

‘Piteous massacre’:
violence, language, and the off-stage
in *Richard III*

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Abstract: Shakespeare regularly stages extreme violence. In *Titus Andronicus*, Chiron and Demetrius are baked in a pie and eaten by their mother. Gloucester’s eyes are plucked out in *King Lear*. In contradistinction to this graphic excess are moments when violence is relegated off-stage: Macbeth kills King Duncan in private; when Richard III suborns the assassination of his nephews—the notorious ‘Princes in the Tower’—the boys are killed away from the audience. In such instances, the spectator must imagine the scope and formation of the violence described. Focussing on *Richard III*, this article asks why Shakespeare uses the word ‘massacre’ to express the murder of the two princes. Determining the varied, and competing, meanings of the term in the 16th and 17th centuries, the article uncovers a range of ways an early audience might have interpreted the killings—as mass murder, assassination, and butchery—and demonstrates their thematic connections to child-killing across the cycle of plays that *Richard III* concludes.

Keywords: Shakespeare, massacre, *Richard III*, off-stage violence, child-killing.

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Medea is not to butcher her boys before the people
(Horace, *Ars Poetica*)

In William Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1593), an assassin enters the stage alone:

TYRREL: The tyrannous and bloody deed is done
The most arch-act of piteous massacre
That ever yet this land was guilty of.

(4.3.1–3)¹

The audience has not seen the massacre Tyrrel describes, but we know what he is referring to. Determined to usurp the crown, Richard of Gloucester has commanded the murder of his young nephews, Edward and Richard of York—The Princes in the Tower. Tyrrel's is a curious speech. Its moral implications seem clear: the murders were shameful, bloody affairs that defile the kingdom: a 'ruthless piece of butchery' carried out by 'bloody dogs' (4.3.6). And yet, we shortly learn that the speech, and the murders it describes, are characterised by several processes of remove. Though recruited for the murders himself, Tyrrel suborns two further assassins—Dighton and Forrest—to actually carry out the job. But they, like their paymaster, were unable to act in the ruthless manner for which they are famed: when faced with the sleeping children, these murderers melted with 'tenderness and kind compassion' (4.3.7). Almost unable to execute their orders, they 'smothered' the boys to death (4.3.17). There is a further disconnection, then, between the bloodless off-stage murder and the way speech renders it on-stage—by blood, and through 'massacre'.

The boys are not alone: they join a retinue of characters for whom the off-stage area is metonymic and emblematic of the site of death.² As John Jowett argues, *Richard III* 'habitually draws back from the moment of execution or butchery', relegating murders behind the scenes.³ But the play does not always shy away from on-stage killing: Richard's infamous cry 'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!' (5.6.7) is voiced during the staged battle in which he is slain. Earlier, Shakespeare deviates slightly from his source material, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, to stage the murder of Richard's brother, the Duke of Clarence. Whereas the *Chronicles* describe how 'the duke was [...] drowned in a butt of malmsie', in *Richard III* Clarence's protracted conference with his assassins precedes a knifing: it is 'a bloody deed, and desperately performed!' (1.4.245).⁴ Scholars disagree about the extent to which the direction '*stabs*

¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, edited by John Jowett (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000). Unless otherwise stated, all references are to this edition and will be made in text.

² Womack (2013: 81).

³ Jowett (2000: 26). See also Blake (1993: 297).

⁴ Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, edited by Henry Ellis, 6 volumes (London, 1587; reprinted J. Johnson 1807–08: 3:712).

him' (SD, 1.4.243) indicates Clarence's moment of death.⁵ Per Holinshed, Clarence is chopped and drowned off-stage, 'in the malmsey-butt in the next room' (1.4.244), but he is fatally stabbed on-stage in full view of the audience.

It is not always clear what drives Shakespearean violence off-stage, but the practice of reporting rather than enacting bloodshed is by no means unusual. Lavinia is raped away from the spectator in *Titus Andronicus*. Shakespeare describes rather than depicts Macbeth's murder of King Duncan. *King Lear* hangs Cordelia off-stage. Scholars often explain the off-staging of this kind of violence by pointing to the constraints of early modern stage technologies and the sensibilities of the censor.⁶ However, while technological constraints may have hampered the representation of violence, early modern performers regularly overcame such difficulties. For example, it was hard, but not impossible, to erect a scaffold and effect a hanging on the early modern stage.⁷ While playwrights of the period had to be careful not to incur the wrath of the censor, plays regularly represented politically controversial violence. Shakespeare dramatised regicides in a range of plays including *Richard II*, *King John*, and *Macbeth*. Stanley Wells argues that Lavinia's attack 'takes place off-stage, no doubt both because it involves rape and because the victim would have originally been played by a boy', thus drawing both on ideas of practicality and the argument about theatrical decorum.⁸ However, although common convention saw coition, forced or otherwise, removed from the main platform, as David Mann points out, stage directions often suggest that intercourse 'is to be imagined no further than behind the curtains at the rear' of the playhouse, thus operating on the threshold of stage space.⁹ Moreover, the instances of off-stage violence highlighted above are often isolated from the play's bloodier, on-stage, fare. The violation and mutilation of Lavinia takes place off-stage, but *Titus Andronicus*' final scene creates a bloodbath from which few characters emerge still speaking or indeed eating. *Macbeth* shies away from depicting king-killing, but the massacre of the Macduffs starts on-stage with the murder of Macduff's young boy; it is later reported that his mother and all her 'babes' have been 'savagely slaughtered' (4.3.206).¹⁰ *King Lear* brings Cordelia on-stage only after she is dead or fatally wounded, but it physically enacts the blinding of Gloucester in a scene so graphic that it

⁵ See, for example, Lopez (2005), Jowett (2000: 26).

