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**‘MORBID EXHILARATIONS’:  
DYING WORDS  
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment  
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## Abstract

In Renaissance England, dying a good death helped to ensure that the soul was prepared for the afterlife. In the theatre, however, playwrights disrupt and challenge the conventional formulas for last words, creating death scenes that range from the philosophical to the blackly comic. In expanding the potential of the dying speech, dramatists encourage in their audiences a willingness to contemplate less orthodox responses to death.

This thesis thus focuses on the final utterances of dying characters, in selected scenes from early modern English tragedies. While scenes from iconic dramatists such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe are considered as part of the discussion, emphasis is primarily given to those of less canonical playwrights, including George Chapman, Thomas Dekker, John Fletcher, Thomas Kyd, Gervase Markham, John Marston, Philip Massinger, Thomas Middleton, John Webster, William Sampson, and Robert Yarrington. Chronologically, the scenes span nearly four decades, from Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* plays in 1590, to Sampson's *Vow Breaker* in 1636.

The thesis encompasses four major contexts for the study of dying speeches: beheadings, murder, revenge and suicide. Chapter One, on public execution, focuses on scaffold speeches delivered prior to simulated beheadings on the stage. The second chapter examines the genre of the murder play and the pattern of the victim's displaced last words. Chapter Three explores the creative freedom taken by playwrights in the composition of dying speeches in revenge scenarios, and the final chapter foregrounds the verbal preoccupations of characters who choose to take their own lives. Each subject is established in relation to social, religious and political contexts in early modern England, so that

characters' final words are considered from both historical and literary perspectives.

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for

George and Daphne Martin,  
the very best of parents

and

in memory of

Jason Waterman,

friend and scholar,  
who is much missed

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## A Note on Editions

Unless indicated parenthetically in the text, citations from the plays of William Shakespeare, John Webster and George Chapman are from the following editions:

**Shakespeare:** *The Complete Works*. Compact Edition. Ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988.

**Webster:** *The Works of John Webster: An Old-Spelling Critical Edition*. Ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie and Antony Hammond. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

**Chapman:** *The Plays of George Chapman*. Ed. Thomas Marc Parrott. 2 vols. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961.

**Note:** The phrase ‘morbid exhilarations’, used in the title of this thesis, is from Mark Houlahan’s chapter, ‘Postmodern Tragedy? Returning to John Ford’. *Tragedy in Transition*. Ed. Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, 253.

## Introduction: Dying Speeches and the 'Quality of the Liminal'<sup>1</sup>

In one of the more bizarre scenes in Jacobean tragedy, the villain D'Amville in Cyril Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedy* (published 1611) accidentally brains himself with an axe. This extraordinary occurrence may be considered variously as an instance of providential self-execution, as a murder that represents the culmination of a revenge scenario, or as an unwitting act of self-slaughter. While this is strange, what is more astonishing is that D'Amville makes a speech as he is dying: he staggers from the scaffold and articulates twenty-four lines of coherent last words, acknowledging the crimes he has committed and musing upon the appropriateness of his own demise.

In making such a confession, D'Amville fulfills the Jacobean spectator's expectation of a dying speech and provides a form of closure, both for himself and for his audience. His final speech draws attention to the potentially complex nature of the dying utterance, for it touches upon issues that were of central importance during the early modern period, including the notion of the good, Christian death; the tradition of deathbed confession after careful preparation for dying; and anxiety over the fate of the soul in the afterlife. From the theatrical perspective, the improbability of D'Amville's performance is immaterial – what is important is that he dies spectacularly, his ability to speak uncompromised. His final words both satisfy and unsettle: they explain and conclude, but they also indicate the extent to which D'Amville has alienated himself from the possibility of Christian redemption.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon McMullan's phrase "the quality of the liminal", from his *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, points to the dying speech as a crucial, threshold event (215).

At the time Tourneur's play was produced, there was already a well-established tradition that accorded particular significance to the final speeches of the dying, suggesting that these moments on the threshold of death represent a numinous, if very temporary, state of existence which separates the dying from the living. While Karl S. Guthke observes that we "associate truth and wisdom" with last words (*Last Words* 4), there was also an early modern belief that proximity to death could impart the ability to foresee the future, as attested by the dying Hotspur in Shakespeare's *1 Henry 4*:

. . . O, I could prophesy,  
 But that the earthy and cold hand of death  
 Lies on my tongue. No, Percy, thou art dust,  
 And food for —     *He dies* (5.4.82-85)

Hotspur's words evoke the mystery of death, the peculiar placement of the dying person who simultaneously inhabits two oppositional states, being neither fully alive nor yet dead.

Thomas Lupset, in his *Waye of Dying well* (1534), acknowledges the estrangement of the living from the experience of dying: "This change of the bodies state, whether by hit selfe hit be good or yuelle, it is an harde thyng for vs to iuge, seing the trowth is that no man lyuing expertlye knoweth what thyng deathe is, and to determyne of a thyng vnknown, hit semeth a presumption full of folye" (qtd. in Atkinson 76). A dying person's last moments can only be witnessed, his or her words representing an attempt to communicate a final message, or to give the listener a glimpse, perhaps, of the beyond from the speaker's perspective. Gordon McMullan observes that "Last words mattered in early modern England . . . though their precise import was not always clear. They

had the quality of the liminal: for the Christian, they marked the transition not from life to extinction but from life to life in another form, a change not unlike a rite of passage within the earthly life” (215).

The “quality of the liminal” is a crucial phrase, for dying speeches are threshold speeches, clusters of words uttered with a particular intensity, and which tend to be received by hearers – even in the present day – as worthy of being carefully noted and shared with others. The urge to record last words is the desire for conclusion and consummation, as well as the impulse to remember and memorialize. In his *Preparatione to Deathe* (1538), Erasmus observes:

. . . the wordes of theym that dye are wont to be snatched vp somdele gredyly, and to be printed more depely in the myndes of the hearers, partly that no man is thought to fayne in that ieopardy, partly that the mynd whan it beginneth to be plucked from the body, wherwith it is combred, oftentimes vttereth a glymmerynge, and a profe of that lybertie and knowledge whervnto it goth” (qtd. in Atkinson 65).

The dying speech may be made as a formal declaration or as a humorous aside; in tone it may range from the philosophical to the blackly comic, its content and delivery full of subtle nuances. In an historical context, recorded final words are often echoed by those who follow, creating specific links between the dead and the dying. This allusive parallelism also occurs in the theatre, when characters ‘borrow’ from historical persons and from characters in other plays. Similar last-hour preoccupations, and the popularity of certain phrases in dying speeches – both historically and in the drama – are evidence of the early modern appreciation

of final speeches. Moreover, they emphasize the apparent desirability of conscious participation in the tradition of last words.

The dramatists who were producing plays in the 1590s and the first three decades of the seventeenth century were active participants in this continuing history of final words. This introduction explores some of the influences – both classical and medieval – on dying speeches in the early modern theatre. I will discuss the relevance of Stoicism as a philosophy for death, giving three examples of reported scenes of dying drawn from antiquity. This will be followed first by a brief look at last words in two medieval morality plays, then by a more detailed focus on the genre of the *artes moriendi*, or spiritual tracts on the art of the ‘good’ death. To conclude, the chapter will acknowledge the impact of religious upheaval in the early modern period, as a specific context for the development of the dying utterance in Renaissance plays.

Both the classical and medieval traditions embody an inherent tension between the dying individual and the significance of that death to the wider community. Each individual faces death alone, in the sense of inhabiting a unique consciousness that does not permit the experience to be shared – not, at least, beyond an attempted description of immediate emotional and physical responses to dying. At the same time, however – particularly in the historical context – that dying individual is part of the social group comprised of family, friends and neighbours. In these circumstances, last words participate in what Richard Macksey calls “speech performance”, constituting a “unique dialogic occasion, an exchange at the threshold”, whose context is “always a dramatic one” (500-501, 503). This exchange also represents a set of mutual obligations between the dying and the living. When *moriens* (the dying person) speaks, it is to convey what is of

greatest importance and urgency in those moments; this requires an audience that is willing to receive and honour that message. Indeed, Robert Pogue Harrison argues that to “cope with one’s mortality means to recognize its kinship with others and to turn this kinship in death into a shared language” (71).

In the traditional deathbed scenario, the dying person communicates final wishes or instructions to those in attendance, who in turn aid *moriens* in prayer, as last-hour preparation for the soul’s passage to the afterlife. For the early modern spectator in the playhouse, the awareness of this sort of deathbed exchange is present in the background of scenes of dying on the stage, even when – as is usually the case – the dying person is denied the time and circumstances which would allow this form of preparation. When Hamlet dies, he anticipates the silence beyond his own annihilation, but he is also keenly aware of his position at court from a political perspective; death’s strict arrest necessitates Horatio’s survival, so that he may explain what Hamlet cannot. The Prince’s final speech thus embodies both a personal, even intimate, exchange with his friend, as well as formal instructions pending the arrival of Fortinbras.

In the classical context, last words often function as a summation of the life lived. The speech as it is reported attempts to capture the essence of the dying person’s character, thus providing an appropriate and satisfying conclusion to the speaker’s life. This is true, for example, of the death of Socrates, whom Macksey considers to be the initiator of “a long tradition of dying philosophers” (513). Plato’s *Phaedo* gives an account of Socrates’ death in 399 B.C.: the philosopher was condemned to death on “vague charges of impiety and corruption of the young” (Taylor 837), and for his execution was administered hemlock.

The narrator describes how Socrates, presented with the poison, “pressed the cup to his lips, and drank it off with good humour and without the least distaste” (*Phaedo* 117c, 72). When his friends began to weep, Socrates admonished them, urging them to be calm and “have strength” (117e, 72). He was aware that as the hemlock moved up through his body it would cause numbness, resulting in death when it reached his heart. Socrates had covered his face for his final moment, but by the time the poison reached his abdomen, he “uncovered his face . . . and spoke; and this was in fact his last utterance: ‘Crito,’ he said, ‘we owe a cock to Asclepius: please pay the debt, and don’t neglect it.’” (118, 72).

Socrates demonstrates his readiness to die and his belief in the attainment of wisdom after death (Ahrensdorf 199); his last words thus epitomize his “style and values” (Macksey 495).<sup>2</sup> Christopher Gill, however, points out that Plato, in omitting many of the unpleasant symptoms of hemlock poisoning, chooses not to give an authentically “torrid picture of the physical collapse the drug induces” (25). By describing only the physical numbness that Socrates experiences, Gill suggests, Plato’s account of his death is contrived to draw attention to the departure of the *psyche* or soul from the body, and is thus evidence of “an author selecting and embellishing those features which will illuminate, in visual form, the intelligible meaning of his argument” (28).

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<sup>2</sup> In his notes on the death scene in *Phaedo*, David Gallop indirectly draws attention to the issue of how variously the meaning of last words may be interpreted: he points out that the repayment of the debt to Asclepius “is sometimes supposed to be for healing Socrates of the sickness of human life”, but argues that, because this view of life is “nowhere espoused by Socrates”, it is “simpler to take the words as referring to an actual debt, incurred in some connection unknown” (225n118a7-8).

The reporting of the death of Socrates in *Phaedo* is thus a good example of how – even at this early date in a long history of death scenes – the final words of the dying may be presented in a context which has been selectively ‘staged’ for the reader, so that the possible motives of the narrator or author must be questioned and the specific content of the account considered.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, Macksey describes last words as a “‘transtextual genre’”, drawing attention to the issue of “‘intertextuality’” and pointing out that the quotation is a “‘second-order utterance, ‘abstracted’ from its origin” when it is recorded (514, 498).

The calm acceptance of his own death, demonstrated by Socrates as the fitting end to a life lived according to philosophical principles, was the type of death sought by adherents to Stoicism; for them, death was a natural process of change from one state to another. Most relevant to the present study is the Roman, as opposed to Greek, form of Stoicism, which is described by Gregory Hays as “a practical discipline – not an abstract system of thought, but an attitude to life” (xxiii). As far as dying is concerned, Marcus Aurelius argues in his *Meditations* that only philosophy can guide us, to teach us to allow the “power within” to accept death “in a cheerful spirit, as nothing but the dissolution of the elements from which each living thing is composed.” He asks of the reader, “If it doesn’t hurt the individual elements to change continually into one another, why are people afraid of all of them changing and separating? It’s a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil” (2.17, 23). Death is as natural a process as that of birth, and should be awaited “not with indifference, not with impatience, not with

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Origins of Shakespeare*, Emrys Jones proposes that the account of Socrates’ death in *Phaedo* is the source for the reported death of Falstaff in *Henry V*, and argues that the use of the classical text “in a new vernacular context” is characteristically Shakespearean (21). This form of borrowing illustrates both the appeal of classical descriptions of dying, and the lively spirit of creative experimentation brought to the stage by early modern dramatists.

disdain, but simply viewing it as one of the things that happen to us. Now you anticipate the child's emergence from its mother's womb; that's how you should await the hour when your soul will emerge from its compartment" (9.3,118).

Quite simply, Aurelius advises acceptance: "If it's time for you to go, leave willingly" (3.7, 31), and "make your exit with grace" (12.36, 170).

Stoicism urges an acceptance of uncertainty, since nobody knows when or in what specific circumstances they will die. Such willing submission to the unknown and inevitable is achieved partly through the practice of visualizing one's own death, and partly by living wisely, with conscious self-discipline. Aurelius advises, "Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what's left and live it properly" (7.56, 94). Seneca agrees; in Letter 12 he advises, "Every day . . . should be regulated as if it were the one that brings up the rear, the one that rounds out and completes our lives" (58). In Letter 26 he offers an example of his own strategy: "I imagine to myself that the testing time is drawing near, that the day that is going to see judgement pronounced on the whole of my past life has actually arrived" (71).

In addition to his philosophical writings, Seneca also produced ten tragedies, available during the early modern period in Thomas Newton's 1581 edition. In his *Issues of Death*, Michael Neill perceives in Seneca's influence a merging of philosophy and theatre, through the use of an aesthetic which "depends upon the dying person's ability to make death the consummation of a life conducted according to immaculately theatrical precepts" (35). An essential part of this theatricality is the concept of conscious rehearsal for death, upon which Seneca quotes Epicurus in Letter 26: "'It is a very good thing to familiarize oneself with death.' You may possibly think it unnecessary to learn

something which you will only have to put into practice once. That is the very reason why we ought to be practising it” (72).

In Letter 77 Seneca sustains the theatrical metaphor: “As it is with a play, so it is with life – what matters is not how long the acting lasts, but how good it is. It is not important at what point you stop . . . only make sure that you round it off with a good ending” (130). The same trope is echoed in the early modern period by Christopher Sutton, in his *Disce Mori: Learne to Die* (1600): “Wee are but now actors vppon the stage of this world. They which are gon haue played their parts, and wee which remayne are yet acting ours. Onely our epilogue is for to ende” (qtd. in Atkinson 186).

For Beverly Clack, the idea of rehearsal is linked with Seneca’s concern that we should have an “ethical response” to dying, for it follows that the consequences of fearing death may be a series of negative actions, “greed, betrayal, cowardice.” If one conquers the fear of death and lives virtuously, and according to reason, then the “discipline of ‘practising death’” becomes “part of the practice of life.” Part of this process is making “every moment worth while”, so that when death arrives, it will be faced with equanimity (117-18).

Seneca’s own death was an appropriate test of his philosophical principles, for he was forced to commit suicide on the orders of the emperor Nero (Macksey 508). According to the *Annals* of Tacitus (XV, 60-64), Seneca’s death was “slow and lingering” (qtd. in R. Campbell 244).<sup>4</sup> Suffering first with cuts to his arms, ankles and behind his knees, he was then administered poison in an attempt to hasten the process; the dose was ineffective, so he was “placed in a bath of warm water”, then “carried into a vapour-bath, where he suffocated.” His final words

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<sup>4</sup> R. Campbell includes this account in an appendix, 43-44. The excerpt from Tacitus is translated by Michael Grant.

were spoken as he sprinkled bath-water on his slaves, “commenting that this was his libation to Jupiter” (qtd. in R. Campbell 244).

Although she was prevented from following through, Seneca’s wife declared her intention to die with him, and the two of them cut their arms together. Tacitus claims, however, that before this decision was made, Seneca “embraced his wife and, with a tenderness very different from his philosophical imperturbability, entreated her to moderate and set a term to her grief, and take just consolation, in her bereavement, from contemplating his well-spent life” (243). The incisions made, he was “afraid of weakening his wife’s endurance by betraying his agony – or of losing his own self-possession at the sight of her sufferings. So he asked her to go into another bedroom. But even in his last moment his eloquence remained” (qtd. in R. Campbell 243-44).

The amount of detail recorded in the account, and the manner in which Seneca conducts himself as he is dying, point equally to the event as a form of specialized performance. Even when his words are not directly quoted, they are paraphrased, demonstrating his directorial qualities in managing his own death scene. Moreover, as in Plato’s account of Socrates’ death, the physical aspects of the death are subordinate to the description of the philosopher’s conduct, in order to foreground the nobility and the (relative) imperturbability of his character. Despite the difficulties attending his suicide, Seneca is aware of the public eye, and is careful to ensure that his death proceeds in accordance with his Stoic beliefs. Tacitus, likewise, shapes his account to uphold the same principles.

In a third example drawn from antiquity, the Emperor Julian is reported to have given a lengthy dying speech, in an account given by Ammianus Marcellinus (XXV, 3). Wounded in battle, Julian is removed to his tent, and begins his

address to his companions with the words, “Most opportunely, friends, has the time now come for me to leave this life, which I rejoice to return to Nature, at her demand, like an honourable debtor, not (as some might think) bowed down with sorrow, but having learned from the general conviction of philosophers how much happier the soul is than the body . . .” (Marcellinus 497). In a well-structured and carefully paced speech, Julian acknowledges his death as a gift and explains that he feels no regret for past actions. As Emperor, he claims, “I have preserved my soul, as taking its origin from relationship with the gods, stainless (in my opinion), conducting civil affairs with moderation” (499). He continues in a similar vein, concluding that his embracing of death as “so noble a departure” from the world is entirely fitting, “For he is justly regarded as equally weak and cowardly who desires to die when he ought not, or he who seeks to avoid death when his time has come.” He raises the issue of succession, but pronounces himself “prudently silent”, wishing only that “a good ruler may be found to succeed me.”

These last quoted words in the text are followed by Marcellinus’s account of the remainder of the dying scene. Julian grieves for the death of his chief court-marshal, but “even then maintaining his authority”, he chided those present for weeping, “saying that it was unworthy to mourn for a prince who was called to union with heaven and the stars” (501). Finally, death arrived: “Suddenly the wound in his pierced side opened wide, the pressure of the blood checked his breath, and after a draught of cold water for which he had asked, in the gloom of midnight he passed quietly away . . .” (501, 503).

As in the accounts of the deaths of Socrates and Seneca, Marcellinus’s description of the death of Julian is the result of the author’s respectfully selective approach to reporting the event. Julian is keenly sensitive to his role as the central

protagonist in the scene, while Marcellinus fulfils the role of witness and recorder of the event; the scene contains the necessary ‘extras’ in the form of grieving supporters. The phrase “as if with the last stroke of his pen” – used to describe the conclusion of Julian’s formal last words, and his request to “distribute his private property to his closer friends” – at the same time indicates the intention to preserve the essential details of this momentous occasion so that it may be shared with future readers (501). Although his death is briefly described at the end of the account, this final detail is entirely subordinate to the central issue of Julian’s dying speech, which is long, unabbreviated, and directly quoted. With the revival of interest in Stoicism during the latter part of the sixteenth century, noted by Gordon Braden, such scenes of consummate control and conscious philosophical calm in the midst of dying were a source of inspiration for early modern playwrights, “both as one of the commanding achievements of classical antiquity and as a potential guide to modern life” (“Plutarch” 193).

Early modern writers thus were heirs to a classical tradition that could be drawn upon as a rich source of material for their own work, but they were also the inheritors of two deeply entrenched, alternative traditions: medieval drama and the *artes moriendi*, spiritual treatises on the craft of dying which incorporated specific advice in regard to preparation for death and the passage of the soul to the afterlife.

While the relationship between dying utterances in medieval drama and those in early modern plays is beyond the scope of the present study, two morality plays, *Everyman* (ca. 1465-70) and *The Castle of Perseverance* (ca. 1405-25), are

included in this discussion for the differing emphasis accorded in each to last words.<sup>5</sup>

*Everyman* demonstrates the necessity of preparation for death and divine judgement. This preparation is presented as a progression of stages which must be passed through and mastered if the protagonist is to die well. God summons Death as his messenger, instructing him to go to Everyman,

And shewe him, in my name,  
A pilgrimage he must on him take  
Whiche he in no wise may escape,  
And that he bringe with him a sure rekeninge  
Without delay or ony taryenge. (67-71)

His attempts to bribe Death and request more time proving unsuccessful, Everyman is forced to accept the inevitability of his death; he has only until the end of the day to prepare himself. He appeals, in turn, to Fellowship, Kindred and Cousin, Goods, Good Deeds, Knowledge, and Confession; he calls together Discretion, Strength, Five Wits and Beauty, who wait while Everyman receives the seven sacraments.

The procession then moves to his grave, where one by one his companions take their leave of him. Close to death, only Good Deeds remains to accompany him, and Everyman speaks his final words before descending into the grave:

Into thy handes, Lorde, my soule I commende.  
Receive it, Lorde, that it be not lost.  
As thou me boughtest, so me defende,  
And save me from the fendes boost,

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<sup>5</sup> I have used David Bevington's anthology, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) for the texts of both plays. Line numbers are cited parenthetically in the text.

That I may appere with that blessyd hoost

That shall be saved at the day of dome.

*In manus tuas*, of mightes moost

Forever, *commendo spiritum meum!* (880-87)

His dying speech begins and ends with paraphrases of Christ's last words on the cross, while the formal rhyme emphasizes the solemnity of these final moments. The moment of transition from life to death is represented by his symbolic descent into the earth; in the absence of physical suffering, the impact of his passing is entirely focused on his last words. As Pamela M. King observes, the play exhibits "no conflict, no *psychomachia*, but simply an orderly progress towards a predetermined end" (256).

While King considers the "abandonment" of Everyman by his companions as pessimistic (258), I would argue rather that the depiction of his increasing isolation poignantly illustrates the inherent tension between the dying individual and the community, for the inevitable approach of death emphasizes the unavoidable truth that this is an experience that cannot be shared. Although Everyman is representative of all mortals, the moment at which his human consciousness is terminated signals his final estrangement from the living.

In contrast to Everyman's smooth passage into death, the physical demise of Mankind in *The Castle of Perseverance* is an integral part of his dying scene. Struck with Death's dart, his lengthy lament begins thus:

A, Deth, Deth, drye is thy drifte!

Ded is my desteny.

Min[e] hed is clewyn al in a clifte!

For clappe of care now I crye;

Min[e] eye-lydys may I not lifte;

Min[e] brainys waxyn al emptye;

I may not onys min[e] hod up-schifte! (2843-49)

He continues at length, crying out for Mundus (The World) to help him, before collapsing onto his bed. The servant Garcio, who comes to prepare Mankind for burial, complains that “he stinkith”, and is “hevier thanne any led”, while the dying man demands to know why he is there (2912, 2923). When he learns that Garcio will take his possessions from him, Mankind laments his earthly attachments, and his prolonged scene of dying is concluded with a lengthy speech of departure, of which the last part is addressed to the audience:

Now, good men, takithe example at me:

Do for youreself whil ye han spase!

For many men thus servyd be,

Thorwe the Werld, in diverse place.

I bolne and bleyke in bloody ble,

And as a flour fadith my face.

To helle I schal bothe fare and fle

But God me graunte of his grace.

I deye, certeynly!

Now my life I have lore.

Min[e] hert brekith. I syhe sore.

A word may I speke no more.

I putte me in Goddys mercy! (2995-3007)

Like *Everyman*'s dying speech, that of *Mankind* is in rhyme; from the spiritual perspective, it demonstrates the desire to attain heaven, and finishes with an equivalent of Christ's last words.

The differences from *Everyman* are more striking than the similarities, however, particularly in the tone of the speech. Whereas *Everyman* is brief and formal, addressing his words directly to God, *Mankind* is keenly aware of his audience, as he consciously presents himself as a warning and an example to others. This done, he draws attention to the physicality of dying, sharing with the audience an intimate sense of his ebbing vitality. Bevington glosses the line, "I bolne and bleyke in bloody ble" as 'I swell, and my ruddy complexion turns pale' (881n2999); this is reinforced by the following line, "And as a flour fadith my face" (3000). In the penultimate line, death's arrival is signalled by the cessation of speech, and it is only in his final words that he prepares for the next moment through the use of established formula.

*Mankind*'s dying speech is longer than that of *Everyman*, and shares with the spectator more details of his experience of dying; whereas we accept the death of *Everyman* as a logical conclusion to the progressive stages of dying, we are encouraged to feel a personal sympathy toward *Mankind*. This is partly because he directly addresses his audience, but also because of the length of his speech and the fact that he delivers it from his deathbed. This contextual detail is missing entirely from *Everyman*, and its absence significantly diminishes the affective impact of the scene.

The *artes moriendi* share with *The Castle of Perseverance* an intensive focus on the deathbed as the locus of the dying utterance. The genre has been explored exhaustively elsewhere; I shall therefore discuss only those aspects of

the subject that are most relevant to the issue of last words during the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest works of influence in England appeared in the late medieval period (Atkinson xii-xiii). A grouping of texts, collectively identified by Mary Catharine O'Connor as the *Ars moriendi*, include the anonymous *Tractatus artis bene moriendi*, which is based on the third part of the French theologian Jean Gerson's *Opusculum tripartitum*, translated from French to Latin in c.1400-10 (Szarmach, Tavormina and Rosenthal 77). *The Crafte of Dying* (c.1490) is an English translation of the *Tractatus* in manuscript form, while William Caxton's *The Arte and Crafte to Know Well to Dye* (1490) was the earliest printed English version of the *Tractatus*, translated from French (Atkinson xiii).

'*Ars moriendi*' (plural *artes moriendi*) designates, then, this specific group of texts, which O'Connor describes as "a complete and intelligible guide to the business of dying, a method to be learned while one is in good health and kept at

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<sup>6</sup> Philippe Ariès offers some coverage of the topic in his *Hour of Our Death*, particularly the transition from the medieval form to the later, Protestant form of the genre. In *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750*, Ralph Houlbrooke similarly includes discussion of the texts in the context of last rites and the craft of dying. David William Atkinson's *The English ars moriendi* includes a brief introduction, followed by a selection of excerpts from treatises dating from 1490 to 1689. For more detailed accounts of the tradition, see Mary Catharine O'Connor's *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars moriendi*, which contains a comprehensive listing of extant works; and Nancy Lee Beaty's *The Craft of Dying: The Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi in England*, which includes discussion of Catholic, Humanist, Calvinist and Puritan examples of the tradition. Works which focus on the link between the *ars moriendi* and the theatre include Bettie Anne Doebler's "*Rooted Sorrow*": *Dying in Early Modern England*, which looks particularly at the issue of despair in various early modern texts; and Phoebe S. Spinrad's *The Summons of Death on the Early Modern Stage*, in which she argues for the development of tragedy in the medieval and early modern period as a response to the legends and Dance of Death traditions. Philippa Berry identifies a "Shakespearean *ars moriendi*" in her *Shakespeare's Feminine Endings: Disfiguring Death in the Tragedies*, one that combines "tragic horror with a grotesque scatology" (11).

one's fingers' ends for use in that all-important and inescapable hour" (5). The phrase also, however, is used to refer more generally to this genre of texts, in which there was significant interest throughout the sixteenth, and into the seventeenth, century, with Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* appearing in 1651.

Essentially, the *artes moriendi* are spiritual treatises that give clear directives for both *moriens* and those in attendance in the bedchamber. O'Connor suggests that they were probably originally intended – particularly in times of plague or other epidemics – for those “to whom the ministrations of the clergy were not available” (6). The *Crafte* is divided into six sections, as follows:

The fyrste ys a commendacon of dethe and kunnyng to dye well.

The seconde conteyeth the temptacions of men that dyen.

The thyrde conteyneth the interrogacyons tha[t] shullen ben asked of hem that been in theyr deth beede whyle they may speke and vnderstande.

The fourthe conteyneth an informacion with certeyn obsecracions to hem that shall dye.

The fyfte conteyneth an instrucion to hem that shall dyen.

The syxeth conteyneth prayers that shullen be seyde apouon theym that been a dying off some off hem that ys abowte heme. (qtd. in Atkinson 1)

The didactic nature of the work is evident in its vocabulary of “interrogacyons”, “informacion”, and “instrucion”; as Eamon Duffy observes, the text “insists on the importance of bringing the dying Christian to a knowledge of his or her

condition, in order to evoke from them a declaration of faith and repentance”, even if this was a painful process (*Stripping of the Altars* 315).

Aside from the content of the *Crafte*, the structure of its parts indicates the shape of events in the final scene: the chamber becomes a place of conflict, in which *moriens* is besieged by Satanic promptings that may tempt him to doubt his faith; to feel despair; to experience impatience; to exhibit spiritual pride; and to be excessively preoccupied with “wordely rychesses” and personal attachments (qtd. in Atkinson 8). The “informacion” includes specific responses for *moriens* to make; the “instrucion” pertains to contrition, confession and repentance. The last section is comprised almost entirely of prayers, which may be repeated verbatim from the text. Thus the entire ritual is governed by formula, and the success of the efforts of all involved is measured by the dying person’s careful adherence to religious orthodoxy. The words that are intrinsic to the dying scene are circumscribed, dictated; there is no place for originality of expression, for the primary aim of the ritual is to ensure eternal salvation in the afterlife.

In *The Arte & Crafte to Know Well to Dye*, Caxton stresses the importance of the dying person’s ability to speak:

And yf he be so seke that he hath loste thusage of speche, and hath his knowlecle hole and entier, he ought to answeere to thyse thinges by some sign outward, or by hole consentynge of herte, for that suffyceth to his sa[l]uacyon. Alway oughte to be taken heede that the interogacyons be made to fore or that the seke man lese thusage of speche (qtd. in Atkinson 30).

Loss of speech implies a troubling lack of clarity, for it suggests that the dying person may not have understood the various stages considered necessary to a good

death. In its rigid formality, the instruction provided is akin to a series of tests, for which the correct answers must be given; the importance of speech is entirely for this purpose of communication.

As demonstrated in *Everyman*, Christ's last words on the cross comprised the single most important model for dying words during the medieval period, and continued so long after: "Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum" (Macksey 499).<sup>7</sup> Erasmus advises the dying man to use the formula already well established in the literature of dying: "And so mystrustyng hym selfe, and trusting vpon the excedyng mercye of God the merytes of Christ and the suffrages of all holy menne, with a contrite harte and religious trust let hym saye, *in manus tuas domine commendo spiritum meum*, into thy handes Lord, I commende my spirite" (qtd. in Atkinson 65). Sutton offers a paraphrase of the same words, as he urges patience in enduring pain and sickness before death: the Christian man should ". . . with all gratefull remembrance of Gods goodnesse towardes him, of blessings receiued, of daungers preuented, now patiently bequeath his departing soule into the handes of God, quietly enduring his transitorie triall" (qtd. in Atkinson 204).

Earlier Catholic treatises tend to emphasize the predations of the devil, illustrating verbally – and sometimes visually, through the inclusion of woodcuts – the psychomachia of the soul caught between 'bad' and 'good' impulses. Duffy describes the deathbed as "the centre of an epic struggle for the soul of the Christian, in which the Devil bent all his strength to turn the soul from Christ and

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 23:46 records his words as, 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'. In the King James translation, only the book of Luke records these as Christ's final words; in Matthew 27:50 and Mark 15:37 he cries, "with a loud voice"; while in John 19:30 his last words are "It is finished".

His cross to self-loathing or self-reliance. Against these temptations the cross and the armies of the redeemed were marshalled to assist the dying Christian” (*Stripping of the Altars* 317). As a remnant of the medieval fascination with the macabre, at times even the physicality of death is graphically represented, as in Thomas More’s *The Last Things* (c.1522).<sup>8</sup> The reader is exhorted to visualize his or her own death, which in More’s example appears as an extremity beyond the use of words:

thy hed shooting, thy backe akyng, thy vaynes beating, thine heart panting,  
thy throte ratelyng, thy fleshe trembling, thy mouth gaping, thy nose  
sharping, thy legges coling, thy fingers fimbling, thy breath shorting, all  
thy strength fainting, thy lyfe vanishing, and thy death drawyng on. (140)

The description is dramatic, its purpose being to stress the importance of preparing for these moments.

If deathbed struggles suggest an agonistic dimension with overtly theatrical overtones, the performance of dying may itself be perceived as educational. While the dying person may have learned from instructive *artes moriendi* texts, readers and spectators may also gain insight into dying through witnessing the deaths of others and listening attentively to their final words. The act of imaginatively visualizing of one’s own end was referred to as either *contemplatio mortis* or *meditatio mortis*. Michael Flachmann describes this as “an extended, sequential narrative of intensely personal dimension” (“Fitted for Death” 229), while the Tudor writer and monk Richard Whytford, in his *Dayly Exercyse and Experyence of Dethe* (1537), defines the practice as “the

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this work, including the probable date of composition, see the introduction to *The Last Things* in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Anthony S. G. Edwards, Katherine Gardiner Rodgers and Clarence H. Miller, lx-lxiv.

cogytacyon, thought and remembraunce / the busynes, tractacyon or intreatye, mencyon, and disputacyon of dethe” (89).<sup>9</sup> Conscious immersion in scenarios of dying promoted awareness of mortality and habituated both mind and body to the idea of death. As James L. Calderwood observes, “Only by keeping fearful images of death before our eyes can our spiritual self-interestedness be activated” (9).

Whytford recommends two forms of practice; in the first, the reader becomes a prisoner who has been condemned to death, while the second scenario involves suffering a final illness. The reader is encouraged to imaginatively experience the horror of being unprepared for death, but is also enjoined to remember the comfort that may be obtained by consciously choosing to avoid such negligence.

Lupset draws upon two contrasting execution scenarios in order to illustrate the importance of the appropriate attitude toward death. He compares the conduct of the pagan philosopher, Canius, to one Frances Philippe, a felon recently executed for treason.<sup>10</sup> Condemned to death by the tyrant Caligula, Canius accepted his sentence with equanimity: “There were x dayes gyuen of respite before he shuld dye, the whiche tyme he so passed that he neuer seemed to be in lesse care, nor to haue his mynde in better quietnes” (qtd. in Atkinson 70).

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<sup>9</sup> In issuing these instructions, Whytford participates in a well-established tradition. In the introduction to St. Thomas More’s *The Last Things* – in the context of a discussion of Denys the Carthusian’s *Liber utilissimus de quattuor hominis novissimis* (c.1455-1460) – the editors observe that fear is the “dominant emotion which should result from disciplined and serious meditation . . . Moral vigilance, penitence, awareness of one’s mortality, abandonment of worldly inclinations, desire to please God, the comfort and joy of the Holy Spirit: all these are the result of *meditatio mortis* and the fear it evokes” (Edwards, Rodgers and Miller lxvii, lxx).

<sup>10</sup> Atkinson notes that ‘Frances Philippe’ was possibly Franciscus Philippi, “a page and . . . an advisor to Catherine of Aragon” (370n6).

This mental orientation is essentially Stoic, for “comfort is based . . . on rational understanding”; the condemned exhibits a “willingness to adhere to divine intention”, demonstrating Lupset’s crucial point that “to die well is to die willingly” (Atkinson xvi).

When Canius arrived at the place of execution, he became contemplative, observing to his friends, “I haue determynedde with my selfe to marke wel whether in this short pange of death my soule shal perceyue and feele that he goeth oute of my body. This poynte I fully entende to take hede of, and if I can, I wyll surely brynge you and the reste of my felowes word what I felte, and what is the state of our soules” (qtd. in Atkinson 71). Lupset is impressed, not only that Canius possesses a “wonderfull caulme stomake in the myddest of so stormy a tempest”, but also that he maintains such equipoise without having received the benefit of Christian teachings (71).

At the opposite extreme, Lupset reports that Francis Philippe died:

. . . so cowardelye, in soo greatte pangas of feare, that he semed extracte from his wittes . . . The fewe wordes that he coulde with moche stuterynge sownde were only in the declaration of his dispayre, nor nothyng was sene nor harde of hym but wepyng, lamentyng, wryngyng of his handes . . . as thoughe his harte shulde haue burste for sorrowe. (73)

In each example, Lupset describes the condemned person’s state of mind, which is perceived as a direct determinant of his capacity for articulate speech. Thus the despairing Philippe’s ability to communicate is compromised by the physical symptoms brought on by fear, while Canius looks upon death with philosophical detachment and accepts his fate with equanimity, promising if he can to bring his

friends ‘word’ of what he experiences. For Lupset, “This mans mynde was worthye of an euer lastyng lyfe that was, not onely to the deathe studious of knowlege, but also in the selfe death founde occasion of lernynge” (qtd. in Atkinson 71).

Atkinson observes that most of the English *artes moriendi* texts are Protestant, although they “tend to reflect the theological and devotional diversity of the English Church” (xviii). Whereas Catholic treatises are emphatically instructional, Protestant versions are characterized by a concern for being one of the ‘elect’, emphasizing the “general principles of Christian living” and the importance of early preparation for death (xxii). Ariès observes that, whereas such texts had previously been “manuals for dying” in the medieval period, they had now become “a new category of pious literature for the devotions of everyday life” (*Hour of Our Death* 303, 304). Thus their central purpose “is no longer to prepare the dying for death but to teach the living to meditate on death. . . in this new economy, death . . . is no more than a means to living well” (301). Sutton states the matter succinctly: “Liue well and die well. If wee take heede in time, wee may liue and not to die. Wee cannot. Neither are we to regard how long wee liue, but how well we liue” (qtd. in Atkinson 183).

