance at Loretto carrying the infant Christ (1603–5).<sup>12</sup> Reputed to be Mary's own home transported miraculously from Galilee, the famous and extremely wealthy shrine was dominated by a great statue of the Virgin with a nobleman in armour kneeling before her.<sup>13</sup> So Webster has the fugitive Duchess and her family kneel to pay a 'vow of pilgrimage' to the Virgin whose functions were to be an example of domestic virtue and to intercede for men and women, being the closest of them all to the godhead.<sup>14</sup> The Duchess is soon surprised at her devotions and banished from the state of Ancona, but this solemn and elaborate show of reverence will make a large and lasting impression in performance; there has been nothing like it in the play so far, and later echoes will help to keep it in the audience's mind. After the Duchess has knelt again, this time to be strangled, she is given some of the properties of the Virgin. When she revives from death and her eyes open, Bosola says 'heaven in it seems to ope . . . to take me up to mercy' (IV. ii. 342–59)—'Mercy' being what the Virgin begs on mankind's behalf at the throne of God. Later the Duchess seems to appear in a vision to Bosola and strengthens his 'penitence' (V. ii. 345–9). With a 'face folded in sorrow' as if at an empty tomb, she appears also to her husband, while an echo 'like his wife's voice' tells him to 'fly his fate' (V. iii. 44–5, 26, 35). Protestants in England considered the cult and miracles of the Virgin to be vain superstitions, but Webster used them to define the nature of

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Kitson, *Caravaggio* (1967), 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth, 1985), Catalogue number 58; p. 98; pls. XLIII, XLIV.

<sup>13</sup> The Prince of Transilvania 'sent to the B. Virgin of *Loreto* for a gift, a silver Image of our B. Ladie, almost a cubite and a halfe, of excellent workmanship, and curioslie inlaied with gold, at whose feet the Vayvode him selfe being all in armour is expressed in a silver Image as if he were praying.' O. Torsellino, *The History of Our B. Lady of Loreto*, tr. out of Latin into English (St Omer, 1608), K3.

<sup>14</sup> '*Sophrionius* doth confesse the Virgin Marie to be the forme and Rule of Christian discipline, given by almightie God to men, next after Christ the first and chiefest president of all perfection. . . . in tribulation and adversitie she hath given us such rare examples of vertue, that if the afflicted and vexed in this life would wel consider them, their tribulations would not seeme to be so grieuous as they doe.' L. Pinelli, *The Virgin Marie's Life*, tr. R. G[ibbons] (Douai, 1604), \*4, 5v. It was widely believed that when the Devil demanded Mankind from God, the Virgin Mary interceded and obtained Mercy for him; see, for example, *All's Well that Ends Well*, III. iv. 25–9.

his play's violent action in contexts where his characters themselves could not.

Shakespeare also introduced markers to chart the course of violent action. Obvious examples are the Clown in *Titus Andronicus* who carries two pigeons as gifts to settle a brawl, the Pursuivant and Priest who encounter Hastings on his way to the Tower in *Richard III* and so remind him of the affairs of the world and those of heaven, the death-like Apothecary at Mantua in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Gravedigger in *Hamlet* who had started digging graves the day young Hamlet was born, and the 'good' King of England, reported to be just off stage in *Macbeth*, whose hand has been given such 'sanctity' by heaven that it cures 'wretched souls' (IV. iii. 140–59). In each case the audience is alerted during the course of the tragedy so that whatever happens in its violent conclusion may be seen over against a common course of life.

The strategy of this device is clear enough, its effect much less so. At this distance in time it is hard to put oneself on the same footing as members of Shakespeare's audience. Yet it would seem that an acceptance of the context for violence might have been part of the reason why attitudes to public executions were so very different from those of today. In London, before a large or small gathering, the public executioner would hold the severed head aloft and cry out 'Behold the head of a traitor', and that seems to have justified the barbarity of the occasion. It is hard for us to credit that the horrific stories in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* should have been considered such good reading that copies were made publicly available in churches and colleges, and at court; or that Sir Francis Drake should take a copy around the world with him for recreation and kept himself from being bored by colouring the pictures.<sup>15</sup> Repeatedly the extreme tortures described are said to be suffered for the Protestant faith of England, and that seems to have made the unbearable tortures more acceptable reading.