⁶ On the practicalities of stage violence, see Womack (2013: 88). For more on the censorship of sensitive acts of violence, see Clare (1990: 159).

⁷ For example, Horatio is hanged in an arbour in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*; the Admiral Coligny is also left hanging in Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*.

⁸ Wells (2016: 76).

⁹ Mann (2014: 219).

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, edited by Sandra Clark & Pamela Mason (London, Bloomsbury, 2015).

drew censure from the 18th-century writer and critic, Samuel Johnson, who declared it ‘an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition’.¹¹

Johnson’s view is consistent with Horace’s famous proscription: ‘you will not display on the stage what ought to be performed within, and you will keep many things from our eyes, which an actor’s ready tongue will in due course narrate in our presence’.¹² Simply put, Horace prohibited the incredible and the atrocious from the stage. Theatrical credibility is contingent upon a range of factors, including historical and cultural attitudes, stylistic conventions, and the kinds of contracts drawn between performer, performance, and spectator. It is tricky, then, to draw hard and fast conclusions about what an early modern audience might have considered dramatically or emotionally true. Believability might have been a factor in relegating violence that is particularly awkward to stage, such as decapitations. Shakespeare’s contemporaries John Fletcher and Philip Massinger stage the decapitation of the Dutch politician Sir John van Olden Barnavelt at the close of their tremendously topical tragedy, but this practice is uncommon: the vast majority of early modern drama’s decapitations take place off-stage. The second part of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, for instance, features four severed prop heads, but no one is beheaded on-stage. This is perhaps unsurprising; decapitations are logistically tricky and easy to botch, apt to slip from gory to burlesque. When it comes to the performance of violence, the Horatian idea of permissibility has had a long reach. Indeed, permissibility underpins the 20th-century French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre’s spatialised understanding of theatrical violence: the off-stage, or ‘obscene area’, housed ‘everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene (stage) space: whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden’.¹³ For Peter Womack, this distinction creates an ‘opposition between on-stage as verbal and off-stage as corporeal’: the stage narrates bodies which have become ‘too horrid’, in Johnsonian terms, to display.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s drama has a complex, even fraught, relationship to the violence it shows and withholds: it is a relationship which does not always conform to the Horatian atrocity/credibility binary. There are often distinct aesthetic and affective advantages to off-stage violence in Shakespeare’s drama; it can be a function, rather than a limitation, of stagecraft. The verbalisation of off-stage violence can do what the stage cannot: it demands that the audience mentally contribute to its imaginative creation, requiring them to participate in the drama in psychologically

¹¹ Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, edited by Samuel Johnson & George Steevens (London, 1765: 695). Johnson’s sensibilities here were prevalent. Indeed, it was common for this scene to be cut in the 18th and 19th centuries.

¹² ‘*Quodcumque ostendis mihi sic, incredulous odi*’ (Horace 1929: 188).

¹³ Lefebvre (1991: 36).

¹⁴ Womack (2013: 90).

and theatrically profound ways. And, crucially, the off-stage allows for a multiplicity of images and metaphors to proliferate in ways that are impossible to physically actualise. Drawing on these ideas, this article returns to *Richard III*, focussing on the interplay between what is seen and what is spoken in the murder of the Princes. In doing so, the article demonstrates the processes whereby humans become bodies and bodies become words.

Centring particularly on Tyrrel's speech, the article argues that his invocation of the word 'massacre' in his description of the boys' murders mediates their deaths through this term's redolent range of connotations and denotations. 'Massacre' is not a neutral word. It is peculiarly charged, serving both as a description of violence, and a comment on the (im)moral quality of those who would commit it. Tyrrel's use of 'massacre' is extraordinary, and extraordinarily knotty. While I argue that the term can offer us ways of understanding the murder of the Princes, it works here according to conflicting logics. Tyrrel's use of the word seems to condemn the killings, shedding light on their extreme brutality. Conversely, the metaphorical use of 'massacre' operates as a kind of euphemism that seems designed to distance Tyrrel from the violence he has himself presided over: it is an act for which the 'land' collectively, and not he personally, is responsible. Nonetheless, Tyrrel's language does not immediately conform to received understandings of euphemisms employed by perpetrators of violence. As legal theorist M. Cherif Bassiouni points out, euphemisms 'distort reality' in such a way that individuals become distanced 'from the moral consequences of their actions'. Focussing particularly on terms like 'terrorism', 'ethnic cleansing', and the Third Reich's notorious catch-all—'The Final Solution to the Jewish Question'—Bassiouni posits that such anodyne language is used by proponents and perpetrators of violence to internalise and inculcate rationalisations for atrocity.¹⁵ Similarly, as massacre scholar Jacques Sémelin maintains, 'massacre is still often portrayed as a "cleaning task", a word that is present in the expression "ethnic cleansing" but also in military language such as "clean up the area"'.¹⁶ Thus, for Sémelin, 'the reality' of 'massacre' 'disappears behind the positive notion of cleanliness or even health'.¹⁷ Tyrrel's 'massacre' is not the bland language described by Bassiouni or Sémelin. It seems almost dysphemistic in its substitution of 'massacre' to describe bloodless murder; a sharp shock that broadcasts Richard's tyranny. Nevertheless, Tyrrel's language works here much like the discourses associated with repressive regimes. As Alex Argenti-Pillen argues in her study of women and violence in southern Sri Lanka, in these contexts euphemisms are a 'powerful device of hegemonic discourse',

¹⁵ Bassiouni (2011: 66-8). See also, Hagan & Haugh (2011), Meron (1998: 150).