Despite Catholic and Protestant differences on the specific details of deathbed rituals, however, members of both faiths were in agreement, at least, on the necessity of spiritual readiness for death. In this sense, the essential preoccupation of these texts is quite compatible with Stoic arguments for living well, although McMullan reminds us that from the early modern perspective, the “classical good death” lacked “the possibility . . . of redemption” (214).

Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce argue that the *artes moriendi* helped to “popularize” the concept of the ‘Final Moment’ (263). This was a sixteenth-century “leitmotif concerning death and salvation”, which perpetuated the belief that “one’s state of mind at the final instant of life eternally committed one’s soul to salvation or damnation”, in spite of the fact that such an idea ran “counter to any accepted theology of salvation”, either Catholic or Protestant (260, 261). Houlbrooke, in his discussion of the influence of Puritanism, concludes that the *artes moriendi* “placed a weight of unrealistic expectations on the dying”, by setting up a “fragile and vulnerable ideal” which the dying were expected to attain (*Death, Religion and the Family* 218).

The emphasis on the ‘Final Moment’ during the sixteenth century appears to have developed parallel to increasing elements of individualism in regard to funeral practices. For example, Clare Gittings describes the ritual of “waking with the corpse” during the Renaissance as the survival of a medieval attitude characterized by “a collective, rather than individualistic, approach to the problem of death”, in that it emphasized “group solidarity and support for the bereaved” (102). During the early modern period, however, the wake came to be replaced by the “solitary vigil of the close family”, which was indicative of a trend toward “stressing the individuality of the deceased and the importance of the immediate family, rather than the wider social group” (109, 102). Gittings argues that the individual had come to be seen as irreplaceable, so that anxiety increased around the “process of dying”; this “crisis of death” is, she claims, “possibly the most severe of all the problems resulting from an individualistic philosophy” (9-10).

These shifts in perspective may be seen as evidence of a wider set of cultural anxieties surrounding death and the soul’s passage to the beyond.

Katharine Eisaman Maus points out that between the early 1530s and Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1558, the national religion in England changed four times; the consequence of these rapid changes and associated strictures was to draw attention to "the strategic difference between thought and utterance, secret conviction and external manifestation" (*Inwardness* 17, 19). She suggests that, from the 1530s, the growing sense of divergence between an internal consciousness and an external self became "unusually urgent and consequential for a very large number of people", regardless of their religion (*Inwardness* 13). While Maus's focus is the cultivation of 'inwardness' in the context of heresy, her observations are equally relevant to scenes of dying, for changes in faith are likely to have been accompanied by unsettling doubts, and the need to question the received wisdom in regard to established rituals.

Specifically, the impact of Protestantism had direct implications for both the dead and the living, as Neill writes:

Crucial in exacerbating the anxieties attendant upon death and dying for most post-Reformation English people were the changes in religious practice that resulted from the Protestant denial of purgatory. The abolition of the whole vast industry of intercession – indulgences, prayers of intercession, and masses for the repose of the soul – suddenly placed the dead beyond the reach of their survivors. (*Issues of Death* 38)

The eradication of such rites meant that death "became a more absolute annihilation than ever", the individual death "a painfully private apocalypse, whose awful judgement could never be reversed" (38). Such a fundamental alteration to the familiar rituals of death and grieving also implies a modified

perspective upon the issue of last words; the final utterance becomes yet more final, the prelude to a more profound rupture between the dying and the living.

McMullan points out that the “problem with the art of dying . . . is that you have to wait until you are dying in order to demonstrate your skill in it” (*Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* 218). Imaginative practices for the event are necessarily theoretical, and thus can only envision dying as a pale shadow of real death; the reader cannot know how or when death will come, nor whether it will be possible to retain the power of speech. Moreover, one may plan a particular type of final speech, only to discover when actually dying that there is a message of even greater urgency to be imparted. Dying speeches in the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries reflect a dissatisfaction with formula, and an impulse toward self-fashioning, as described by Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. At the same time they acknowledge the human need for the very thought of death itself to be acknowledged as difficult and distressing.

In his discussion of the iconography of death, Neill writes that during the Renaissance “Death is not merely imagined, but in the most literal sense *envisaged*, given a face”; he further suggests that “Death can be conceived as a threatening Other, or a morbid anti-self – the one we are each born to meet, an uncanny companion we carry with us through life, a hidden double who will discover himself at the appointed hour” (*Issues of Death* 5, 8). From this perspective, dying characters in plays have the potential to achieve a more profound impact on the spectator than the private meditations urged in such texts as Whytford’s; if death is perceived as originating from within, then the dying character onstage is transformed into the figure of Death, as if Death has the

power to arise from the hidden bones and fill out the flesh of the character's body. In this sense, the theatre offers immediacy of action, powerful visual images, and a variety of specific contexts for the performance of death.

If the godly practice of attempting to be ready for death on a daily basis robbed dying of its impact – and if the deathbed struggle as it appeared in the older *artes moriendi* texts somehow provided psychological and emotional acknowledgement that part of us, at least, *does* wish to fight against death and attempt to defeat it – then the dying scenes that commanded the London stages perhaps compensated for this loss, acknowledging the possibility that dying could be done bravely, flamboyantly, defiantly, nobly, angrily – and, in many cases, with unprecedented eloquence. Tragedy, in Neill's view, “offered to contain the fear of death by staging fantasies of ending in which the moment of dying was transformed, by the arts of performance, to a supreme demonstration of distinction” (*Issues of Death* 32). Deaths on the early modern stage are violent, and the ways in which characters die are various and memorable – as Webster's Duchess of Malfi observes, “I know death hath ten thousand severall doores / For men, to take their *Exits*” (4.2.206-207).

These scenes in the theatre, I would argue, fulfil the very human need to acknowledge death as an outrage, and the fear of our own mortality as natural and understandable. Neill argues that the “displays of agony, despair, and ferocious self-assertion” performed on the stage had psychological value in that they “provided audiences with a way of vicariously confronting the implications of their own mortality, by compelling them to rehearse and re-rehearse the encounter with death” (*Issues of Death* 31). Similarly, Robert N. Watson argues that drama is one of the “genres of imaginative literature” that is “a form of armor” that we

use to relieve ourselves from the “pressure of mortal terror” (*The Rest is Silence* 13). Despite the most valiant attempts to prepare ourselves psychologically and emotionally for death, it would be most unusual for us to relinquish our worldly attachments without some form of internal struggle. In the early modern period, too, the sort of detachment sought by the Stoics may have been palatable only to a few, and the didacticism of the *artes moriendi* tracts difficult to reconcile with personal anxieties. Even those who could find comfort in philosophical and spiritual teachings presumably retained some small repository of fear which needed to be carefully controlled; the amount of interest in the subject and the proliferation of texts offering advice would seem to suggest, at least, that this assumption is reasonable.

This sort of fear is the “dread of something after death”, voiced by Hamlet, the anxiety produced by dwelling on the “undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.80-82). In *Measure for Measure*, Claudio expresses a similar anxiety, at odds with the disguised Duke’s urging to be “absolute for death” (3.1.5). Condemned to die, Claudio remonstrates with Isabella:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;  
 To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;  
 This sensible warm motion to become  
 A kneaded clod, and the dilated spirit  
 To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
 In thrilling region of thick-ribbèd ice;  
 To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,  
 And blown with restless violence round about  
 The pendent world; or to be worse than worst

Of those that lawless and incertain thought  
 Imagine howling – 'tis too horrible!  
 The weariest and most loathèd worldly life  
 That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment  
 Can lay on nature is a paradise  
 To what we fear of death. (3.1.118-32)

For these fears to be acknowledged and answered, death needs to be represented as large, thrilling, and spectacular. As Watson points out, part of the reason why we are drawn to “scenes of violent death” is because “their contingency and vividness helps us repress the suspicion that death consists of a banal extinction” (41). On the early modern stage, the rich and varied responses of characters to the immediacy of their own deaths are a form of antidote to death’s banality.

Scenes of death both confront us with a reminder of our own eventual demise (a kind of *memento mori* in action), and give us that small shiver of relief that it is not yet our time, not yet our own death, that we are confronting. In the theatre, we may be both attracted and repelled, but we need these images and actions and words, to register our instinctive responses to the unappealing prospect of death’s inevitability. If we cannot be absolute, we can at least observe – on the stage – that the performance of dying momentarily cheats death, because what we witness there is merely a clever fiction, a *frisson* of danger and entertainment combined, in mimetic gestures that may be continually repeated and varied, in performance after performance. Neill suggests that the secularity of tragedy, “combined with the dialectical tendency of all drama to incorporate contradictory and subversive voices, make possible the articulation of doubts and anxieties which orthodox forms of instruction were calculated to repress” (*Issues*

*of Tragedy* 32). Observing death, being temporarily immersed in it in the theatre, allows the spectator to emerge from the encounter affected, but intact.

Just as plays draw together “contradictory and subversive voices”, so do accounts of historical events and the varying contexts of literary criticism represent multiple perspectives in relation to the dying speech. Broadly speaking, I take an historicist approach in this thesis, in that I am interested both in historical events, and in the relationship between early modern cultural practices and their impact on the performance of dying on the stage. Indeed, my approach embodies the assumption that it is impossible to appreciate the full significance of last words in the theatre, without considering them in the context of their parallels in the real world, particularly on the scaffold and in non-dramatic texts.

Each chapter incorporates its own body of scholarship, which is discussed as part of the introductory material. Thus the chapter on beheadings includes background information on the protocols of public executions in early modern England, along with examples of executed nobility as a point of departure for the focus on beheaded characters’ last words in the drama. The chapter on murder plays considers the genre as a specialized form of tragedy, and draws upon providentialist and social readings as contexts in which ‘domestic’ killings occurred and were staged. In contrast, the revenge plays in the third chapter are considered almost exclusively from a literary perspective. The fourth chapter, on self-murder, once again relies upon an understanding of contemporary cultural attitudes toward suicide, particularly as they are voiced in the didactic literature of the period.

Despite the separate groupings of material associated with each chapter, however, there are a number of works that fundamentally inform the thesis as a

whole, and these are largely the works of historians. Ariès traces the changing context of dying from a social perspective, while Gittings focuses on the importance of ritual and burial practices in England, in a culture whose responses to death were becoming increasingly individualistic. Duffy examines the implications of Protestantism from an historical point of view, while Watson's and Neill's insights on religious change are integrated into their literary perspectives. Neill explores social trends in England as a prelude to his exploration of tragedy as a developing genre associated with the desire to memorialize.

Even the chapters that are not specifically concerned with capital punishment still draw upon material about public execution. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* has been fundamental to many historical and literary discussions of the topic; John Bellamy's *Tudor Law of Treason* focuses on execution rituals during the early modern period specifically in England, with extensive use of examples from the Tudor and Elizabethan eras. J. A. Sharpe's work on dying speeches has been equally valuable in assessing the development of the scaffold speech in England, while Thomas W. Laqueur's carnivalesque perspective has challenged Foucault's position by arguing – much as Nicholas Brooke does from a literary point of view in *Horrid Laughter* – for a grimly humorous reading of grotesque events. More recently, Peter Lake's *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat* (with Michael Questier) has included discussion of the scaffold speech in the context of post-Reformation religious upheaval, and points of similarity and difference in didactic texts and commercial plays on the subject of murder.

Using these texts as a foundation for the study of plays, I focus on literary criticism in my consideration of individual scenes. The work that deals most directly with the issue of last words is Michael Cameron Andrews's *This Action of Our Death*, which provides a survey of selected early modern playwrights and includes two chapters on Shakespeare. The book is useful as a compendium of final speeches, but Andrews's emphasis on the playwrights' individual styles, and his attempt to provide a wider overview of the subject, means that the surrounding contexts of dying words are sacrificed. In a sense, I take the opposite approach to Andrews. I have chosen to focus on a relatively small number of speeches, placing them firmly in social, political, religious and historical contexts, and subjecting each dying scenario to much closer scrutiny.

Renaissance plays feature an enormous number of dying speeches, particularly as the period covered by this thesis extends from the 1590s through to the end of the 1630s. Hence it has been necessary to be highly selective when choosing scenes for inclusion in this thesis. As much as possible, I have given precedence to those scenes which incorporate both a dying speech and the death itself. Within this category, a distinction must be made between those speeches delivered when the body is still intact, and those spoken after physical injury, when the body is in the process of shutting down. The former type of speech is associated primarily with execution and suicide scenarios, while the latter is uttered by murder victims and characters implicated in revenge plots. In both cases, however, the two components of the dying scene are inseparable, the final words an essential part of the context of dying.

For the most part, my focus on the combined dying speech and death excludes valedictory speeches, such as those made by condemned prisoners

whose executions occur offstage, and deaths that are merely reported.<sup>11</sup> As my primary focus, I have also favoured – with the exception of the revenge plays – less canonical works. Shakespeare’s tragedies have, of course, commanded the greatest share of critical attention; although I do refer to Shakespearean scenes, I have focused more exclusively on the works of his contemporaries, including (collaboratively, in some cases), George Chapman; Thomas Dekker; John Fletcher; Thomas Kyd; Gervase Markham; Christopher Marlowe; John Marston; Philip Massinger; Thomas Middleton; William Sampson; John Webster; and Robert Yarrington. Although a number of the plays I have included may be argued to be of lesser literary merit than those of Shakespeare, they do represent what are often both lively and rather quirky contributions to the study of dying speeches.

The dramatization of both last words and the moment of death allows scenes in the theatre to be experienced as scenarios analogous to Whytford’s imaginative preparations for death; as such, they may be perceived as alternative ‘teachings’ which offer challenging responses to the heavily moralistic admonitions of didactic spiritual texts. Part of the challenge issued by these scenes is the interrogation of the very concept of the ‘good’ death: those on the stage (as in real life) who die outside of the customary, established formulas participate in a conscious expansion of the notion of dying well, by responding to their own deaths in instinctive and original ways.

Chapter One focuses on the public address given by the condemned prisoner prior to execution. The scaffold speech itself was an essential part of the ritual of public execution, and it was equally important in the rare instances of

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<sup>11</sup> I borrow the term ‘valedictory’ from Harry C. Bauer, although I use it as an adjective rather than a noun. Bauer observes that the valedictory “can precede last words or it can be last words” (260).

simulated beheadings on the stage. In these scenes, as in the real world, characters were expected to include in their speeches a confession of the crime committed, a demonstration of repentance, a request for forgiveness from the sovereign and from God, a blessing upon the nation, and a final prayer. In some cases, however, characters come to the scaffold defiant and unprepared, creating a sensation by refusing to conduct themselves as instructed, and thereby signalling to the audience that their souls were endangered.

Chapter Two explores what happens to the dying speech of the murder victim in a small group of plays designated variously as ‘domestic’ tragedies or ‘murder’ plays, which were based on true stories of local murders dramatized for the stage. In these grisly dramas, victims are often stabbed (and sometimes dismembered) before the audience, their last words either prevented or abbreviated by their attackers. Taken by surprise, these victims can only signal that they are dying, and the final speech that the audience anticipates is eclipsed by a greater interest in the fate of the murderer, who inevitably ends up on the scaffold.

If plays including murder and execution offered exciting possibilities for dying speeches, revenge tragedies – from which were removed the customary constraints imposed by factual source materials – permitted even greater licence in terms of their characters’ last words. Revenge scenarios, the subject of Chapter Three, feature some of the most compelling death speeches, in which their speakers defy the accepted formulas in favour of more spontaneous, individual confrontations with mortality. Revenge deaths are extreme, often prolonged and improbable, and the dying speeches that accompany them are correspondingly

bold and innovative, particularly as the Christian emphasis is either deliberately distorted or abandoned.

Suicides are frequent on the early modern stage. Chapter Four focuses on the pre-suicide speeches of those who choose the time and method of their own deaths. Self-murder was strenuously condemned by the church, and the bodies of those who had taken their own lives were superstitiously feared; they were denied Christian churchyard burial, and instead disposed of at a crossroads, with a stake driven through the heart to prevent the spirit from walking. The stage permits representation of that which normally, in such circumstances, remains hidden; as in the chapter on beheadings, the plays discussed in this chapter feature onstage suicides in addition to the final speeches.

The paradoxical nature of the dying speech is that it dramatizes what is, in one sense, an individual's most private and inward moments, yet it simultaneously represents an anticipated and essential final communication to the living. Moreover, despite the many ways in which it is possible to die, and the difficulty of the dying person's circumstances, the expectation remains – in the early modern period, at least – that the speech must be delivered clearly and meaningfully. Last words indicate whether the death is exemplary or deplorable, whether the speaker has demonstrated spiritual preparedness or is likely to be damned.

The traditional deathbed scene, even today, is one that is familiar to Western cultures, despite the transition it has undergone from a medieval and early modern family drama in the bedchamber to the clinical hospital ward in our own era. What is more alien to us, however, is the figure of the condemned noble on the public scaffold, watched intently and expectantly by the gathered crowd

who have come to listen to the prisoner's final words and to witness the decapitation that follows. The pressure to perform – to fulfil a role that was defined by specific requirements – was an obligation that was directly associated with the concept of the scaffold speech. The challenge of making a public statement, of attempting to make a good end despite the inevitable fears and anxieties attending such circumstances, forms the subject matter of the first chapter.

## Chapter One

### ‘Headless Errands’: Beheadings<sup>12</sup>

Dying mens wordes are euer remarkable, & their last deeds memorable for succeeding posterities, by them to be instructed, what vertues or vices they followed and imbraced, and by them to learne to imitate that which was good, and to eschew euill.

Henry Goodcole, *A True Declaration* (A4r)

On 13 February 1542, Catherine Howard, fifth wife of Henry VIII, was executed for treason. She was found to have been unfaithful to the king, having entertained various previous lovers, including Thomas Culpeper. On the night before her decapitation she requested that the execution block be brought to her chamber, so that she might rehearse the ritual of kneeling before it in preparation for the following day. David Starkey writes that, according to the ambassador Eustace Chapuys, Catherine’s request to see the block was granted, and ““she herself tried and placed her head on it by way of experiment”” (qtd. in Starkey 683). As Karen Cunningham observes, her determination to practise for the occasion suggests that she “embraced the decorum of formal death” (*Imaginary Betrayals* 49); moreover, it draws attention to the inherently theatrical nature of the ritual of execution. Unable to escape the role of doomed criminal, Catherine rehearsed for her beheading as the final performance of her life, ensuring as far as possible that she died with composure.

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<sup>12</sup> As he jests his way through his final scaffold scene, Sir Thomas More (in the play *Sir Thomas More* by Anthony Munday et al.) observes, “In sooth, I am come about a headless errand, / For I have not much to say, now I am here” (5.4.49-50).

The present chapter focuses on specific scenes from four Jacobean plays that are unusual in that they feature simulated onstage beheadings as part of the ritual of public execution. Identified as such by Margaret E. Owens in *Stages of Dismemberment*, these plays are John Marston's *The Insatiate Countess* (first published in 1613 but likely to have been written as early as 1607-08); John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelte* (1619); Thomas Dekker and Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr* (1620) and Gervase Markham and William Sampson's *Herod and Antipater* (1619-22).<sup>13</sup> Although impending executions are often signalled in the theatre, and scenes of judicial hangings<sup>14</sup> are sometimes staged, these plays – in theatrical terms – represent a unique form of dramatic spectacle. They also heighten the significance of the prisoner's last words, insofar as the scaffold speech is witnessed by the audience as an inseparable part of the entire ritual of public execution. Before examining these scenes, I shall first describe the process of execution as it occurred in early modern England. This will be followed by a close consideration of the

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<sup>13</sup> This chapter owes a substantial debt to Owens, particularly Chapter 5 of *Stages of Dismemberment*, for her discussion of these plays in the context of staged beheadings and scaffold conduct. While we draw upon many of the same core texts, however – including the material from Reginald Scot and Thomas Ady – my primary interest is in the specific details of the condemned protagonists' scaffold speeches, as an area deserving of further scrutiny. In addition to the above mentioned texts, Owens notes that "An onstage beheading also occurs in the B text of *Doctor Faustus* (printed 1616), but the date at which that episode was first performed is unknown and remains a matter of considerable debate" (138). I have not included this example in my own discussion, as it does not occur as part of the ritual of state-imposed punishment.

<sup>14</sup> Hanging was a form of execution for treason imposed upon the labouring class, whereas decapitation was reserved for the nobility. John Bellamy writes that the rope and axe "account for 99 per cent of such deaths", but while theoretically the "proper death for a female traitor was to be drawn to the place for execution and burned", the sentence was often changed to beheading (207). For possible strategies employed in onstage hangings, see Charles Dale Cannon's introduction to *A Warning for Fair Women* (54-55).

conventions of the scaffold speech, *vis-à-vis* the scholarship of historians and literary critics, and will include non-fictional and fictional examples of dying speeches, both exemplary and problematic. While acknowledging the issue of staging such scenes in the early modern theatre, my focus is primarily on the complexities of the scaffold speech, particularly when the speaker departs from the conventional formula.

If the spectacle of the scaffold is recognizable to us today through depictions of such events in plays, films and television series, the sight of burnings, hangings and beheadings was familiar during the early modern period as an integral part of community life. The procedures leading up to the death sentence were well established, and prisoners and spectators alike knew, to a large extent, what could be expected. According to John Bellamy, following the trial and the passing of the death sentence, the condemned individual was conveyed back to prison. With the exception of some members of the nobility, the prisoner “was likely to be kept in irons until the time of execution”; this was partially to prevent escape or suicide and partly to encourage the confession of further information regarding treasonous activities (182-83). While in prison, the condemned would be visited by a clergyman providing spiritual guidance, for, as Rebecca Lemon points out, “the confession of sins and the expression of penitence were vital to gaining salvation after death” (90).

Lake (with Questier) writes that, in addition to spiritual guidance, the prisoner was also instructed as to the appropriate formula for the scaffold speech (*Antichrist's Lewd Hat* xix). Bellamy suggests that it is likely that prisoners were “simply admonished, as was Sir Thomas More, not to use too many words”; similarly, the Earl of Essex was sent specific instructions in the form of a letter

while he was in prison (Bellamy 191). In an article about the execution of the Earl of Essex in 1601, Beach Langston refers to the *Calendar of State Papers: Domestic, 1601-3*, in which it is stated that Elizabeth ordered Essex to restrict himself in his scaffold speech to ““confession of his great treason and his sins toward God, his hearty repentance and earnest and incessant prayers toward God for pardon.”” (qtd. in Langston 127). Such instructions indicate an acknowledgement of the potential for inflammatory speech afforded by the scaffold address; the condemned might attempt to justify illegal actions or treasonous intent, or otherwise inappropriately try to win the sympathy of the crowd.<sup>15</sup> Those who attempted to say more than was deemed acceptable were likely to be silenced, as was the Catholic priest William Dean in 1594; he “had his mouth gagged with a cloth and was nearly suffocated because his words were thought harmful” (Bellamy 191). Similarly, in 1571 when the Duke of Norfolk attempted to justify his actions and “denied consenting to rebellion or invasion he was ‘vehemently interrupted’ and told such matters were not to be dealt with” (198).

On the actual day of execution, the traitor who was to be beheaded was normally accompanied on foot to the scaffold. As an alternative to public execution, members of the nobility were sometimes permitted to be executed in or near to the Tower of London, where there may have been a smaller number of mostly aristocratic spectators. The scaffold was set up so that the proceedings were clearly visible to those who attended (Bellamy 189-90).

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<sup>15</sup> In More’s case, Henry wished to ensure that the issue leading to More’s condemnation was not raised in his scaffold speech. Both Fisher and More had refused to sign an oath to uphold the Act of Succession (which dealt with ‘prohibited’ marriages), for signing this document would thereby have implied the destruction of the “jurisdiction and authority of the Pope” (Ackroyd 347).

Once the prisoner had arrived, the commission would be read out, and often a proclamation for spectators to stand clear; only the executioner, “with perhaps an assistant, a chaplain, and the sheriff”, was allowed to remain near the prisoner (Bellamy 191).<sup>16</sup> This was the crucial moment at which the prisoner was given the opportunity to address the assembled crowd. When the condemned had finished speaking, he or she had the option of being blindfolded before kneeling at the block, and it was customary for the prisoner (along with the crowd, at times) to pray; often the axe fell in the midst of the final prayer.

The opportunity for the individual to speak formal last words was a distinctive feature of the public execution. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the address from the scaffold was an inherent part of the proceedings, representing a unique type of performance. Charles Carlton observes that confessions were “pieces of public theater, which to be effective required the cooperation of all involved – the people as the audience, the traitor in the leading role, and the state as the director” (69).

Broadly speaking, early modern scaffold speeches – both inside and outside the theatre – range from the exemplary to the problematic. The assessment of a scaffold performance as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ was determined by the extent to which it either conformed to or departed from the established conventions imposed by state and church. If the prisoner observed the ‘correct’

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Covington writes that the sheriff, as a local official, often knew the condemned, and suggests that the difficulty of his task was increased as a result of changes in religious policy. While the sheriff’s function was generally “well-defined”, his duties “could often be improvisationally handled” (164). Bellamy observes that occasionally “the officials present showed what amounted to either great tolerance or laxity”; in one instance, the condemned was “allowed to tell his hearers that they should reconcile themselves to the catholic church three times over before the sheriff interfered” (198).

formula and died submissively, then order was preserved through the successful enactment of public punishment as a demonstration of state power. Failure to follow the imposed 'script' closely enough, however, increased the subversive potential of the scaffold address and could alter the spectators' perception of the event. The fascination of public execution, of dramatizing a condemned individual's confrontation with death, was thus fuelled by the tension between these specific formulas and the exciting possibility of an alternative and unanticipated, more individualized response on the scaffold.

Indeed, departure from the set formulas for scaffold conduct prompted a different kind of interest in the proceedings. When the ritual was transposed from the real world to the commercial stage, the potential for innovation was increased, for the constraints operating in the world outside the theatre were diminished on the stage. While the issue of censorship was an ongoing concern for playwrights, scenes containing potentially subversive material could be carefully framed so as to suggest ambiguity and to encourage a range of possible interpretations.

Historically, however, the conduct of prisoners at executions was expected to reflect remorse for their transgressions against the state. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes that the condemned prisoner was given the opportunity to make a 'gallows speech', "not to proclaim his innocence, but to acknowledge his crime and the justice of his conviction" (65). Thus the address was expected to follow a specific format, incorporating a confession, a humble request "for the monarch's forgiveness", and a wish or prayer "for his health and the prosperity of the realm" (Bellamy 195-97). The prisoner's admission of guilt, and demonstration of repentance, neutralized the threat posed to both monarch and citizens by the original act of transgression.

According to Foucault, the execution “belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored . . . over and above the crime that has placed the sovereign in contempt, it deploys before all eyes an invincible force”, for there must be “an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority” (48-49). The conventional scaffold address, correctly observed, is an essential part of the “ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted”, by “manifesting” that sovereignty at its “most spectacular” (48). The visual display of the entire execution process for treason – ending in the drawing and quartering of the body, the exposure of the traitor’s heart and (sometimes) the display of the severed head on a pike – was intended to function as a dire warning to potential offenders.

In historical terms, my perspective on execution is essentially Foucauldian, although my focus on last words centres upon the intrinsic importance of formula to the structure and content of the scaffold speech, rather than the mechanisms of state power. Moreover – given the pressures exerted on the prisoner to make an appropriate speech – I am interested in what is *not* said, in what is suppressed and remains hidden when the correct formula is observed. What happened, for example, to the Earl of Essex’s rebellious spirit, that led to such exemplary conduct at his execution on 25 February 1601? According to Langston, Essex “sought forgiveness for his rebellion”, then “prayed for Her Majesty, the Council, and the state . . . and acknowledged the justice of his trial and sentence” (110). *A Last Elizabethan Journal* records Essex’s own description of the rebellion for which he was responsible:

‘ . . . I humbly beseech our Saviour Christ to be the Mediator unto the Eternal Majesty for my pardon; especially for this my last sin,

this great, this bloody, this crying, and this infectious sin, whereby so many for love of me have ventured their lives and souls, and have been drawn to offend God, to offend their sovereign, and to offend the world, which is so great a grief unto me as may be.’  
(qtd. in Harrison 163).

Did this performance represent true remorse for his transgression, or was it rather an admission of defeat, reflecting a decision to make a ‘good end’ in spite of the inevitable?<sup>17</sup> Thomas W. Laqueur acknowledges this type of ambiguity in the context of scaffold conduct: “Neither contemporaries nor historians know whether the condemned meant what they said, however they chose to die” (319).

In Shakespeare’s *Henry V* there is a triple echo of such compliance, in the final speeches of Lord Scrope, the Earl of Cambridge and Thomas Grey, prior to their (offstage) executions for treason:

SCROPE. Our purposes God justly hath discovered,  
And I repent my fault more than my death,  
Which I beseech your highness to forgive  
Although my body pay the price of it.

CAMBRIDGE. For me, the gold of France did not seduce,  
Although I did admit it as a motive  
The sooner to effect what I intended.  
But God be thankèd for prevention,  
Which heartily in sufferance will rejoice,  
Beseeching God and you to pardon me.

GREY. Never did faithful subject more rejoice

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<sup>17</sup> Bettie Anne Doebler describes the event as a “dignified and humble liturgical submission to death” (74). For an account of his scaffold performance, see her chapter on Essex, 60-75.

At the discovery of most dangerous treason  
 Than I do at this hour joy o'er myself,  
 Prevented from a damnèd enterprise.  
 My fault, but not my body, pardon, sovereign.

(2.2.147-161).

All three of the men ask for forgiveness; Scrope and Grey verbally dissociate themselves from their bodies, upon which the punishment will be, in Foucault's word, 'inscribed' (47).

The Foucauldian perspective on execution has, however, been challenged and extended, in studies that focus more specifically on the significance of the dying speech and the depiction of punishment within English Renaissance plays. J. A. Sharpe's studies reflect the influence of Foucault as well as a focus on England; he acknowledges the eighteenth-century emphasis in historical writings on executions, yet argues that the "decisive changes in the rituals surrounding public execution, along with the first wave of legislative harshness and the rise in the number of capital convictions, occurred around the middle of the sixteenth century" (*Judicial Punishment* 31). He suggests that confession and repentance expressed by condemned traitors "probably first occurred on a regular basis in the early years of Henry VII and were apparently little known before then", so that "the 'last dying speech' seems to have been a Tudor innovation" ("Last Dying Speeches" 165). The scaffold speech, after about 1700, was employed by felons as well as traitors, but tended to express courage rather than penitence (165).

Bellamy characterizes the Tudor period as "an age when men paid great attention to words uttered just before dying", and describes the government as one which "overlooked almost nothing in execution management" (226). Thus the

sixteenth century, in England at least, has come to be regarded as a highly significant period in terms of a prisoner's conduct at executions. Katherine Royer observes that "most execution narratives written before 1500, and some after, make no mention of a last dying speech", although very rarely "descriptions of contrition and confessions are found in . . . late medieval chronicles" (69). For the most part, in medieval texts "the condemned were portrayed as bereft of voice and will", represented as being "passive, inanimate and silent" (69-70). Sixteenth-century narratives, in contrast, are "filled with speeches, farewells, prayers and the descriptions of the demeanour of the condemned" (71).<sup>18</sup>

Thomas W. Laqueur argues for the importance of the carnivalesque at public executions, focusing on the behaviour and responses of the crowd rather than the prisoner. For Laqueur, the "history of festivity" provides an alternative to the "images of solemn state theatre" (306), as he envisions a "theatre of far greater fluidity" (309). Covington notes that large crowds often attended, which "could carry a riotous element, though without the level of merriment of later execution crowds" (174). Laqueur also draws attention to the "ludicrous and macabre mishaps of various sorts" to which executions were "susceptible" (323). In an instance of this on the stage, Pedringano in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* is fated to die badly when the conventions of scaffold conduct are turned upside down. Firmly believing that he is to be pardoned, he goes to the gallows with supreme

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<sup>18</sup> Although there was increased emphasis on the dying speech during the early modern period, this does not mean that last words were not sometimes reported in medieval chronicles. For a notable and detailed example of a medieval death, see Klaus P. Jankovsky's discussion of Walter of Guisborough's account of the death of Richard the Lionheart, in which the dying speech "shows in words and gestures the heightened emotionalism (with a view toward stirring compassion) which is one of the characteristic elements of the devotional literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" ("From Lion to Lamb" 220).

confidence, where he is immediately and unceremoniously turned off the ladder (3.6.101-105). As will be discussed later, the comic subplot in Marston's *Insatiate Countess* similarly manipulates the conventions of confession and the royal pardon.

Like Laqueur, Lake and Questier depart from Foucault's position, accounting for a more complex interplay of "competitive ideologies" in their account of Catholic executions for treason ("Agency" 65). In *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, Lake (with Questier) focuses on the content of murder pamphlets and their relation to 'good' deaths on the scaffold, as well as on the executions of Catholic priests hoping for the status of martyrdom (xvii). Lorna Hutson offers a further challenge to the Foucauldian perspective, lamenting that it has been "routinely used in the criticism of English Renaissance tragedy", and she focuses instead on the jury trial as an important feature of lay participation in the process of justice (33). Carlton makes the point that the public confession "allowed the prisoner to address future generations", as the speech was both heard and read by many (70). Elizabeth Bouldin examines the evolution of scaffold performances in the sixteenth century in the context of personal identity, arguing that "each convicted person had to form his own identity within the boundaries set by the state", and was obliged to "project this image through a theatrical scaffold performance, all the while interacting with the authorities and crowds" who had their "own ideas" about the identity of the prisoner (85).

Political imperatives on the scaffold were supported by pressure from the clergy to be guided by religious 'coaching' prior to the execution. In a broad sense, this form of instruction drew upon the concept of the good death as disseminated in *artes moriendi* treatises; more specifically, Christ's last words on

the cross – ‘Into thy hands I commend my spirit’ – were often quoted by the victim on the scaffold. Essex’s scaffold performance was exemplary in this observance (Harrison 164-65), as was that of Lady Jane Grey and Mary Queen of Scots (Marvin 118-19, 184). In his funeral sermon *Death’s Duel*, John Donne advises that it is “*not the last stroake that fells the tree, nor the last word nor gaspe that qualifies the soule*” (27); rather, he urges his listeners to a “*viscerall*” meditation on Christ’s death (35). This form of meditation is not “*ordinary and customary prayer*”, but prayer accompanied by the “*shedding of teares*” and a “*readines to shed blood for his glory*”; which “*puts thee into a conformity with him*” (39). No doubt experiencing an instinctive fear of the physical blow about to be delivered, the condemned on the scaffold may have found this form of “*viscerall*” prayer particularly apposite. As an imitation of Christ, the quotation of his last words would have signalled to the gathered crowd the prisoner’s preparedness for death; an imaginative and emotional merging with Christ may have been profoundly comforting for the condemned when anticipating the imminent journey into the afterlife. However, just as adherence to the political imperatives of the dying speech negated the possibility of a personalized response on the scaffold, so the religious formula likewise sublimated any impulses toward individual expression.

In addition to the political and social expediency of good conduct, then, the individual’s personal salvation as a Christian was at stake. Many evidently considered the form of their death to be the will of God and therefore accepted it, wishing to face the event as secure as possible in the knowledge that they were prepared for both death and the afterlife to follow. According to Lacey Baldwin Smith, if treasonous activities were discovered, their exposure tended to be

interpreted as evidence of God's displeasure and the need for the treason to be punished ("English Treason Trials" 495). Whether or not this is true, there were "last minute reversals" (487); no doubt, when faced with the immediate reality of execution and death, many chose to conduct themselves as they were expected to.

Thus, although the circumstances of public punishment were vastly different from the traditional deathbed scenario, a prisoner could perform equally well on the scaffold if he or she followed the directives of the clerical representative who advised the prisoner and aided with preparations for death prior to execution. This process, in which the "literature on the art of dying well provided the framework for sixteenth-century execution narratives", represented an important sixteenth-century transition, as the "deathbed vigil moved to the scaffold" (Royer 72). Before this development, there had been "little in execution narratives to imply that the condemned were offered any spiritual comfort on the scaffold or had any hope of salvation" (70).

Even those who were innocent of the crimes of which they were accused often made a confession on the scaffold. Lacey Baldwin Smith observes that it was common for both the innocent and the guilty to acknowledge "their real or imaginary offences in terms of glittering generalities"; they "confessed the iniquities of their lives" and drew upon past sins to demonstrate their "worthiness to die" ("English Treason Trials" 476).

There are a number of possible motivations for this conformity, the simplest being a desire on the part of the prisoner to be remembered positively by those who attended the execution. Yet there were other, more complex reasons for exemplary conduct. Although Foucault claims that, in the "last moments", the guilty party no longer had anything to lose (43), this was certainly untrue for

members of the English nobility, whose conduct on the scaffold could be crucial in determining the fate of their surviving family members. Lemon points out that the “sentence for treason included forfeiture of the prisoner’s entire estate to the monarch” (89-90). Thus good behaviour on the scaffold may have been strongly motivated by the hope that compassion would be extended to one’s dependants, and at least a portion of one’s inheritance restored to the family. Indeed, Bellamy observes that it was “not uncommon for the victims in their last words to make requests concerning their debts, money that was owed to them and provision for their wives and children” (198; Lemon 89-90).

Sir Thomas More is a leading example both of an unjust execution and of impressive conduct on the scaffold. Transferred to the stage, the entire last scene of *Sir Thomas More* (c.1592-93) is a dramatization of the historical More’s scaffold scene.<sup>19</sup> Beginning with his departure from the Tower and ending at the moment just before he is led to the block, this scene of the dying speech embodies the sense of humour and the self-control for which More’s scaffold performance is famous.