Shakespeare's conventional markers accompanying a play on its way to a sensational climax do not insist on a religious or doctrinaire interpretation. They activate the audience's minds to think of the consequences of what is happening, but do not supply a firm moral framework or comprehensive judgement on a play's action. In *King Lear* even the persons who act as markers are not clear-cut or distinguished from the other characters, as the English King and Gravedigger had been. The stages of Lear's journey toward a last torture on the 'rack

<sup>15</sup> See William Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* (1963), pp. 220–3.

of this tough world' (V. iii. 313–5) are marked by encounters with persons in his story who have been transformed so that they represent a series of recognisable challenges whereby mankind's resources are progressively displayed and tested.

The King had sought out the Fool when, unkinged, he returned from hunting, but when the storm rages the Fool proceeds to lose confidence and becomes absorbed in his own loneliness. He shivers with cold and Lear sends him to take cover as if he represented 'houseless poverty' (III. iv. 26): in him, Lear and the audience have witnessed 'what wretches feel' (l. 34). He next meets Edgar transformed to Poor Tom, the mad Bedlam beggar obsessed with fiends. The audience sees Lear take the false madman for real, especially when he is most violent. Edgar does not answer when Poor Tom is asked the cause of thunder, but when asked what his study is he replies as Tom at once: 'How to prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin', and it is at this point that Lear takes him aside to talk 'in private' (III. iv. 154–61). When Tom says '*I smell the blood of a British man*' (ll. 179–80), Lear and he leave the stage together: defiance, killing, and darkness unite King and madman in a common cause. The Bedlam hospital took special precautions against inmates attacking visitors; as Thomas Dekker explained, they could be

. . . like hungry lions  
Fierce as wild-bulls, untameable as flies,  
And these have oftentimes from strangers' sides  
Snatched rapiers suddenly . . .<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the audience, Lear believes he is in the presence of a dangerous madman, pursued by fiends and obsessed with violence, and this is now the company he seeks. When next seen he is intent on destroying his daughters, in a most terrifying way:

To have a thousand with red burning spits  
Come hizzing in upon 'em— (III. vi. 15–16)

Here the Quarto and Folio texts vary,<sup>17</sup> but both show that, from this moment on, Lear is determined to arraign or anatomise his cruel daughters, and stay close to Mad Tom. Gloucester acts as the next marker—a blind man ready to recognise authority—and Lear's mind

<sup>16</sup> *I, The Honest Whore* (1604), V. ii. 162–5.

<sup>17</sup> The longer Quarto version leads through arraignment to the climax of Lear's violent cry for 'Arms, arms, sword, fire!' (l. 54).

lurches forward again to see the exercise of power in a new or even revolutionary way: morality as a cruel joke, and the world as 'a great stage of fools'.

None of these three encounters is necessary to Lear's story; they are in the play solely because Shakespeare has invented and willed their presence. By their means violence and pain are shown in a meaningful progression, through physical to mental torture, through suffering in one's self to suffering with a misused, violent, and unjust world. The course of Lear's suffering may seem so purposefully ordered that a Jacobean audience might have accepted it without flinching but without being offered any religious consolation or explanation; and any audience might be encouraged to recognise what is at stake.

The culminating atrocity of this tragedy, Cordelia's assassination and Lear's immediate revenge upon the assassin, takes place off stage. But just as amazing is the old king's continued physical energy when he enters carrying his daughter's corpse, crying out in suffering, longing, and anger, and searching for a sign that Cordelia lives. Lear, like all of Shakespeare's later tragic heroes, attempts to assert himself by means beyond the use of words. Saying 'never' repeatedly to express his sense of loss and despair involves him also in a physical struggle which leaves him in need of a deeper breath, so that he asks for a button to be undone.<sup>18</sup> That done he thanks the servant and emphasises, with short-phrased, repetitive questions and injunctions, his need to see, or to think he sees, that Cordelia lives, and his need for others to see and believe it too. Does he think that she indeed revives? We cannot know, because he falls silent. What we do know is that he continues to give signs of life until Edgar says 'He is gone indeed', four lines later. The end of this tragedy is not summed up in the last words of its protagonist; it is defined by Lear's physical struggle to assert his will to live and hope in a body that can bear no more. The words which others speak ensure that the audience watches intently as the actor draws on his own hidden resources to sustain the role to its wordless end. Here, lies the performative centre of the play's last moments. Then as Albany orders 'Bear them from hence' (l. 318), a procession will form and move off slowly, keeping in view the bodies of the King and his daughters after all words are spoken.