¹⁶ Sémelin (2007: 254).

¹⁷ Sémelin (2007: 254).

frequently aimed at reducing ‘people’s access to reality altogether’.¹⁸ Likewise, Tyrrel’s speech describes a killing the audience never sees through a distorting, distancing, metaphor—‘massacre’. It is a term that describes murders over and above those of the smothered Princes; a word that blurs and reifies their deaths. Thus, on the one hand, Tyrrel’s use of an explosively emotive word seems to undermine the typical logic underpinning this kind of communication: he acknowledges and arguably augments the atrocity. On the other hand, by using ‘massacre’ as a metaphor with multiple connotations, Tyrrel’s language works in concert with the off-staging of these killings, effectively distorting and abstracting ‘the undesirable (or unbearable)’ reality of the Princes’ death.¹⁹ It defies the earlier sense of distance, highlighting instead the hypocrisy of a murderer denouncing murder.

The article explores these ideas further across two sections. The first situates Tyrrel’s language against early modern understandings of ‘massacre’, explicating key meanings, including mass killing, butchery, and assassination. In doing so, I argue that Tyrrel encourages the audience to imagine the murders as having a scope impossible to represent on-stage: the deaths of the Princes are more and less than a massacre. The second section uses these understandings in combination with *Richard III*’s thematic interest in transgenerational and retributive killings to link the massacre of the Princes to the wider violence of the first tetralogy: a cycle that depicts the dynastic and civil Wars of the Roses, fought between the Royal House of Lancaster and the claimant House of York.

PITEOUS ‘MASSACRE’

So far, I have suggested that Tyrrel’s use of the word ‘massacre’ is important to our understanding of the off-stage murders he describes. This section expounds this assertion, establishing Tyrrel’s utterance within his wider speech, and within ‘massacre’s’ wider lexicographical context. It is useful, then, to start by reproducing Tyrrel’s monologue in its entirety:

The tyrannous and bloody deed is done,
The most arch-act of piteous massacre
That ever yet this land was guilty of.
Dighton and Forrest, whom I did suborn
To do this ruthless piece of butchery—
Although they were flesh’d villains, bloody dogs—
Melting with tenderness and kind compassion,

¹⁸ Argenti-Pillen (2003: 127).

¹⁹ Ibid.

Wept like two children in their deaths' sad stories.
 'Lo, thus', quoth Dighton, 'lay those tender babes.'
 'Thus, thus,' quoth Forrest, 'girdling one another
 Within their innocent, alabaster arms.
 Their lips were four red roses on a stalk
 Which in their summer beauty kissed each other.
 A book of prayers on their pillow lay,
 Which once,' quoth Forrest, 'almost changed my mind.
 But O, the devil—' there the villain stopped,
 Whilst Dighton thus told on: 'We smotherèd
 The most replenishèd sweet work of nature
 That from the prime creation e'er she framed.'
 Thus both are gone with conscience and remorse.
 They could not speak; and so I left them both,
 To bring these tidings to the bloody King.

(4.3.1–22)

Critics have long observed a disconnection between the Princes' precociousness earlier on in the play and the almost mythical innocence with which Tyrrel describes them here.²⁰ As Nina Levine points out, it is a monumentalising speech: their bodies are re-hewn from flesh into alabaster, their lips figured as flowers.²¹ The passage is also peculiarly polyvocal, a dialogue spoken by one. Tyrrel's speech relates Dighton and Forrest's own; and these citations unfold sequentially with each 'thus' counterpointing the assassins' reported weeping. The speech ventriloquises the murderers in such a way that linear time seems to shatter. This is narration, a telling of murder committed, and a detailed verbal rehearsal of a scene for an audience denied its actualisation. And yet, exclamations like 'But O, the devil' places the speech in a moment of suspension—in the moment of the murderers' dreadful decision to follow orders.

A later dramatic iteration of this story by Shakespeare's contemporary, Thomas Heywood, renders a similar episode with a comparable temporal split. In the second part of *Edward IV* (1599), the Princes exit just as Tyrrel (or Tirell in Heywood's version) enters. 'Go lay ye down', says the assassin of, and perhaps even to (?), the departing/ed boys, 'but never more to rise' (17.26–7): 'I have put my hand into the foulest murder, / That ever was committed since the world' (17.27–8).²² There is a simultaneity between the pastness with which Tyrrel characterises a murder that is presumably ongoing off-stage; he talks about them as past before they have passed. Tyrrel's response to 'a noise within' (SD, 32) compounds this impression:

²⁰ See, for example, Belsey (2007: 35), Campana (2007).

²¹ Levine (2013: 86).