In the play, More jokingly draws upon popular tropes of execution: as a form of medicine; of beards and barbers; and of decapitation. More jests about his upcoming execution as a cure for his “sore fit of the stone” (5.3.18-20) and for “the headache” (5.4.83-84); he refers to the scaffold as his “bedchamber”, where he will “take a sound sleep” (5.4.66-67). In a further preoccupation with the physical body, More refers to the removal of his beard – he has been “trimmed of

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<sup>19</sup> The play was a collaboration between Henry Chettle, Thomas Heywood, Shakespeare, Thomas Dekker and Anthony Munday. For a discussion of authorship and related issues, see the introduction to the Revels edition of the play, ed. Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori. See also Scott McMillin’s *The Elizabethan Theatre and The Book of Sir Thomas More*, particularly 135-59. The dates for the composition of the play are proposed by G. Harold Metz (495).

late” – at the same time he characterizes his sentence as a “smooth court shaving” (4.2.56-57). Shaving and decapitation are conflated in More’s observation, “I thought to have had a barber for my beard, / Now I remember that were labour lost, / The headsman now shall cut off head and all” (5.3.97-99). John Jowett sees the “divestment of hair” as a form of “Christian metaphor for relinquishing the mortal body”, for More links together the “barber who would remove his beard” and the “headsman who will remove his head” (7).

The inevitable separation of head and body is invoked during the last act of the play through references to beheading. More jests, “And sure my memory is grown so ill / I fear I shall forget my head behind me” (*Sir Thomas More* 5.4.25-26), and describes himself as being on a “headless errand” (49). He promises that, for his trespass against the king, he will send “a reverent head, somewhat bald, for it is not requisite any head should stand covered to so high majesty” (75-77). More is escorted offstage, and the audience is left to imagine the execution. Thus, while the play does not include an onstage beheading, it does foreground the scaffold speech as an essential component of More’s last performance. At the same time, it includes execution tropes that appear in similar contexts, both historical and literary, and which are echoed (as I shall discuss later) in *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*.

At the other end of the spectrum are ‘bad’ deaths, in which the prisoner died either unrepentant or disputing the justice of the imposed sentence. Lacey Baldwin Smith notes the case of Sir Ralph Vane (or Fane), executed in 1552, as the “most obvious example of refusing to confess one’s guilt” (“English Treason Trials” 480n30). According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, after protesting his innocence at his execution, Fane is reported to have said, “. . .

my blood shall be the duke's bolster as long as he lives" (Löwe n. pag.). Even in cases such as these, it can be difficult to determine the precise details of what transpired at an execution, particularly because of the issues associated with the recording and publication of posthumous accounts.

Indeed, the concept of scripted speech is central to the parallel between the playhouse and the theatre of punishment. While the prisoner's words were formulaic to begin with, pamphleteers may at times have "fabricated" an account for printed circulation, having "experienced pressure to record speeches according to the conventional formula" (Lemon 91). Foucault suspects that many of the speeches were "fictional", and "circulated by way of example and exhortation" (66), while Lake (with Questier) acknowledges the "element of scripted performance" recounted specifically in murder pamphlets and "martyr scenes". Prisoners were "schooled" to "perform and vindicate their status as repentant sinners or Christian martyrs on their way to heaven", and any "rough edges" in the scaffold performances "could then be subsequently smoothed off in the manuscript and printed accounts that were so often circulated and sold after the event" (*Antichrist* xix). Covington argues that, while prisoners could arrive at the scaffold with "elaborate and rehearsed" final speeches, some of these speeches "could also have been shaped later on to produce more dramatic and powerful effects" (157).

The uncertainty surrounding the authenticity of last words is emphasized in the case of the execution of Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, in 1541, of which there are conflicting accounts. As Hazel Pierce writes, two ambassadors at the court of Henry VIII, Marillac and Chapuys, reported that the execution was both hushed and rushed, "probably to ensure that the spectacle of an elderly lady's

execution was avoided” (177). According to these reports, the countess was compliant, but her final speech was kept short; the young and inexperienced headsman “literally hacked her head and shoulders to pieces in the most pitiful manner” (qtd. in Pierce 178). Yet Lord Herbert of Cherbury later reported an alternative account of Pole’s conduct, passed on to him by “a person of great quality”, in which she “refused to lay her head on the block declaring, ‘So should Traitors do, and I am none . . . turning her grey head every which way, she bid [the executioner], if he would have her head, to get it as he could: So that he was constrained to fetch it off slovenly’”. Pierce observes, “this tale was probably a later invention to explain Margaret’s appalling end” (qtd. in Pierce 227n42).

A similar discrepancy between recorded accounts exists in the case of Catherine Howard. According to Cunningham, the official version of her scaffold speech is that it was exemplary; an unofficial version, however, claims that she denied having wronged King Henry, and declared her love for Culpeper, to whom she had been previously betrothed. Cunningham draws attention to the ramifications of each account; whereas the official version imagines Catherine as “the source of Henry’s personal victimization and the nation’s political jeopardy”, the unofficial account presents her as “an individual agent clinging faithfully to her role as Culpeper’s wife, despite having been led astray by the flatteries of an overly-amorous king” (*Imaginary Betrayals* 49-50). Again, each report of the scaffold speech is entirely at odds with the other, perhaps suggesting widely divergent political interests.

If defiance on the public scaffold was rare (or, at least, seldom recorded), it could provide lively material for dramatization on the commercial stage. Literary scholars have explored the seemingly symbiotic relationship between real

executions and their simulated counterparts in the theatres. Cunningham argues, for example, that when Marlowe wishes to “contest the propagandizing of Tudor spectacles of punishment, he exaggerates the elements of dramatic art to expose the multiple meanings of executions”, thereby undermining “the development of a monological version of events” (“Renaissance Execution” 220, 217). Molly Smith and James Shapiro each discuss Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* and the play’s relationship to public punishment. Smith points out that “contemporary narratives about public hangings and executions frequently insist on the theatrical analogy”; drawing on Foucault, she argues that the “speech delivered on the scaffold by the victim provided an especially suitable opportunity for . . . manipulation; intended to reinforce the power of justice, it frequently questioned rather than emphasized legal efficacy” (219, 226-27).

According to Shapiro, Kyd tests “the boundaries between the prerogatives of the state and those of the theater”, thus suggesting that “it is not the opposition between state and theater, but their potential confusion and indistinguishability, that makes theater powerful and (to the political authorities) dangerous” (100-101). Steven Mullaney discusses amphibology, or ambiguity, in the context of convictions for treason, acknowledging the potential for “a certain power in language”, in a “linguistic sphere the law cannot control” (*The Place of the Stage* 121). This observation is particularly relevant to the concept of the dying speech, for it implies a wider range of possibilities for expression on the scaffold than was intended by the state’s established formula.

There are three other perspectives mentioned here for their relevance to the genre of the scaffold speech. The first two pertain to perceived shifts in early modern culture; Katharine Eisaman Maus’s concept of inwardness as discussed in

her *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, and Stephen Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning. The third perspective is that of the martyrologist John Foxe, whose *Actes and Monuments* is widely acknowledged as a specific influence on Renaissance plays.

In her discussion of inwardness, Maus draws attention to the gap between the “unexpressed interior and a theatricalized exterior” (*Inwardness* 2), arguing that “the sense of discrepancy between ‘inward disposition’ and ‘outward appearance’ seems unusually urgent and consequential for a very large number of people” during the early modern period (*Inwardness* 13). She ascribes this in part to the “far-reaching political, religious, and economic realignments that constitute the English Reformation” (*Inwardness* 15). The rapid transitions between Catholic and Protestant reigns involved the “sometimes violent but never wholly successful suppression of what was heretofore the approved doctrine”; this encouraged the “awareness of a secret interior space of unexpressed thoughts and feelings” which did “not require commitment to a particular theology” (*Inwardness* 17, 16). Maus points out that by the late sixteenth century, John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, with its graphic images of the burning of heretics, was “installed beside the Bible in English churches” – a constant reminder of the Marian persecution of Protestants – at the same time Catholics had begun “sending their own martyrs to the scaffold” (*Inwardness* 17).

Parallel to the development of inwardness described by Maus is Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning. This reflects a change in the “intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities”, so that in the early modern period there was an “increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful

process” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 1-2). His account of Sir Walter Raleigh’s scaffold performance in 1618 as a prime example of self-fashioning focuses on Raleigh’s deliberate assumption of “a *role*”, with its associated elements of self-conscious “theatricality and artifice” (*Sir Walter Raleigh* 7).

Greenblatt points out that “a ‘good death’ was no accident of blind courage”, but “the result of discipline, intelligence, timing, and careful preparation.” He suggests a parallel between the deaths of More and Raleigh, for both were able to transform “a dreadful trial into a triumphant act of will” (*Sir Walter Raleigh* 15). Also like More, Raleigh drew upon the trope of execution as a curative for human ills. Greenblatt recounts how Raleigh requested that the executioner show him the axe; he “ran his finger along the edge and then, smiling, said to the sheriff, ‘This is a sharp Medicine, but it is a Physitian for all Diseases’” (qtd. in *Sir Walter Raleigh* 20).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Greenblatt interprets Raleigh’s scaffold performance as a “calm and dignified rebuke to King James and the entire judicial system”, for it included “no last-minute repentance, no praise of the sovereign’s divine justice”, and “no impassioned appeals to Christ for forgiveness and mercy” (9). Instead, he “manipulated the facts of his life in order to present the desired last image of himself”, and in so doing, won over an initially unsympathetic crowd (19-20).

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<sup>20</sup> Raleigh’s gesture had a precedent in the scaffold performance of Richard, Earl of Arundel, who was executed during the reign of Richard II. One chronicler records that Arundel ran his fingers across the blade to test it, then said, “It is sharp enough . . . do quickly what thou must do.” (qtd. in Jankovsky, “From Lion to Lamb” 214). Jankovsky notes that the Earl’s “quietly superior attitude in the face of death” led to “reports about his sanctity and of miracles, particularly the rumor that the decapitated head and body had grown together again.” Richard II subsequently had the corpse disinterred, and a friar “pass between the head and the body”; the grave was then left bare of votary candles and other trappings (“From Lion to Lamb” 214).

Greenblatt emphasizes that the achievement of self-fashioning occurs “in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile”; it “always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.” Moreover, he argues that self-fashioning is “always, though not exclusively, in language” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 9). In the context of execution, self-fashioning thus becomes a strategy – conscious or otherwise – for retaining and projecting one’s sense of identity in the midst of the forces of church and state as agents of depersonalization. Confined to the scaffold and close to death, the dying speech was the means of achieving this projection of self.

The deliberate enactment of a specific and consciously inhabited role links Greenblatt’s self-fashioning with the performance of martyrdom in Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*. A detailed consideration of the influence of Foxe and martyrology is beyond the scope of the present study, but I include one example from Foxe’s text in order to illustrate the similarities between his account of martyrdom and the representations of executions in stage plays, with specific reference to the dying speech. These parallels will emerge more fully in my consideration of each of the plays, and are particularly pertinent to *The Virgin Martyr*.

Foxe recounts the last morning of one of the first Protestants to be put to death during the reign of Mary Tudor. John Hooper was the bishop of Gloucester and Worcester, burned at the stake on 9 February 1555. The martyrologist’s account of the day of his execution (in Part 5ii of the 1563 edition), contains a number of features relevant to the present chapter: most importantly, it includes a lengthy dying speech, but it also draws attention to the issue of recording those

words for posterity, and gives graphic details of the physical torments suffered by Hooper.

Foxe estimates that seven thousand people were present for the execution, prompting Hooper to ask, “Alas why be these people assembled and come to gether? peradventure they thynke to heare something of me now as they haue in tymes past. But alas, speache is prohibited me” (Foxe 1060). When the procession reached the place of execution, he kneeled in prayer for half an hour, at which time he was carefully observed in order to prevent him from saying anything further. Then, however, “ther stepped one or two in vncalled”, who overheard Hooper speak, but “Assone as the Maior had espied these men which made reporte of the former words, they were commaunded awaye, and could not be suffred to heare any more: but I doubt not but hereafter the hearers will set it forth.”

Foxe describes how Hooper was divested of his outer garments, and “hadde a pounce of gonne powder, in a bladder, and vnder each arme the like quantity, delyuered him by the garde” (Foxe 1061). Bound by an iron hoop around his middle, the fire was lit but did not properly kindle, and the process was further prolonged by the wind blowing in the wrong direction:

In the time of the which fire, euen as at the first flame he prayed, saying mildely and not very loud (but as one without paines:) O Iesus the sonne of Daudid haue mercy vpon me, and receaue my soule. After the second was spent he dyd wpe both his eyes with his handes, and beholding the people he said with an indifferent loude voice: For gods loue (good people) let me haue more fire: and all this while his nether partes did burn. (Foxe 1062)

When a third fire was lit, he “praied, with somewhat a loud voice: Lord Iesu haue mercy vpon me: Lorde Iesu haue mercy vpon me. Lord Iesus receaue my spirite. Foxe reports that these were “the last wordes he was herd to sound”, and continues:

but when he was blacke in the mouth, and his tonge swollen, that he could not speake: yet his lippes went, till they wer shrounke to the gomme: & he did knocke his brest with his hands vntill one of his armes fel of, and then knocked still with the other, what time the fat, water, and bloud dropped out at his fingers endes, vntil by renewing of the fire, his strength was gone, and his hand did cleaue fast in knocking, to the yron vpon his brest. So immediatly bowing forwardes, ye yelded vp his spirite” (Foxe 1062).

Foxe concludes his account with the observation that Hooper was “thre quarters of an hower or more in the fire, euen as a lambe . . . hauing his nether partes burned, and his bowels fallen out, he died as quietly as a child in his bed, & he now reigneth I doubt not as a blessed martir in the ioyes of heauen . . .” (1062).

The details included in the account of Hooper’s death are carefully shaped to ensure a sympathetic response from the reader: the condemned man’s humility before God; his echoing of Christ’s last words on the cross; the mild manner in which he speaks; and the meekness with which he endures his physical suffering. His conduct is both subversive – in that he dies steadfast in his faith – and exemplary, for he adheres to the conventional Christian formula for dying words. While these elements may also be present in executions for treason, they are more deeply unsettling in the context of heresy because of the prolonged suffering associated with burning as the method of execution, and because the faith for

which Hooper dies has only recently been the official faith, and soon will be again in Elizabeth's England.

Foxe thus participates in documenting part of an historical cycle, in a manner that has impact upon both the public perception of executions, and on the way these rituals are represented in plays. Royer considers the *Book of Martyrs* a "political narrative that charts a history of English executions", and thus provides an "opportunity to examine the discourse of the scaffold from late medieval to sixteenth-century England" (65). Mullaney considers the impact of Foxe, in the movement away from the "morality tradition of earlier indigenous drama . . . toward the particular, discursive, and theatrical embodiment of affective characters" ("Reforming Resistance" 247). For John R. Knott, Foxe's death scenes offer "a kind of sharp detail that makes us feel we are in a different and much more fully realized world" (46); moreover, his martyrs exhibit a "flair for self-dramatization" (50). Knott suggests that the role of martyr was "consciously acted", and that Foxe includes "enough gruesome details of the deaths themselves to give his readers a visceral sense of the pain involved" (78-79). The church could assert itself as a presence at the stake, he argues, but could not dominate the "symbolic confrontation" enacted there, because the "drama of holy dying could not be contained by assertions of official doctrine" (79). Those who were obliged to 'perform' on the scaffold – both outside and inside the theatre – could draw upon this type of 'affective' death scene in order to consciously create maximum impact upon spectators.

The Renaissance playwright had greater scope for creativity in the composition of the dying speech, for he was, of course, less constrained than the real prisoner on the scaffold. The subversive or problematic scaffold performance

offered great potential for dramatization on the stage, particularly when the protagonist was based on an actual person, for then a direct parallel was made between the real world and that of the theatre. The Duke of Byron, executed for treason against the King of France on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1602, became the subject of George Chapman's *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron* (1608). Owens argues that it would be "difficult to overestimate the influence of Chapman's characterization of Byron", for the later scaffold scenes in *The Insatiate Countess*, *Sir John van Olden Barnavelt* and *Herod and Antipater* all contain echoes of Byron's "words and gestures" (134). She suggests that the "impact" of Byron's scaffold performance derives from the "audacity with which he repudiates the pious, submissive formulas that governed real-life executions" (135). Such audacity is significant in two ways. Firstly, the conduct of Byron recalls that of other theatrically defiant characters onstage – such as Barabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (5.5.76-88) and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (5.1.124-44) – becoming part of a tradition of subversive characters within the theatre. Secondly, Byron's defiance can be contained neither in a physical sense, nor by the rigid scaffold formula; his anger and resentment explode onto the stage, opening up dramatically the possibilities for self-expression on the scaffold.

Whereas Barabas and Aaron publicly celebrate their own transgressions, however, Byron comes to the scaffold unable to accept the truth of his impending execution. He disputes the reading of the sentence, then threatens both to pluck out the throat of the executioner and to strangle him, pouring scorn upon the attending officials and spectators alike:

Let tame nobility and numbed fools

That apprehend not what they undergo,

Be such exemplary and formal sheep.

I will not have him [the Executioner] touch me till I will;

If you will needs rack me beyond my reason,

Hell take me but I'll strangle half that's here,

And force the rest to kill me! I'll leap down,

If but once more they tempt me to despair. (Vol. 1, 5.4.194-201)

Byron boldly distances himself from the “tame nobility and numbed fools” who go to their deaths like sheep; he draws attention to the empty and submissive formality of such conduct, as well as to the barbarity of the authorities prepared to torture him for information. He refuses to consent to being the executioner’s subordinate, clearly demonstrating his determination to exert some form of control over the scaffold proceedings. His awareness that the officials present may “tempt” him to “despair” transforms them into devil-like figures, and his wildness in response to them implies a fear of being forced to relinquish his identity on their terms.

Thus, whereas condemned characters in other plays may achieve a form of absence through spiritual absorption and prayer, Byron’s resistance to the scaffold rituals is dictated by fierce pride and unsuppressed resentment. Acceptance of his fate happens only in the last moments, when death is inevitable, at which point he reflects upon the cycle of seasons:

All these and all fruits in them yearly fade,

And every year return; but cursed man

Shall never more renew his vanish’d face. (250-52)

He kneels, finally, for the last lines of his dying speech:

Fall on your knees then, statists, ere ye fall,

That you may rise again: knees bent too late,  
 Stick you in earth like statues: see in me  
 How you are pour'd down from your clearest heavens;  
 Fall lower yet, mix'd with th'unmoved centre,  
 That your own shadows may no longer mock ye.  
 Strike, strike, O strike; fly, fly, commanding soul,  
 And on thy wings for this thy body's breath,  
 Bear the eternal victory of Death! (253-261)

The opposition between falling and rising, earth and heaven, human misfortune and spiritual release, finally takes the form of the winged soul, which is the only “commanding” authority to which Byron will submit. With his “Strike, strike, O strike”, he orders the headsman to his task, maintaining an autonomous stance until the end.

Byron’s last-minute eloquence suggests the potential for the protagonist to attain the status of a hero, by offering resistance to the demand for contrition and submissiveness. I disagree with Owens’s assessment of his death as “heroic and stoical” (134), for while it may appear so to the modern spectator, from an early modern perspective his Stoic acceptance of death is demonstrated only at the end of his speech, and his earlier anger and violence are emphatically not Stoic. The dramatic impact of his conduct on the scaffold, however, cannot be disputed, and it is his refusal to willingly submit himself to the rituals of execution that is so compelling. The existence of the scene and its echoes in later plays suggest the powerful appeal it exerted upon playwrights and audiences alike.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Parrott draws attention to Chapman’s incorporation of close paraphrases of many of the actual Duke’s words on the scaffold, as recorded in Grimeston’s *General Inventory*, itself a translation of French sources (Vol. 2, 593-94). According to Grimeston, Byron and his dramatic counterpart

In terms of Byron's beheading – according to George Ray – existing evidence “at least does not discount the possibility that Byron's decapitation was actually staged”; if so, he adds, “it might have struck a fatal blow to the practice of tableau or offstage beheadings” (571). However, there are no stage directions that indicate that this was likely.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, onstage decapitations appear to have been a rare occurrence during the early modern period; Owens draws attention to the possibility that there may have been onstage beheadings that we do not know about, because the plays have been lost (139), while it is also possible that beheadings were performed yet not specified in the stage directions. Such a possibility is suggested by Henslowe's diary, for example (Owens 139): in an inventory of properties dated 10 March 1598, one of the items listed is “j frame for the heading in Black Jone” (Rutter 137), a play no longer extant. This entry appears to confirm the possibility that a particular apparatus for the staging of beheadings did exist at that time, and that the action presumably took place onstage; unfortunately, the diary affords no further details of such equipment.

There is, however, ample evidence that simulated – yet realistic – decapitations were possible on the stage. Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of*

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give the same command to the Executioner to strike: ““The Executioner having seene him to rise and to unblinde himselfe thrice, that in turning toward him being not bound, having the sword in his hand, hee might wrest it from him, thought that there was no way to execute him but by surprise, and therefore he sayd unto him that he must say his last prayer to recommend his Soule unto God, intreating the Preachers that were gone downe to cause him to say it, at which wordes the Executioner made a signe to his man to reach him his sword, with the which he cut off his head, even as he was speaking. The blow was so sodaine, as few men perceived it, the Head leaped from the scaffold to the ground”” (qtd. in Parrott Vol. 2, 623). Chapman departs radically from this account, giving Byron much greater control over the scaffold scene; this is particularly evident in the long, final part of Byron's speech, which continues uninterrupted until its triumphant conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> For a brief discussion of this issue, see Ray, pp.569-71.

*Witchcraft* describes a juggling trick called ‘The Decollation of John Baptist’, which he claims had been “doone by one Kingsfield of London, at a Bartholomewtide, An. 1582. in the sight of diverse that came to view this spectacle” (290).<sup>23</sup> According to Scot, this method of showing “a most notable execution” requires a board made of two planks, each with half a hole at either end of the plank, so that when they are pushed together there is a flat surface with two holes, each large enough for a boy’s head. This is covered with a tablecloth and a platter, each with corresponding holes, the cloth concealing the space under the table. Two boys participate in the illusion: one lies upon the board with his head thrust down through the hole, while the other sits beneath the table with his head appearing to be laid in the platter. Special effects are added to “make the sight more dredfull”:

put a little brimstone into a chafing dish of coles, setting it before the head of the boie, who must gaspe two or three times, so as the smoke enter a little into his nostrils and mouth . . . and the head presentlie will appeare starke dead . . . and if a little bloud be sprinkled on his face, the sight will be the stranger (290).

Scot also suggests that there are “other things which might be performed . . . the more to astonish the beholders”, yet gives only one example: “put about his necke a little dough kneded with bullocks bloud, which being cold will appeare like dead flesh; & being pricked with a sharp round hollow quill, will bleed, and seeme verie strange” (290). A stage direction in T. B.’s *The Rebellion of Naples* (1649)

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<sup>23</sup> The name applied to the juggler’s trick described by Scot is an indication of the status of John the Baptist as a major figure associated with decapitation; Owens observes that the beheading of John the Baptist was the “most notorious subject” of the hagiographic drama in France during the medieval period, and suggests that it is likely that there were similar plays featuring John the Baptist in England, as well (39).

gives such an instruction; when Massenello is executed, the text specifies, “*He thrusts out his head, and they cut off a false head made of a bladder fill’d with bloud. Exeunt with his body*” (73).<sup>24</sup> Although this is a later play, and one written during the period of the closure of the theatres, this more explicit stage direction may indicate a familiar method of representing onstage executions.

In 1655, Thomas Ady resumed Scot’s discourse on witchcraft, describing the same juggling trick in *A Candle in the Dark*. Ady describes how, by “slight of hand”, a piece of wood is used to represent a neck, with a concave end “hidden under the Boys shirt”, and the other end appearing to the spectators “very dismal (being limbnd over by the cunning Limbner) like a bloody neck, so lively in shew that the very bone and marrow of the neck appeareth, insomuch that some Spectators have fainted at the sight hereof” (39). Ady’s terminology indicates the familiarity of the audience with the spectacle of execution, suggesting how realistic the trick needed to be if it was going to come close to convincing audience members who had seen any number of public executions; the “bone and marrow” are carefully reproduced, and the audience sees the “Corps tremble like a body new slain”, while the false head is taken up by the hair and laid in “a Charger” (39). Louis B. Wright suggests that with “slight modifications, either of the methods described by Scot and Ady was adaptable to stage executions” (282).

Theatre audiences were accustomed to the heads of traitors being brought back onstage after an imagined execution, and even with the display of heads – as

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<sup>24</sup> Surprisingly, at the suggestion of a “generall pardon” after his execution, Massenello revives in the final scene of the play so that he may speak a posthumous commentary in the form of an epilogue, similar to the format in *The Mirror for Magistrates*. Massenello warns kings not to be too harsh upon their subjects, but then hastens to lament his own treasonous rebellion (76-77). This revival from the dead, in performance, would offer a metatheatrical touch, but would also tend to diminish the impact of the onstage decapitation.

in the opening scene of *Pericles* – yet this simulation of the dismembered body as well as the decapitated head represents a significant intensification of the dramatic event by attaining a new degree of realism and by creating greater impact upon the audience through representing the execution scene in its entirety. This also suggests a higher profile for the prisoner’s last words on the scaffold, for instead of being spoken just prior to exiting the stage for an imagined execution, the onstage beheading makes the last words of the character inseparable from the physical punishment which immediately follows the speech; the audience *experiences* the binaries of speech and silence, wholeness and dismemberment, life and death, and the execution ritual itself is presented whole and complete.

Most theatre companies apparently decided that an onstage decapitation was too labour-intensive and too costly in terms of the extra materials required for successful staging. Yet exceptions were evidently made for *The Insatiate Countess*, *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, *The Virgin Martyr* and *Herod and Antipater*. These plays dramatized the full execution ritual, no doubt drawing in the same audiences who flocked to real executions, and permitting them to witness the strange conjunction of the grotesque and the solemn.<sup>25</sup>

In regard to staging, I make the assumption that these simulated beheadings were performed in the English manner, with a block and axe rather than a sword. The latter method, favoured on the continent, required the victim to remain upright in a kneeling position, while the headsman struck from behind. The historical figures on whom the Countess and Barnavelt were based were both executed in this fashion; Grimestone’s account of Byron’s decapitation suggests

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<sup>25</sup> By “full execution ritual” I refer to the simulated beheading as a conclusion to the scaffold speech. There are no stage directions indicating that drawing and quartering took place onstage, although the head may have been displayed as the finale to the execution.

likewise. English-style beheadings in the theatre would have been easier to simulate, for the block could be used to obscure crucial stage business, allowing the substitution of a fake head for that of the actor.

The audience must certainly have embodied a wide range of responses to these performances. Regina Janes's observation regarding the pike and the guillotine is equally relevant to beheading; she writes that they "evoked contradictory responses . . . linked by the usual continuum, fascinated horror, queasy relish, and the shrug of indifference" ("Beheadings" 242). Owens suggests that the spectator's "sense of his or her own spiritual and corporeal fragility" is both "excited and assuaged" by witnessing the mutilation of another (120). While some attended, then, for purposes of sheer entertainment, others undoubtedly remained sensitive to the spiritual implications of the event.

Chronologically, the first of these Jacobean plays is *The Insatiate Countess*.<sup>26</sup> The beheading scene in Marston's play is characterized by the dual polarities of comedy and tragedy, body and spirit. While my primary focus is on the scaffold conduct of Isabella, her final scene is contrasted and contextualized by a comic subplot which incorporates gallows humour and represents an inversion of the elements of public execution that occur in the tragic plot. Both plots involve murder charges, marriages and issues of infidelity; they also

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<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Melchiori, editor of the Revels edition of the play, suggests that Marston "devised the plot and underplot of the play" no later than 1607 or 1608, and that William Barksted and Lewis Machin revised and completed the play, probably in 1608 or 1609 (16-17). He also favours Marston as the author of Isabella's execution scene (11-12), surmising that it was intended to represent the conclusion of the play. Instead, the final scene (5.2) attempts a resolution of the comic plot, thereby undermining the tragic impact of the Countess's death. For a full discussion of authorship issues, dates, textual problems and sources, see Melchiori's introduction.

incorporate the shadow of execution, manipulating the established conventions associated with sentencing, pardons and appropriate conduct on the scaffold.

The comic plot involves two newlywed couples, Claridiana and Abigail, and Rogero and Thais.<sup>27</sup> The mutually antagonistic husbands are unaware of their wives' long-term friendship; each husband is thwarted in his attempt to sleep with the other's spouse by means of a double bed-trick contrived by the conspiring wives. Believing themselves cuckolded, however, the husbands seize the opportunity afforded by a supposed killing to present themselves before Duke Amago as the murderers. Preferring the death sentence to the imputation of cuckoldry, they argue vehemently that they must both be hanged, despite their actual innocence and the repeated suggestion that they may successfully sue for pardon. Rogero instead urges the duke to show no leniency: "Make not us precedents for after wrongs; / I will receive punishment for my sins: / It shall be a means to lift us towards heaven" (4.1.52-54). When the two are led in for what they believe to be their execution, Claridiana curses the wives, in an inversion of the "prayers" and "orisons" expected of prisoners (5.2.38-39). The dire punishments he imagines for them suggests a carnivalesque preoccupation with the body and its functions, completely at odds with the state of mind required immediately before facing God:

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<sup>27</sup> Due to the confusion arising from inconsistencies in the first Quarto regarding characters' names, editions vary widely, particularly in the designations of the names Rogero, Mizaldus and Guido. For information on the editing issues associated with the various Quartos, see Melchiori's introduction, in the Revels edition of the play I have used as the text for this chapter. See also the brief discussion of the play in Martin Wiggins's introduction to *Four Jacobean Sex Tragedies*.

. . . O may bastard-bearing with the pangs of childbirth be doubled  
 to 'em: may they have ever twins and be three weeks in travail  
 between . . . may they live to ride in triumph in a dung-cart and be  
 crowned with all the odious ceremonies belonging to't: may the  
 cucking-stool be their recreation, and a dungeon their dying  
 chamber . . . (26-34)

Rather than bestowing forgiveness, Claridiana berates Abigail, declaring, "I had rather Chirurgeons' Hall should beg my dead body for an anatomy, than thou beg my life" (81-83), alluding to the practice of using the bodies of executed criminals for dissection.<sup>28</sup>

Duke Amago, aware of the husbands' innocence but continuing the charade for his own amusement, releases them in the final scene amidst general merriment and the prospect of a banquet. The repeated references to hanging and death in the comic plot have little potency, for the situation is understood from the outset to be artificial. That which is treated facetiously in the subplot, however, is given serious expression in the depiction of the Countess's tragedy. As I shall discuss later, the juxtaposition of Isabella's execution scene with the charade of Rogero and Claridiana's mock condemnations and pardons complicates the spectator's response to her death, the parallel issues of marital infidelity linking the two plots.

Isabella's quickly-inflamed passions and her trail of previous lovers earn her the label 'insatiate'. As Melchiori notes, her character is based upon the real-

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Neill points out that dissection was performed upon the corpses of criminals, to deliberately and "disgracefully" expose their bodies to the "prying gaze of the crowd". This practice not only ensured the "humiliation of the malefactor beyond execution", but also functioned to enhance "the moral lessons of the whole theatre of punishment" (118).

life figure of Bianca Maria, Countess of Cellant (or Challant), who was executed in Milan in 1526 for the murder of a former lover, and it is for the same crime that Marston's Isabella is condemned to die.<sup>29</sup>

Even before her arrival at the scaffold the Countess demonstrates her unpreparedness for death, for it is reported that she has sent Duke Medina twenty thousand pounds in the false hope of a pardon (5.1.46-50). When she enters, she is confronted with the corpse of her former lover Guido, for whose murder she had hired Don Sago. In an inversion of the husbands' plight in the comic plot, Don Sago quickly seizes the opportunity to sue for pardon and to demonstrate public repentance for the murder he has committed. He performs well, lamenting that his hands will never be free of the "sanguinolent stain" upon them, to which Medina replies, "God pardon thee, we do" (44-45).

This act of mercy on the part of the duke does not extend to the Countess, however, for even Don Sago is perceived as a victim of her lust, which would "make a slaughter-house of Italy" (55). This misogynistic double standard, as Wiggins points out, suggests that Isabella is "killed as much for her promiscuity" as for murder, particularly as Don Sago is freely pardoned (Introduction, *Four Jacobean Sex Tragedies* xii). Janet M. Spencer considers the royal pardon, in relation to execution, as an "equally viable display of power"; comic treatment in plays 'carnivalizes' the subject matter, "producing scenes replete with the

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<sup>29</sup> Melchiori 19-20. There is a popular tradition that the woman in a fresco by Bernardino Luini is the Countess of Cellant. Depicting the beheading of St. Catherine, the image shows the executioner with his sword raised, about to decapitate his victim. Melchiori cites Bandello, one of the original accounts of the Countess's story: ". . . whoever wishes to see her face pictured to the life, should go to the church of the Monastero Maggiore, and there will see it painted" (qtd. in Melchiori 21). See Sandrina Bandera and Maria Teresa Fiorio for a reproduction of the fresco (205).

ambivalence of popular festivity” (55, 58). This is true of the mock sentencings and pardons of Claridiana and Rogero in the comic plot, but as Wiggins observes, the pardon of Don Sago at the beginning of the execution scene instead “sets up an uncomfortable association between the operations of crime and of punishment . . . which must make us at least open-minded about the execution’s claim to just impartiality” (Introduction, *Four Jacobean Sex Tragedies* xii).

Isabella appears before the scaffold as a virginal Ophelia figure. As the stage directions indicate, her hair is loose, she wears a “*chaplet of flowers on her head*”, and she holds a “*nosegay in her hand*” (*Insatiate* 66). When the waiting Cardinal welcomes her to her “dance of death”, she jests, “I sent today to my physician, / And as he says he finds no sign of death” (69-72). The humour seems out of character for her, but its placement here is evidence of the popularity of such commonplaces associated with execution, as we have seen both with More and Raleigh.

The Countess exhibits all the signs of dying ‘badly’, by resisting the spiritual advice she has been given to prepare for death. When the Cardinal hands her a book to “instruct” her soul, she summons Medina and again requests a reprieve (94-104). Instead of confessing to murder, Isabella shows no remorse for the death of her former lover, insisting that he “died deservedly” for writing libels against her, and declaring, “I . . . would not wish him living / Were my life instant ransom” (78-89). When the headsman is urged to proceed, she erupts into curses, rather than prayer: “Now God lay all thy sins upon thy head, / And sink thee with them to infernal darkness, / Thou teacher of the Furies’ cruelty” (141-43). She refuses to “die in quiet” while the Duke remains present; he does exit the stage,

but at this point there enters unexpectedly a character who initiates a profound change in the atmosphere on the scaffold (146).

Isabella's estranged husband Roberto, now a friar, climbs the stairs to join her on the scaffold. He speaks, at first seemingly to remind her of her infidelities; as he continues, however, it is obvious that he is still captivated by her. Roberto explains that he has hoped for her reform, yet has come forward upon hearing that she is condemned to die. Then, strangely, he "clasps" her and "falls into a trance" (160-82). Ironically, it is this – the unexpected embrace from a former love – that creates a crucial transformation in Isabella. Whereas the Cardinal has been unsuccessful in prompting her to contrition and care of her soul, Roberto's speech and the closeness of his physical embrace appear to awaken a form of latent self-awareness in the Countess. She acknowledges that, had she lived with her husband in "lawful pleasure", she "might have lived in honour, died in fame", and on her knees she asks his pardon, which, she says, "shall confirm more peace unto my death / Than all the grave instructions of the Church" (185-90).<sup>30</sup> Roberto does so freely: "Pardon belongs unto my holy weeds, / Freely thou hast it" (5.1.191-92). He thus pardons the Countess as Medina refused to, and confers upon her the blessing she would not accept from the Cardinal.

This blessing, like the embrace, evokes an earlier physical intimacy, as he remembers her kiss on their wedding day and urges her to die well:

Farewell my Isabella. Let thy death

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<sup>30</sup> Isabella married Roberto while still in mourning for her deceased husband; abandoned Roberto for Guido (whom she arranges to have murdered); then displaced Guido with Gniaca. Ironically, when she betrays Guido with Gniaca, Isabella pretends to be repentant, claiming that she wishes to be reconciled with her husband (3.4.126-46).

Ransom thy soul: O die a rare example;  
 The kiss thou gavest me in the church, here take,  
 As I leave thee, so thou the world forsake. (193-96)

Whereas the scaffold scene begins with Isabella's fear, denial and defiance, she now moves toward readiness for execution. Her encounter with Roberto is the catalyst for Isabella to transcend the physicality of her body – associated with lustfulness and shame – and to both imagine and accept her separation from it. Her compliance is evidenced in her bestowal of forgiveness upon the executioner and her request for further instructions. The focus turns to the Countess's hair as the executioner directs her to tie it up. As she obeys, Isabella exclaims,

O these golden nets  
 That have ensnared so many wanton youths,  
 Not one but has been held a thread of life  
 And superstitiously depended on . . . (201-204)

Like Atropos poised to cut the 'thread of life', the executioner likewise awaits his moment. In the Countess's speech there is both a residual vanity and an awareness of its emptiness, as she contemplates the imminent demise of her own physical beauty. In a continuing blazon of her best features, she meditates upon her eyes as she is asked to secure her blindfold. They have been, she says,

. . . more gazed at than the god of day:  
 Their brightness never could be flattered,  
 Yet thou commandest a fixèd cloud of lawn  
 To eclipse eternally these minutes of light. (210-13)

Here, death and the blindfold merge, to extinguish the brilliance of her eyes.