<sup>18</sup> Today we would say that Lear struggles against the restriction of breath associated with a heart attack. It would seem that Shakespeare was recreating the actual circumstances he had witnessed in a death from a series of strokes.



Lear has to experience the consequences of violence, his own as much as that inflicted on him; there is no palliative available except endurance and a sharing of the experience. When Lear says 'Thank you, sir' to whoever undoes the button, it may be a sign that he has changed so that now he 'takes care' of other nameless people (see III. iv. 32–3). But who could be sure of that? Perhaps this servant is a last 'marker' on Lear's journey, introduced to show, as if accidentally, a change in the hitherto thankless king. The only time he has thanked anyone before is when Kent, as Caius, trips up and berates Oswald in Act I, scene iv. What is certain is that nothing less than the actor wholly concentrated and open in performance at the end of an exhausting role is able to bring continuous credibility and force to Lear's broken speeches and so carry him beyond words until he 'is gone indeed'. Showing the utmost reach of Lear's consciousness, Shakespeare seems to withdraw from the contest, leaving actor and audience responsible for any meaning that might be extracted or constructed from what has happened. He has brought the audience so close to the consequences of violence, that only the actor's power to complete and find the accumulated truth of his role stands for the play's conclusion.

This sustained and finally close focus on the person who suffers has consequences for many who try to understand what Shakespeare has written. For dramatists writing today, it demonstrates a way of exploring the nature of violence and its consequences which should make them pause before using more modern devices drawn from film and television. These accentuate momentary sensation rather than process and discovery; and provide visual images so compelling that an audience must either submit to them uncritically or withdraw attention, as if it were not happening.

The performative nature of the conclusion of Shakespeare's later tragedies should encourage theatre directors and designers to seek ways of staging them that will not destroy the close-focused particularity, immediacy, inexplicability, unpredictability, and deep involvement provoked by his stagecraft. An artful and commanding impressiveness is not an acceptable substitute.

The critic and scholar have a harder task, for no amount of quotation from the words of a text is sufficient to explain the image of violence and suffering which the plays provide. Nothing short of the whole progress of the action, through familiar markers, can give some sense of what is at stake at the end of a tragedy. The issues declared in the play's dialogue are comparatively easy to grasp, and may be heard out

in private; but to understand how Shakespeare held the mirror up to the violence of his times, and so to the violence of ours, it is necessary to pay attention to what is done as well as what is spoken. This implies that criticism should not only refer to the words of a text, but also to an experience of the play in sustained and individual performance.

The demands on an actor are perhaps greatest of all. If you have ever been present as an old and bereaved father dies of two successive heart-attacks and at this last moment tries to assert to his remaining friends his will to live, his love, and his hope for the future, then you will know the kind of reality which Shakespeare has asked the actor to perform at the close of this prodigious play. Instead of holding attention with impressive rhetoric and affecting images, the actor must appear to struggle physically to speak of the simplest but crucially important matters so that those who listen cannot know precisely whether Lear dies in hope or in despair. Both must have taken possession of his mind during the last eddyings of consciousness. Gone are the plumed troops of words and the pretended horrors of bloodletting, and in their place the summation of a life and a performance before which an audience must be hushed and attentive. As a dead march concludes the play, any comfort the audience draws from its painful events must be derived from its own thoughts; from those on stage is heard only:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;  
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.  
 The oldest hath borne most: we that are young  
 Shall never see so much nor live so long.

Has any dramatist left more to a single actor than Shakespeare does as King Lear dies?

Has any dramatist left more to an audience? In the last moments of this tragedy, having earlier posed many questions and named many doubts, Shakespeare gives little guidance on how to react to what is played. What does it all mean, what can be understood? What does it *do* for an audience? After showing the violence in sensational ways, Shakespeare offers an opportunity for silent thought and compassion.