²² Thomas Heywood, *The First and Second Parts of King Edward IV*, edited Richard Rowland (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be made in text.

The mandrakes' shrieks are music to their cries.
 The very night is frightened, and the stars
 Do drop like torches, to behold this deed.

(17.33–5)

Here, the boys' off-stage cries, analogised with the legendary mandrake, signal their point of death: the murders and Tyrrel's speech take place in real time. In Shakespeare's play, Tyrrel does not describe precisely what has befallen the princes until its final third. For the first for the first sixteen lines or so, the audience is directed by Tyrrel's speech to imagine a massacre.

'Massacre' is an inexact substitute for the smothering eventually meted out by the murderers, but what might an early modern audience have understood this term to mean? It is a critical commonplace to link the murders with Herod's massacre of the innocents, the biblical episode in which Herod, King of Judea, ordered the infanticide of male children following the birth of Christ.²³ Furious that his order to the Magi that they alert him to the location of the new-born Jesus had been gainsaid, Herod 'slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men' (Matthew 2:16). For Ann Blake, 'the brutal killing of children in *Richard III*, would have awakened memories of theatrical performances during the last years of the miracle plays: the last performances at Coventry, for instance, were in 1579. The fifteen-year-old Shakespeare may have seen them.'²⁴ Gemma Miller explains that in readings such as these, the Princes 'represent children everywhere, casting Richard in the role of Herod, the murderer of infants, the destroyer of innocence'. Accordingly, for Miller, the careful individuation of the two Princes 'delineated in earlier scenes, are suppressed in this elegy in favour of a generalized fantasy of childhood that is both objectified and idealized and relies on absence for maximum impact'.²⁵

When Shakespeare came to write *Richard III*, however, the word 'massacre' had only recently become widely available in English. First performed in 1593, *Richard III* is the second of Shakespeare's plays to use this word; he used it first in the notoriously visceral *Titus Andronicus* a year earlier. Where, then, did this term come from, and what did it mean? The first extant printed use of 'massacre' in English is from a devotional text in the early 16th century, Andrew Chertsey's *The Flower of the Commandments of God* (1510). Chertsey uses it to condemn Herod and his 'cursed massacre' of the innocents.²⁶ In many ways, though, this usage is an outlier. While this

²³ See, for example, Williams (2004: 53), Belsey (2007: 34).

²⁴ Blake (1993: 304).

²⁵ Miller (2016: 213).

²⁶ Andrew Chertsey trans. *The Flower of the Commandments of God* (London, 1510: sig. K2^r).

locution is now familiar, there is no record of this phrase being used again until the end of the century, when it appeared in Robert Allot's *Wit's Theatre of the Little World* (1591). As with medieval mystery plays, the episode was more commonly known as the 'slaughter' or 'killing' of the innocents.

Thus, the reference to the massacre of the innocents might have been more secondary to an early modern audience than it appears to us today. Usages like Chertsey's are highly unusual: it is one of only two extant records of 'massacre' in printed texts prior to 1572. This year marked the cataclysmic St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris, the apogee of a series of sectarian conflicts between French Catholics and Protestants and an event which is frequently credited with the importation of 'massacre' from French into English.²⁷ Starting in the capital in August 1572, the violence spread quickly into other parts of France, continuing until October. Reports decrying the massacre flooded England, both in the massacre's immediate aftermath and through the next two decades as England's relationship with Rome, and its Catholic allies, deteriorated.²⁸ Andrew Hadfield describes the English fear that similar violence might break out on English shores as directing domestic and foreign policy.²⁹ Indeed, the psychic effect of the massacre should not be underestimated. When the Spanish attempted their Armada in 1588, it was to the Bartholomew massacre that pamphleteers commonly looked as an exemplar of the violence averted. Shortly after the Bartholomew massacre, moreover, the term was soon put in the service of violence that rivalled Bartholomew as the most shameful of the Elizabethan period: the 1576 siege and sack of Antwerp, described by the soldier and poet, George Gascoigne as a 'pitiful' and 'piteous' 'massacre'.³⁰ 'Massacre', moreover, was a common feature of reports of the conflicts in Ireland, both during the Tudor conquest, and later during the Nine Years War (1594–1603). 'Massacre' in these examples denotes indiscriminate violence directed against those belonging to particular social or religious groups; massacre, here, is unconfined. The most popular Protestant account of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre offers an indicative example. Francois Hotman's *True and Plain Report* (1573) excoriates 'the horrible and shameful slaughter of Chastillion the Admiral, and divers other nobles and excellent men, and of the wicked and strange murder of godly persons, committed in many cities of France, without any respect of sort, kind, age or degree'.³¹ There is a negative equality to the massacre Hotman describes: it is not limited to children.

²⁷ See Hopkins (2008: 36). See also Harraway (2000: 152), Hammil (2008: 292).

²⁸ Parmelee (1994: 857).

²⁹ Hadfield (2007: 201).

³⁰ George Gascoigne, *The Spoil of Antwerp* (London, 1576: sig. C8^r).

³¹ Francois Hotman, *The True and Plain Report* (London, 1572: title page).