The previous stages of the ritual fulfilled, Isabella makes the final part of her scaffold speech, now asking the Cardinal's blessing and demonstrating her readiness to take the stroke:

Lord, I am well prepared:  
 Murder and Lust, down with my ashes sink,  
 But like ingrateful seed perish in earth,  
 That you may never spring against my soul,  
 Like weeds to choke it in the heavenly harvest;  
 I fall to rise, mount to thy Maker, spirit,  
 Leave here thy body, death has her demerit. (219-25)

At this point, the executioner strikes.<sup>31</sup>

In her speech – which recalls that of Byron in its initial resistance to authority – the physical body is described in terms of earth, death and descent, while the spirit is associated with ascension. The Countess balances on the border between presence and absence; she indicates her association with spirit through externalizing and distancing the body as a material object. She does not pray as the axe descends, yet these lines indicate clearly that – at the final, crucial moment – her concern is for the salvation of her soul.

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<sup>31</sup> Melchiori includes the word 'Strike' – printed in the right-hand margin of the various quartos – as the concluding word of the Countess's dying speech. He acknowledges the possibility that the word may have been intended to refer to "a 'noise' off stage", but ultimately concludes that 'Strike' is "not a stage direction, but the dramatically effective conclusion of Isabella's speech, addressed to the executioner" (174-75n226). I have compared the quartos of 1613, 1616 and 1631, and am not entirely convinced that the word is intended for Isabella; what I consider to be of greater importance, however, is the clear indication in each quarto that the beheading occurs onstage.

Isabella's flaws are clearly demonstrated throughout the play – she is fickle, selfish and lustful, her body an instrument of pleasure. Had Roberto not appeared at the scaffold to take his farewell, Isabella's submission would undoubtedly have been achieved through violent physical coercion, her death perceived by the audience as shameful and demeaning. As it is, her 'insatiability' is replaced with humility and penitence, and although her transformation is sudden, it appears to be genuine. Paradoxically, although her initial resistance may be considered a form of defiance against the authority of the church, she finally observes the protocols of execution, not through a formulaic, public acknowledgement of her crime, but through personal confession to Roberto. In the ritual, she ultimately finds meaning relevant to her own experience, thus infusing her final moments with an unexpected dignity.

If the simulated beheading of the Countess was, in fact, the first of its kind on the commercial stage, then it was an innovation that undoubtedly elicited a variety of reactions. As the text stands, the play does not end with Isabella's death, but is followed by a comic conclusion. Had Marston completed the work, the Countess's execution might have formed the tragic finale to the play, but instead the audience's response to the immediacy of her 'death' must be modified by the general air of festivity, as the confusion of the comic subplot is finally cleared. From this perspective, the Countess's execution may be seen in a metatheatrical context; understood to be a clever stage device, the simulated beheading of the actor may be perceived as a trick parallel to the deception played upon the two husbands. If so, then the tragedy is undercut by the atmosphere of carnival, as the separation of Isabella's head from her body reduces her merely to a grotesque body and the execution is experienced as a mock ritual enjoyed as

sensational visual entertainment. In an entirely tragic context, it might be argued that the beheading is required in order to create a corresponding sense of relief when the husbands are pardoned, but this too is problematic, for the pardons themselves are artificial and the comic context does not support this type of reading. Moreover, the elements of humour that immediately precede the execution are not sustained throughout the scaffold scene.

At the time this play was first performed, members of the audience who retained the awareness that the stage beheading represented, in one sense, a recreation of the actual death of Bianca Maria, may also have remained susceptible to the ghastliness of the display. They may have experienced, as Patricia Palmer describes, the “wrenching quality of still-life death, of animation abruptly arrested”, for the severed head, she argues, is “a terrifying figure of liminality, staked on the no-mans-land (sic) between life and death” (41-42). From this perspective, the act of beheading in the play represents a visual echo of the scaffold speech, spoken on the threshold that separates living from dying. Certainly to a modern audience Isabella appears to be at least partially the victim of obvious gender inequality, but her execution, in the Jacobean context, is unavoidable, for the killing of Guido demands it. Yet the extremity of her situation encourages sympathy for her plight, and the impact of her death is increased through the choice to depict her decapitation; the same response would not be achieved were she simply escorted offstage to die. If the play in its entirety is considered from the perspective of the justice of public execution in comparable scenarios, then Isabella’s tragedy appears in the midst of uneasy comedy as a disturbing and unforgettable episode.

If Isabella's confrontation with death is distinctive, the scaffold scene in *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* is equally so.<sup>32</sup> The play dramatizes topical news from the Netherlands concerning the fall and execution of the Advocate of Holland. According to T. H. Howard-Hill, the play was quickly written, for Oldenbarnevelt was executed on 3 May 1619, and the play was ready for performance in August of the same year ("Buc" 50). The subject matter was sensitive in terms of current political and religious issues; King James I was a supporter of the Prince of Orange (who decreed Oldenbarnevelt's execution), and Sir George Buc, Master of the Revels, was therefore careful to have removed from the play any negative interpretation of the Prince's conduct. From the religious perspective, Oldenbarnevelt's espousal of Arminianism and his hopes for religious toleration were central to his fall from favour, for he thereby placed himself in direct opposition to the Calvinist prince.<sup>33</sup>

Like Isabella, the character Barnavelt is depicted as flawed. He is proud, overly ambitious, and endangered by his religious and political views. Moreover, he is directly implicated in the suicide of his former colleague, Leidenberch. Visiting him in prison, prior to his own fall, Barnavelt is devastated to learn that Leidenberch has 'confessed'. As a challenge to the authorities, he argues, Leidenberch's only honourable action is to "Dye uncompelld: and mock their preparations, / Their envyes, and their Justice" (*Barnavelt* 3.4.83-84). Barnavelt warms to his topic, suggesting that to submit to the "hands of Infamy" is to die a

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<sup>32</sup> To avoid confusion, I shall refer to the historical person as Oldenbarnevelt, and to the dramatic character as Barnavelt.

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent summary of the play's action, see the 1922 edition edited by Wilhelmina P. Frijlinck, which also discusses authorship issues, sources and literary perspectives. See John E. Curran for a discussion of the implications of Calvinism and Arminianism to the play.

“doble death” (97-100), while self-slaughter in such circumstances will preserve one’s name:

One blow, one short peece of an howre do’s this  
 And this cures all: maintaines no more phisitians,  
 Restores our memories, and ther’s the great cure,  
 Where, if we stay the fatall Sword of Justice  
 It moawes the man downe first, and next his fashion,  
 His living name, his Creadit. (109-14)<sup>34</sup>

Barnavelt is an impassioned and persuasive statesman, clearly adept at manipulating others, yet he is also presented as a tired and disillusioned old man who appears genuinely puzzled by the disfavour into which he has fallen. Alone in his study, he dwells on his past glories and begins to despair:

Must all theis glories vanish into darknes?  
 And *Barnavelt* passe with’em, and glide away  
 Like a spent Exhalation? I cannot hold,  
 I am crackt too deepe alreedy: what have I don,  
 I cannot answeare? (4.3.20-24)

These opposing tensions are transferred to the scaffold, where he assumes the role of tragic actor, vowing, “I shall not play my last Act worst” (5.1.204).

As Isabella’s final scene is preceded by comic manipulations of the conventions surrounding execution, so Barnavelt’s last performance is anticipated by a grotesquely comic scene which emphasizes the brutality and depersonalization associated with the ritual. Prior to Barnavelt’s arrival at the scaffold, three executioners appear on the scene, eager to demonstrate their skills.

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of Leidenberch’s suicide, see the Chapter 4, on self-murder.

These figures, embodying gallows humour and a shared obsession with the decapitated body, are described as “hungry vulturs” who have “smelld out their imployment” (5.1.212-13). Leyden, Harlem and Utricht boast of their prowess with the sword, playing dice to determine who shall have the privilege of dispatching Barnavelt.<sup>35</sup> Harlem draws upon the popular trope of the sword as healer:

Heer’s a Sword would doe a mans head good to be cut of with it,  
Cures all rhumes, all Catharrs, Megroomes, virteegoes,  
*Presto*, be gon. (5.2.2-4)

Jonathan Sawday points out the “intersection of the trade of the executioner and the profession of the physician”, both of whom practised their skills upon the “frail human body” (81). Just as the executioner and physician intersect, so do the barber and surgeon, as execution here is ironically perceived as the ultimate form of bloodletting. Leyden describes himself as an “old Cutter”, who has “polld more pates / And neater then a Dicker of your Barbers, / They nere need washing after” (5.2.7-9). As he brandishes his sword, Utricht evokes an image of a dismembered body as he combines the concept of barbering with the biblical metaphor of flesh as grass:<sup>36</sup>

Looke on’t, but come not neere it: the very wind on’t  
Will borrow a leg, or an arme; heer’s touch and take, boyes,  
And this shall moaw the head of Monsieur *Barnavelt*:

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<sup>35</sup> Owens points out that this game “recalls the games that Christ’s torturers conduct in order to decide who will keep the convict’s clothes (the traditional prerogative of the hangman)”, thus drawing a parallel between the execution of Barnavelt and the crucifixion of Christ (142).

<sup>36</sup> See Isaiah 40:6-8: “All flesh *is* grass, and all the goodness thereof *is* as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth . . . but the word of our God shall stand forever”. See also Psalms 103:15: “*As for* man, his days *are* as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth”.

Man is but grasse, and hay: I have him here,  
 And here I have him . . . (23-27)

He wins at dice, and gloatingly describes how he will perform his office:

. . . first, how ile take my leave of him:  
 With a few teares to draw more money from him:  
 Then fold up his braunchd gowne, his hat, his doblet,  
 And like the devill, cry mine owne: lye there boyes:  
 Then bind his eyes: last, stir myself up bravely  
 And in the midle of a whollsome praire  
 Whip: and *hic jacet Barnavelt* . . . (53-59)

Utricht alludes to the established rituals associated with public executions – the prisoner giving payment and garments to the executioner, the binding of the eyes of the condemned, and the anticipated recitation of a final prayer. For Utricht, however, these procedures merely represent easily exploitable opportunities for personal gain. Whereas a skilled headsman’s proficiency could promise a quick and uncomplicated beheading – implying at least an element of compassion toward the victim – Utricht’s gallows humour characterizes him as little more than a butcher, whose callousness further compromises Barnavelt’s dignity and strips him of his personal identity by making him just another victim, a “generall game” (5.3.68).

The exchange between executioners is followed by a brief conversation between two Captains, who represent opposing loyalties and who question whether or not the execution will actually take place.<sup>37</sup> While one Captain argues

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<sup>37</sup> Curran argues that, in England, “few would have had cause to identify with or mourn for Barnavelt”, for his “association with Arminianism and opposition to Calvinism would have

that Barnavelt is a “guilty man” and a “Traitor”, the other observes, “You know hee’s much lov’d, / And every where they stir in his Compassion” (5.3.9-13). A Burgher, also awaiting the arrival of Barnavelt, predicts, “He will make a notable Speech I warrant him” (49), testimony both to Barnavelt’s eloquence and to the expectation that such a ‘notable’ execution must include an address to the crowd. A condemnatory pamphlet translated from Dutch into English, which names Oldenbarnevelt the ‘new St. John’, accuses him of dissembling, “wherewith hee beautifies and adornes both his words and actions . . . with his smooth sleek starcht face and honied words shewing himselfe onely giuen vp to the consultation for his Countries good” (*Barnevelt Displayed* 29). The writer continues, “Beleeue it, he is an excellent fellow for a Stage, for he can change himselfe to all fashions, and make his outside and inside mearely two contraries” (30). From the opposite perspective, Frijlinck claims that even his enemies “admired Barneveld’s stoic calm, and heroic spirit, displayed all through the trial, the condemnation to death and at the execution” (cxxxiv).

Barnavelt is spared the grisly exchange between the executioners, but he is unable to escape the physical presence of Leidenberch’s confined corpse, suspended on the scaffold and awaiting his arrival. In accordance with actual events in Holland, the play includes Leidenberch’s suicide while in prison (3.6.19-62), but the addition of the coffin containing his body is historically inaccurate. The body of Ledenberg [Dutch spelling] was in fact confined and “strung up on a gibbet”, but not on the day of Oldenbarnevelt’s execution. In reality, the coffin

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marked him as among the reprobate” (239). Jan den Tex, however, suggests that opinion in England was divided (692n3).

with which the condemned was confronted on the scaffold was his own (den Tex 650, 688).

The playwrights' deliberate juxtaposition of Leidenberch's corpse with Barnavelt's execution recalls the Advocate's earlier coerciveness, but it simultaneously suggests an element of particular psychological cruelty in the spectacle of public punishment. In an abrupt return to the earthy language of the body, the executioner is quick to observe that Leidenberch "stincks like a hung poll cat" (*Barnavelt* 5.3.32), referring to the body as a cut of meat: "This venison wants pepper, and salt abhominably" (34). He assures the Provost, "If ere he run away againe, ile swing for him: / This would make a rare signe for a Cookes shop: the Christmas pie" (36-37). Barnavelt is "much moved" at the sight of the coffin (77), his brief silence followed with the outburst, "Are theis the holly praires ye prepare for me, / The comforts to a parting soule?" (78-79). His initial response, presumably both repulsed and remorseful, is transmuted into bold defiance as he challenges the Lords:

Hang up a hundred Coffins, I dare view'em,  
 And on their heads subscribe a hundred treasons,  
 It shakes not me: thus dare I smile upon'em  
 And strongly thus out looke your fellest Justice. (86-89)

Barnavelt throws out a further challenge in the next part of his speech, as he urges the Lords to remember the many services he has rendered to his country. He presents himself not only as a healer who has lovingly bound up the wounds of an orphan-like Holland, providing food and opening up avenues for trade, but as a martyr who has suffered "throaes, and grones", "dangers", and "almost gripes of death" to bring glory and prosperity to his country:

Thinck through whose care, you are a Nation  
 And have a name yet left, a fruitfull Nation,  
 (Would I could say as thanckfull,) bethinck ye of theis things  
 And then turne back, and blush, blush for my ruyne. (94-96,  
 112-15)

Barnavelt's bitter outburst is dangerously subversive, for he casts shame upon his persecutors as he publicly disputes the justice of the Prince's sentence. The two Lords' refutation of this part of Barnavelt's speech, however, is cast in religious terms rather than political, as they urge him to, "Confes, and dye well" (145).

The Advocate maintains his guiltlessness, claiming simply, "I dye for saving this unthanckfull Cuntry" (149). Admonished that he should "Play not with heaven", Barnavelt replies, "My Game's as sure as yours is: / And with more care, and inocence, I play it"; to the executioner he adds, "Take of my doblet: and I prethee fellow, / Strike without feare" (150-53). From this point to the time of his execution, Barnavelt is compliant, appearing outwardly calm. In an ironic moment, he grants forgiveness to the executioner, unwittingly echoing Utricht's earlier jests about the healing properties of the sword:

. . . heer's my hand: I love thee too; thy phisick  
 Will quickly purge me from the worldes abuses:  
 When I speak lowdest, strike. (155-57)

The final section of Barnavelt's scaffold speech follows the formula whereby the penitent prisoner praises and blesses the sovereign, and he bestows his forgiveness upon all (169-178).

According to den Tex, Oldenbarnevelt directed the following words to the assembled spectators: "Men, do not think me a traitor; I have acted honestly and

religiously, like a good patriot, and as such I die” (qtd. in den Tex 688). There is no report of an inflammatory speech such as the one written for him in the play, suggesting that the dramatists were eager to intensify the drama of the scaffold scene through a restatement of the political issues leading to the statesman’s condemnation and death. When Oldenbarnevelt’s eyes were covered, he said, “Jesus Christ shall be my guide. Lord God, Heavenly Father, receive my spirit”, while his final words were addressed to the executioner: “Be quick about it, be quick” (qtd. in den Tex 688).

In the play, however, Barnavel’t’s final words are abruptly concluded by Utrecht’s sudden impatience:

Honour, and world, I fling ye thus behind me,  
 And thus a naked poore-man, kneele to heaven:  
 Be gracious to me, heare me, strengthen me,  
 I come, I come: ô gracious heaven: now: now:  
 Now I present —                    [*Head struck of.*]  
 (5.3.179-83)

Utrecht’s earlier grotesque imagery of dismemberment is graphically realized as Barnavel’t is beheaded onstage, at the same time losing two fingers. This was, in fact, what happened as Oldenbarnevelt was decapitated (den Tex 688), but here the executioner triumphantly asks, “Is it well don mine Heeres?” The first Lord replies, “Somewhat too much: you have strooke his fingers too / But we forgive your haste” (*Barnavel’t* 183-185). The image of the two fingers, presumably displayed to the audience along with the head, combines the comic and the tragic: the fingers are removed as a result of Barnavel’t’s final prayer, but the accident is inseparably associated with grotesque physicality and the black-humoured jokes

of the executioners. This minor blunder is an instance of Laqueur's "ludicrous and macabre mishaps" (323), and demonstrates the way in which the intended solemnity of the event might be undermined by what Nicholas Brooke describes as 'horrid laughter', in which the "opposites of laughter and tears" could "easily and bewilderingly transpose into each other" (Brooke 3). The detail of the two fingers, then, invites contradictory responses to Barnavelt's end on the scaffold, for the incident increases our sympathy at the same time it is likely to prompt spontaneous, if uncomfortable, laughter.

Barnavelt – like Isabella – comes to the scaffold unprepared for death, in an attitude of resistance and defiance. Whereas Isabella undergoes a form of secular conversion, however, Barnavelt seems rather to demonstrate a last-minute acceptance of the inevitable. Throughout his scaffold address he progresses through a range of emotional reactions: from bitter sarcasm to dismay and disgust; from shock to anger to open defiance; from impassioned rhetoric to increased self-control. By the time the blade strikes, however, he has become humbled, resigned. Whereas the comic and the tragic are treated in separate plot strands in *Countess*, in *Barnavelt* there is a closer integration of comic physical elements with the tragedy of his downfall. In *Countess* the accommodation of Roberto within the execution ritual allows Isabella to see herself from an alternative perspective, to gain a sense of personal peace before death, and to ensure salvation of her soul. In *Barnavelt*, the executioners epitomize the physical brutality of public punishment, while the presence of the Lords on the scaffold serves to emphasize – in Laqueur's phrase – the "thunderous reaffirmation of the state's might and authority" (308).

Of the four plays featuring onstage beheadings, *Countess* and *Barnavelt* are the most complex in terms of the ambiguity of the scaffold speeches. The final speeches in the remaining two plays, *The Virgin Martyr* and *Herod and Antipater*, are more straightforward in terms of their characters' motivations. The former focuses on the figure of St Dorothy, who was "believed to have suffered martyrdom during the Diocletian persecutions on 6 February 304", although Jane Hwang Degenhardt observes that her legend "did not emerge until the Middle Ages" (86).<sup>38</sup> From the opposite perspective, *Herod and Antipater*<sup>39</sup> features the execution of Herod's villainous bastard son, Antipater.

Whereas the punishable crimes in *Countess* and *Barnavelt* are murder and treason, in *The Virgin Martyr*<sup>40</sup> Dorothea is beheaded for being a devout Christian. Although other characters in this play achieve martyrdom, they are tortured and stabbed rather than decapitated. Dorothea herself is subjected to various tortures before her death, including being dragged by the hair (*Virgin Martyr* 4.1.59sd); bound with cords to a pillar (4.2.61sd); and beaten with cudgels

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<sup>38</sup> Degenhardt sees the "dramatic adaptation" of the Dorothea legend as a "unique and remarkable development" in post-Reformation England (87). She perceives the representation of Dorothea's martyrdom "as a model for framing contemporary religious threats" from the Ottoman empire, and argues that the play "evokes an additional Protestant valence through its immediate resonance with the powerful tradition of representing martyrdom established through Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*" (93-94).

<sup>39</sup> Gordon Nicholas Ross claims that the play "may have been written as early as 1612 or as late as 1621" (xv). See his introduction to the Critical Edition, to which I refer in this chapter.

<sup>40</sup> According to Fredson Bowers, the play was "'reformed' and licensed by Buc for the Red Bull" in 1620, entered in the Stationers' Register in the same year, and printed in 1622 (*Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker* Vol.3 367). In his Textual Introduction, Bowers notes that the nineteenth-century editor William Gifford ascribes the scene of Dorothea's martyrdom to Massinger; Bowers discusses the issues of authorship 367-74. For an account of the textual sources most likely to have been utilized by Dekker and Massinger in the composition of the play, see Julia Gasper's "The Sources of *The Virgin Martyr*".

(85sd). She possesses, however, the miraculous ability to heal from the physical injuries that are inflicted upon her; Nova Myhill points out that the scene of her beating thus “differs significantly” from earlier versions of the legend, in that “it involves no visible damage to her at all” (20). Earlier in the play, Dorothea declares herself unafraid of death: “The visage of a hangman frights not me; / The sight of whips, rackes, gibbets, axes, fires / Are scaffoldings, by which my soule climbs vp / To an Eternall habitation” (2.3.166-69).

Delivered to the scaffold, Dorothea expresses a similar sentiment, assuring her persecutor Theophilus (who by the end of the play becomes a convert and martyr himself) that his malice

. . . serues

To me but as a ladder to mount vp  
 To such a height of happinesse where I shall  
 Looke downe with scorne on thee, and on the world,  
 Where circl'd with true pleasures, plac'd aboue  
 The reach of death or time, twill be my glory  
 To thinke at what an easie price I bought it. (4.3.75-81)

Moments before Dorothea's beheading, she is asked by Theophilus, “Hast thou ought else to say?” (171). The first four lines of her final speech are a direct response:

Nothing but blame  
 Thy tardinesse in sending me to rest,  
 My peace is made with heauen, to which my soule  
 Begins to take her flight, strike, O strike quickly . . . (171-74)

Dorothea embraces her death, demonstrating herself to be beyond the reach of her persecutor's punishment as she expresses her longing for "heaven". She also gives the standard signal of readiness for the blade to strike, echoing the same command issued by Byron and Barnavelte, and by Raleigh. The remainder of her speech, however, is directed outward, given from the assured perspective of one who has already gained heaven and attained salvation:

And though you are vnmov'd to see my death,  
 Hereafter when my story shall be read,  
 As they were present now, the hearers shall  
 Say this of *Dorothea* with wet eyes,  
 She liu'd a virgin, and a virgin dies. *Her head strucke off.*  
 (175-179)

She simultaneously defies Theophilus and addresses present and future witnesses of her martyrdom. She speaks of "my death" and "my story", but then shifts to a third person perspective, distancing herself from her body and envisioning later "hearers" overcome with emotion. Dorothea's metatheatrical strategy is to frame her martyrdom in terms of future reenactments; while Myhill notes the emphasis on textual transmission ("my story shall be read"), the play in which she is featured may be later performed, so that Dorothea's martyrdom occurs in the Diocletian 'present', the 'present' of the Jacobean audience, and again in the indeterminate future. Each time the scene of her death is performed, it is once more in the 'present', for the audience witnesses its re-enactment as if it were the original event. In this sense, her martyrdom is both "spiritually authentic and theatrically constructed" (Myhill 11-12, 9), and her scaffold speech encapsulates this duality. As Covington writes, "For martyrs, the execution scene was the

ultimate stage, allowing them to witness their faith before others and to fashion themselves in ways that circumvented the authorities' control" (180).

Myhill also emphasizes the importance of the crowd's perception in generating the meaning of martyrdom: the audience must be sympathetic to Dorothea in order for her to be perceived as a martyr, and the victim's last words are therefore carefully constructed so that future audiences perceive her death in precisely this way (17). Just as the conflicting reports of Margaret Pole's and Catherine Howard's scaffold conduct appear to indicate the opposing perspectives of each reporter, so Myhill argues that the answers raised by similar, competing accounts of executions and martyrdoms are dependent "not on the heretic, traitor, or martyr's beliefs but those of their audience" (17-18).

Dorothea initiates the narrative of her own martyrdom, manipulating both her words and the emotional responses of the 'witnesses' of her death; by suggesting that future audiences will weep, she makes it quite clear that the 'present' audience should be deeply moved by her fate and her courageousness in embracing death.

In the early modern context, the framing of Dorothea's "story" in the form of a prophecy would have added greater potency to her claims, while future performances – assuming that her strategy is successful – would confirm her prophecy as truth. In this sense the scene's function is similar to that of Foxe's narratives. Knott observes that the identity of Foxe's Marian martyrs as "true Christians" is affirmed through both gestures and "memorable last words", so that rather than being silenced, the victims manage to transform their suffering into a

source of “enhanced spiritual power”, thus defeating the “intent of the punishment” by “finding means of demonstrating joy in suffering” (9,8).<sup>41</sup>

Thus, whereas Isabella’s and Barnavelt’s attitudes of defiance are ultimately broken down, their resignation a response to the inevitable, Dorothea’s resistance to persecution requires her willingness to die, and her triumph in remaining steadfast. “By remaining unmoved by punishment, or even exulting in it,” Knott observes, “the victim shows the limitations of the power of church or state to control the subversive spirit” (8). Mullaney agrees, and writes of early modern heretics that they were “almost more dangerous to punish than to let be; they had a nasty tendency not to resist their fate but to embrace it, to use the forum designed to humiliate and annihilate them as a stage to act out and demonstrate the power of their own faith” (“Reforming Resistance” 241).

The scene of Dorothea’s death creates a specific interaction between the martyr and her audience, which is parallel to the descriptions of martyrdom in *Actes and Monuments* (Myhill 15). Myhill sees Dorothea’s final words as the “logical conclusion to the Foxean conventions of martyrdom in which the text replaces the relic, the narrative replaces the miracle, and the hearer replaces the spectator” (26). Mullaney observes of Foxe that in treating “recent and even current historical figures with the same weight and import as classical and biblical martyrs”, his text “helped to establish the affective power of the contemporaneous and particular over the classical or general or typological” (“Reforming Resistance” 247). Conversely, Dekker and Massinger take a classical example of martyrdom, and demonstrate that the immediacy of performance can rescue the martyr from possible obscurity and prompt the audience to an affective response

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<sup>41</sup> In Book 1 of the 1570 edition, Foxe does not include a detailed description of Dorothea, but merely includes her name in a list of martyrs (Foxe 105).

to her fate. The dramatists achieve this through the conjunction of the scaffold speech and the simulated onstage beheading, so that the representation of martyrdom is parallel to the text and images in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. Although Foxe's readership was larger than the number of London theatre goers, the stage play may possibly have had a more immediate impact on attending audiences, confronted as they were with the graphic visual spectacle of a onstage beheading.

Larry S. Champion laments that, although Dorothea may "command utter admiration", and her "sensationalistic tortures" afford for the audience "a certain horrific fascination", ultimately her character is "not dramatically compelling" (201). Her scaffold conduct is certainly not characterized by the same ambiguity that attaches to Isabella and Barnavelte, but as an adjunct to her execution, the death of the devoted Antoninus is of interest in the scene.

Antoninus, son of the Governor of Caesaria, expresses his love for Dorothea, but she firmly refuses his attentions; he is overwhelmed with melancholy and his health becomes dangerously compromised. Prior to her execution Dorothea acknowledges his loyalty, requesting of the good angel (unsurprisingly named Angelo) that he ensure that Antoninus's love for her is "Chang'd to the loue of heauen" (*Virgin Martyr* 4.3.150-52). Accordingly, a short time before Dorothea's beheading, Antoninus announces that he feels "a holy fire" within, by which he is "quite alterd" (160-62). He kneels before Dorothea and touches her hand with a "religious kisse" (165). At the moment her head is struck off, Antoninus speaks a final line: "O take my soule along to waite on thine" (180). He collapses and dies, returning at the end of the play as part of Dorothea's ghostly company. This group appears as a vision to the tortured

Theophilus just before he dies, “a souldier in the Christian warres” (5.2.219sd, 233).

This dramatic device of the double death evidently proved to be a popular success, for it appeared again in *Herod and Antipater*, a play also produced at the Red Bull theatre. Like *The Virgin Martyr*, this play is set in the distant past and incorporates figures familiar to early modern audiences, and therefore less topical than the earlier *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelte*.<sup>42</sup>

In the scene that precedes Antipater’s scaffold performance, Herod receives confirmation of his bastard son’s plans to kill him, as well as the other murders he has perpetrated. He laments that Antipater “was so deeply rooted in our love”, but is even more overwhelmed that he was himself responsible for the execution of his wife:

I’m growne a monster, and could chase my selfe  
 Out of my selfe; I’m all on fire within:  
 O Marriam, Marriam, mistris of my soule;  
 I shall expire with breathing on thy name . . . (5.1.160, 171-  
 74)

He requests an apple, then “a knife to pare it” (179) – like Hieronimo, calling for a knife to sharpen his pen – and before he stabs himself, he refers to

Something I must act, worthy my meditation;  
 Ile not live to have care dwell so neere me; one small pricke  
 With this will doe it: thus Ile trye it. (187-89)

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<sup>42</sup> Ross sees the choice of an earlier time period as the setting for the play as quite possibly a way for the dramatists to obliquely comment on contemporary political events without encountering issues of censorship (xv-xvi). For a discussion of *Herod and Antipater*, including its sources, history and staging, see Ross’s introduction to his Critical Edition of the play.

The scene of his initially unsuccessful suicide recalls those of Antony and Leidenberch, Herod ruefully observing that “A little more had done it” (192). He consoles himself with the prospect that he shall “ere long rest in my Marriams armes” (195), but before he dies, he is determined to see Antipater put to death, in the final line of the scene predicting “A wager, of us two, I live the longest” (204).

Throughout Antipater’s scaffold scene, then, Herod is increasingly weakened by his self-inflicted wound. Whereas in the earlier part of the scene Herod is deeply unsettled by the ghostly visitations of those whom he has killed, when Antipater is likewise visited by spirits while he is still in prison, he vows to “laugh / Even in my grave, at all my villanies”, and to “out-face” both them and “Death himself”. Halfway through the speech he suddenly pronounces himself “transfigur’d” and admits his guilt, but once they are gone, he reassures himself that he is “onely fool’d with visions” (5.2.132-48). This is echoed a little later, when he voices his determination, now that “the goale is gotten”, not to let “such poore morall shadowes” upset him: “I’m my selfe, / A king, a royall king; and that deare joy / Shall bury all offences” (188-89, 191-93). At this point, he believes the rumour that Herod is dead and himself king, “And in his grave, sleepe my distemperance” (193-94). Brought out to the scaffold, he learns that his father is yet living, and realizes that his treasons have been discovered, that he is “Past hope, and past imagination” (236). Herod tells him, “I live / Only to sound thy judgement” (240-41), and requests that the “minister of death” be called forth, “and in my view, / Some minutes ere my dying; let me see / His head tane from his body” (257-59).

The execution scene itself is very much an early modern scenario, for it anachronistically embodies the familiar concept of pre-death confession and the

need to purge the soul of past sins. Augustus points out to Antipater that he is lost “to all mankinde and mortality”, and urges him therefore

. . . to make your last houre better seeme,  
 Then all that went before it; what you know  
 Of treasons unrevealed; lay them forth:  
 The worke will well become you. (5.2.264-68)

In an apostrophe to death, Antipater appears to accept his fate – less out of humility and more as Death’s equal:

. . . welcome Death;  
 I, that have made thee as mine instrument,  
 Will make thee my companion; and, I thus  
 Ascend and come to meete thee . . . (270-73)

He confesses to having engineered the deaths of Herod’s heirs, and to intending Herod’s own “tragedy” (276-78). He admits that his aunt, Salumith, has been his accomplice in his plots; when Augustus orders that she be brought before them, it is reported that she has already died in prison, prompted by her captivity to forsake “all foode, all comfort” (280-85).

Although in ordering the execution of his son Herod has protested that he acts as a king, rather than a father (259-60), when he gives the order, “strike, O Strike”, the urgency of the command stems from the fear that he will die before he can “behold the grace / Of the revenge I thirst (sic) for” (286-89). Thus, although he dies deservedly, Antipater’s execution appears to be more the outcome of Herod’s personal grievance, his desire for vengeance, than the legal consequence of his numerous crimes.

The next part of the scaffold scene represents an exchange between Antipater and the executioner. In an echo of Herod's earlier command, the condemned man urges the headsman to "Strike, and strike home with boldnesse", following this with a defiant assertion of his own self-worth:

here's a life

Thy steele may quench, not conquer; for the thought

Exceeds all mortall imitation:

Greatnesse grew in my cradle; with my blood,

Twas fed to mature ripenesse; on my grave,

It shall, to all the ages of the world,

Live in eternall dreadfull epitaphs:

This service men shall doe me; and my name

Remains a bug-beare to ambition. Come; I am now prepar'd.

(293-301)

Antipater combines fierce pride with a strategy similar to that of Dorothea, although his vision of himself as a future exemplar of evil, living on in "eternall dreadfull epitaphs", inverts and even parodies such claims to martyrdom. Like Byron, he then refuses to kneel for the executioner: "Ile stand as high / And strong as is a mountaine; strike, or perish", making it impossible for the headsman to decapitate him (303-305).

At this point, the stage direction calls for the ghostly figure of Salumith to appear, "betweene two Furies, waving a torch" (305). Structurally, her arrival recalls the scene in *Countess*, in which Roberto intervenes in the proceedings, acting as the catalyst for Isabella's acceptance of death. Here, however, the context is once again inverted, as Salumith appears to be both the punished and

the punisher; her brandishing of the torch suggests that she has become one of the Furies, come to summon Antipater to eternal punishment for his intended parricide. This is an exciting moment of theatre: from the early modern perspective, the audience watches as an utterly lost soul passionately embraces his damnation. Salumith's presence before him captures Antipater's attention completely, instilling in him an eagerness for death, a willingness to enter the darkness of the beyond despite the tortures that await him. His last lines are addressed to her:

What art thou there, poore tortur'd wickednes?

And dost thou waft me to thee? Then, I come;

I stoope, I fall, I will doe any thing;

Thou art to me as Destiny: O stay,

My quicke soule shall oretake thee: for, but we,

Never two reacht the height of villany.

Strike, O strike. (307-13)

Antipater's final, incomplete line is concluded with Herod's dying groans; the stage direction specifies, "Here the executioner strikes, and Herod dies"<sup>43</sup> (313). The execution is thus a double, simultaneous death; Herod gasps his last breath as the headsman brings down the axe, so that he dies at the very moment his son is beheaded. This is confirmed by the dialogue that follows: Augustus asks, "Whence came that deadly groane", and receives the reply, "From the King; the

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<sup>43</sup> Ross notes the places in which the playwrights depart from their sources. For example, Herod attempts suicide in three sources, but is prevented; in the histories Antipater did not admit guilt and neither did he incriminate Salumith; and Herod actually outlived Antipater by five days (230-31).

blow the hangman gave Antipater, / Tooke his life in the instant: Sir, hee's dead" (*Herod* 314-16). Just as the blow that severs Dorothea's head also brings about the death of Antoninus, so Antipater's death-stroke achieves for Herod the end he had begun with his attempted suicide.

Yet while the scenes of beheading in the other plays discussed have tended to promote at least a degree of sympathy for the condemned, the death of Antipater is more likely to encourage a humorous response; he is established throughout the play as a true villain who deserves to die, for he possesses no redemptive qualities whatsoever. His propensity for evil surpasses that of even Herod, whose unfortunate decisions may to some extent be ascribed to gullibility and an overly quick temper – and Herod at least demonstrates a form of remorse for the deaths he has permitted by attempting to end his own life. Antipater's only claim to humanity is his regard for Salumith, but even this relationship is based on self-promotion, for Salumith has been a co-conspirator in all of his plots, equally betraying members of her own family.

Thus, once the immediate intensity of Antipater's unearthly summons has subsided, the double death scene holds the potential for, if not a comic ending, then at least a mixed response. As the two murderous characters are felled by a single stroke, the atmosphere for the spectator may be one of mingled festivity and satisfied relief, as the tension created by multiple innocent deaths has increased with the unfolding action of the play. While Herod's death may be seen as the direct outcome of both physical weakness and excessive emotion, the providentially-minded members of the early modern audience may well have been inclined to see the combined deaths as a double execution, divine justice finally being visited upon father and son alike.

Considered as a group, these four plays featuring onstage beheadings appear to represent an intensive, if short-lived, tradition of dramatic stagings of executions. The novelty of these performances would no doubt have attracted audiences to the theatre, while the shared elements of the plays would seem to attest to the success of the initial venture.

While each scaffold scene is distinctive, they all share certain characteristics. In each one, the condemned exhibits some form of resistance to his or her fate, refusing to comply with the role that has been accorded them. Isabella's resistance is motivated primarily by vanity and self-absorption; Barnavelt's stems from his sense of injustice; and Antipater's is consistent with his single-minded and "strange carriere in villany" (5.2.245). Dorothea's is, of course, a different form of resistance, but one that she maintains unflinchingly throughout her martyrdom.

If the characters are initially resistant to their fates, they also – apart from Dorothea – undergo emotional transitions on the scaffold. Isabella is redeemed by her former husband, who forgives her for her past offences against him and thereby helps to move her into a state of preparedness for death. Barnavelt speaks bitterly in his own defence on the scaffold, but finally accepts the inevitability of his fate with resignation. Antipater echoes Byron's wild defiance of the authorities, yet his capitulation at the end is brought about by the dark vision of Salumith rather than an aspiration to Stoic principles. Of the four scaffold speeches, Dorothea's is the calmest; while she speaks of the emotion her death will arouse in others, she herself remains clear-headed and even-tempered. The characters' final words – even those of Antipater – occur in a context framed by the established formulas for scaffold speeches in early modern England.

While issues of spiritual salvation were central to the ritual of execution, in some instances the solemnity of the occasion is made grotesquely comic by the intrusion of the unexpected. This is particularly true in *Barnavelte*, in which the potential executioners compete for the office of headsman, introducing the event to the audience through an earthy gallows humour. The striking off of two of Barnavelte's fingers along with his head provides a further grotesque detail, while in *Herod and Antipater* the simultaneous deaths of the protagonists invites mirth; the opposite effect, of course, is intended by the double death of Dorothea and Antoninus in *The Virgin Martyr*.

The conjunction of the scaffold speech with the simulated decapitation permitted dramatists to represent the full execution ritual, replicating the spectacle of public punishment that occurred outside the theatre. It also encouraged a degree of creative experimentation with the scaffold speech, allowing elements of subversion to be played out; in departing from conventional formulas, the final words of the condemned might be seen increasingly as an opportunity for conscious self-expression. This could include engagement with issues of political justice, implying a critique of situations bearing suggestive parallels to current events. The completeness of the execution scene thus offered festive excitement for those who desired entertainment; elements of potential subversiveness for those who enjoyed witnessing a challenge to the established formulas; and serious matter for those more inclined to contemplate issues of mortality and the mystery of what lay 'beyond'.

In the chapter that follows, some of those characters who commit murder – or are otherwise implicated in the crime – also make their exit from the scaffold. In keeping with their lower social status, their method of dispatch is the gallows,

rather than the block and axe; their inability to escape the consequences of their actions represents the culmination of the drama. Before this occurs, however, graphic physical violence is enacted on the stage, in recreations of local homicide stories. The dying utterance of the murder victim, then – who struggles to communicate a final, urgent message – is the primary focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter Two

### ‘Sanguinolent Stains’: Murder<sup>44</sup>

Doe you not weepe?  
 Other sinnes onely speake; Murther shreikes out:  
 The Element of water, moistens the Earth,  
 But blood flies upwards, and bedewes the Heavens.  
 John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* (4.2.247-50)

I ne’er knew murder yet, but it did bleed.  
 John Marston, *The Insatiate Countess* (5.1.7)

At the beginning of Robert Yarrington’s *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601), the figure of Homicide commands the stage, lamenting the lack of minds and hearts “For blood and causelesse death to harbour in” (A2r). He complains,

I cannot glut my blood delighted eye;  
 With mangled bodies which do gaspe and grone,  
 Readie to passe to faire *Elizium*,  
 Nor bath my greedie handes in reeking blood . . . (A2r)

Together with Avarice, however, Homicide promises a “bloodie feastiull”, while Truth, in introducing the play, warns the audience of the appalling damage – “Bloodily made by mercy wanting hands” – about to be re-enacted before them (A2v-A3r). For, although murder and death are never far from the early modern stage, the murders that occur in what are variously styled ‘domestic’ or ‘murder’ plays are shockingly brutal and gruesome, with the added impact that they were

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<sup>44</sup> Pardoned for the crime of murder, the character of Don Sago in Marston’s *Insatiate Countess* laments that his “guilty hands” will never be cleansed of their “sanguinolent stain” (5.1.43-44).

based upon actual local events.<sup>45</sup> In the current chapter I shall refer to this genre as murder plays, as I am interested less in the domestic aspects of the drama than in the relationship between the murderer, the victim, and the issue of last words.

The murder plays drew upon topical ‘news’ and vividly recreated such events on the stage, allowing the audience a sense of immediacy and vicarious involvement. The dramatization of such incidents presumably satisfied those who wished to know more about the particulars of a specific murder, enticed those who enjoyed the story on the level of sensationalist entertainment, and also functioned as an attempt on behalf of the community to make sense of the event – to understand the killer’s motivations and to put the crime into some sort of reassuring perspective.

Compared to alternative forms of popular print – the pamphlet, broadside ballad or sermon – which offered coverage of murder incidents and were often a source of material for the plays, the dramatization of a topical murder on the stage permitted the audience to observe a recreation of a full sequence of events, focusing in turn on the motivation for the crime, the murder itself, supernatural elements in relation to the killing, and the consequences of the act. Vanessa McMahon observes that murder “was a crime that ordinary people were intimately affected by and one in which they were expected to intervene, in terms of capturing culprits, giving evidence and witnessing the punishment” (xiv).

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<sup>45</sup> For synopses of specific murder cases in early modern England and their printed accounts in pamphlet, ballad and play form, see Joseph H. Marshburn’s *Murder and Witchcraft*. For longer pamphlet accounts of some of these murders, see his *Blood and Knavery*, co-edited with Alan R. Velie. Andrew Clark offers an annotated list of lost domestic plays (twenty-six tragedies and fifteen comedies). He points out that “nearly three-fifths of the surviving references to probable but now lost domestic plays date from the period 1598-1620, certainly the period of greatest popularity for the genre” (29-30).

Malcolm Gaskill likewise argues that “ordinary men and women played a crucial role in English accusatory justice” (1). Indeed, the involvement of members of the community in the process of bringing murderers to justice – neighbours and even passers-by – is an essential part of the representation of these events. The focus on ‘ordinary people’, and the familiarity of the ‘real’ locations in which these events transpired, are two crucial characteristics of the murder plays.

At the time they were produced – at the end of the 1590s and the first decade of the seventeenth century – the murder plays represented a new form of tragedy, one that Lake (with Questier) describes as “a decidedly and inherently mixed genre” (*Antichrist* 146). As Henry Hitch Adams points out, the protagonists are of humbler social status than their counterparts in non-domestic tragedies (98), and the playwrights were clearly concerned with the ramifications of murder within the local community. Catherine Richardson observes that the interest in these plays lies “in the psychological effects of crime upon the individual protagonist and in the threat transgression offers to the communities of household and town” (129).

To a certain extent these plays are characterized by ambiguity, for in their oscillation between scenes of graphic violence and stern moralizing they provide a challenge for the spectator in terms of reconciling conflicting responses. The curious hybridization of the sensational and the moralistic is achieved through the sometimes direct juxtaposition of these perspectives within a single scene. While acknowledging these elements of “moral edification” in the texts of murder accounts, Lake (with Questier) also observes that many of the “titillating features” in the pamphlets became “even more graphic and immediate once these stories were transferred to the stage” (*Antichrist* xx). As Adams suggests, the

“excitement of the murder story probably enticed the people into the theatre, and they accepted the lecture which came with the play as a necessary part of the dramatization of a thrilling tale of homicide” (123).

While Madeleine Doran maintains that the “tendency to exploitation of brutality and sentiment” in the plays suggests that they were “designed as stage thrillers” (350), Sandra Clark argues that the theatre possessed the capacity to arouse “an emotional response to current events”, which exceeded that of ballads and pamphlets (106). McMahon observes that the stories that gained popularity in pamphlet and ballad form were the “most salacious cases”, those that had the capacity to “terrify and intrigue” (xxiv). According to Garthine Walker, the “bizarre and gruesome tales” contained in the murder pamphlets were “hardly typical of early modern murders”, for it seems that “much of the gruesome detail of the tales was pure fabrication” (“Demons” 124). While their widespread appeal to contemporaries did not necessarily provide an accurate reflection of the nature of crime in early modern England, then, these dramas do provide us with “crucial evidence about how crime was popularly portrayed” (McMahon xxiv). When these events were made into narratives they became “literary constructions”, in which “character, motive and detail” were subject to “purposeful remoulding” (Walker 134).

The emphasis of literary criticism in regard to the domestic or murder plays has shifted in focus, from discussion – most notably by Adams – of the pervasive providential and supernatural elements, to consideration of the social, gender and domestic concerns explored by such writers as Viviana Comensoli, Catherine Belsey, Frances Dolan and Catherine Richardson. From the providential perspective, the apprehension and execution of the killer is

represented as an inevitable outcome of the initial act of murder, while strange and supernatural manifestations that facilitate this process of justice are perceived by those in the play as evidence of God's unseen manipulation of circumstances, to ensure that 'murder will out'. For, as Richardson points out, "Secrecy cannot disguise the fact of murder, only the connection between evidence and perpetrator" (146). The extensive body of scholarship concerned with the social, gender and domestic elements of the plays considers issues of marriage and family in early modern England, the materiality of the household, and the relationship between contemporary print culture and the murder plays.<sup>46</sup>

These diverse spheres of interest complement and extend one another. My own perspective is similarly complementary, as I acknowledge aspects of both providentialism and the domestic in my focus on final words before death. The former provides understanding of the religious framework in which to consider the plight of the individual soul, and is thus directly relevant to the issue of last words and the question of the dying person's fate in the afterlife. At the same time, the focus on the social and domestic grounds the stories in the sphere of everyday human relationships; it acknowledges the material aspects of domestic life as a social context for acts of violence and murder, and celebrates the specifically 'local' character of these plays.

While these perspectives have dominated historical and literary assessments of the murder plays, and are therefore useful as broader contexts for the examination of last words, the particular features of the plays discussed in this

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<sup>46</sup> Comensoli argues that the 'domestic' play "brings into the relief the instability of the early modern household, together with the passions, rivalries, and ambivalence attending early modern theories of order. A number of the tragedies and comedies reconstitute inherited precepts through irony, paradox, and ambiguity, creating disjunctions and clashes of values that are not easily resolved by homiletic formulas" (16).

chapter require a more specific focus – not exclusively on the victim’s dying utterance, but also on the circumstances that surround both the act of dying and the presence of the murder victim’s body on the stage. Thus, I acknowledge that the structure of the plays is shaped by what appears to be an inevitable, eventual revelation of the full crime and the identity of the culprit; this unfolds partly through the occurrence of miraculous, apparently supernatural events which ultimately lead to the apprehension and punishment of the murderer. I shall also argue, however, that – perhaps as a form of compensation for the paucity or absence of victims’ last words – their bodies become the medium for the discovery of information leading to the resolution of the crime.

In the absence of speech and animation, the body of the murder victim resembles what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the ‘grotesque body’, the characteristics of which include dismemberment and the “throes of death”, as well as the ‘apertures’ of the body such as the open mouth (*Rabelais* 25-26). As the murdered body is severed from its identity, becoming a focus for information and evidence about the crime, the fatal wounds are often perceived as mouths, which ‘speak’ on behalf of the victim, thus according them a specific posthumous – if temporary – role within the drama. According to Bakhtin, the “essential principle” of grotesque realism is “degradation”, or a “transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). This principle is associated with the cycle of death and regeneration on the collective, rather than the individual, level (23). In the murder plays, the damaged bodies of the victims register the crime that has been committed, thereby functioning as a means of healing the rupture within the community, and – ultimately, with the punishment of the criminal – permitting a return to normalcy.

Whether or not audiences revelled in the grotesque elements of physical injury depicted on the stage, the enormous emphasis on the damaged body combines a preoccupation with physicality with the assumption that murder will ultimately be discovered. In *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelte*, the executioners perceive the body of the condemned as merely a physical object; their gallows humour depersonalizes both the victim and the ritual of his impending decapitation. Although in the murder plays the sight of the damaged body is received – for the most part – with more sympathy than is shown by the headsman Utricht to Barnavelte, it is associated with a similar stripping away of the victim's identity. Thus the emphasis on the physicality of the body is part of the displacement of the victim's final words, representing a theft of the opportunity for personal self-expression while dying. This theft represents part of the eclipse of the murder victim, while the other part is achieved through the displacement of his or her last words by the murderer's scaffold speech at the end of the play.

My areas of focus in this chapter, then, are the dying words of the murdered, the implications of the displacement of dying speeches through an emphasis on the physical body, and the final emphasis in the plays on the just punishment of the murderers. I shall discuss these issues in the context of four plays, on the basis of their close examination of 'local' murders: *Arden of Faversham* (1592), Thomas Middleton's *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), Yarrington's *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601), and the anonymous *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599).<sup>47</sup> Rather than dealing with the plays in chronological order, I will

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<sup>47</sup> Regarding the date of *Arden*, Martin White observes that the play was entered in the Stationer's Register on 3 April 1592, but may have been written as early as 1587 or 1588. For a discussion of the date and the sources drawn upon for the play, see his introduction to the New Mermaid edition (ix-xii). See also the introduction to the Revels edition, ed. M. L. Wine, and MacDonald P.

instead organize the discussion according to their structure, briefly looking at *Arden of Faversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* as pre-eminent examples of the murder play genre, then examining the latter two in greater detail. I have chosen to focus primarily on *Two Lamentable Tragedies* and *A Warning for Fair Women*, partly because there has been less critical attention directed toward them, but – more importantly – because these two plays include the murderers’ scaffold speeches and onstage hangings as the culmination of the murder event.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the scaffold speech prior to execution represented a unique opportunity for the prisoner to speak and to be remembered by the attending crowd. Although the condemned was constrained by the formulaic nature of the conventional scaffold speech, and may (in some cases) have been physically weakened by torture received while in prison, he or she was still allocated time for the specific purpose of addressing the crowd. In the theatre, this convention was used creatively, and characters given speeches that were unlikely to have been permitted on the real scaffold. In contrast, the victims in murder plays tend to be quickly dispatched. As Martin Wiggins points out, murder is “usually a lonely affair”, with conspirators kept to a minimum in order to avoid discovery (Introduction, *A Woman Killed* ix). Indeed, the clandestine

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Jackson’s article, “Shakespeare and the Quarrel Scene in *Arden of Faversham*”. Unless stated otherwise, all citations from *Arden* are from the M. L. Wine edition. I have used *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, for the text of *The Yorkshire Tragedy* (ed. Stanley Wells); all references are to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

According to Keith Sturgess, although *A Yorkshire Tragedy* was first published in 1608, it is “reasonable to infer that the play was written and staged before the end of the story was known, that is, within three months of the actual murders”, in April 1605 (9). Sandra Clark suggests that *A Warning for Fair Women* may have predated *Arden* (116). Charles Dale Cannon, editor of the critical edition of the play, discusses the uncertainty surrounding the date, observing that “No critics accept 1599, the date of the title page, none accept the play as contemporaneous with the crime it memorializes (1573), and most prefer a date of near 1590” (10).

nature of murder, the sudden acute physical pain, and the psychological shock produced by the attack, all combine to produce circumstances in which the victim's opportunity to speak is seriously compromised. As Gaskill observes, this often gives rise to the convention of the victim signalling murder through a standard exit line which makes "innocence and malice . . . unequivocal" (23). Thus Arden cries out as he is stabbed, "Mosby! Michael! Alice! What will you do?" (*Arden* 14.233), while the final line of the son attacked by his father in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is "Mother, mother, I am killed, mother!" (*Yorkshire* 5.15). The short dying lines accorded the murder victims emphasize the surprise and shock of the attacks, while the speedy deaths attest to the potency of the mortal wounds inflicted.

In a theological sense, the horror of murder inheres in the loss of the victim's opportunity to make spiritual preparations for dying. Sudden death – *mors repentina*, or *mors improvisa* – placed the soul in spiritual peril, so that the individual was in particular need of God's merciful judgement at the time of death. Thus Hamlet's father was, as he reports, "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin", dispatched to the next world "With all my imperfections on my head" (*Hamlet* 1.5.76, 79). Before Othello kills Desdemona he acknowledges the need to be ready for death, declaring, "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. / No, heavens forbend! I would not kill thy soul" (5.2.33-34). The heinousness of murder is symbolized by the displacement of the victim's final words – their brevity, their incompleteness, and their inadequacy as a form of closure – particularly in a culture that deeply valued the final words of the dying.

Whereas the victim is silenced under clandestine circumstances, then, the captured murderer is given the opportunity to speak publicly before execution.

Although the punishment itself attempts to balance the loss of the murder victim – honouring the biblical injunction that “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:5-6) – there can be no compensation for this theft of words. According to Adams, the scaffold speech of the murderer “was accepted by others in the play and by the audience to indicate that the soul of the victim would receive the mercy of God.” He adds, crucially, that it was “not a goodness suddenly developed in the man, it was the infinite benevolence of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, which provided for the salvation of the sinner” (185). Was there a lingering uneasiness in the spectator, that the murderer was given the opportunity to prepare his or her soul in this manner, despite having stolen the same opportunity from the murder victim? In fact, while this public process involved a “complete confession of . . . past errors, earnest contrition for them, a recognition of their gravity, and an ardent plea for the salvation of [the] soul” (Adams 185), there is also an emphasis in the murder plays on the issue of *true* repentance; was there a greater sense of unease if the malefactor appeared to be merely feigning repentance? Was the execution of the criminal generally regarded as adequate compensation for the loss of the murder victim?

In *Arden of Faversham* the killing of Arden occurs near the end of the play, after initially unsuccessful attempts; in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, the murders occur in the fifth of eight scenes. In both cases, the deferral of the crucial act of murder until later in the play increases the audience’s suspenseful anticipation of the crime, and brings closer together the murder and the eventual punishment of the killer. Lake (with Questier) points out that the “basic template of the murder narrative could be altered . . . by starting the action of a play or pamphlet at

different stages of the basic story line or narrative scheme” (*Antichrist* 378).<sup>48</sup> In this way, *Arden* and *Yorkshire* are structured differently from *Two Lamentable Tragedies* and *A Warning for Fair Women*, for *Lamentable* places the murders near the beginning of the play, while in *Warning* they occur about half way through. Various members of the local community are then involved in the process of bringing the criminal to justice, before the play ends with an onstage performance of public punishment.

*Arden* tends to be considered the first of the murder plays, ushering in a new subgenre of tragedy. Wiggins observes that the play was written “at a time when English tragedy was systematically enriching itself by incorporating elements more usually associated with the opposite genre of comedy”; more specifically, the “domestic concerns of ordinary people” (Introduction, *A Woman Killed* vii). Alexander Leggatt argues that the *Arden* playwright opened a “vein of realism in Elizabethan drama”, bringing tragedy “down to earth” by depicting “a world of tough reality” (“*Arden*” 133). Richard Helgerson, in discussing the various adaptations of the *Arden* story, observes that “even when the genre is more elevated and the audience more socially select, the special *frisson* of the *Arden* story continues to come from the nonaristocratic ordinariness of its victim – a kind of provincial everyman – and from the still lower-ranked menace of those who surround and destroy him” (“Murder in Faversham” 137). Lena Cowen Orlin observes that in its blurring of the generic distinctions between comedy and tragedy, the story thereby “altered the landscape of generic possibility in English

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<sup>48</sup> For an exploration of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in relation to the structure and preoccupations evident in the murder pamphlets, see Lake, 380-92. He argues that these two Shakespeare plays share with the pamphlets an interest in the “interiority of the chain of sins” (382), and the problems of conscience and repentance, *vis-à-vis* the workings of providence.

drama.” The play “established the precedent that found private matters fit for domestic representation and institutionalized in a new medium an operative domestic ethic” (*Private Matters* 75-76). Richardson focuses on the materiality of the early modern household as it is represented in domestic drama. She considers this “a very distinctive kind of particularity which takes its cue from the familiarity of the local narrative and its clear engagement with audience experience” (14).

An account of the actual murder, which occurred on 15 February 1550/51, appears in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, and is the source for *Arden* (Marshburn, *Murder and Witchcraft* 3). While the recounting of this story of middle-class protagonists is unusual for Holinshed, it appears to have been included as a noteworthy example of petty treason. The depiction of the domestic household in crisis, as the master is set upon by social inferiors, reflected the dangers of such transgression at the level of the local community. As a microcosm of the hierarchy of state, the disruption of social order within a single family had even wider and more dangerous implications in terms of the entire nation.

The play’s climactic scene depicts the murder of Arden as he is set upon by his adulterous wife, Alice; her lover, Mosby; two assassins hired to assist in the crime, Black Will and Shakebag; and the more reluctant accomplices – Michael, and Mosby’s sister Susan. After being repeatedly stabbed, Arden’s body is dragged away from the house, leaving an incriminating trail of blood in its wake. The conspirators are (for the most part) quickly brought to justice, and the epilogue of the play accounts for all but one of their fates. If we assume this play to be the first of its genre, *Arden* set precedents in a number of ways: it functions as a form of entertainment, as a dramatic recreation of local ‘news’, and as a

demonstration of how murder might be motivated, planned, enacted, discovered and punished. While the play was sensational and exciting, it was also instructional in terms of attempting to understand the reasons for the crime, and to reflect back to the community the involvement of some of its members in the process of justice.

In its depiction of the original events leading up to Arden's death, the playwright follows closely the account given in Holinshed. In the murder scene, however, there are significant differences between the two. Holinshed recounts how, once the watchword was spoken,

. . . blacke Will stept foorth, and cast a towell about [Arden's] necke, so to stop his breath and strangle him. Then Mosbie hauing at his girdle a pressing iron of fourteene pounds weight, stroke him on the hed with the same, so that he fell downe, and gaue a great grone, insomuch that they thought he had beene killed.

(qtd. in M. L. Wine 155).

As they were about to lay him in the counting house, "the pangs of death comming on him, he gaue a great grone, and stretched himselfe, and then blacke Will gaue him a great gash in the face, and so killed him out of hand" (155). Presumably to ensure that he was, in fact, dead, Alice soon after "came into the counting house, and with a knife gaue him seuen or eight p[r]icks into the brest" (qtd. in M. L. Wine 155).

The Wardmote Book, a "semiofficial record" in the Faversham Town Hall which also records the event, does not include the detail whereby Alice stabs her husband's corpse (Marshburn, *Murder and Witchcraft* 4-5). It does, however, report that, following the blow to the head with the pressing iron, Mosby

“im[m]ediately drewe out his dagg<sup>r</sup> which was great and broad and therw<sup>t</sup> cutt thesaid Ardens thrott Beyng at the death of him” (qtd. in M. L. Wine 161).

In the play, Black Will also takes his cue from the watchword, ‘Now I can take you’, and pulls him down with a towel. This appears to be merely a tactic to disarm Arden, rather than a strategy to facilitate strangulation, for Arden is able to speak a single, final line before he dies: “Mosby! Michael! Alice! What will you do?” (14.233). Although Arden is startled by the suddenness of the attack and has little time to comprehend what is happening to him, his words express his shock and dismay as he realizes that he is being murdered. This type of line represents what Gaskill refers to as a “common device” used to signal the “specifically murderous intent of assailants”: he observes that victims often “announce their own deaths in an unrealistic but passionate manner, usually with the words ‘I am killed’” (23).

Arden’s final attempt at communication takes the form of dying groans, as the conspirators attack him in turn, and – as Wiggins points out – “pithily express their reasons” (*A Woman xi*) for the murder as they do so:

MOSBY. There’s for the pressing iron you told me of.

[*He stabs Arden.*]

SHAKEBAG. And there’s for the ten pound in my sleeve.

[*He stabs him.*]

ALICE. What, groans thou? – Nay, then give me the weapon! –

Take this for hind’ring Mosby’s love and mine.

[*She stabs him.*]

MICHAEL. O, mistress! [ARDEN *dies.*] (*Arden 235-39*)

The text suggests that Alice's final thrust at her husband is an unplanned, impulsive gesture on her part. Perhaps due to strained nerves after the earlier failed attempts on Arden's life, and possibly stimulated by a rush of adrenalin prompted by the actual reality of killing, Alice appears to be goaded into action by the sound of her husband's suffering. Her lines thus suggest that she has not concealed a weapon of her own to use against Arden, so that when she obeys her own impulse to kill she is obliged to use one belonging to another conspirator.

The exclamation that follows – Michael's "O, mistress!" – further reinforces the impression that her active participation is a surprise element in the plan; he may be expressing dismay at her brutality or, alternatively, his outburst may represent a spontaneous expression of approval for her boldness, if he too is drawn into the heightened emotionalism of the violence. However her action is perceived by the others, it does represent a departure from Holinshed's account, in which Alice does not actively participate in the killing, but does inflict further damage on the body once it has been moved to the counting house. This altered detail intensifies the focus on Alice as the transgressive wife, whose determination to murder her husband does not falter, despite the ghastly reality of the act she performs.

Arden's murder in the play takes place very quickly – particularly considering the multiple failed attempts which have delayed the event, both for Arden and the expectant theatre audience. Moreover, the sudden brutality of the murder is emphasized by a detail of low physical comedy that does not occur in the source. While waiting for the watchword, the concealed Black Will expresses the fear that Arden will see him coming; Michael responds, "To prevent that, creep betwixt my legs" (14.229). In his Bakhtinian perspective on the play, J. M.

Breen perceives Arden's body as "a place on which carnival energies are exposed", for the "lower body" of the assassin is "brought into contact with the master, turning normal power relationships upside-down" (18). Indeed, Black Will's undignified delivery into the parlour between Michael's legs suggests a form of monstrous rebirth into the scene of the crime, as he scrambles across the floor toward his victim.<sup>49</sup>

In the play, Arden's inability to speak at the time of his murder is prefigured in his earlier failure to directly confront the issue of his wife's intimacy with Mosby. For Alice, on some level, the failure of her husband to assert himself is seized upon as a form of indirect consent, so that each of her unchecked misdemeanours prompts her to take yet greater liberties. Arden's inward response to the lovers is described in images of dismemberment, as he vows to Franklin in the first scene that he shall see Mosby's "dissevered joints and sinews torn", and his body "Smear'd in the channels of his lustful blood" (1.41-43). This is the "language of horrific violence reminiscent of the villains of revenge tragedy" (Richardson 114), and his words ironically foreshadow his own mutilation later in the play.

Yet Arden's anger is quickly deflated. Confronted by Alice, he immediately becomes conciliatory; as Holinshed writes, he was "contented to winke" at his wife's "filthie disorder" (qtd. in M. L. Wine 149).<sup>50</sup> He threatens

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<sup>49</sup> Holinshed reports merely that Michael "stood at his masters backe, holding a candle in his hand, to shadow blacke Will, that Arden might by no meanes perceiue him comming foorth" (qtd. in M. L. Wine 155). Likewise, the detail is not mentioned in the Wardmote Book (M. L. Wine 161).

<sup>50</sup> In *Dangerous Familiars*, Dolan argues that *Arden* may be seen as "an extended cuckold joke", for the play "holds the cuckolded husband responsible for his wife's adultery and insubordination." She suggests that the "wife's enlargement into volition, speech, and action necessarily implicates, diminishes, and even eliminates the husband" (36).

Mosby later in the scene, vowing, “The next time that I take thee near my house, / Instead of legs I’ll make thee crawl on stumps” (1.316-17). Rather than banishing Mosby, however, he continues to tolerate him, describing his inner torment to Franklin as a form of fatal debility: “My heart’s grief rends my other powers / Worse than the conflict at the hour of death” (4.19-20). For Arden, his wife’s offence is experienced as a form of internal mortal combat: “Here, here it lies [*He points to his heart.*], ah, / Franklin, here it lies / That will not out till wretched Arden dies” (32-33).

If Arden’s opportunity for uttering last words is displaced at the time of his death, his body wordlessly asserts itself through his spilled blood. When Mosby’s sister Susan is instructed to wash the blood from the floor, she tells Alice that it “cleaveth to the ground and will not out”; Alice herself attempts to scrape away the blood with her fingernails, but laments, “The more I strive, the more the blood appears!” (14.255-57). This phenomenon is, psychologically at least, similar to the concept of *cruentation*, whereby the proximity of the murderer to his or her victim was believed to cause renewed bleeding, thus confirming the killer’s guilt. Gaskill writes, “No discovery of murder seems more factually dubious – or providentially impressive – than the ordeal whereby a corpse was supposed to bleed in the presence of the murderer”, and suggests that both plays and pamphlets exploited the theatrical potential of *cruentation* “to great effect” (8-9).

The indelible bloodstains appear to awaken the first pangs of remorse in Alice, who is convinced that it has happened “Because I blush not at my husband’s death” (14.259). Despite this belief, however, she attempts to conceal the evidence of the crime, abandoning the attempt only when Arden’s corpse once again signals her culpability:

Arden, sweet husband, what shall I say?

The more I sound his name, the more he bleeds.

This blood condemns me and in gushing forth

Speaks as it falls and asks me why I did it. (16.3-6)

Alice seems to be finally moved to repentance, as Arden's body becomes an agent of providence, offering 'proof' of Alice's guilt before the mayor and the watch.

The bleeding appears to intensify at the very sound of Alice's voice, suggesting a direct link between her words and those that Arden cannot speak; although he has been robbed of last words, his wounds still permit a form of alternative, supernatural communication. Thus the blood "Speaks as it falls", silently seeking from Alice an explanation for her conduct. She responds directly to her dead husband:

Forgive me, Arden; I repent me now;

And, would my death save thine, thou shouldst not die.

Rise up, sweet Arden, and enjoy thy love,

And frown not on me when we meet in heaven;

In heaven I love thee though on earth I did not. (7-11)

Although she is not yet at the gallows, Alice publicly repents the murder and asks forgiveness of Arden. Incapable of loving him "on earth", she vows that she will compensate for this failure in heaven. Curiously, she does not seem to question her eligibility for heaven at this point; this is presumably an indication that her professed remorse is genuine. Even if the spectator is, at this stage, in doubt of her sincerity, she does appear to have shifted her perspective by the time she makes her final onstage lines. As she contemplates her impending death, she no longer wants to be troubled with "worldly things", but wishes to "meditate upon

my Saviour Christ, / Whose blood must save me for the blood I shed” (18.9-11). She blames Mosby for taking advantage of her youth and inexperience, now that her repentance has come too late (14-18), and her final, valedictory line before leaving the stage to go to execution is simply, “Let my death make amends for all my sins” (33).

Alice’s contrition is emphasized at the end of the play, and the fates of all but one of the conspirators are announced in the Epilogue, specifying the punishments visited upon each:

As for the ruffians, Shakebag and Black Will,  
The one took sanctuary and, being sent for out,  
Was murdered in Southwark as he passed  
To Greenwich, where the Lord Protector lay.  
Black Will was burnt in Flushing on a stage;  
Greene was hangèd at Osbridge in Kent;

The painter fled, and how he died we know not. (Epilogue 2-8)

The minor characters in the drama are culpable and must therefore be accounted for, but they are given no last words on stage because they are unable to demonstrate remorse for their involvement in the crime. If the audience experiences uneasiness at the thought of the painter escaping punishment, this is partly due to the nature of “this naked tragedy”, which presents the “simple truth”, thereby suggesting an anxiety that pertains both to the immediate performance and to the reality of the original event (Epilogue 14, 17). At the end of his own account of the Arden murder, however, Thomas Beard – in his *Theatre of Gods Judgements* (1631) – provides the reader with a reassuring reminder of the ultimate fate of criminals: “And thus all the murderers had their deserved dues in

this life, and what they endured in the life to come (except they obtained mercie by true repentance) is easie to judge” (294).

Although Arden’s final words are overshadowed at the time of his murder – to be replaced by unwashable bloodstains and unstoppable wounds – he is credited with yet another, strangely potent form of eloquence after his death. At the play’s conclusion, the final emphasis is on the miraculousness of Arden’s posthumous body, for his “body’s print” was seen in the grass “Two years and more after the deed was done” (Epilogue 12-13). Although the implications of this phenomenon are ambiguous,<sup>51</sup> it is clearly perceived as a supernatural means by which the body of the victim could continue to assert itself even after death, the grassy imprint functioning as a reminder of Arden’s murder.

In *Arden* there are shifting perspectives on the murderers involved: the ruffians Black Will and Shakebag are an ambivalent mixture of evil intent and bumbling ineptitude; they are part of what Lake (with Questier) sees as the “leaky, disordered, carnivalesque version” of events, the “nightmare vision of the world turned upside down by the crime and the criminal” (xxi). Their comic exploits and initial lack of success are comparable, and perhaps prefigure, the pair of assassins in Yarrington's *Two Lamentable Tragedies*. Comic mishaps that inspire what Brooke describes as ‘horrid laughter’, and awkward attempts to conceal the

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<sup>51</sup> The Epilogue describes the location of Arden’s murder as the “plot of ground / Which he by force and violence held from Reede” (10-11), an issue which is included as part of the play’s subplot. Thus, although there is a suggestive connection made between Arden’s shady business dealings and his death, this odd manifestation may equally be viewed as a result of the violence brought against him. Catherine Belsey points out the difficulty in assigning a “final meaning” to the play: Arden’s death is “variously identified as a part of God’s providential plan, as a tragedy, as the effect of social and economic change, or as an act of unauthorized heroism, a noble transgression of an absolute law” (“Alice Arden’s Crime” 147).

physical evidence of the crime, become inextricably associated with the grotesque body, prompting a dual response in the audience.

Middleton's *Yorkshire Tragedy* is based on a topical murder, drawing upon a pamphlet account of events. Keith Sturgess observes that the play was "retailing sensational news of the moment", and was performed even "before the end of the story was known" (9). The play dramatizes the murder of two children by their father, Walter Calverley, which occurred in Yorkshire on 23 April 1605. Seemingly motivated by the threat of penury due to accumulated debt, the father kills his children, as he states in the play, as "the charitablest deed I could do / To cozen beggary" (*Yorkshire* 7.15-16). Sturgess notes that, after committing the murders and injuring his wife, Calverley refused to plead, and was "executed on 5 August by the method called *la peine forte et dure* or pressing to death" (30). Presumably because the theatre company was "cashing in on the topical interest in the crime", the play does not include the sentencing of the doomed husband, and thus "ends on a note of indecision" (Sturgess 9). The figure of the husband<sup>52</sup> therefore is given no scaffold speech, in a play in which last words are already scarce: those of the Son – the only character in the play to be given dying words – function primarily as an illustration of the brutality of the murder. There is one short exchange between father and son as the young boy is seized and stabbed, while the second murdered child has no lines at all.

The husband's bizarre attack upon his son occurs in the fourth scene. With unfortunate timing, the young boy enters at the conclusion of a long speech in which the husband acknowledges the misfortunes he has created, tearing his hair as he contemplates a future of destitution for himself and his family. The son

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<sup>52</sup> The designation of the family members in the play as 'husband', 'wife' and 'son' emphasizes their domestic roles and relationships, rather than their individual personalities.

asks, “What ail you, father, are you not well?” – then complains when his father towers over him, still in a rage: “I cannot scourge my top as long as you stand so. You take up all the room with your wide legs. Puh, you cannot make me afeard with this. I fear no visors nor bugbears” (4.94-97).

The stage directions for the attack – “*Husband takes up the child by the skirts of his long coat in one hand and draws his dagger with th’other*” – precede the following exchange:

HUSBAND. Up, sir, for here thou hast no inheritance left.

SON. O, what will you do, father? — I am your white boy.

HUSBAND. (*strikes him*) Thou shalt be my red boy. Take that!

SON. O, you hurt me, father.

HUSBAND. My eldest beggar. Thou shalt not live to ask an usurer bread, to cry at a great man’s gate, or follow ‘good your honour’ by a crouch, no, nor your brother. ’Tis charity to brain you.

SON. How shall I learn now my head’s broke?

HUSBAND. (*stabs him*)

Bleed, bleed, rather than beg, beg. Be not thy name’s disgrace.

Spurn thou thy fortunes first if they be base.

Come view thy second brother. Fates, my children’s blood

Shall spin into your faces . . . (97-111)

The odd exchange between father and son is likely to prompt conflicting responses in the spectator. There is a chilling disparity between the child’s

innocent incomprehension of the situation and the father's grim purpose; the son attempts to speak to his father 'normally', but the replies he receives are, essentially, words which the father speaks obsessively to himself. The scene, from the child's perspective, is horrible – but from the viewer's perspective the horror is also rather ludicrous, from the husband's declared intention to turn the favoured first-born into a "red boy", to the psychotic line, "Bleed, bleed, rather than beg, beg". The last line of the above speech demonstrates the extent to which the father's emotional excess is centred upon his financial situation, rather than the children themselves; while he initially appears to address his wounded son, he abruptly distances himself from the action he has just performed by challenging the Fates, with a graphic invocation of the children's blood that will "spin" into their faces.

Scene four ends with the husband carrying his injured child offstage; the fifth scene opens with a maid holding the second son while the mother sleeps. The maid's rhyming lament for the family's woes is broken off with an exclamation as the husband enters with the "*boy bleeding*"; when he attempts to take the child from her she cries, "Oh, help, help, out, alas, murder, murder!" (5.7, 9). Her one-line alert to the mother is also her last speech, for the husband throws her down the stairs; it is unclear whether or not this kills her, but from this point she no longer appears in the play. The Son's final line – "Mother, mother, I am killed, mother!" (15) – is the signal at which she awakes into a nightmare, as she and her husband fight for the second child between them:

WIFE. O, what will you do, dear husband?

HUSBAND. Give me the bastard.

WIFE. Your own sweet boy.

HUSBAND. There are too many beggars.

WIFE. Good my husband –

HUSBAND. Dost thou prevent me still?

WIFE. Oh God!

HUSBAND. (*stabs at the child in her arms*)

Have at his heart!

WIFE. O my dear boy! (21-24)

Part of the horror of this scene, of course, stems from the implication that the child is so young he *cannot* speak yet; but the wife's "O, what will you do, dear husband?" is very similar to Arden's "Mosby, Michael, Alice, what will you do?", suggesting that her line is intended by the dramatist as a form of substitute dying speech. Whereas in the earlier scene the son is powerless against his father, the rapid exchange of dialogue here indicates the physical struggle between husband and wife. She is wounded when he removes the injured child from the protection of her arms, but the murder of the third child is prevented by the intervention of a servant and the master. At this point, the community quickly closes in upon the children's father.

The husband has not yet been sentenced to death by the end of the play, reminding contemporary spectators of just how recent these dramatized events were. From the early modern perspective, the conclusion is satisfactory, at least, for he has been captured by officers of the law, and goes on to demonstrate what appears to be genuine remorse for the crimes he has committed. Aware that he faces imprisonment and death, the husband expresses a wish to speak with his wife, whose extraordinarily forgiving nature surprises even him. He admits that he did the murders "roughly, out of hand, / Desperate and sudden" (8.15-16),

claiming for his previous behaviour a form of Satanic possession: “Now glides the devil from me, / Departs at every joint, heaves up my nails” (18-19).<sup>53</sup> He suggests that the devil has prompted him to enact “unnatural tragedies”, filling him with “fury” so that he has become his “children’s executioners” (23-25). The sight of the children’s two dead bodies, laid out ready for burial, moves him to further remorseful speech:

Here’s weight enough to make a heartstring crack.  
 O were it lawful that your pretty souls  
 Might look from heaven into your father’s eyes  
 Then should you see the penitent glasses melt  
 And both your murders shoot upon my cheeks. (35-39)

He expresses the fruitless wish that they “living were again”, and that they could on his behalf “pray heaven me to forgive / That will unto my end repentant live” (44-48). As he is about to be escorted offstage, he vows, “I’ll kiss the blood I spilt, and then I go. / My soul is bloodied, well may my lips be so” (51-52). His final exit lines are addressed first to his sons, then to the listening audience: “Farewell, ye bloody ashes of my boys, / My punishments are their eternal joys. / Let every father look into my deeds, / And then their heirs may prosper while mine bleeds” (57-60).