The French term from which English understandings of ‘massacre’ derive counts amongst its etymons objects relating to butchery, hunting, and sovereign power. The earliest extant texts often record ‘massacre’ in its archaic sense of butchery and the physical space of an abattoir; as Mark Greengrass notes, up until the 1540s, ‘massacre’ frequently denoted a butcher’s chopping block; the butcher’s knife was a *massacreur*.³² In these contexts, ‘massacre’ refers just as much to the geography of killing as to the act itself, to the mode of death, and the dismemberment that follows. In English as in French, ‘massacre’ held a variety of denotations: the dominant understanding of mass killing was joined by secondary meanings that included butchery and dismemberment, and lone murders or assassinations.³³ The latter was surprisingly familiar in imaginative and political writings. Herod accuses Mariam of plotting his ‘massacre’ (4.4.49) in Elizabeth Carey’s closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1605).³⁴ The King in Thomas Dekker’s tragi-comic *The Noble Spanish Soldier* (1622) fears that he ‘shall be massacre[d] in this’ the ‘spleen’ of his enemies (sig. E3^v).³⁵ And, the reluctant assassin in the anonymous chronicle history *King Leir* (1589) informs the elderly monarch that his ‘own two daughters, Goneril and Regan / Appointed [him] to massacre’ their father (sig. F3^r).³⁶ In 1585, Philip Stubbes characterised Dr William Parry’s supposed plot to kill Queen Elizabeth in 1584 as ‘a most cruel massacre of God’s anointed’.³⁷ The term was also applied to historical figures. The French lawyer and politician, Innocent Gentillet’s *Anti-Machiavel* (1576) described how the Roman Emperor, Heliogabalus, was ‘massacred and slain’ by his Praetorian Guard in 222 AD.³⁸ Philemon Holland’s landmark 1600 translation of Livy’s *The Roman History* describes how Caesar was ‘massacred in the court of Pompeius’, receiving ‘three and

³² Greengrass (1999: 69).

³³ For more on massacre’s various etymons, see Greengrass (1999: 71). See also Lucas (2017).

³⁴ Cary (2012). Gervase Markham and William Sampson repeat the accusation in *Herod and Antipater* (1619): *The True Tragedy of Herod and Antipater* (London, 1622: sig. E2^r).

³⁵ Thomas Dekker, *The Noble Spanish Soldier* (London, 1934).

³⁶ Anon., *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters* (London, 1605). See also John Gough, *The Strange Discovery* (London, 1640) in which Apollo’s priest gestures to the altar on which ‘Pyrrhus [was] massacred before’ (D3^v). Thomas Goffe’s *Orestes* (1620) presents a slightly different dynamic when its title-character vows to ‘go and [...] massacre’ his father’s murderers (London, 1633: sig. D2^r).

³⁷ Philip Stubbes, *The Intended Treason of Doctor Parry* (London, 1595: sig. A2^r). Sir George Buc’s *The History and Life and Reign of Richard the Third* made similar claims about Edward III’s role in the deposition of his father: he was ‘not only privy and consenting to the deposing of the king his father (a king anointed) but also to his massacre’ (London, 1647: 141).

³⁸ Innocent Gentillet, *Anti-Machiavel*, trans. Simon Patericke (London, 1602: sigs. B3^r). Gentillet also noted that Caligula ‘committed [...] a thousand cruelties and strange and horrible wickedness’ until ‘he was suddenly massacred and slain’ (E2^r).

twenty wounds: and by these murderers was the Capitol seized and held'.³⁹ This phrase became a common way of describing this killing, and an arresting way of analogising contemporary assassinations. When the Cardinal and Duke of Guise—leaders of a powerful faction of French Catholics—were killed in 1588, their murders were often linked to Caesar's by Catholic polemicists. Like Caesar's, these assassinations were frequently called 'massacres'.⁴⁰

These lexical choices are striking. With the exception of Gentillet, each 'massacre' in these examples highlights the cruelty and wickedness of the murderers, and the pity owed their victims; unlike more positive, or morally ambiguous, uses, here 'massacre' sullies the assassin and valorises the assassinated. Choosing 'massacre' makes claims about the violence that are not encompassed by 'assassination'. A brief investigation of the word 'assassination' illustrates this point. The word 'assassin' began its entry into the English language in the 1590s: 'the noun "assassin" is first recorded in 1600, in its alternative of "assassinate" which indicates derivation from the French "assassinat"'.⁴¹ The word was used erratically, 'reflecting the original provenance: assassins, like the *hashishiyyin* of the Levant, could be political or paid killers, or both'.⁴² Martin Wiggins explains that 'from the seventeenth century to the twentieth', the word 'assassin' had 'several interrelated meanings, contaminating one another and usually not distinguished in dictionaries: it can refer to a suborned murderer, a political murderer, and particularly in French usage, simply an especially opprobrious murderer'.⁴³ The verb *assassiner* is first recorded in French in the 1540s, and in the 1560s it was still regarded as a new word because 'it had become necessary to find new terms for new wickedness'.⁴⁴ It is possible, therefore, that the word is used in some of the earlier examples outlined above because the word 'assassination', with which we most frequently associate this kind of murder, had not yet stabilised in English. When applied to individual murders, 'massacre', like the French denotation of 'assassination', highlights the brutality and ignominy of the act. But the elision of

³⁹ Livy, *The Roman History*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1600: 1259). Another striking example is found in *The Happiness of the Church* (1619) by the clergyman, Thomas Adams, who asserts that 'in that Imperial state of Rome, 'til that Constantine's time almost every Emperor died by treason or massacre' (sig. Ff2^r). See also, Thomas Beard's augmented translation (1597) of Jean de Chassanion's *The Theatre of God's Judgement*, which declares that 'Julius Caesar [...] did tyrannously usurp the key of the Roman Commonwealth and intruded himself into the empire against the laws, customs, and authority of the people and Senate, yet it was accounted a most traitorous and cruel part to massacre and kill him' (249).