The final scene focuses on the husband’s repentance and the wife’s forgiveness of the murders, and in this sense the husband’s demonstration of penitence functions as a substitute for the conventional scaffold speech prior to

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<sup>53</sup> In his preface to the *The Yorkshire Tragedy* in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, Stanley Wells observes that the idea of “demoniac possession” is, in a thematic sense, “the dramatist’s main development of his source material”, and draws attention to the eloquence of this speech (8.16-27) as evidence that the dramatist was “writing at the height of his power” (453-54).

execution. This interpretation is further supported by his admonitory warning to “every father” to avoid the errors that he has made, an obligation that was an essential to an exemplary scaffold confession. While on one level this intensive focus on the husband represents a further eclipse of the children’s identities, their status as victims is mutely attested to by the onstage presence of their corpses. Although they have been silenced, their physical bodies are visual emblems of the father’s guilt, functioning as the spur for his repentance. The final word of the play itself – “execution” – promises that justice will be done (75).

In both *Arden* and *Yorkshire*, the victim’s last words are overshadowed by the final declarations of the murderers at the end of the play. Moreover, the dramas are similarly structured in that the killings occur near the play’s conclusion, to be closely followed by the murderers’ avowals of remorse and repentance. While also drawing upon other printed accounts of actual murders, the playwrights responsible for *Two Lamentable Tragedies* and *A Warning For Fair Women* employ a different structure for their dramas, in which the homicides occur near the beginning and the middle of the plays. The eventual identification and capture of the criminals culminates in their onstage hangings, providing for the audience an immediate experience both of the ultimate consequences of committing murder and of restoring to the community a sense of order and resolution.

Yarlington’s *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (1601) has received relatively little critical interest, and while the play is not distinguished in a literary sense, it is of great interest in terms of the various types of death speeches it includes, and particularly the final words – or the forms of displacement of last words – of those who are murdered. In more extreme form than *Arden* or *Yorkshire*, Yarlington’s

tragedy evinces an intense preoccupation with the wounded body and the corpse of the murder victim. Moreover, the play – like *Arden* – illustrates a connection between the damaged body and forces of supernatural origin, aiding the efforts of the local community to solve the murder and bring the criminal to justice.

*Two Lamentable Tragedies* combines two separate murder stories in one play, both of them thematically linked by the murderers' motives of personal financial gain. The Merry plot concerns the real-life murders of Robert Beech, a chandler, and Thomas Winchester by Thomas Merry, "a respectable tapster", which took place in London on St. Bartholomew's Eve, August 23, 1594 (Marshburn, *Murder and Witchcraft* 82). According to Marshburn, no official record of these murders exists, although a pamphlet and a number of ballads on the subject were printed very soon after the episode (83). The Pertillo plot was based on an account – as documented on Yarrington's title page – of "a young childe murdered in a Wood by two Ruffins, with the consent of his Vnckle", which also appeared in both pamphlet and ballad form (Marshburn, *Murder and Witchcraft* 83-84).

In the play as a whole, the longest dying speech is given to a mortally wounded would-be murderer, who develops serious qualms about his involvement in a plot to kill the young Pertillo. He is one of two assassins hired by Fallerio, who is determined to have his innocent young nephew murdered so that he may claim his inheritance.

Known only as '1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderers', the two assassins are – as indicated by the length of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer's dying speech – an important part of the playwright's moralistic perspective, for they are polarized into what are essentially allegorical figures of good and evil. Struck by conscience as he

contemplates the deed for which he has been hired, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer refuses to carry out the plan; instead, he gives his payment to his accomplice and attempts instead to protect the boy. In a tone similar to the speech of the executioner Utricht in *Barnavelte*, the first murderer makes it clear that he suffers no qualms about his task:

Grace me no graces, I respect no grace,  
 But with a grace, to giue a gracelesse stab,  
 To chop folkes legges and armes off by the stumpes,  
 To see what shift theile make to scramble home:  
 Pick out mens eyes, and tell them thats the sport,  
 Of hood-man-blinde . . . (E3r).

His laborious, repetitive puns and his glee at the prospect of dismemberment are both comic and grotesque; like Black Will in *Arden*, he is unabashedly proud of his capacity for violence, and is undeterred by his companion's anxieties.

Thus, despite the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer's attempt to prevent him, the 1<sup>st</sup> Murderer slays Pertillo, leading to a fatal duel between the two assassins. Despite his awareness that he is dying, the 1<sup>st</sup> Murderer is totally unrepentant and unprepared for his imminent journey to the beyond, so that even though he knows he is dying, his gallows humour and preoccupation with the grotesque physical body remains intact until the end:

Swoones I am peppered, I had need haue salt,  
 Or else to morrow I shall yeeld a stincke,  
 Worse then a heape of durty excrements:  
 Now by this Hilt, this golde was earn'd too deare:  
 Ah, how now death, wilt thou be conquerour?

Then vengeance light on them that made me so,  
 And ther's another farewell ere I go. (E4v)

With these words, the stage directions conclude, "*Stab the other murtherer againe*" (E4v).

If the unrepentant 1<sup>st</sup> Murderer is prepared to kill again the moment before he dies, and be damned as a consequence, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer represents the opposite extreme. As a result, he has a relatively long death speech, important to the play in terms of emphasizing the importance of free confession and 'true' contrition. While he is dying, his priority is to speak the truth, so that his speech represents a form of confession comparable to the conventional scaffold address. His final words are directed toward clearing Allenso – Pertillo's cousin – of all suspicion of foul play, and clearly establishing Fallerio's guilt in the murder of Pertillo. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer, despite his final stab wound, survives long enough to provide essential information regarding the murderer: when the bodies are found by the Duke, the dying man's first words are, "Oh God forgiue me all my wickednesse, / And take me to eternall happinesse" (F1v). We may assume that his opening lines, that would usually come at the end of a dying speech, are enough – along with his truthful confession to the Duke – to assure him of salvation. Aware that he is the only one who can attest to the facts surrounding the murder, he explains that he and his companion were hired by Fallerio to kill Allenso:

But yet my conscience toucht with some remorse,  
 Would faine haue sau'd the young *Pertillos* life,  
 But he remorselesse would not let him liue,  
 But vnawares thrust in his harmlesse brest,

That life bereaving fatall instrument:

Which cruell deede I seeking to reuenge,

Haue lost my life, and paid the slaue his due

Rewarde, for spilling blood of Innocents:

Surprise *Fallerio* author of this ill,

Saue young *Allenso*, he is guiltlesse still. *Dyeth.* (F2r)

Motivated in part by the innocent purity of both Pertillo and Allenso, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer is also no doubt moved to speak the truth as he dies, for fear of otherwise jeopardizing his soul. Significantly, his death contains essential elements present in the standard scaffold speech prior to public execution: an authority figure (the Duke) is present to witness the speech, which contains a confession of his intended crime, as well as a demonstration of penitence. The 2<sup>nd</sup> murderer is clearly aware that he is answerable not only to the state – for legal information – but also to God, and his final, exemplary ‘performance’ is shaped accordingly. For the early modern audience, the crucial change of heart undergone by the 2<sup>nd</sup> murderer would stand as proof that even a seemingly irredeemable sinner could be saved, by obeying the inner promptings of conscience and ensuring that the truth is communicated to the relevant parties.

The other murders that occur in the play – those of Beech and Winchester in the Merry plot, and of Pertillo in the secondary plot, are savage and premeditated. Pertillo, warned by the repentant assassin, is aware that he is in danger and attempts to reason with the 1<sup>st</sup> Murderer:

First here me speake, thou map of Butcherie,

Tis but my goods and land my Vncle seekes,

Hauing that safely, he desires no more,

I do protest by my dead parents soules,  
 By the deare loue of false *Fallerios* sonne,  
 Whose heart, my heart assures me, will be grieu'd,  
 To heare his fathers inhumanitie:  
 I will forsake my countrie, goods, and lands,  
 I and my selfe, will euen change my selfe,  
 In name, in life, in habit, and in all,  
 And liue in some farre moued continent,  
 So you will spare my weake and tender youth,  
 Which cannot entertaine the stroake of death,  
 In budding yeares, and verie spring of life. (E4r-E4v)

Despite his plea for mercy, along with his professed willingness to forsake all of his property and assume an alternative identity, Pertillo is run through with a sword, and speaks only two final lines before dying: “Oh ī am slaine, the Lord forgiue thy fact, / And giue thee grace to dye with penitence” (E4v).

In contrast to Pertillo’s death, Beech and Winchester in the Merry plot are attacked with such unexpected ferocity and speed that they are unable to make any further utterance; their final words are spoken before they have been struck down, when they have no sense of what is about to befall them. Both of their speeches are therefore mundane, specifically concerned with Beech’s whereabouts. Merry stops by Beech’s shop, conveying a fabricated message that two men are waiting for him at Merry’s establishment. Beech reluctantly agrees to go, instructing his boy, Winchester, “. . . looke you tend the shoppe, / If any aske, come for me to the Bull: / I wonder who they are that aske for me” (B4r). Merry draws him upstairs,

and the murder follows immediately; Beech is struck in the head fifteen times and dies instantly.

Merry achieves the death of Beech, but the murder is discovered by Merry's sister Rachell and the apprentice Harry Williams, prompting the desperate Merry to insist that they must conceal the deed. Determined that Beech's boy must also be killed, for he knows of his master's whereabouts, Merry goes to where the boy is sitting at the shop door, and hears him wondering aloud, "I wonder that my maister staies so long, / He had not wont to be abroad so late: / Yonder comes one, I thinke that same is he" (C4r). Merry attacks swiftly: "*When the boy goeth into the shoppe Merrie striketh six blowes on his head & with the seauenth leaues the hammer sticking in his head, the boy groaning must be heard by a maide who must crye to her maister*" (C4r). These stage directions – lengthy and specific – emphasize the necessity of the boy's groans being heard, as a clear signal to those in the vicinity. The neighbours who find Winchester's body repeatedly draw attention to the murder weapon, exclaiming, "See how the hammer sticketh in his head", and "I was affrighted by a sodaine crie, / And comming downe found maister *Beeches* man, / Thus with a hammer sticking in his head" (C4r). The audience has witnessed the onstage dramatization of the two murders, but the repeated emphasis on the image of the hammer is crucial – if also lacking in subtlety – for it signals to the spectator that this information will be of particular significance later in the play.

Merry is at least partially susceptible to guilt, and fears God's judgement. He worries aloud to Rachell, "Although we hide our sinnes from mortall men, / Whose glasse of knowledge is the face of man, / The eye of heauen beholdes our wickednesse, / And will no doubt reuenge the innocent" (D2r). This anxiety,

however, is subordinate to his desire to keep the crime hidden: as the puritan divine Richard Greenham observes in his treatise on repentance, “Many sorrow . . . but in a worldly sorowing, which bringeth eternall death, not in a godly grieffe which bringeth repentance” (178). Despite his episodes of uneasiness, then, Merry initially attempts to conceal the body in a heap of faggots, instructing Rachell to clean up the blood. Later, Merry decides to dismember Beech’s body in order to facilitate disposal of it, and again the stage directions are specific: “Merry *begins to cut the body, and bindes the armes behinde his backe with Beeches garters, leaues out the body, couers the head and legs againe*” (*Lamentable* E2r). While this is performed in full view of the audience, the allegorical figure of Truth addresses the audience, reminding them that they are “sad spectators of this Acte, / Whose harts do taste a feeling pensiuenesse”; yet they are also reminded that “this deede is but a playe”, and they can therefore check their “brinish teares” and sorrows that “flowe vp to the brim” (E2v).

This scene, occurring roughly half way through the play, contains a direct conjunction of graphic violence and moral distance from the action, a yoking of the shocking and horrific together with a reminder of the artifice of the representation. This functions as a kind of pre-Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, as Truth interrupts the action, disrupting the spectators’ emotional engagement with the play, and encouraging them toward a more objective assessment of what they have witnessed. This interpolation prompts the audience to consider the moral implications of the events depicted, and the need to translate horror, outrage and sadness into an awareness of the need for community action against the killer and his accessories.

Immediately upon the exit of Truth, Merry and Rachell discuss the disposal of the sundry parts of Beech's body, which are placed into two separate bags for that purpose. The stage business with Beech's corpse is protracted for as long as possible, so that despite being dead and thoroughly silenced, his prolonged presence onstage continues to threaten Merry with the discovery of his murder.

Indeed, the mutilation of Winchester's body and the corpse of Beech are given enormous emphasis; in both cases, their bodies are brought back on stage for display, where they are examined and commented upon at length. Despite their inability to communicate, the victims' broken bodies are eloquent of their terrible fates, while their continued visibility functions as a form of replacement for the speeches they have been unable to make. From the moralizing perspective of the playwrights, these elaborate details are necessary if the eventual identification and capture of the murderer is to appear truly providential and miraculous.

Richardson observes that the Merry plot is "intimately, almost myopically concerned with the physicality of death" (134). The graphic representation of the bodies of Beech and Winchester suggest a displacement of their dying speeches, with an emphasis on the horror of their appearance. The grotesquerie continues, as the two bags of severed limbs – dumped in separate locations – are discovered. One bag is found by a comic pair of watermen, reminiscent of Shakebag and Black Will in *Arden*, while the other bag is sniffed out by an inquisitive dog. The body parts are brought back together and reassembled; as Richardson points out, the physical "completeness" of Beech's reconstitution "creates the *expectation* of solution through the metaphorical connections between disordered corpses and disordered communities" (147).

The displacement of Winchester's dying speech is more obviously associated with verbal communication; not yet dead, but barely living, the boy inhabits an intermediate space between living and dying, and the neighbours hold out hope that he might yet speak. This is emphasized on two separate occasions; in the first, Winchester is reported to have "a dying life, / For neither speech, nor any sence at all, / Abideth in the poore vnhappy youth" (D3v). He is brought back onstage, the hammer still protruding from his head; the neighbours survey his wounds, which are pronounced "mortall . . . and all incurable" (D3v). This reappearance onstage is itself a continued displacement of the expectation of final words; his physical presence points to the absence of animation, of 'sense' in him. Later in the play, following the dismemberment of Beech, there is another report on his precarious state: "There is no hope he should recouer speech, / The wiues do say, he's ready now to leaue / This greuous world full fraught with treacherie" (G1r-G1v). The last line itself has an air of finality appropriate to a dying speech, and thus attempts to fill the void created by Winchester's absent words. Shortly after this, one of the women announces Winchester's death and muses upon the strangeness of his unusually prolonged survival:

Tis very strange, that hauing many wounds,  
 So terrible, so ghastlie, which is more,  
 Hauing the hammer sticking in his head,  
 That he should liue and stirre from Friday night,  
 To Sunday morning, and euen then depart,  
 When that his Maisters mangled course were found . . . (G3r)

Winchester's delayed death – given the extent of his injuries – is directly, if supernaturally – associated here with his master; the implication is that he has

been unable to relinquish his own life until the various parts of his master's body have been found and identified, for he dies only when he has been placed beside the reassembled Beech. His amazing survival, despite the atrocity of multiple head wounds, further indicates supernatural agency as the manifestation of providentialism; if God keeps Winchester miraculously alive, and ensures the discovery and identification of Beech's dismembered body, then those bodies become instruments for the eventual enactment of both divine and legal justice.

Alexandra Walsham observes that providentialism was "an ingrained parochial response to chaos and crisis, a practical source of consolation in a hazardous and inhospitable environment, and an idea which exercised practical, emotional, and imaginative influence upon those who subscribed to it" (3). Thus the depiction of the horror and anxiety aroused by murder was a necessary part of the larger perspective; one had to vicariously experience the danger and unpleasantness of the murder in order to ultimately experience the relief and reassurance that the outcomes of such events had always been in God's capable hands.

Although the ghastly figures of Beech and Winchester tend to dominate the stage for much of the play, the transition near the end shifts the focus to the executions of the criminals and their accomplices. In the Pertillo plot, the penitent dying speech of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer sets a precedent for the scaffold speeches of Merry and Rachel. Fallerio and Allenso are both condemned to death (for despite his name being cleared earlier in the play, Allenso angers the duke by swapping identities with Fallerio in an attempt to protect him). Despite his earlier criminality, Fallerio is finally repentant, making his "parting peace with God and men":

I doe confesse euen from my verie soule,  
 My hainous sinne and grieuous wickednesse,  
 Against my maker manie thousand waies . . . (K1r)

He confesses to the murder of Pertillo, exchanges forgiveness with his son, and Allenso speaks the final lines before they are led offstage for execution:

Come let vs kisse and thus imbrace in death,  
 Euen when you will come bring vs to the place:  
 Where we may consumate our wretchednesse,  
 And change it for eternall hapinesse. (K1v).

Fallerio, like the 2<sup>nd</sup> Murderer, goes to his death demonstrating remorse and humble penitence, assured of salvation from God, who is “Powerfull enough for to redeeme our soules: / Euen from the verie gates of gaping hell, / Forgiue our sinnes, and wash away our faults” (K1r).

In the scene that immediately follows, Merry and Rachel are brought on stage to be executed. This represents a significant departure, not merely from the Pertillo plot, but from *Arden* and *Yorkshire* as well, in which the fates of the murderers are reported rather than staged. In the Pertillo plot the violence is of a more conventional nature; thus the condemned prisoners speak valedictory last words before making their exits. The brutal violence of the Merry plot, however, achieves a different type of impact, and the continual emphasis on the damaged bodies of Beech and Winchester seems to demand – from the playwright’s point of view, at least – the spectacle of onstage punishment in order to balance the extremism of the violence depicted.

Merry, having asked pardon of Rachel for involving her in his crime (and thus taking her to the scaffold with him), gives a speech very similar to that of Fallerio. As he ascends the ladder, he claims that his “conscience is at peace”,

And feeles no terror for such wickednesse,  
 Mine hath beene vexed but is now at rest,  
 For that I am assur'd my hainous sinne:  
 Shall neuer rise in iudgement gainst my soule,  
 But that the blood of Iesus Christ hath power,  
 To make my purple sinne as white as Snowe. (K1v-K2r)

He protests that he was innocent before the murder, and the phrase “I am assur'd” indicates that he has received spiritual guidance during his imprisonment. He observes that “the iustest man aliue / That beares about the frailtie of a man, / Cannot excuse himselfe from daily sinne, / In thought, in word, and deed” (K2r); for his crime, however, his “very soule dooth bleede”.

Merry continues:

God strengthen me with patience to endure,  
 This chastisement, which I confesse too small  
 A punishment for this my hainous sinne:  
 Oh be courageous sister, fight it well,  
 We shall be crown'd with immortallitie. (K2r)

When prompted to finish by one of the attending officers, he concludes his scaffold address in the conventional manner:

I am prepar'd, oh God receiue my soule,  
 Forgiue my sinnes, for they are numberlesse,  
 Receiue me God, for now I come to thee. (K2r)

Rachel “*shrinketh*” as her brother is turned off the ladder, yet she too makes a rather lengthy speech. “Let me be”, she says, “merror (sic) to ensuing times”, a warning to other women not to conceal “wicked deeds” (K2v). She does not repent of her love for her brother, but that she has “prouoked God, / To heauie wrath and indignation”. She initially casts blame upon Harry Williams, accusing him of being the “chiefest cause, / That I do drinke of this most bitter cup”, and laments that he did not immediately inform the authorities of Beech’s death, for if he had, “The boy [Winchester] had liu’d, and thou hadst sau’d my life” (K2v).<sup>54</sup> She immediately forgives him, however, “from my very soule”, and points instead to the lesson that may be learned from their mistakes: “Conceale no murther, least it do beget, / More bloody deeds of like deformitie” (K2v).

Rachel’s final words before death are similar to those of Merry, yet there is a greater hint of regret and despondency in hers, despite their conventionality:

Thus God forgiue my sinnes, receiue my soule,  
 And though my dinner be of bitter death,  
 I hope my soule shall sup with Iesus Christ,  
 And see his presence euerlastingly. *Dyeth.* (K2v)

Rachel, too, dies onstage. The presiding official at the execution reinforces the lesson of public punishment; to “teach all other by this spectacle, / To shunne such dangers as she ran into, / By her misguided taciturnitie” (K2v). Although the order is given for the bodies of Merry and Rachel to be cut down, they appear,

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<sup>54</sup> At the sentencing, both Williams and Rachell are “conuict / For their concealement” of the crimes, but Williams “craues his booke, / And so receaues a brond of infamie” rather than capital punishment. Unjustly, “wretched *Rachels* sexe denies that grace”, and she “therefore dooth receiue a doome of death” (I2v).

as Sandra Clark observes, to remain onstage as a “visual exemplum” of the play’s moral lesson (133).

The anonymous *Warning for Fair Women* bears striking parallels to *Two Lamentable Tragedies* in its structure, action and thematic concerns. More specifically, there is a similar treatment in both plays of the final words of the murder victims and malefactors. Like the murders of Beech and Winchester in Yarrington’s play, those of George Sanders and John Beane were based on true-life murders. The plays share an overall structure that includes the initial acts of murder, attempts on the part of the killer to conceal the crimes, eventual apprehension and sentencing of the criminals, and the simulated onstage execution of the malefactors. Whereas the scaffold performances of Merry and Rachel are relatively straightforward, however, the final speech of the murderer Browne is distinctly problematic. Moreover, the valedictory last words of Anne Sanders are deliberately written to maximize the sympathy of the audience toward her fate, potentially prompting mixed responses within the play to the fates of the condemned.

As pointed out earlier, Sandra Clark observes that this play may have predated *Arden*, as its source, *A Brief Discourse of the Late Murther*, came out in 1573 (with the initials A. G.) and in 1577, under the name Arthur Golding. She points out that Golding’s is a “self-standing pamphlet, written directly after the events it recounts”; he writes “with a social and moral mission, and his providential reading of the events of the case is signalled at every turn” (123). Rather than being concerned with the murder, Golding is interested in “its moral uses in demonstrating how a group of people . . . were brought to a condition of hearty repentance and readiness for death” (124).

Like the Merry plot in *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, then, *Warning* is based on an actual homicide. There are numerous parallels between the representations of the two murders; in both *Warning* and the Merry plot, two murders occur relatively early in the play, and the remainder of the action is concerned with the identification, apprehension and punishment of the killers.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the prolonged survival of the servant Beane in *Warning* is remarkably similar to that of Winchester, although in Beane's case there is a greater preoccupation with the expectation of speech. In *Lamentable*, both murderers are motivated to murder by a desire for wealth; in *Warning*, however, Browne kills Sanders because he is in love with Sanders's wife, Anne. Finally, this play includes the onstage hanging of Browne, albeit with significant departures from the scaffold performances of Merry and Rachel.

Of the two characters murdered by Browne, Sanders is the first to die. Beane is attacked first, crying out, "Oh we are undone" (*Warning* 1373). Like Pertillo, Sanders is aware of the danger he is in, but conducts himself with impressive self-command: when Browne announces his intention to kill, Sanders responds, "Heare me a word, you are a gentleman, / Soile not your hands with bloud of innocents" (1379-80). Browne, undeterred, stabs him, and Sanders replies, "Then God forgive my sinne, / Have mercie on me, and upon thee too, / The bloudie author of my timelesse death" (1382-84). Browne stabs him repeatedly, then dips a handkerchief in the blood: "Looke how many wounds my hand hath given him, / So many holes Ile make within this cloth" (1387-88).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Presumably influenced by *Arden*, in *Warning* there are multiple thwarted attempts made on Sanders's life before Browne is successful.

<sup>56</sup> This stage property recalls Hieronimo's handkerchief, "besmeared with blood", that he keeps as an emblem of his revenge quest (*Spanish Tragedy* 2.4.113). Hieronimo displays the object in his

Sanders's final line is an *imitatio Christi*: "Jesu receive my soule into thy handes" (1389). His imperturbability suggests that he is a 'godly' man who has made it his practice to be spiritually prepared for death on a daily basis – as recommended by the *artes moriendi* – and therefore quite naturally summons the appropriate words despite the unexpected nature of the attack.

From the spectator's point of view, Sanders's well-performed death is disappointing in the sense that his adherence to formula means the total suppression of any individual self-expression. Even Pertillo, in a similar situation, is given a longer speech than that of Sanders. Although neither victim is distinctively characterized, Pertillo at least does express anxiety and the will to live by pleading for his life.

However anticlimactic Sanders's final line may be for the audience, however, it has the power to throw his murderer into turmoil, for it is spoken – as far as Browne is concerned – after Sanders has already expired. Deeply shaken, he attempts to rationalize what he has just heard:

What sound was that? it was not he that spake,  
 The breath is vanisht from his nostrils,  
 Was it the other? no, his wounds are such,  
 As he is likewise past the use of speech.  
 Who was it then that thundred in mine eares,  
 The name of Jesu? Doubtlesse twas my conscience,  
 And I am damn'd for this unhallowed deede. (1390-96)

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final scene: "here behold this bloody handkercher, / Which at Horatio's death I weeping dipped / Within the river of his bleeding wounds" (4.4.121-23). In *Warning*, however, the token acquires ironic significance as both a love token for Anne and as ghastly evidence of the murder.

As he assumes Beane to be dead, Browne surmises that it must be Sanders's voice that he heard, arousing his conscience and giving him "dreadful agonie of soule" (1399). Momentarily paralyzed by fear and uncertainty, Browne anticipates being discovered, while the wounds of his victims appear as open mouths that "do gape unto the skies, / Calling for vengeance" (1402-1403).

Only after Browne's exit does Beane reveal that he is still alive. Despite his "deadly wounds", he resolves to try to get home "Before I drowne my selfe in my owne blood" (1422, 29). Twice the stage directions specify that he '*creepes*' (1419, 1445), and reference is made to his groans (1456). When he is found by Old John and Joane, Old John is initially fearful that Beane has attempted suicide, but the wounded man assures him otherwise. He provides crucial information about the murderer: "One in a white dublet and blew breeches, he has slaine another too, not farre off", then exclaims, "O stoppe my woundes if ye can" (1462-64). In contrast to the quick demise of Sanders, this part of the scene emphasizes Beane's struggle to make it home before he dies, and promotes sympathy for his plight by allowing the spectator to glimpse something of his character.

Thus, in contrast to Golding's brief treatment of Beane in the pamphlet account of the murders, the playwright sets up a careful context for the wounded man's miraculous survival.<sup>57</sup> Before the attack, there are numerous omens

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<sup>57</sup> In Golding, Beane is accorded only a few lines: "But M. Barneses man having ten or eleven deadly wounds, and being left for dead, did by Gods woonderfull providence revyve againe, and creeping a great waye on all foure, (fore hee could nother go nor stande) was found by an old man and his mayden that went that way to seeke their kine, and conveyed too Woolwich, wher he gave evident tokens and markes of the murtherer, and so continewing still alive till he had bin apprehended and brought unto him, dyed the next Munday after" (*A Briefe Discourse*, qtd. in Cannon 218). Golding's interest is in the psychological and spiritual states of the conspirators,

associated with Beane: he stumbles twice (*Warning* 995); he is the focus of Joane's bad dreams (1032-34); and he has strong misgivings just prior to being attacked (1353-68). Further portents and dreams are reported by Joane, implying that even before the event, evidence of a providential design might be discerned (1436-44). In the meantime, however, the audience is confronted with Beane's physical suffering, which – like Winchester's head wound and Beech's dismembered body in *Two Lamentable Tragedies* – is given strong emphasis for a significant portion of the play.

When Sanders's body is removed, Beane cries out, "Lord comfort my soule, my body is past cure" (1484). In a later scene, his body is brought back onstage "*in a Chaire*" (1896). One character observes to another, that those who heard of the murder,

. . . hardly were induced to beleeve,  
That this poore soule having so many wounds,

*Laying his hand upon him.*

And all so mortall as they were reported,  
With so much losse of blood, should possibly yet live:  
Why it is past beliefe. (1912-17)

He follows this up with, "More fearfull wounds, nor hurts more / dangerous / Upon my faith I have not seene" (1921-23). At this stage, Beane is still capable of speech: he asks for "a little drinke", and winces at the pain in his head and in his belly. Again, his wounds are imagined as mouths: "He spends more breath that issues through his wounds / then through his lippes" (1929-31). This conflation of 'apertures' turns Beane into a grotesque body even before he has died, particularly

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and he writes at length on these aspects of the case, also including Anne Sanders's scaffold confession at the end of the document.

as so much emphasis is placed upon them; from a Bakhtinian perspective, the open wounds are the means by which his body “goes out to meet the world” (*Rabelais* 26), to make vital communication to members of the community before making its final exit.

This scene is prolonged and the strangeness of his survival further emphasized. As the mayor arrives to investigate, the audience is repeatedly directed toward Beane’s damaged body: “looke you where he sits, / But past all sense, and labouring to his end” (1967-68). Browne is brought in under guard, denying the accusation of murder, and is faced with Beane in his mutilated, liminal state. Like Merry in *Lamentable*, Browne suffers the pangs of guilty conscience, yet persists in his attempts to conceal his crime. Upon seeing Beane, however, the test of his resolve is a difficult one, for he is confronted with the dying man’s eyes and wounds, each of which he experiences as direct accusations, an undeniable truth issuing from the body of his victim: “Oh how his very sight affrights my soule! / His very eies will speake had he no tongue, / And will accuse me” . . . and, “I gave him fiteene wounds, / Which now be fiteene mouthes that doe accuse me, / In ev’ry wound there is a bloody tongue, / Which will all speake, although he hold his peace, / By a whole Jury I shalbe accusde” (1988-99). In the midst of this scene, Beane’s wounds “break out afresh in bleeding” (1991), another instance of cruentation like the one that occurs in *Arden*, when Alice’s presence beside the corpse of her husband signals her guilt through the renewed bleeding of his wounds.

Amongst those present, however, there remains a vestige of hope that Beane will be able to identify his attacker. He is asked, “*John*, dost thou heare? knowest thou this man?”, and Beane’s reply constitutes his final, miraculous last

words: “Yea, this is he that mured me and Master *Sanders*” [*He sinckes downe*] (2000-2003). The wondrousness of Beane’s last-moment recovery of speech is reiterated immediately after he is pronounced dead:

The wondrous worke of God, that the poore creature, not speaking  
for two dayes, yet now should speake to accuse this man, and  
presently yeeld up his soule. (2011-14)

The scene of Beane’s death is followed by reported anecdotes of comparable strangeness, which appear to be recounted while the body of Beane remains on stage before them. Each of the brief stories of miraculous revelation is included because it illustrates the point that, even though the murder had been concealed for a considerable time, eventual discovery was inevitable.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, each anecdote is contributed by a different speaker, so that it creates an odd tableau for Beane’s death: instead of eulogizing Beane or saying prayers over his body, the interest of his companions is in the miraculous way that previous murders have been unravelled. This represents a curious distancing from Beane, indicating that his personal identity has been overshadowed by the remarkable survival of his physical body, and that he is perceived, finally, as an instrument of providence. Although Beane has only just died, then, in a sense he has been forgotten much earlier. To stage the conventional death rituals here would be to acknowledge his identity and the sadness of his passing, but instead he becomes an object of wonder, a bizarre physical relic of the murder.

In the scene that follows, a messenger brings news to the Lords at the Court, informing them that Browne has been positively identified as the murderer.

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<sup>58</sup> Cannon notes that the third of these anecdotes also appears in Thomas Heywood’s *An Apology For Actors*, and he includes the parallel text for comparison. He observes that the story “was a theatrical commonplace”, as was the belief that ‘murder will out’ (188-89n2026).

He reports that Beane, “with a constant voice, praid God forgive *Browne*, and receive his soule, and so departed” (2061- 63). The assertion is a curious one, for it does not confirm what the audience has already witnessed of Beane’s dying speech. Sanders calls upon God to have mercy upon his soul, and upon that of his killer, but Beane appears to have been incapable of uttering words of forgiveness, even had he wished to; the ten words he speaks before expiring are just enough to identify Browne, and no more. This may be an oversight on the part of the playwright; alternatively, it may represent a formulaic response on behalf of the messenger, to suggest that Beane’s death was essentially a ‘good’ one. Ultimately, it may be read as a further indication of Beane’s loss of self: just as he is reduced to a physical source of information about the murder, so his final spoken words become subject to a form of paraphrase.

As Merry and Rachel are executed onstage at the end of *Lamentable*, so Browne is hanged onstage near the conclusion of *Warning*. Yet, unlike the conventional, unsurprising speeches made by Merry and Rachel, the issue of the truth of Browne’s confession is absolutely central to his scaffold speech, creating conflict and anxiety at the very time the prisoner was meant to be demonstrating his readiness for just punishment and his preparedness for facing God.

When he is brought in for execution, Browne muses to himself in an aside, in response to the Sheriff’s urging that he confess Anne Sanders’s knowledge of her husband’s death. “Have I not made a covenant with her,” he asks,

That for the love that I ever bare to her,

I will not sell her life by my confession,

And shall I now confesse it? I am a villaine.

I will never do it: Shall it be said *Browne* proov’d

A recreant: (and yet I have a soule). (2438-43)

At this critical moment of facing death and the afterlife, Browne consciously chooses the rationale and the strategy for his scaffold performance, and in so doing he pledges his soul to Anne rather than to God. As Sandra Clark points out, Browne “does not renege on his loyalty” to Anne, but honours his commitment to her “at the peril of his soul” (126). The Sheriff points out to Browne that his determination to conceal Anne’s culpability is unlikely to clear her name, and he attempts to persuade Browne to confess honestly:

But *Browne*, it is confest by *Druries* wife,

That she [Anne] is guiltie: which doth fully prove

Thou hast no true contrition, but concealst

Her wickednesse, the bawd unto her sinne. (*Warning* 2450-53)

When Browne refuses to alter his confession, the Sheriff reminds him, “*Browne*, thy soule knowes” (2456).

Browne takes this as his cue; asking the Sheriff to be silent, he immediately begins his scaffold speech with an arresting rhetorical flourish: “Vile world how like a monster come I soyld from thee? / How have I wallowed in thy lothsome filth, / Drunke and besmeard with al thy bestial sinne?” (2458-60). Deliberately focusing on his own past behaviour and refusing to allude to either Anne or the murders, he offers instead plentiful details about the various forms his sin has taken, in a specifically Christian context:

I never spake of God, unlesse when I

Have blasphemed his name with monstrous oathes:

I never read the scriptures in my life,

But did esteeme them worse then vanitie:

I never came in Church where God was taught,  
 Tooke benefite of Sacrament or Baptisme:  
 The Sabbath dayes I spent in common stewes,  
 Unthrifitie gaming, and vile perjuries . . . (2461-68)

On the surface, his words appear to conform to the formula appropriate for the occasion, yet it is the awareness of what Browne has omitted that destabilizes his speech.

Browne gains momentum now, and appears to improvise somewhat, but again he makes no personal confession and demonstrates no remorse for the murders he has committed:

I held no man once worthie to be spoke of  
 That went not in some strange disguisde attire,  
 Or had not fetcht some vile monstrous fashion,  
 To bring in odious detestable pride:  
 I hated any man that did not doe  
 Some damned or some hated filthie deede,  
 That had beene death for vertuous men to heare . . . (2469-75)

In creatively fashioning a monstrous self behind which to conceal Anne, Browne offers up what amounts to a parody of the conventional scaffold speech, with its admission of sin and demonstration of penitence. His final four lines acknowledge the function of his punishment as a warning to spectators, yet his self-assertion as an exemplar of evil sounds a note of triumph, rather than humility:

Of all the worst that live, I was the worst,  
 Of all the cursed, I the most accursed,

All carelesse men be warned by my end,

And by my fall your wicked lives amend. (2576-79)

In this context, the rhyme gestures at formality, but the seriousness of the ritual is undermined first of all by Browne's confident delivery, and secondly by the stage direction indicating that he "*leapes off*" the ladder at the conclusion of his speech (2479).

This leap from the scaffold represents a final act of defiance, of refusal to conform – inwardly, in Browne's case – to the formulas promoted by state and church. According to John Sym's treatise on suicide, *Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing* (1637), for a man to "*cast himselfe off the ladder*" or otherwise "*hasten his death*", is inexcusable both as an act of self-murder and as deliberate interference in the course of justice. For the condemned, death must be "*an act of suffering, and not of agency*" (265), and Browne is clearly aware that an energetic leap from the platform will hasten his death.<sup>59</sup> As Browne evades the issue of true confession, then, he likewise eludes the hangman's control over him by embracing death on his own terms, violating Sym's assertion that "*a person condemned to die, and in the hands of the executioners, is not to strive, oppose, or withstand them in doing execution upon him*", but must "*patiently . . . receive his death by their hands*" (266).<sup>60</sup> No moralizing conclusion is voiced, following

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<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey Abbott distinguishes between the 'short drop' method of hanging, in which victims "were allowed to fall a mere three or four feet, thereby dying a slow, lingering death by strangulation", and the 'long drop' method, whereby the rope dislocated the vertebrae of the neck and severed the spinal cord, making death almost instantaneous. The former method was used until the late nineteenth century. According to Abbott, the breathing "stops in seconds", whereas the heart "may beat for up to twenty minutes after the drop" (31). The effects of the 'long drop' could be replicated by either leaping from the platform, or by pulling on the victim's legs.

<sup>60</sup> The association between leaping from the scaffold and ignominious death is illustrated in the pamphlet account of the scaffold conduct of Robert Keyes, executed in 1606 for his involvement

Browne's onstage death, but his body is condemned to be hanged in chains, the very outcome that he had earlier requested that he be spared (*Warning* 2264).

In contrast to Browne's onstage execution, the deaths of his accomplices – Anne Sanders and her scheming neighbour, Anne Drury – occur offstage. Moreover, the penitential final speeches made by both of the women are at least partly attributable to the counsel they receive while in prison. Anne, however, does not initially confess to her crime. During her trial scene, she wears a white rose in her bosom, “In token”, she says, “of my spotlesse innocence, / As free from guilt as is this flower from staine” (2313-14). Sentenced to death, she implores the Lords to “be good unto *Anne Sanders*, / Or els you cast away an innocent”, whereupon one of them replies, “It should not seeme so by the rose you weare, / His colour now is of another hue” (2372-75). Like Arden's indelible blood and the instances of cruentation in the other plays, the stained rose appears to be a supernatural manifestation of Anne's guilt.

Despite her stubborn insistence upon her innocence, events subsequent to her trial and condemnation lead Anne to a reconsideration of her position. On the day of her execution, she overhears a conversation between two carpenters who are constructing the gallows at Newgate. She requests a visit to Drury, seeking reassurance that her involvement in the murder will remain a secret. Drury points out, however, that they are too close to death to continue “dissembling”, and suggests that they both tell the truth, asking, “Should I . . . / Hazard mine owne soule everlastingly, / And loose the endlesse joyes of heaven, / Preparate for such

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in the Gunpowder conspiracy. Keyes came to the scaffold “like a desperate villaine vsing little speech, with small or no shew of repentance.” He “wente stoutelie vp the ladder, where not staying the Hangmans turne, turned himselfe of with such a leape, that with the swing, he brake the Halter.” Following this, he was “quicklie drawne to the blocke, and there was quicklie deuided into four partes” (*Araignment* C3r-C3v).

as wil confesse their sinnes?" (2579, 2589-93). Like Roberto's crucial words to Isabella in *Countess*, Drury's pious speech to Anne effects a sudden profound change, as evidenced in her astonished reply:

Your words amaze me, and although Ile vow  
 I never had intention to confesse  
 My hainous sinne, that so I might escape  
 The worlds reproach, yet God I give him thanks  
 Even at this instant I am strangely changed,  
 And wil no longer drive repentance off,  
 Nor cloake my guiltinesse before the world . . . (2602-08)

In this resolute state, the women receive a visit from a Doctor, who has come to prepare them for death. Drury's declaration is laudable:

I am as well resolv'd to goe to death,  
 As if I were invited to a banquet:  
 Nay such assurance have I in the bloud  
 Of him that died for me, as neither fire,  
 Sword nor torment could retaine me from him. (2637-41)

The remainder of the scene is devoted entirely to Anne Sanders. The tone of pathos, similar to the penitent lament of the husband in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, is established from the moment when she requests that her children be brought in:

Oh maister Doctor, were my breast transparent,  
 That what is figurde there, might be perceiv'd,  
 Now should you see the very image of poore  
 And tottred ruines, and a slaine conscience:  
 Here, here they come beblind mine eyes with teares,

And soule and body now in sunder part. (2653-58).

The enforced separation from her children, and her guilt at having to leave them, are perceived as a form of death-before-death, rending body and soul; as she points out to the children, she is responsible for having deprived them of both their parents. She asks for pardon, not merely of God, of her children, and of her dead husband, but of “al men and women in the world, / Whome by my foule example I have griev’d” (2679-80). Her message of warning, however, is directed specifically toward her children, as she urges them to “follow vertue, and beware of sinne”; “Content your selves, and surfet not on pride” (2687, 2693). At the last, she gives each of them a book of “holy meditations, *Bradfords workes*” (2703),<sup>61</sup> and her final lines before she exits are doubtless intended to draw tears of sympathy from the audience:

So God send downe his blessing on you al:

Farewel, farewel, farewel, farewel, farewel.

*She kisses them one after another.*

Nay stay not to disturbe me with your teares,

The time is come sweete hearts, and we must part,

That way go you, this way my heavie heart. (2710-15)

The pathos of the scene is increased as Anne takes her farewell of each child individually, then kisses them in turn, addressing them as “sweete hearts” and twice emphasizing her separation from them.

According to Sandra Clark, the “fullness of Anne’s confession and repentance entitle her to a final, recuperative, scene as pious mother bidding her

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<sup>61</sup> In a footnote, Cannon notes that John Bradford was a Protestant martyr burned at the stake in 1555, and observes that his written works “would have been appropriate for Mrs. Sanders to give to her children for their edification” (195n2703).

children farewell” (127). Mitchell B. Merback writes that the convict’s ‘good’ death “reflected well on the Christian values of the community and contributed to their upholding”, for crime brought “a taint of corruption and infamy upon the social body, and a proper execution held the potential to lift the miasma” (146). According to Lucinda M. Becker, a woman on the scaffold would “provoke a sense of pity if she had confessed and shown repentance”, even though it had to be seen that justice was done (84-85).

Anne Sanders’s valedictory speech indicates that her (imagined, offstage) death will be a ‘good’ one, yet the placement of this final scene after Browne’s onstage scaffold performance – which despite appearances is not exemplary – tends to obscure the question of whether or not his death adequately balances the deaths of his victims. Just as the treatment of execution in the comic subplot of *Countess* displaces and therefore problematizes the penultimate scene of Isabella’s beheading, so the sentimentalism of Anne Sanders’s farewell to her children shifts the audience’s attention away from Browne as an unrepentant murderer. The implications of Browne’s scaffold strategy are complex: his performance leaves the spectator with a lingering sense of uneasiness, in that he does not directly acknowledge the crime he has committed, and because his refusal to make a ‘full’ confession implies that his love of Anne was worth the murder of her husband. Browne’s unsettling effect on the audience, however, and the ambiguity of his final speech, create both exciting theatre and a continued challenge to the standard formulas for dying, demonstrating how the political obligations forced upon a prisoner could be simultaneously observed and flouted.

From the earlier intensive focus on the mutilated body of Beane, then, the final emphasis in the play shifts to the characters who are guilty of murder. Orlin

argues that the “relatively brief essential action of the play” is nearly “overwhelmed by the long scenes devoted to consequences”, so that the “eventual affirmation of orthodoxy could not be more painstakingly detailed, nor more sentimental” (“Familial Transgressions” 34). From the point of view of last words, then, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* and *A Warning for Fair Women* – more so than *Arden of Faversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* – linger on the damaged bodies of the victims, then ultimately displace them with a focus on the murderers. The victim is robbed of speech and reduced to a physical presence onstage. The sudden death and the necessary process of identifying and punishing the murderers results in the rapid obliteration of the victim’s identity, a subsuming of the dead person into the larger, more public drama of the culprits’ fates. The miraculous survivals that do occur have the distinct purpose of allowing the transmission of essential information regarding the circumstances of the crime: those who have no information die almost immediately, while those who can make a contribution to the pursuit of justice are ‘permitted’ to survive and either speak (as do the 2<sup>nd</sup> murderer and Beane) or communicate wordlessly (as Winchester does). In this sense, the victims become objects of supernatural agency, presumably animated by God especially for the purpose of ‘discovering’ the truth and exposing the villain. This state of being oddly touched by the hand of God begins, at times, even before the murder itself, and it increases the spectator’s sense of the victim existing in a liminal space, being neither fully alive nor completely dead.

The victims are, then, finally upstaged by the scaffold performances of those who were responsible for their deaths. Because the murder plays dramatize actual events, the initial homicide becomes inseparable from the later rituals of

execution, for the unfolding of the dramas must be parallel to the sequence of events outside the theatre. As a result – and because their ultimate purpose tends toward the moralistic – the playwrights discussed in this chapter did not seize the opportunity to write astounding or poetic last words for their dying victims. In remaining, for the most part, close to their sources for the plays, they produced instead scenes which convey the suddenness and immediacy of murder, often sacrificing volubility in order to emphasize the providential context in which their characters die. Any sense of restitution on their behalf stems from the culminating, publicly-enacted scene of the killer's execution.

Merback writes, “Elemental to the ‘punishment response’ of practically every society that institutes criminal sanctions is retribution, a nice legalistic word meaning revenge” (134). From the depiction of local murder victims and the concomitant spectacle of public punishment on the scaffold, I will now turn to the fictional courts of dukes and kings, where victims of homicide and revenge heroes alike are permitted to revel in the lengthy eloquence of their dying speeches.

## Chapter Three

### ‘Monstrous Resolutions’: Revenge<sup>62</sup>

Vengeance, thou murder’s quick-rent, and whereby  
 Thou show’st thyself tenant to tragedy,  
 O, keep thy day, hour, minute, I beseech,  
 For those thou hast determined.

*The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1.1.39-42)

It may be pain, but no harm to me to die  
 In so good a quarrel.

*The Duchess of Malfi* (5.5.98-99)

In *A Warning for Fair Women*, the figure of Comedy scorns the “filthie whining ghost” of tragedy, garbed in “some fowle sheete, or a leather pelch”, who appears “skreaming like a pigge halfe stickt, / And cries *Vindicta*, revenge, revenge” (lines 55-57).<sup>63</sup> That an uncanny visitor returns from beyond the grave to incite the living to revenge suggests that he was permitted no last words at the time of his death and therefore still wishes to impart an urgent message. Moreover, his initiation of the revenge plot emphasizes the importance of the final words of the dying that will be performed before the play’s conclusion.

In the murder plays of the previous chapter, supernatural elements associated with homicide tend to take the form of providential miracles, providing – quite literally – a body of evidence which leads to the judicial punishment of the malefactor, thus demonstrating God’s workings in ultimately arriving at a just and appropriate outcome to an horrific event. Jonathan Dollimore identifies this as ‘establishment providentialism’ – the form “favoured by protestantism” – which

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<sup>62</sup> In Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, after Hieronimo has bitten out his own tongue, the King exclaims, “O monstrous resolution of a wretch! / See, viceroy, he hath bitten forth his tongue, / Rather than to reveal what we required” (4.4.192-94).

<sup>63</sup>The quotation is from the Critical Edition, ed. Cannon.

was supported by the idea of “specific intervention”, often involving a “punitive action by God or one of His agents” (*Radical Tragedy* 87). The intrusion of a ghost obsessed with revenge, from the Christian point of view, represents the threat of chaos, for his presence suggests that there has been no promise of reparation, even in the afterlife; instead of divine justice being bestowed on behalf of the sufferer, a keen sense of injury still seeks redress. The sustained desire for revenge even beyond death indicates that the victim of an original injustice has made the transition to the ‘beyond’, only to discover that the scales of justice remain unexpectedly, and infuriatingly, unbalanced.

There needs no ghost, however, come from the grave – like Don Andrea in Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* – to signal this shift in perspective. Even without such otherworldly promptings to initiate the action, the determined revenger distinguishes himself by becoming the denizen of an alternative world, in which Vengeance is the presiding deity. In her introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Katharine Eisaman Maus provides a succinct definition of the genre. Revenge tragedies:

feature someone who prosecutes a crime in a private capacity, taking matters into his own hands because the institutions by which criminals are made to pay for their offences are either systematically defective or unable to cope with some particularly difficult situation. Such plays testify to an apparently ineradicable yearning for justice – a yearning that abides even, or especially, in the most unfairly victimized persons. (ix)

The avenger experiences a twofold sense of outrage toward the villain, firstly as a result of the murder previously committed, and secondly because that crime has

remained either undetected or unchallenged. In response, he forges a connection between himself and his quarry: just as the enemy committed the initial crime, thereby placing himself outside the boundaries of law and church, so the revenger likewise chooses to inhabit a world in which he consciously situates himself beyond the customary channels for seeking justice. Structured on the principle, in John Kerrigan's phrase, of "grim equivalence", the avenger's killings are "distinguished from common murder by the sign, the evidence, of their fittingness" (115, 17). While the murderer wishes to "conceal" his actions – like Merry in *Two Lamentable Tragedies* and Browne in *A Warning For Fair Women* – the avenger is instead prompted to "display"; for this reason, the revenge hero resembles the playwright, for he must "manipulate a fluid and contingent world with a dramatist's inventiveness and authority . . . transmuting creative ambition into narrative and stage action" (Kerrigan 17).

In seizing this creative, yet risky role, the avenger thereby alters the context of the dying speech. If the good, Christian death becomes inaccessible for both villain and revenger, then what replaces that model? How do the corrupt noble and his nemesis die, and what form do their dying speeches take?

On a fundamental level, the 'good quarrel' challenges the supremacy of the notion of the 'good death', and the scene of the villain's dying speech represents the triumphant culmination of the hero's revenge strategy. This is not to imply that characters are no longer interested in dying a good death; on the contrary, the importance of this concept in Jacobean revenge tragedy is undiminished. What it does mean is that the exemplary performance of dying is determined by the hero's courage in facing death, in refusing to betray signs of fear or regret, yet doing so in the absence of the customary Christian formulas.

For a culture in which the rituals associated with the good death were considered essential, this shift is both significant and shocking; even those whose souls were considered imperilled at the time of dying would have been less likely to take risks when confronted with the reality of death and God's judgement in the afterlife. Yet the very danger of departing from safe, Christian formulas meant that the playwright's scope for creativity was increased: no longer obliged to remain faithful to the details of local murders, for instance, dramatists could permit their characters to relinquish the deathbed and scaffold formulas for dying, creating scenes of death that were extreme and stylized, a blend of the grotesque and the absurd – or, as Dollimore puts it, “a vicious blend of the appropriate and the unexpected” (*Radical Tragedy* 143).<sup>64</sup> The imaginary revenge scenario thus encouraged a spirit of experimentation, while the composition of dying speeches invited the development and exploitation of the creative potential of last words, which could be as implausible and outrageous as the various modes of dying inflicted upon the enemy.

The plays discussed in this chapter include, for the most part, more canonical works than those in the Murder chapter. I will begin by briefly considering examples from Thomas Middleton's *Bloody Banquet*, George Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (1609-10), Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), and Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1621), chosen for their clear demonstrations of the revenger's strategy in manipulating the

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<sup>64</sup> Some of the revenge plays are based on historical persons. As René Weis points out, Webster's Vittoria Corombona in *The White Devil* is based on the figure of Vittoria Accoramboni of Gubbio (1557-85) (Introduction xv). The figure of the Duchess is, as Elizabeth M. Brennan notes, modeled on the historical Giovanna d'Aragona, born c.1478 (xvii). However, these are loose adaptations, and are treated quite differently from the material that was printed in broadside and pamphlet accounts of 'local' murders, drawn upon by dramatists for the murder plays.

adversary's dying utterance.<sup>65</sup> The scene of Tymethes' death in *The Bloody Banquet* illustrates both the extent to which the Christian deathbed formula was an integral part of the early modern preparation for death, and the possible implications of departing from this formula. Montsurry's dying scene in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* highlights the desirability of the avenger resolving the issue of revenge with an opponent who is worthy of the 'quarrel'. In *Titus Andronicus*, the ritualized deaths of Chiron and Demetrius are performed by Titus, who combines specific strategies that I shall refer to as 'silencing' and 'scripting'; in the masque scene in *Women Beware Women* the dying speeches of Isabella and Livia are largely scripted, emphasizing the use of theatrical performance as a means of obscuring the crucial business of revenge.

The chapter will further develop these concepts in relation to the four plays which are the primary focus of the present discussion: Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1587); Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (1606); and John Webster's *White Devil* (c.1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (c.1614).<sup>66</sup> In these plays, villains and revengers alike die spectacularly, in a variety of ways. Characters are shot; their throats are cut and their tongues damaged or removed; they are stabbed, poisoned and strangled; and in some instances their deaths are finally brought about by the receipt of last-minute 'news'. In fact, the plays discussed have been chosen precisely for this reason: they are notable for the dramatic impact of their dying scenes, as well as for the challenge they offer to conventional Christian rituals associated with death, which become subject to distortion and parody. Moreover, the revenge heroes in these plays are characterized by their total absorption in the

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<sup>65</sup> All citations from Middleton's plays in this chapter are from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino.

<sup>66</sup> Citations from *The Spanish Tragedy* are from *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Maus.

quest for retribution, their enthusiasm for the process of ensuring that their adversaries are appropriately punished.

The avenger does not bring about the destruction of his adversary merely through physical force, however. In boldly determining to settle the quarrel with the enemy, the revenger manipulates the villain into a position of vulnerability, then draws variously upon three major strategies in order to dominate his victim's dying utterance. The first is inseparable from both the concept of the good quarrel and the issue of the good death: the revenger who holds power over his enemy – specifically in the dying scene – often tests his adversary for a fear of death. This strategy is governed by paradox; for the vanquished to demonstrate fear is to confirm the victor's triumph, to be proved the weaker of the two. Yet, at the same time, the disadvantaged villain must prove himself or herself a worthy opponent in order to honour the quarrel and thus die with some vestige of integrity; a shameful and pusillanimous death disrupts the peculiar equality, the bond of honour, between villain and avenger that the latter has been at pains to establish and exploit. This practice is inevitably tinged with irony, for the revenger is eventually tested in precisely the same way, and obliged to perform his or her death in exemplary fashion, with personal integrity, fortitude and eloquence.

Two related but distinct strategies are further employed by the avenger, as methods of assuming control over the dying words of the adversary. The first – a manoeuvre employed by Titus – is that of silencing the victim, of completely removing the opportunity for last words. This may be achieved through direct, physical force, or by the artful manipulation of circumstances in order to otherwise prevent the dying person from speaking authentically. The second tactic, more devious and clever than the first, is what I shall refer to as 'scripting',

in which the dying speech is replaced by an alternative ‘script’ of the revenger’s devising. This may take the form of either a literal text, or another form of substitution which makes an authentic dying utterance unlikely or even impossible. While scripting does, in a sense, impose a form of silence on the dying character, it tends to do so flamboyantly, fulfilling the revenge quest through elaborate deception. The usurpation of a victim’s last words in the context of a court play or masque is a particularly daring and dangerous approach to exacting vengeance, and one that draws attention to the dying scene itself as a consciously enacted performance.

Even revenge scenarios which occur in a specifically classical context are often permeated with an awareness of the Christian formulas for dying, as explained and discussed in the *artes moriendi* treatises, and as integral to the format of the confessional scaffold speech. In *The Bloody Banquet*, Tymethes’ final words conform to the structure of the traditional Christian deathbed confession, while in Shakespeare’s play Chiron and Demetrius are robbed of the opportunity to speak any final words. The space in which they might have made final utterances is appropriated black-humouredly by Titus; as he prepares his victims for slaughter, his speech plays upon the established structure of the scaffold address.

In *The Bloody Banquet*, a certain amount of ambiguity surrounds Tymethes’ final speech, for he fails to realize that it is, in fact, his last. He has been taken as a lover by the young queen, Thetis, but on the strict condition that her identity remains a secret; he is hooded when he is brought to her chamber, and her servants wear visors as they lay out a banquet before him (3.3). Despite being threatened with death if he learns who his mysterious lover is (3.3.105-12),

Tymethes cannot overcome his curiosity and discovers the Queen's identity as she lies sleeping; she wakes and pronounces him doomed, despite his protestations that he will reveal nothing (4.3).

Thetis gives Tymethes the opportunity to spend an hour "In true repentance of your sin, and all / Your hasty youth stands guilty of", and she leaves the chamber so that he may pray (4.3.68-70). Alone, and kneeling "*as praying*", he speaks aloud, congratulating himself that he has been given an easier penance than he expected, and cheerfully conceding that the penitential exercise he is about to undertake is "wholesome / For soul and body, though I seldom use it" (82-83). Tymethes appears to be merely humouring Thetis, bowing his head in mock submission and observing the correct penitential formula without fulfilling its true function. He muses that her wisdom "is as pleasing as her beauty", and that "It so amazed me to know her my mistress, / I had no power to close the light again . . . Unhappy that I was" (84-89). He breaks off as he hears her re-enter the chamber – "Peace, here she comes. / Down to thy penance" – and is thus unaware that she has returned bearing two pistols (88-90). He continues his speech, conscious that she is listening to him:

. . . think of thy whole youth.

From the first minute that the womb conceived me  
 To this full-heapèd hour, I do repent me,  
 With heart as penitent as a man dissolving,  
 Of all my sins, born with me, and born of me,  
 Dishonest thoughts and sleights, the paths of youth.  
 So thrive in mercy as I end in truth! (4.3.90-96)

As a confession, this is hardly an impressive effort, for Tymethes speaks in broad generalities rather than attempting to acknowledge both the quantity and seriousness of his past transgressions. His claim to be guilty merely of “Dishonest thoughts and sleights”, attributable to the “paths of youth”, strongly suggests not only that his engagement with his task is superficial, but that he has no inkling whatsoever that his life is about to be brought to an abrupt end. For, at the conclusion of his speech, Thetis “*shoots him dead*” (96).

In her introductory preface to the text, Julia Gasper considers this scene to be the “dramatic climax” of the play; as she points out, Thetis has previously warned Tymethes of death, yet we do not expect her to kill him herself (“*The Bloody Banquet: A Tragedy*” 639). The queen speaks a lengthy lament over his body, but her stated purpose has been, she explains, to permit him time to make adequate preparation for death:

I dealt not like a coward with thy soul,  
Nor took it unprepared.  
I gave him time to put his armour on  
And sent him forth like a celestial champion.  
  
(*Bloody Banquet* 99-102)

The first two lines are addressed to the dead Tymethes, while in her third and fourth lines Thetis justifies her actions, both for herself and for the theatre audience. She assumes that Tymethes has earnestly embraced the opportunity she has provided for him; like Othello’s declaration to Desdemona, “I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. / No, heavens forbend! I would not kill thy soul” (5.2.33-34), the Queen demonstrates a concern for the salvation of her lover’s soul. The audience is aware, however, that unless Tymethes had experienced a genuine

change of heart during the pronouncement of his final lines, then he was no more prepared for death at the end of his speech than he was at the beginning. As Gasper observes, the opportunity offered by Thetis to Tymethes “raises the question, so fascinating to Calvinists such as Middleton and Dekker and most of their audience: how could you ever be sure who was saved and who was damned?” (“*The Bloody Banquet: A Tragedy*” 640). From this perspective, the scene also draws attention to the implications of last words – for spectators – in assessing the dying person’s degree of readiness for their passage to the afterlife.

From the early modern perspective, the Christian formula for dying is integral to death scenes, even when its absence is conspicuous. In revenge tragedy, however, this awareness is displaced, to varying degrees, by the dictates of the good quarrel. In Chapman’s *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois*, the scene of confrontation between Clermont D’Ambois and his adversary Montsurry illustrates the nature of the honourable understanding that should be shared by the combatants, so that in the resolution of the conflict, both meet as equals, and both acquit themselves with dignity.

Aware that Clermont seeks revenge for the death of his brother, Montsurry has retreated from the court in an attempt to evade the consequences of having killed Bussy. Yet Clermont eventually forces a confrontation upon his enemy, vowing,

. . . not a minute more

My brother’s blood shall stay for his revenge,

If I can act it; if not, mine shall add

A double conquest to you, that alone

Put it to fortune now, and use no odds. (Vol. 1, 5.5.14-18)

Montsurry attempts to escape from the room, whereupon Clermont admonishes him,

Storm not, nor beat yourself thus 'gainst the doors,  
 Like to a savage vermin in a trap;  
 All doors are sure made, and you cannot scape  
 But by your valour. (19-22).

Montsurry, seized by panic, cries, “No, no; come and kill me”, and with comic abruptness – without the slightest inclination toward valour – he lies down, refusing to engage in the fight (22). Clermont is calm, however, urging Montsurry to meet him as an equal: “If you will die so like a beast, you shall; / But when the spirit of a man may save you, / Do not so shame man, and a nobleman” (23-25). For Clermont, Montsurry’s failure to meet his obligations honourably makes him less than human; rather than simply killing him at this stage, Clermont gives him the opportunity to raise himself from his degraded, bestial state and be ‘saved’ by the “spirit of a man”. Salvation, in the context of revenge, is thus divorced from its Christian associations, and is reconceived as the conscious deployment of nobility, as a demonstration of an inner fortitude in confronting, unflinchingly, the necessary actions in concluding the honourable quarrel.

From his supine position on the floor, Montsurry replies, “I do not show this baseness that I fear thee, / But to prevent and shame thy victory, / Which of one base is base, and so I’ll die” (26-28). He insists that for Clermont to claim a victory in this manner is to basely triumph over him, and he is thus determined to die, with paradoxical integrity, triumphant in his own cowardice. Ironically, Clermont does not intentionally prompt Montsurry to an exhibition of fear; an

initially reluctant revenger himself, his prime objective is avenging his brother's death. Yet Montsurry's preoccupation with personal fear, and his desire to die only when his own position on the terms of the quarrel have been made clear, are evidence of just how integral the issue of fear is to the performance of death in revenge scenarios.

At this impasse, however, Montsurry abruptly changes his mind and "*starts up*" from the ground, addressing Clermont: ". . . since I must afford thee victory, / It shall be great and brave, if one request / Thou wilt admit me" (29-32). He requests that Clermont give him leave to "fetch and use" the sword that was given to him by Bussy, when he was "bravely giving up his life" (33-34); neither Clermont nor Tamyra are prepared to trust Montsurry, however, and their refusal prompts him to resume his recumbent position on the floor. Disgusted with his cowardice, Tamyra pronounces Montsurry an "abject" and laments their wedded state, while Clermont urges Tamyra, "Revenge your wounds now, madam; I resign him / Up to your full will, since he will not fight" (45, 49-50). Clermont gives her his poniard, but the prospect of being injured by a woman is insupportable to Montsurry – he rises once again in refusal, and addresses Clermont:

. . . I'll fight now, and the terror be  
 Of all you champions to such as she.  
 I did but thus far dally: now observe.  
 O all you aching foreheads that have robb'd  
 Your hands of weapons and your hearts of valour,  
 Join in me all your rages and rebutters,  
 And into dust ram this same race of furies;

In this one relic of the [D']Ambois gall,

In his one purple soul shed, drown it all. (59-67)

Invoking the “rages and rebutters” of all cuckolds, Montsurry goads himself into action by nursing his grievance against his wife, that her infidelity might be drowned in the avenging Clermont’s blood. His “I did but thus far dally” indicates that he is now serious about engaging with Clermont; the two men fight, then pause, at which point Montsurry makes a crucial speech, which further changes the dynamic between them: “If you were not a D’Ambois, I would scarce / Change lives with you”, and he claims, “I feel so great a change / In my tall spirits; breath’d, I think, with the breath / A D’Ambois breathes here” (75-78). Montsurry, it seems, is profoundly altered through combat with Clermont; by breathing their shared air, Montsurry is infused with the D’Ambois spirit, feeling himself both invigorated and ennobled. When they resume their conflict, it is under circumstances which have subtly but significantly changed; the two men confront each other, finally, as equals, and the honour of the quarrel is restored. It is from this position of equality, then, that Montsurry is wounded, and again there is a pause in the proceedings, as Clermont’s sister intervenes.

Impatient for her enemy to be dispatched, the disguised Charlotte descends to the stage, declaring her intention to enter combat; Clermont urges her to have patience, but agrees to let her take his place if he is unsuccessful. Montsurry requests of Clermont, “Pray thee, let him decide it”, but Clermont refuses: “No, my lord, / I am the man in fate, and since so bravely / Your lordship stands me, ’scape but one more charge, / And, on my life, I’ll set your life at large” (105-108). The terms of the engagement may be flexible, but Clermont insists upon settling the quarrel before he will concede to any other avenger taking his place.

Montsurry agrees: “Said like a D’Ambois, and if now I die, / Sit joy and all good on thy victory!” (109-110). This constitutes a complete reversal of the relationship between the two men as it stood at the outset of the scene, and the equality now established between them allows both a resolution of the issue of revenge.

In the fight that follows, Montsurry collapses with a mortal wound, and “*gives his hand to Clermont and his wife*” as he utters his final words: “Farewell, I heartily forgive thee; wife, / And thee; let penitence spend thy rest of life” (111-12). Clermont pronounces him “Noble and Christian”, and when Tamyra declares her heart broken, he replies,

And should; for all faults found in him before,  
 These words, this end, makes full amends and more.  
 Rest, worthy soul; and with it the dear spirit  
 Of my lov’d brother rest in endless peace!  
 Soft lie thy bones, Heaven be your soul’s abode,  
 And to your ashes be the earth no load! (113-19)

Significantly, Montsurry dies only after this gentle benediction has been spoken over him; dying to honour the quarrel, he can receive this blessing only from Clermont. Despite the bizarre choreography of Montsurry’s initial refusal to fight, Clermont’s commitment to his appointed task results in the mutual respect of the combatants, and it is only after this resolution has been achieved that there is space for reversion to the Christian model for dying.

While the process of resolving the quarrel between Clermont and Montsurry necessitates at least a temporary suspension of Christian formula during the scene of combat, in *Titus Andronicus* the displacement of Chiron and

Demetrius's final words occurs in a context which similarly acknowledges, but deliberately distorts, the idea of Christian preparation for death, and does so through the mechanism of a bold and premeditated revenge. Titus silences Tamora's sons as he prepares them for slaughter, appropriating the structure of the scaffold speech and subverting its usual content in order to fill his victims' silence with a revenge 'script' of his own devising. The content of his speech is thoroughly opposed to the spirit of the confessional address at an execution, shaped as it is by rage and the hunger for retribution.

In preparation for the cannibalistic banquet at the end of the play, Titus seizes upon the opportunity offered to him when Tamora visits him as the figure of Revenge, accompanied by her sons in the supporting roles of Murder and Rape. He appears to be credulously taken in by the performance of his three adversaries, but he turns their own script against them and successfully contrives to detain Chiron and Demetrius. Chiron's penultimate line, "Tell us, old man, how shall we be employed?" (5.2.149) indicates his intention to remain in character, as the brothers at this point are still playing their parts of Murder and Rape. His final line, however, represents an attempt to break the script and escape the danger by revealing their true identity: "Villains, forbear! We are the Empress' sons" (161).

His victims in his power, Titus instructs Publius, Caius and Valentine to "bind them sure, / And stop their mouths if they begin to cry" (159-60). Chiron and Demetrius are bound and gagged, deprived of the opportunity to utter any form of speech. Titus repeats the command to stop their mouths: "Let them not speak to me, / But let them hear what fearful words I utter" (166-67). As Lavinia is silenced earlier in the play by the loss of her tongue, her assailants are likewise

silenced by Titus, who speaks partly on her behalf as she stands by with a basin to hold their blood.

Titus voices questions to which Chiron and Demetrius cannot respond, and enumerates the crimes that they would be expected to openly confess on the scaffold:

Here stands the spring whom you have stained with mud,  
 This goodly summer with your winter mixed.  
 You killed her husband, and for that vile fault  
 Two of her brothers were condemned to death,  
 My hand cut off and made a merry jest,  
 Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear  
 Than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity,  
 Inhuman traitors, you constrained and forced. (169-76)

Titus turns their ‘confession’ into a diatribe against their crimes, demanding, “What would you say if I should let you speak? / Villains, for shame. You could not beg for grace” (177-78).

As he continues his speech, Titus specifically describes the sequence of steps he will take after he has executed Chiron and Demetrius:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,  
 And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste,  
 And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
 And make two pasties of your shameful heads,  
 And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,  
 Like to the earth swallow her own increase.  
 This is the feast that I have bid her to,

And this the banquet she shall surfeit on . . . (185-92)

This expression of intent represents a perversion of the scaffold confession, for whereas the prisoner was expected to demonstrate remorse for his or her transgressions, Titus instead gloatingly describes an act of butchery that he has yet to perform. Preparation for death is thereby transformed from a sacred rite into a culinary procedure: rather than the soul being ready for its journey into the afterlife, Titus ensures that Chiron and Demetrius are ‘prepared’ as slabs of meat, ready for cooking.

The final part of an exemplary address from the scaffold included prayer, and the request that God receive the soul of the condemned. In a grotesque parody of this ritual, Titus urges the brothers once more to “prepare your throats”, and instructs Lavinia to “Receive the blood” that is about to be shed (195-96). Rather than the axe falling, the stage direction indicates that Titus “*cuts their throats*” (202). In the final two lines of his speech, he promises, “I’ll play the cook / And see them ready against their mother comes”, thus conflating the roles of executioner and cook, butcher and revenger (203-204). The communal meal that follows this preparation is both a Thyestean bloody banquet – in the Senecan tradition – and a parody of the Last Supper.

In addition to the horror of anticipating their own deaths, then, Chiron and Demetrius are further mocked by Titus’s appropriation and distortion of the dying speech. This occurs outside the customary channels of justice; just as the brothers have unlawfully raped and killed, so Titus is determined to seek retribution on his own terms. While Titus employs a form of scripting when he usurps his victims’ opportunity for last words, this strategy for seizing control of the enemy’s dying scene is realized in its most potent form when it occurs in the context of a play or

masque, as in *Women Beware Women*. In Middleton's play, the deaths of several characters are achieved during a court performance of a masque in celebration of the nuptials of the Duke and Bianca; the deaths of Isabella and Livia in particular are to a significant degree shaped by their scripted lines, so that the authenticity of their final speeches is compromised by the roles they have assumed.

Isabella, in the role of a lover, has a final speech within the masque, half of which is scripted, and the other half an aside. In character, she delivers her lines: "And after sighs, contrition's truest odours, / I offer to thy powerful deity / This precious incense. May it ascend peacefully" (5.1.135-36). In her aside, she signals to the audience her intention of dispatching her Aunt Livia through the medium of poisoned incense:

And if it keep true touch, my good aunt Juno,  
 'Twill try your immortality er't be long.  
 I fear you'll never get so nigh heaven again  
 When you're once down. (138-41)

In the speech that follows, Livia's lines are also a combination of script and aside, and her lines are self-interrupted by the first symptoms of poisoning:

This savour overcomes me. –  
 Now, for a sign of wealth and golden days,  
 Bright-eyed prosperity which all couples love,  
 Ay, and makes love, take that. (151-54)

According to the stage directions, she "*throws flaming gold*" upon Isabella, who "*falls and dies*", and Livia concludes her scripted speech with the ironic, mocking lines, "Our brother Jove / Never denies us of his burning treasure, / T'express bounty" (155-56). The conventions of performance permit acts of revenge to be

enacted before the very eyes of the spectators, without the audience realizing at first exactly what they are witnessing. Thus the Duke, observing the masque, comments that the action “swerves a little from the argument” (160); it is only when the number of onstage deaths increases and the performance begins to disintegrate that the ulterior purpose of the performance is discovered. The Duke declares the plot to be “drawn false”, and Livia is no longer able to follow her scripted lines:

O, I am sick to th’death. Let me down quickly.

This fume is deadly. O, ’t has poisoned me!

*[She is let down to the stage, with the Cupids]*

My subtlety is sped: her art has quitted me;

My own ambition pulls me down to ruin. (168-71)

With a rueful admission of defeat, she dies. Hippolito, mortally struck by the Cupids’ poisoned arrows, explains to the Duke what has happened, observing that “Vengeance met vengeance, / Like a set match, as if the plagues of sin / Had been agreed to meet here all together” (195-97). The Duke exclaims over the “great mischiefs” that “[m]asque in expected pleasures”, pronouncing them “most fearfully ominous” (209-211). His words in themselves are a summation of the strategy of scripting.

The scenes already discussed represent reasonably straightforward examples of the revenger’s strategies of silencing and scripting, which occur within the wider context of the good quarrel as a challenge to the notion of the good Christian death. The plays that follow are the primary focus of this chapter, and further explore the revenger’s strategies for controlling the enemy’s dying scene. Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* features a scene of theatrical performance that

pushes the possibilities of scripting to an unprecedented extreme; Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* boasts an avenger who employs the technique of scripting in a number of different ways, and whose approach to visiting death upon his enemies is inherently and unabashedly theatrical. In Webster's revenge tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, the most prominent figures of revenge transform the context of the dying scene through significant reversals in perspective, thus revealing complexity of character specifically through the medium of their dying utterances.

Maus observes that, with his *Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd "pioneers English revenge tragedy in the late 1580s", influencing the subsequent appearance of bold, innovative revenge plays in the first two decades or so of the seventeenth century (Introduction, *Four Revenge Tragedies* xiv). One of the notable features of Kyd's play which is borrowed and varied in later plays is the incorporation of a performance at court – as in *Women Beware Women* – as an essential part of the hero's revenge plan, yet Kyd's treatment of this tactic is particularly contrived and complex. In avenging the murder of his son Horatio, Hieronimo cunningly employs the strategy of scripting, in the context of a play, and casts his enemies in the leading roles. In doing so, he kills them both publicly and clandestinely. He uses the drama as a device to ensure that the deaths of his adversaries are openly witnessed by members of the court, then triumphantly reveals the true meaning of the performance.

Hieronimo assumes the role of director for his previously-written university play, *Soliman and Perseda*, providing scripts for his adversaries, Lorenzo and Balthazar, and for his ally, Bel-Imperia. He then gives the instruction that each of them, including himself, must "act his part / In unknown

languages, / That it may breed the more variety”; speaking their various parts in Latin, Greek, Italian and French (*Spanish Tragedy* 4.1.166-71). Balthazar protests that this will be “a mere confusion / And hardly shall we all be understood”, but Hieronimo insists that “the conclusion / Shall prove the invention and all was good” (174-77).

Alone on the stage, Hieronimo concludes this scene of preparation with the observation, “Now shall I see the fall of Babylon / Wrought by the heavens in this confusion” (189-90). Maus observes in a footnote that “Revelations 18 describes the destruction of Babylon, the city of sinful luxury. Hieronimo conflates Babylon with the Tower of Babel, erected to challenge God’s supremacy; God punished its builders by making them speak mutually unintelligible languages” (Introduction, *Four Revenge Tragedies* 348n189). There has been some recent debate (2009) in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* as to whether Hieronimo has his characters within the court play speak quite literally in Latin, Greek, Italian and French, or has them deliver their lines in English. I believe the latter option to have been most likely, and agree with Brian Vickers’s conclusion that the “idea of a polylingual performance was just an obfuscatory tactic, designed to make Hieronimo’s project seem all the more eccentric, and to lull his victims into a sense of safety” (10). Only the members of the court audience watching *Soliman and Perseda* need to be confused, after all; those watching *The Spanish Tragedy* would have understood the convention and accepted its logic.