⁴⁰ Anon., *Les cruauitez sanguinaires* (Paris: 1589: 8).

⁴¹ Wiggins (1991: 13).

⁴² Wiggins (1991: 13).

⁴³ Wiggins (1991: v).

⁴⁴ Wiggins (1991: 11). Wiggins cites Henri Estienne's *L'Introduction au traite de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes* (Geneva, 1566: sig. O8^r).

massacre and assassination is not merely a semantic quirk: they are not directly synonymous. For particularly violent or ruthless deaths, the idea of massacre adds a string of arresting connotations that do not necessarily inhere to the idea of assassination. Mass casualties are exchanged for lone victims, who are themselves frequently outnumbered: it is the perpetrators who put the ‘mass’ in this kind of massacre. Nonetheless, a sense of collective suffering is often retained. It is the impression of scale and not the exact numbers involved that constitute the act: the harshness of the deed—both to the office and the man—that makes the massacre.

So, when Tyrrel describes the killing of the Princes as the ‘most arch-act of piteous massacre’ ever yet committed in England, he is pulling on, and evoking, multiple definitions of this word. On the one hand, he conjures the Biblical innocents slain by Herod: the Princes’ deaths join a continuum of ancient murders, a history that has already been recorded and over which Tyrrel claims no direct responsibility. More immediately, perhaps, he evokes the comprehensive atrocity conjured by the European massacres that so frightened the air of Elizabethan culture and foreign policy: the Princes are metonymic of mass violence that is not restricted to children, it is a massacre that cuts them all. Distinct off-stage bodies juxtapose countless metaphorical ones: Edward and Richard of York. It is to these assassinated children, not just a loose projection of generalised innocence, that Tyrrel also refers. Such specific references resist euphemism, closing the gap between Tyrrel and the act he is trying so hard to distance himself from.

EDWARD FOR EDWARD

After Tyrrel narrates the murder of the Princes in Heywood’s *Edward IV*, the bodies of the boys are brought on-stage. Dighton enters at ‘one door, with Edward under his arme’; at the ‘other door, Forrest with Richard’ (SD. 17.38). In keeping with the symbolic opposition created by this stage picture, the two men hurl insults at each other (‘damned rogue’, ‘thou further villain’), before laying the dead children down in full view of the audience. By introducing their corpses to the stage in this way, the play unites unequivocally Tyrrel’s speech with the off-stage action he has just related. Shakespeare, on the other hand, makes possible multiple readings by not bringing up the bodies.

While the first part of this article considered the way Shakespeare’s Tyrrel suggests a wide range of referents for the word ‘massacre’, this section focusses instead on how the on-stage massacre of children in the wider tetralogy can inform our reading of the Princes’ off-stage murder. I have suggested that the massacre that Tyrrel refers to is both specific and bloody, as well as multiple and metaphoric. This section expounds further this seeming contradiction, linking the murder of the

Princes to the murder of Prince Edward of Lancaster in the third part of *Henry VI* (1591). By reading backwards to *Henry VI*, I read the Princes' killing as part of a wider network of child murder that is yoked together through the language and action of massacre.

The final part of *Henry VI* depicts, in detail, the terrors of the Wars of the Roses. Its battles—at Wakefield, Towton, and Tewkesbury—structure the play, expressing and energising the turmoil of the civil war. During the first battle at Wakefield, the insurgent Yorkists suffer heavy casualties, losing the battle to the Royal Lancastrians. Triumphant, Queen Margaret, together with her ally and military commander, Lord Clifford, scorn their great enemy—Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York. They taunt him with a handkerchief 'steeped in the harmless blood / Of sweet young Rutland' (2.1.62–3), the Duke's youngest son.⁴⁵ Forcing the boy's father onto a molehill, the ruthless pair entreat the Duke to mop his brow with the bloody napkin, and, following a mock coronation, stab him to death. The bloody handkerchief proffered by Margaret becomes emblematic of the point at which the future is cut off. Unable to make reprisal in the present, a scorned York dies in the knowledge that his line is fractured. As a non-combatant, 'innocent child' (1.3.8), Rutland's murder is, in some ways, more keenly felt than his father's. His brothers (even or especially Richard of Gloucester, given his later filicide), cry 'vengeance for his death' (1.4.148). Rutland's murder becomes a blueprint for which future murders return, a terrible history that cycles over and over

When Prince Edward of Lancaster, son and heir to the newly deposed Henry VI is killed at the end of *Henry VI, Part Three*, it marks the point at which history begins to map out a future that will be realised in *Richard III*. Railing at the newly kingd Edward IV, 'perjured George' and 'misshapen Dick' (5.5.34–35) for usurping his father, the young prince is stabbed by each Yorkist in turn:

KING EDWARD IV: Take that, thou likeness of this railer here!

Stabs him.

GLOUCESTER: Sprawl'st thou? Take that to end thy agony!

Richard stabs him.

GEORGE OF CLARENCE: And there's for twitting me with perjury!

Clarence stabs him.

(5.5.38–40)

'Hold, Richard, hold, for we have done too much' (5.5.43) orders the new King. Edward IV realises that they have gone too far; they have not just killed the boy, they have butchered him. He is, according to one early modern understanding, massacred. The outpouring of grief from his mother Margaret, that same killer of Rutland, reinforces this impression:

⁴⁵William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part Three*, edited by John D. Cox & Eric Rasmussen (London, Bloomsbury, 2001). All references are to this edition and will be made in text.

O traitors, murderers!
 They that stabbed Caesar shed no blood at all,
 Did not offend, nor were not worthy blame,
 If this foul deed were by to equal it.
 He was a man; this, in respect, a child,
 And men ne'er spend their fury on a child.
 What's worse than murderer, that I may name it?
 [...]
 Butchers and villains! Bloody cannibals!

(5.5.52–61)

Like Julius Caesar's, Edward's death can be read as a massacre not because of the number killed, but because it is particularly brutal, particularly striking. Yet, Margaret's allusion to Julius Caesar is curiously imprecise: Margaret hyperbolically claims that the death of the Roman dictator in the Capitol was bloodless compared to Edward's. By contrasting Edward's death to Julius Caesar's, Margaret conceives of Edward's killing as a sort of super massacre; it is above and beyond what has been encountered before. The comparison serves to highlight their essential difference: Caesar was a man, Edward a child, if only to his mother; the conspirators were men, but Edward's murderers resist human classification. Her son's killers are worse than murderers. The speech, structured around conditional propositions ('if this foul deed' / 'if I speak') builds to the exclamation: 'Butchers and villains! Bloody Cannibals!' Even these condemnations do not go far enough. This is, after all, a murder that even its murderers think excessive. The Caesar allusion, coupled with the order to cease the stabbing, suggests wounds that go beyond the three proscribed in the stage directions. Although the twenty-three wounds said to have been sustained by Caesar might not have been the number delivered to Edward, it is the image of a corpse so riddled with wounds that it is perhaps unrecognisable that Shakespeare evokes.

Edward's mutilated body stands here on the threshold of metaphor and actuality. He is, in Julia Kristeva's terms, abject: neither subject nor truly object, placed symbolically at the 'border of [his] condition as a living being'.⁴⁶ Whereas for Kristeva, the abject 'draws the onlooker towards 'the place where meaning collapses', Edward's body, though mutilated, is nonetheless still a body to which great significance is attached. Writing of the bloody handkerchief, a prop common to Thomas Kyd's early Elizabethan drama, *The Spanish Tragedy* (4.4.122), and indeed, the final part of *Henry VI*,

⁴⁶ Kristeva defines the master as a merger between a person's ego and superego, which according to Freud denote the parts of a person's mind that respectively mediate desires, and that which reflects the cultural rules and institutions that act as a check to the ego (Kristeva 1982: 2). See also Owens (2005: 20).

Andrew Sofer argues that, as a 'failed love-charm, marital memento, and bloody revenge token, the property continually acquires new connotations for the spectator as it passes from hand to hand in performance'.⁴⁷ He calls this process 'contextual reanimation'.⁴⁸ Even while the actor's physical presence is no longer needed, and even though a stage-property becomes equally redundant, Edward's body likewise accumulates a range of different connotations after his murder and after the end of *Henry VI*, transforming from a site of grief to a site of revenge. If, as Francis N. Teague argues, the actor playing Juliet 'becomes a property [...] very like a tomb statue' after imbibing the Friar's potion in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), so too Edward of Lancaster becomes a property-like centrepiece of future murders in *Richard III*.⁴⁹

As John Jowett observes, when *Richard III* 'opens it looks back to two earlier murders staged in the final scenes of *Henry VI, Part Three*: the stabbing of Prince Edward after the battle of Tewkesbury, and Richard's murder of King Henry VI in the tower'.⁵⁰ The two deaths are rhetorically entwined. Addressing Richard over the corpse of her dead father-in-law, Lady Anne asks the ghost of the fallen king to hear her lament: 'Wife to thy Edward, to thy slaughter'd son, / Stabb'd by the selfsame hand that made these holes.' (1.2.10–11). Anne models Henry VI's murder after his son's, associating them almost to the point of conflation. As she narrates the 'wounds' and 'fatal holes' that mark the corpse of Henry, we are reminded of the similar injuries sustained by his son, just as we recall their common murderer. As she thrice curses Richard in a series of highly wrought repetitions, we are reminded of the 'symmetries of killing and counter-killing' that characterised the first three plays in the sequence.⁵¹

The generative nature of these killings is made explicit a couple of scenes later when Margaret, returned from France, interrupts Queen Elizabeth and her retinue to curse them:

If not by war, by surfeit die your king,
As ours by murder to make him a king.
(*To the Queen*) Edward thy son, which now is Prince of Wales,
For Edward my son, which was Prince of Wales,
Die in his youth by like untimely violence.

(1.3.194–8)

It is a speech that maps the past onto the future, linking inextricably historical murders with those she prays will take place. The parallels between the two kings—dead and

⁴⁷ Sofer (2003: 76).

⁴⁸ Sofer (2003: 6).

⁴⁹ Teague (1991: 143). For a similar argument, see Sofer (2010).

⁵⁰ Jowett (2000: 38).

⁵¹ Jowett (2000: 47).

incumbent—and the two Princes of Wales—dead and heir apparent—are separated by the temporal markers ‘is’ and ‘was’, and contrasting possessives ‘your’ and ‘ours’. Margaret’s curse collapses these temporal and familial distinctions making King and Prince, King and Prince of Wales, Yorkist and Lancastrian, one.

Margaret continues her curses, swearing misfortune on each of the party in turn before her final address: ‘say poor Margaret was a prophetess.’ (1.3.301). The violence wished by Margaret does indeed come to pass: Clarence is executed, his death hastening the King’s, and Queen Elizabeth’s kinsmen and allies are imprisoned and killed by Richard. On hearing the fate of Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan, Queen Elizabeth exclaims: ‘Welcome, destruction, death, and massacre. / I see, as in a map, the end of all’ (2.4.56–7). The murder of her sons, the Princes Edward and Richard, provides the first of these predicted massacres. Their deaths, as Margaret forewarned, bears comparison with Edward of Lancaster’s. Tyrrel calls them a massacre. Despite the reported bloodlessness of the deaths, the Duchess of York insists on the bloody brutality of the murders: ‘England’s lawful earth’ is ‘Unlawfully made drunk with innocents’ blood’ (4.4.23–4). For her the act was so gory that the land itself is saturated and incapacitated, suggesting blood so plentiful that it must have self-multiplied even as it shed. The Duchess’s is a rhetorical bloodiness keenly felt. Unlike the Lancastrian Prince, the York boys are massacred, not because of the physical operation of their deaths, but (very much like Lancastrian Edward) because of the evil of their murders; an evil so unnatural that it is marked by their murderers.

There are multiple textual witnesses to *Richard III*: six quarto editions were printed between 1597 and 1622; the play was printed again in Shakespeare’s First Folio in 1623. In the Folio text, the linking of the two sets of murders continues. When Margaret learns of their deaths she makes a clear equivalence between the murder of the Princes in the tower and her Edward: ‘Plantagenet doth quit Plantagenet: / Edward for Edward pays a dying debt’ (4.4.20–1).⁵² This correspondence is followed up, in a slightly altered form, later in the scene:

Thy Edward he is dead, that killed my Edward:
 Thy other Edward dead, to quit my Edward:
 Young York he is but boot, because both they
 Matched not the high perfection of my loss.

(4.4.62–5)

Margaret unfolds the distinct, but distinctly imbricated, Edwards: Edward of York, later King Edward IV, Edward of Lancaster, Prince of Wales, and Edward of York, Prince of Wales, are tied together in a cycle of reciprocal violence. Even these acts of requital or prophesied revenge cannot match the perception of her loss; even the

⁵² William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, edited by Jonathan Bate & Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2008).

added death of Prince Richard cannot make up the shortfall.

Only one recourse is offered to avenge their wrongs and to end the cycle of violence that has wracked the country, the death of Richard. Margaret declares:

I had an Edward, till a Richard killed him:
 I had a husband, till a Richard killed him:
 Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard killed him:
 Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him.

(4.4.39–42)

Bound up now with the death of the boys is the death of Margaret's husband, Henry VI, and Richard, the architect and agent of all of these murders. It is to these killings that the murders of the Princes combine. And it is Shakespeare's (in)action that enables us to imagine this collage of murders in the report of one. Placing the murders of the Princes off-stage allows the reader to consider more than one mode of killing, to alter the meaning of Tyrrel's strange euphemism and to see the killings for the massacres they are: the particular murder of two boys, the wider tradition to which this kind of death belongs, and the cycle of reciprocal murder that expresses the intimate, intestine, nature of civil war.

CONCLUSIONS

The sociologist Michael Humphrey argues that massacres are intended as a 'communicative act'.⁵³ For Humphrey, this communication is implicitly linked to the visibility of the bodies violated: if you can see violence, then you can interpret its signs. Conversely, this article has demonstrated the manifold ways in which massacre can be communicated by words alone. I have argued that the description of the Princes' murder as a 'massacre' works in a variety of, often competing, ways. Tyrrel's language is capacious: 'massacre' refers both to mass deaths and individual murders, to Herod's notoriously directed killings of male children and, arguably more powerfully, to the widespread massacres raging through Europe in the late 16th century. It is the off-stage that enables us to read this multiplicity and to bind these actions further to reciprocal violence of the earlier tetralogy. I have argued that the murder of Prince Edward in *Henry VI, Part Three* becomes rhetorically intertwined with the Princes in *Richard III* in such a way that their murders become imbricated. In this way, the Princes' off-stage murders are both lone killings and metaphors for a greater number, or mass, of bodies, but these bodies are specific to the tetralogy: the impact of the Princes' murder is partially contingent on, or rewarded by, the killing of children earlier in Shakespeare's War of the Roses cycle. Ultimately, then, Tyrrel's language

⁵³Humphrey (2002: 78).

works against him. Rather than operating as a distancing trope, Tyrrel's 'massacre' renders the murders in our minds, intimately connecting the audience to the interpretation of the killings. It is an 'arch-act' in which we are all implicated.

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