On one level, Hieronimo wishes to recreate the confusion of Babel by similarly mixing up languages, usurping God’s role in meting out punishment to his enemies. Yet this also accomplishes a secondary goal: these set, scripted speeches frustrate any attempt that Lorenzo and Balthazar might make to utter a

conscious and authentic final speech, even if they knew that they were about to die. Thus, at the same time that the strategy involves a public performance, it is also a deliberate manipulation of the dying scene in the sense that the opportunity for conscious and meaningful final utterance is removed. Scott McMillin points out that Hieronimo uses “foreign tongues” to make the language of his play inaccessible to his audience, and compounds this confusion by having his performers “die rather than act.” In this way, the “royal spectators are discovering the gap between the clarity of the world they expect and the outspoken incomprehensibility of the world the poet-revenger creates” (“Figure of Silence” 46). Thus, to bring about a successful outcome, Hieronimo merges the roles of playwright, director and actor.

*Soliman and Perseda* is duly performed. As Erasto, Lorenzo’s scripted final lines are, “Thrice happy is Erasto that thou livest; / Rhodes’ loss is nothing to Erasto’s joy; / Sith his Perseda lives, his life survives” (*Spanish Tragedy* 4.4.35-37). Balthazar’s lines also ironically emphasize survival in the face of loss:

Yet liveth Soliman to comfort thee.  
 Fair queen of beauty, let not favour die,  
 But with a gracious eye behold his grief,  
 That with Perseda’s beauty is increased,  
 If by Perseda his grief be not released. (53-57)

Hieronimo speaks the following lines, before stabbing Lorenzo-as-Erasto:

“Erasto, Soliman saluteth thee, / And lets thee wit by me his highness’ will, / Which is, thou shouldst be thus employed” (49-51).

Whereas Lorenzo and Balthazar unwittingly conspire in their own deaths, Bel-imperia embraces the opportunity offered by the play to take her own life.

Although she too follows the script provided for her by Hieronimo, the final lines she declaims before stabbing herself are spoken with a personal emphasis, for Perseda's loss of Erasto is parallel to her own losses of both Don Andrea and Horatio; moreover, they achieve a particular poignancy in that they are made in the full awareness that they will be her last. Despite the scripted nature of her speech, then, her words achieve, paradoxically, a form of authenticity that is entirely absent in the speeches of her fellow performers:

Tyrant, desist soliciting vain suits;  
 Relentless are mine ears to thy laments,  
 As thy butcher is pitiless and base,  
 Which seized on my Erasto, harmless knight.  
 Yet by thy power thou thinkest to command,  
 And to thy power Perseda doth obey;  
 But were she able, thus she would revenge  
 Thy treacheries on thee, ignoble prince! (58-65)

At this point, she stabs Balthazar, then utters her final line before stabbing herself: "And on herself she would be thus revenged" (66). The line implies that her suicide was planned before the performance, rather than being an impulsive act; her collusion in the deaths of Lorenzo and Balthazar would be punishable by death, were she to live, so that her pre-emptive action is a way of exercising a measure of control over her own exit. In so doing, she also embodies the convention that the avenger must ultimately die, following the fulfilment of the quarrel, and regardless of how justified the motivation for revenge.

Ironically, the Viceroy observes that Bel-imperia "plays Perseda well", and adds, "Were this in earnest, Bel-imperia, / You would be better to my son

than so” (68-70). The King asks what is to follow, and Hieronimo immediately begins to dispel the illusion: “Here break we off our sundry languages, / And thus conclude I in our vulgar tongue” (73-74). He draws attention to the artifice of theatre and the thwarting of the audience’s expectations: the play he has presented is not “fabulously counterfeit”; the actors do not “die today, for fashioning our scene”, only “in a minute starting up again, / Revive to please tomorrow’s audience” (76-81). The ingenuity of Hieronimo’s strategy for revenge is that it achieves the success of a private, concealed intention through the medium of an open, theatrical performance; as Hieronimo’s ulterior motive is both concealed and achieved through the performance of *Soliman and Perseda*, so the dying utterances of his enemies are eclipsed by his theatrical contrivance.

In this lengthy scene, Hieronimo’s explanatory speech has the structure of a confession; it constitutes a grieving lament for his son and wife, as well as a relieved and triumphant expression of his success in eliminating his enemies. He intends the conclusion of this explanation to represent his final words:

And, princes, now behold Hieronimo,  
 Author and actor in this tragedy,  
 Bearing his latest fortune in his fist;  
 And will as resolute conclude his part  
 As any of the actors gone before.  
 And, gentles, thus I end my play;  
 Urge no more words, I have no more to say. (145-51)

In this speech, he represents himself as “author and actor”; he performs, of course, as a conventional actor and as the self-directed agent of retribution. Following the couplet that concludes this speech, the stage directions indicate that Hieronimo

“*runs to hang himself*”; he is prevented, however, and in the verbal exchange that results, the Duke and the Viceroy attempt to assume control of the situation by making Hieronimo speak. He refuses to comply, and concludes the following lines by biting out his own tongue: “And therefore, in despite of all thy threats, / Pleased with their deaths, and eased with their revenge, / First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart” (189-91).

This shocking and grotesque act is a sensational piece of theatre, entirely undiminished by its implausibility; the difficulty of actually biting out one’s own tongue is subordinate to its effectiveness as an expression of defiance and a refusal, on Hieronimo’s part, to compromise the success of his enterprise. The spectacle of his bleeding mouth – and the stage business that the actor could employ, in displaying the dismembered tongue – represent a horrific, but triumphant, conclusion to Hieronimo’s ‘confessional’ speech. Hieronimo has no interest in final words as a preparative for death, only as the conclusion to his revenge. Further speech, in this scenario, would represent a loss of the control that he has maintained throughout the court performance.

Defiant to the end, Hieronimo again proves elusive to his enemies as he gestures for a knife “to mend his pen” (199), stabbing first Castile and then himself. McMillin observes that “language and silence come to the same point in the end, a point of identity where the present reacts upon the past and where acting and dying are figures of each other” (“Figure of Silence” 48). Hieronimo has acted variously in his role as revenger, as Soliman in *Soliman and Perseda*, and as a dying man who utters his last confession; his strategy of scripting finally yields to self-silencing when he has, to his own satisfaction, resolved the quarrel which has motivated him throughout the play.

Additions were made to the 1592 version of *The Spanish Tragedy*, appearing in the 1602 edition of the play. Maus voices the common claim that they were “probably written in the late 1590s to enhance a revival of a highly popular but perhaps over-familiar play”, and suggests that Ben Jonson may have been their author (Introduction, *Four Revenge Tragedies* 82). Of particular interest to the present discussion is the fifth addition, which replaces part of the scene following the performance of *Soliman and Perseda*, when Hieronimo directly confronts the King, the Viceroy, and Castile. Interestingly, the emphasis on the tension between speaking and speechlessness that is an essential feature of the scene in the 1587 version of the play is noticeably absent from the later edition.

In the 1602 text the boastfulness of Hieronimo’s defiance is emphasized; the power and unassailability of his enforced silence in the power struggle with his adversaries is subordinate to the triumph he expresses in the attainment of his revenge:

I tell thee, viceroy, this day I have seen revenge.  
 And in that sight am grown a prouder monarch,  
 Than ever sat under the crown of Spain.  
 Had I as many lives as there be stars,  
 As many heavens to go to, as those lives,  
 I’d give them all, aye, and my soul to boot,  
 But I would see thee ride in this red pool. (*Spanish Tragedy*  
 4.4.10-16)

The success of his enterprise makes Hieronimo a “monarch”, and is worth the sacrifice of heaven and soul for the sake of the “red pool” of his enemies’ blood.

The inflammatory quality of this speech is worthy of Aaron or Barabas, although Hieronimo is motivated, at least initially, by intense grief for the loss of his son and his wife. The fulfilment of his desire for retribution leaves Hieronimo with no further purpose in life, and he thus declares himself, not merely unafraid to die, but eager to be released: “Methinks since I grew inward with revenge / I cannot look with scorn enough on death” (28-29).

With the replacement of the 1587 section, Hieronimo’s biting out of his tongue is still an act of defiance, but it no longer functions as the culmination of the earlier exchange, with its emphasis upon ‘speaking’ and ‘telling’. There is a shift in emphasis between the two editions of the scene: in the earlier version, Hieronimo’s ‘confession’ is longer, and is modelled more closely on the structure of the conventional dying speech. In the 1602 version, the focus is on Hieronimo’s engagement with the ‘good quarrel’, and his vehemence in defending his cause.

The use of theatrical performance as a deliberate strategy for attaining revenge is also a feature of Middleton’s *Revenger’s Tragedy*, as it is, too, in *Women Beware Women* and *The Spanish Tragedy*. However, whereas Hieronimo’s use of *Soliman and Perseda* represents the culmination of his vendetta, Vindice has a distinctly theatrical flair throughout the play, manipulating dangerous circumstances with boldness and pursuing his revenge with a curious blend of grim determination and sinister playfulness.

In the play’s first scene, Vindice plans to assume a disguise, an opportunity offered by Lussurioso, the Duke’s son, who requires a “strange-digested fellow”, a “base-coined pander”, to organize sexual trysts on his behalf (*Revenger’s Tragedy* 1.1.76, 81). Thus, right from the beginning of the drama,

Vindice seizes upon methods of pursuing vengeance that are distinctly theatrical in nature. In his disguise as Piato, Vindice revenges himself on the Duke for having, nine years earlier, poisoned his betrothed. He arranges a secret assignation, poisoning the mouth of Gloriana's skull and concealing the relic behind tires and a mask. He burns incense to sweeten the air, assuring his brother Hippolito,

I have not fashioned this only for show  
 And useless property. No, it shall bear a part  
 E'en in it own revenge. This very skull  
 Whose mistress the Duke poisoned with this drug,  
 The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenged  
 In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death. (3.5.100-105)

To satisfy Vindice, the Duke's punishment must mirror Gloriana's murder; the Duke must kiss the same mouth and be administered the same type of poison that he used to kill Gloriana. Kerrigan notes the importance of bodies in revenge tragedy: "As an eye is taken for an eye, a tooth punched out for a tooth, both agents have registered upon them what they have inflicted on the other" (4).

While this symbolic equivalence has the appeal of symmetry, however, Vindice's use of his dead beloved's skull has more than a touch of the unsavoury about it: aside from the unanswerable questions it raises about how he acquired the relic in the first place, the point is that Vindice uses it to a far more macabre purpose than a mere *memento mori*. Gloriana's skull becomes an object, a prop, in a performance of Vindice's devising, as he clothes her in a costume and casts her in the role of lover, so that she becomes a silent accessory to murder. His use of the skull suggests that his grief at her loss has become subordinated to his

determination to be revenged; thus he performs his role of Piato as she plays the role of fatal lover.

Baited irresistibly, the unsuspecting Duke surrenders to the fatal kiss, whose effect is immediate; the clandestine nature of the meeting ensures that Vindice and Hippolito hold him securely in their power. In order for Vindice to claim that power, it is essential that the Duke is made aware of the identity of his tormenters, and of their reasons for taking revenge upon him. Beyond the ability to argue or resist, he succumbs both to pain and to the irreverent wit of his tormentors:

DUKE. My teeth are eaten out.

VINDICE. Hadst any left?

HIPPOLITO. I think but few.

VINDICE. Then those that did eat are eaten.

DUKE. O, my tongue!

VINDICE. Your tongue? 'Twill teach you to

kiss closer . . . (*Revenger's Tragedy* 3.5.160-63)

Vindice and Hippolito playfully seize upon the Duke's words, using them to mock his suffering and to demonstrate their refusal to extend him mercy in his dying moments. That the poison specifically targets his mouth is an appropriate punishment for the Duke, for the brothers remind him that their father "Fell sick upon the infection of thy frowns / And died in sadness", and he "had his tongue, yet grief made him die speechless" (169-72). Thus, Vindice's initial triumph is in attaining revenge for the death of Gloriana, and in reducing the Duke to the same state of speechlessness as his father; this pleasure is further intensified when the brothers furnish ocular proof of the relationship between the Duchess and the

Duke's bastard son, Spurio. Powerless to intervene, he becomes an unwilling spectator to the lovers' shared banquet, exclaiming, "O, kill me not with that sight", while Vindice vows, "Thou shalt not lose that sight for all thy dukedom" (189-90). In the darkness, and under cover of loud music, Vindice ensures that the dying man is silenced through physical coercion:

Nay, faith, we'll have you hushed. [*To Hippolito*] Now

with thy dagger

Nail down his tongue, and mine shall keep possession

About his heart. If he but gasp, he dies.

We dread not death to quittance injuries. (195-98)

Made an unwilling spectator to the scene, and tortured by the spectacle of his wife and son exchanging a kiss, the duke makes a final attempt at speech:

DUKE. I cannot brook —

[*Vindice kills him*]

VINDICE. The brook is turned to blood . . . (219)

Cut off mid-line, the Duke is silenced completely, his arrested line punningly concluded by Vindice; the avenger's interruption ensures that he, rather than the Duke, has the last word in this theatrically manipulated scene of revenge.

Vindice's self-imposed task is not complete, however, until he has also brought down the Duke's son and heir, Lussurioso, whose lascivious eye has fallen on the brothers' sister, Castiza. Just as Hieronimo takes advantage of the court's request for entertainment, giving him the opportunity to perform *Soliman and Perseda* as a cover for revenge, so does Vindice use the opportunity afforded by the revels to celebrate Lussurioso's rise to the dukedom, following his father's

death. In this play, a masque is performed, and Vindice prepares the Lords ahead of time for what must happen. He promises them that,

Within a strain or two we shall find leisure  
 To steal our swords out handsomely  
 And, when they think their pleasure sweet and good,  
 In midst of all their joys they shall sigh blood. (5.2.19-22)

With a keen sense of timing, and a desire to see the action performed “handsomely”, Vindice – like Hieronimo – fulfils the role of director, ensuring that the event will be managed successfully.

Under cover of the “*masque of revengers*”, then, Vindice, Hippolito and the Lords kill Lussurioso and three others at their table. Amid Lussurioso’s dying groans, the “*masque of intended murderers*” enters, consisting of the brothers Ambizioso and Supervacuo, the bastard Spurio, and a fourth man (41, 48). They are startled to discover that their own intentions have already been enacted by the others, and they turn instead upon each other. Vindice calls upon the Guard, while Lussurioso’s groans continue; the dying man’s final words – “Farewell to all. / He that climbs highest has the greatest fall. / My tongue is out of office” – prompt Vindice to hiss in his ear,

VINDICE. Now thou’lt not prate on’t,

’twas Vindice murdered thee –

LUSSURIOSO. O!

VINDICE. Murdered thy father –

LUSSURIOSO. O!

VINDICE. And I am he.

[*Lussurioso dies*]

Tell nobody. (74-80)

Vindice subjects his victim to a form of mental torture similar to that used earlier on the Duke; by imposing his own script upon his adversary's dying moments, Vindice silences him at the same time. He also ensures that Lussurioso dies in the full knowledge of who has killed him, for it is an essential part of the revenge 'script' – and the hero's control over the dying scene – that the resolution of the quarrel is made clear to the villain. That Lussurioso is reduced to single, inarticulate syllables ensures that this knowledge is received at the point at which he can no longer speak and expose his killer.

Following Lussurioso's death, and heartened by the success of his venture, Vindice recklessly confesses to Antonio – next in line for the dukedom – that he and Hippolito killed the old Duke: "We may be bold / To speak it now. 'Twas somewhat witty-carried, / Though we say it. 'Twas we two murdered him" (96-98). In keeping with his theatrical bias, Vindice emphasizes the cleverness with which he has devised his stratagems, rather than justifying his actions in terms of his outrage at previous injustices. As a result, Antonio has them immediately seized, to be removed for "speedy execution" (101). In his valedictory speech before being escorted offstage, Vindice admits to the seeming inevitability of this outcome:

'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes.

When murd'rers shut deeds close, this curse does seal 'em:

If none disclose 'em, they themselves reveal 'em.

This murder might have slept in tongueless brass,

But for ourselves, and the world died an ass. (109-13)

His “tongueless brass” echoes the play’s previous references to the tongue, a preoccupation noted by J. L. Simmons (56). As the Duke’s tongue is eaten by poison and threatened with being nailed if he attempts to speak – and as Lussurioso declares his dying tongue to be “out of office” – so the revelation of the revenge plot evades the verbal concealment referred to in Vindice’s last speech. Moreover, these lines suggest the notion of providence, as in the murder plays, yet here it is Vindice who manipulates events, with a consistently theatrical style. The dramatic nature of the revenge strategy is also emphasized, as Vindice refers ironically to his own disguise:

Now I remember too, here was Piato  
 Brought forth a knavish sentence once:  
 ‘No doubt’, said he, ‘but time  
 Will make the murderer bring forth himself’.  
 ’Tis well he died; he was a witch. (*Revenger’s Tragedy* 5.2.114-  
 18)

Despite his immediate death sentence, however, Vindice pronounces himself satisfied: “We have enough, i’faith: / We’re well, our mother turned, our sister true; / We die after a nest of dukes. Adieu” (123-25). He accepts death with a good grace, appearing to consider the quarrel – and the demise of a “nest of dukes” – a worthwhile exchange for his own life.

The two remaining plays to be discussed in the present chapter are Webster’s *White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Violent deaths abound in these plays, and the verbal responses of the characters to their deaths are various; as the Webster urchin emphatically asserts in *Shakespeare in Love*, “Plenty of blood. That is the only writing” (Norman and Stoppard 54).

In *The White Devil*, there are three major dying scenes that are notable for their sustained emphasis on final words, including those of Duke Brachiano, Vittoria, and Flamineo. There are also two shorter death speeches that are worth brief discussion, those of Zanche and Lodovico.

The Moor Zanche, Vittoria's servant, dies shortly before her mistress, demonstrating fearlessness in the face of death. Her racial difference becomes the context for her exchange with her killer; Gasparo calls her "blacke fury", and her witty and spirited response – which is also her final speech – takes up the preoccupation with colour:

I have blood

As red as either of theirs; wilt drinke some?

'Tis good for the falling sicknesse: I am proud

Death cannot alter my complexion,

For I shall neere looke pale. (*White Devil* 5.6.223-27)

The last line clearly echoes Vittoria's assertion that, if she looks pale, it is "for want of blood, not feare" (5.6.222). Zanche demonstrates a courage and willfulness that are equal to Vittoria's; faced with death, she obliterates the social gap between herself and her superiors on the grounds that her blood is equally precious. She refuses to be cowed by her captors, but is struck down by both Gasparo and Lodovico, earning scorn from Vittoria: "'Twas a manly blow; / The next thou giv'st, murder some sucking Infant, / And then thou wilt be famous" (228-30).

In contrast to these death scenes, that of Brachiano is lengthy and carefully paced, sustaining the tension of his process of dying. Michael Cameron Andrews observes that Webster is more than usually "concerned with what Bracciano

experiences during his last moments”, as his death is “protracted far beyond the usual limits of death-by-poison” (55-56). However implausible this prolonged death may be, it achieves great impact dramatically, for we see the changing effects of poison in the human body and the process of physical and mental disintegration. Moreover, this episode is an excellent example of how the scene of dying and the last utterance may be manipulated and controlled, and the manner in which the usual formulas for preparing for death may be distorted.

There are marked transitions that occur within this prolonged dying scene, while the full process of Brachiano’s death may be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase is initiated when he is poisoned by the beaver of his helmet, prepared for him by Lodovico in the previous scene (*White Devil* 5.2.74). Fighting at the Barriers, the Duke calls for an armourer to tear off his beaver, crying, “O my braine’s on fire, the helmet is poison’d” (5.3.4). When the physicians arrive, he pronounces himself

. . . gone already: the infection  
 Flies to the braine and heart. O thou strong heart!  
 There’s such a covenant ’twene the world and it,  
 They’re loath to breake. (12-15)

The word “covenant” has biblical overtones, suggesting worship of God, but ironically, it is used here in the secular context of the bond between “the heart” and “the world”.

In this first phase (lines 12-40) the Duke is lucid, intensely aware of what he is undergoing; he has his son removed from the chamber, asks if the poison is mortal, and laments his fate: “I that have given life to offending slaves / And wretched murderers, have I not power / To lengthen mine owne a twelve-month?”

(23-25). For Brachiano, the awareness of approaching death means a loss of control, the stripping away of his authority and autonomy. He warns Vittoria not to kiss him, “for I shall poyson thee”, and he is aware that Francisco is responsible for the poisoning (26-27). The gentleness of natural death is juxtaposed with the violence of his body’s response to the poison, while his ducal status can achieve no mitigation of his suffering:

O thou soft naturall death, that art joint-twin  
 To sweetest slumber: no rough-bearded Comet  
 Stares on thy milde departure: the dull Owle  
 Beates not against thy casement: the hoarse wolfe  
 Sents not thy carion. Pitty windes thy coarse,  
 Whilst horroure waights on Princes. (29-34)

Acutely aware of the “horroure” of his situation, the Duke is in control of his own speech, and his thoughts are clear and articulate. His regret at dying is expressed in his juxtaposition of words: “soft”, “sweetest slumber”, “milde”, and “pitty” are contrasted with “stares”, “beates”, “carion” and “horroure”. The association of “dull Owle”, “hoarse wolfe” and “carion” are associated with violent death – the owl a portent of dying – a preoccupation which is resumed in the next part of his speech.

The first phase of dying is concluded as he insists, “On paine of death, let no man name death to me, / It is a word infinitely terrible” (39-40). Although aware that his time is limited, and powerless to alter his fate, his projection of authority here represents an attempt to maintain some form of control over his dying moments, to retain a shred of the power to which he has been accustomed.

He withdraws from the stage, accompanied by the assassins Lodovico and Gasparo, who are both disguised as Franciscans.

Brachiano is returned to the stage in a bed; during this second phase of dying (lines 80-125) he is distracted and hallucinatory. His thoughts are disjointed, but he unwittingly makes admissions of guilt over his own practices – “Indeed I am too blame” (86). As his body becomes increasingly ravaged by poison, he becomes preoccupied with food and appetite, calling first for “quailes to supper”, then for fried dog-fish, for “Your Quailes feed on poison” (90-91). He is still aware, to some extent, that he has been poisoned, but a brief moment of clarity as he recalls “That old dog-fox, that Politician Florence!”, is followed by an hallucination in which he appears to see the devil: “I know him by a great rose he weares on’s shooe / To hide his cloven foot”, and vows to “dispute” with him, as “a rare linguist” (92-105). He recognizes Flamineo, but he no longer appears to know Vittoria, and is openly amused at the sight of her powdered hair, that “makes her looke as if she had sinn’d in the Pastrie” (118). Brachiano’s mental confusion and disordered words indicate that he is no longer in control of his dying speech; the poison modifies his dying ‘script’ as it attacks both mind and body.

During the third phase of dying, the Duke is robbed of the opportunity for preparation for death in a very direct and parodic fashion; the scene also incorporates silencing and a form of scripting. The stage directions specify that Brachiano “*seemes heare neare his end*”, as the poison has been at work for a considerable time. His tormentors “*in the habit of / Capuchins present him in his bed with a Crucifix and hallowed candle*”; he descends into wordlessness as his eyes, fixed on the crucifix, “Melt into teares” (128-133). This detail is crucial, for

it indicates that the duke has returned to himself enough to comprehend what is happening, and that his mental suffering will thereby be intensified up until the moment of his death.

Susan H. McLeod observes that the next part of the scene represents “an inversion of the ceremony which follows the last anointing (sic) in the *Roman Ritual* – the *Commendatio Animae*, or the commending of the departing soul to God” (50). The inversion of the ‘script’ of the *Commendatio* is at once a method of silencing Brachiano and a reminder, in an explicitly Christian context, of the torment – for the damned – that will follow death. Throughout the “deliberate parody” of this ritual – including the crucifix and candle, whispering into the duke’s ear, and the request for all others to leave the room when “participation in the ceremony” (50-51) was considered important – Brachiano remains silent, the opportunity to speak displaced by the sinister ministrations of Lodovico and Gasparo:

GASPARO. *Brachiano.*  
 LODOVICO. Devill *Brachiano*. Thou art damn’d.  
 GASPARO. Perpetually.  
 GASPARO. A slave condemn’d, and given up to the  
                   gallowes  
 Is thy great Lord and Master. (*White Devil* 5.3.147-50)

The “Devill” Brachiano is “damn’d”, his assassins subjecting him to humiliation by figuring themselves as executioners, and their victim a “slave” to be hanged, a form of public punishment associated with felons of lower social status. The two killers continue to torment him remorselessly, deliberately preventing any attempt he might make to speak authentically:

GASPARO. Now there's Mercarie.

LODOVICO. And copperesse.

GASPARO. And quicke-silver.

LODOVICO. With other develish potticarie stuffe

A melting in your polliticke braines: do'st heare? (158-60)

They follow their own rapid dialogue, continuing to silence him, and filling that silence with the names of the poisons that are killing him. Like Vindice and Hippolito, they clearly identify themselves to their victim, so that Brachiano can have no doubts as to who his persecutors are:

GASPARO. This is Count *Lodovico*.

LODOVICO. This *Gasparo*.

And thou shalt die like a poore rogue.

GASPARO. And stinke

Like a dead flie-blowne dog.

LODOVICO. And be forgotten before thy funerall sermon. (161-64)

Gasparo picks up the animal motif from Brachiano's earlier speech; here, the dog is dead and already subject to decomposition.

Brachiano is thus brought back to an awareness of the grotesque, animal body as he is simultaneously denied the possibility of personal redemption. In the Latin litany just prior to this exchange, he is reminded of the "spiritual armor" that will be needed "on the day he will have to fight against the devil"; the literal contamination of his beaver thus acquires an ironic symbolic significance (McLeod 50). The next part of the ceremony "calls for a series of prayers for the deliverance of the soul from the devil and its acceptance into heaven", while in the

final part of the ceremony the dying person was to utter the words, ‘Jesus, Jesus, Jesus’ (50-51). Yet Brachiano instead calls out – in a last-moment return to lucidity – “*Vittoria? Vittoria!*” (*White Devil* 5.3.165). McLeod points out that he “has not called upon his Savior and Lord, as a dying man should in his last breath, but on the white devil – the woman who has led him to his ruin”, so that his “last words are an indication that he is indeed lost, damned perpetually” (51). His final words also startle his tormentors – “Come to himselfe againe. Wee are undone” (*White Devil* 166) – prompting Lodovico to immediately dispatch their victim by strangulation. Brachiano’s long dying scene is therefore framed by two forms of murder; the process of death is begun by poison, and brought to a close by suffocation.

The scene is one of particular psychological cruelty: Brachiano is subjected to a deliberate parody of a Christian ritual considered – from the early modern perspective – to be essential at the time of death. His torment is prolonged and unrelieved, for he is entirely at the mercy of Lodovico and Gasparo.

Vittoria dies in the last scene of the play, along with her brother, Flamineo. She refuses to betray any fear of death in the presence of her enemies, vowing, “I shall wellcome death / As Princes doe some great Embassadors; / Ile meete thy weapon halfe way” (5.6.215-217). Lodovico bluntly challenges her: “Thou dost tremble, / Mee thinkes feare should dissolve thee into ayre”; to which she retorts, with rhyme for emphasis,

O thou art deceiv’d, I am to true a woman:

Conceit can never kill me: Ile tell thee what,

I will not in my death shed one base teare,

Or if looke pale, for want of blood, not feare. (217-22)

Vittoria becomes more contemplative as death approaches, yet when she responds to Flamineo she seems to speak as much to herself as to him: “My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme, / Is driven I know not whither” (243-44). Vittoria’s soul appears to have no Christian anchor, and her sense of directionlessness leaves her without a ‘script’ to keep her focused; she experiences these moments before death as being lost in an inner tempest, her soul adrift as if in danger of imminent shipwreck. Yet despite the lack of any sense of certainty, her final two lines combine bitterness, regret and resignation, rather than expressing fear: “O happy they that never saw the Court, / „Nor ever knew great Man but by report” (256-57).

Vittoria’s brother Flamineo has the distinction of having two sets of dying speeches, both of which are self-consciously theatrical, yet in distinctly different ways. Flamineo’s actual death is anticipated – as Nicholas Brooke points out – by the scene of his mock death (43-44), in which he urges a suicide pact between himself and Vittoria, claiming that he has made a vow to the (now dead) Duke, that “Neither your selfe, nor I should out-live him, / The numbring of foure howers” (*White Devil* 5.6.34-35).<sup>67</sup> Flamineo argues that they are as unsafe as was Brachiano; when Vittoria protests that this evidence of her brother’s “melancholy and dispaire”, he asks, “shall we groane in irons, / Or be a shamefull and a waighty burthen / To a publicke scaffold?” (42-47). She counters this with an orthodox objection to suicide: “Are you growne an Atheist? Will you turne

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<sup>67</sup> Brooke points out that the scene of Flamineo’s mock death is “amazingly close to the language he uses 160 lines later, when he actually dies”, arguing that the “effect is of a parody in advance.” When death arrives, however, “Flamineo’s jesting tone remains, but its edge is reversed and it is now sharply serious. Laughter is still a possibility; but our immediate urge to laugh has been exorcised by the mock death”, as we are “directed to the intensity within the jests” (43, 45).

your body, / Which is the goodly pallace of the soule, / To the soules slaughter house?" (55-57).

Flamineo pronounces it a "wretched and most miserable life, / Which is not able to dye" (79-80). He produces pistols, and Vittoria and Zanche appear to agree to the pact; Flamineo then formulates the beginning of a dying speech, complete with pistols as props:

Then here's an end of me: fare-well day-light;  
 And ô contemptible Physike! that dost take  
 So long a study, onely to preserve  
 So short a life, I take my leave of thee.  
 These are two cupping-glasses, that shall draw  
 All my infected bloud out. Are you ready? (99-104)

This part of Flamineo's counterfeit death speech employs the popular trope of death as physic, and the weapon by which he is to die a physician's curative instrument. Thus far, then, it is a conventional speech, and one which is self-consciously theatrical; it represents not merely the kind of speech that Flamineo might expect a dying man to make, but may also be interpreted – as Alexander Leggatt points out – as a parody of the sort of speech often heard upon the commercial stage (*English Drama* 157).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> According to David Carnegie, the Red Bull Theatre in Clerkenwell, where *The White Devil* received a less than enthusiastic reception from the contemporary audience, had "a reputation for spectacle which appealed to London's less sophisticated audiences" (Theatrical Introduction 97). Webster himself characterizes his audience, in his preface to the play, as resembling "ignorant asses (who visiting Stationers shoppes their use is not to inquire for good bookes, but new bookes)" (140). Don D. Moore suggests that "[s]uch a house might well have been confused by a drama of old conventions but troublingly new ideas, with characters who did not fit the older stereotypes" (Introduction 3).

Flamineo enjoys indulging himself in a similar strain – “Whither shall I go now?” (*White Devil* 106) – and then urges them to shoot, itself perhaps an echo of the condemned prisoner’s instruction for the execution to ‘Strike’ at a public execution: “Of all deaths the violent death is best, / For from our selves it steales our selves so fast / The paine once apprehended is quite past” (114-16).

Traditionally, of course, sudden and violent death was feared, for it gave the surprised victim no opportunity to make preparation for the afterlife. As if the veil is already descending upon him, Flamineo exclaims, “O the waies darke and horrid! I cannot see, / Shall I have no company?” (135-36). He elaborates still further, incorporating the sort of description that Andrews calls a “catalog of some of death’s (conventional) harbingers” (21):

O I smell soote,  
 Most stinking soote, the chimnie is a fire,  
 My livers purboil’d like scotch holly-bread;  
 There’s a plumber, laying pipes in my guts, it scalds;  
 Wilt thou out-live mee? (*White Devil* 5.6.138-42)

According to Flamineo, the inside of his body is not merely a flaming chimney, but it is also capacious enough to accommodate a plumber laying burning pipes. The effect is both grotesque and comic; his speech begins with the alliterative “smell soote” and “stinking soote”, but the lines that follow are full of harsh consonants and halting syllables. In the words of Weis, Flamineo “enacts an evil-smelling internal combustion parody of imminent death” (xvii), and he appears to enjoy the theatricality of his own performance.

Flamineo’s mock death also draws attention to the tendency of Webster’s characters to continue performing, through having to rapidly adapt to the

circumstances in which they find themselves. For – in an ironic reversal – shortly after revealing the trick he has played upon Vittoria and Zanche, Flamineo is tied to a pillar by Gasparo and Lodovico, and is suddenly confronted with the inevitability of his own, actual, death. Even at this point, however, he inhabits a role; contemptuous of his killers, he points out to Lodovico that he kills “like a hangeman; a base hangman, / Not like a noble fellow; for thou seest / I cannot strike againe”, and declaring that he will carry his “owne commendations” to heaven (*White Devil* 5.6.188-90, 193). Lodovico’s line, “What dost think on?”, prompts Flamineo’s withdrawal into himself:

Nothing; of nothing: leave thy idle questions;

I am ith way to study a long silence,

To prate were idle; I remember nothing.

Thers nothing of so infinit vexation

As mans owne thoughts. (197-202)

When performing his mock death, Flamineo ‘prated’ like Vindice, enjoying the artifice of enacting death. Sobered by his abrupt confrontation with mortality, however, Flamineo’s energy dissipates; the repetition of the word ‘nothing’ and the reference to “a long silence” indicate his self-absorption and suggest that he desires nothing more than a quiet, uninterrupted space in which to contemplate his own death. In his theatrical introduction to the play, Carnegie suggests that Flamineo establishes a “complicit intimacy” with the audience, which “ensures audience sympathy” with him; thus, as his “desperation and stirrings of conscience . . . take increasing hold”, spectators are encouraged to focus on the “ethical complexity of his life and death” (85). Lodovico asks what Flamineo *thinks* about, but Flamineo replies that he *remembers* nothing; this shift in

emphasis suggests that the dying man is searching his memory, attempting to locate a source of philosophy, perhaps, that might be of use to him in the absence of the customary Christian rituals and consolations.

Now that Flamineo is injured and dying, the death-as-physic trope employed in his earlier mock death scene takes on a deeply personal significance, as he muses upon the weapon that wounded him:

. . . O what blade ist?

A Toledo, or an English Fox?

I ever thought a Cutler should distinguish

The cause of my death, rather then a Doctor.

Search my wound deeper: tent it with the steele that made it.

(230-34)

He witnesses the deaths of Zanche and Vittoria, speaking to them despite their states of insensibility, and muses to himself,

I doe not looke

Who went before, nor who shall follow mee;

Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end.

„While we looke up to heaven wee confound

„Knowledge with knowledge. O I am in a mist. (251-55)

Weis observes that, in this part of his dying speech, Flamineo “seems to say that his knowledge is confined to his own person, that matters relating to heaven lie beyond the scope of ordinary human intelligence”; the two types of knowledge he refers to are “basic, and ultimately limited, human knowledge, and ‘true’ knowledge of the kind assumed by divines or theologians” (386n255-9). In contrast to the bold theatricality of his earlier, faked death, Flamineo here appears

to be torn between a desire for inwardness and the need to self-consciously construct and perform his death in the presence of his adversaries. His words indicate that he is determined to die on his own terms, without false consolation – “at my selfe I will begin and end” – so that the closure he envisions for himself is like the tracing of a circle, the joining of self with self.

The last phase of Flamineo’s dying speech occurs after Vittoria’s final words, as he flounders in an inward “mist”. Like other Renaissance characters whose deaths are unusually prolonged – including Brachiano, earlier in the play – Flamineo appears to be close to death, only to revive sufficiently to conclude his dying speech: “I recover like a spent taper, for a flash, / And instantly go out” (*White Devil* 5.6.258-59). The next part of his speech seems to be directed toward the witnesses of the scene: “Let all that belong to Great men remember th’ould wives tradition, to be like the Lyons ith Tower on Candlemas day, to mourne if the Sunne shine, for feare of the pittiful remainder of winter to come” (260-62). Picking up the phrase “great man” from Vittoria’s last line, he sees those who have died in the revenge plot as playing parts that are directed by “Great men”; like captive lions, they are at the mercy of their master’s desires.

Flamineo again appears to move between the public and the private, as he shifts back to a more inward meditation upon his own demise:

’Tis well yet there’s some goodnesse in my death,  
 My life was a blacke charnell: I have cought  
 An everlasting could; I have lost my voice  
 Most irrecoverably . . . (263-66)

Curiously, Flamineo seems to exhibit, perhaps nostalgically, a desire for “some goodnesse”, to redeem the “blacke charnell” that was his life. In direct contrast to

his mock death, with its details of boiling guts, the process of dying is actually experienced as a “could” [cold] that is visited upon him, and the ebbing of life – ironically, for a dying utterance – is equated with the irrecoverable loss of his voice. Rather than expiring at this point, however, he returns his attentions to his killers, addressing them as “glorious villaines”, and looks at life with greater detachment: “„This busie trade of life appeares most vaine, / „Since rest breeds rest, where all seeke paine by paine” (266-68). In his final couplet he consciously rejects any form of Christian ceremony, as he refuses the “harsh flattering Bels” of his death knell, and invokes, instead, thunder to “strike lowde to my farewell” (269-70).

Flamineo appears to entertain no illusions about what will await him after death; his isolation and his refusal either to submit to his killers or to attempt to conform to an orthodox Christian death appear as a form of self-sufficiency, an acceptance of self and circumstances. Indeed, Neill argues that the type of death that is “welcomed” by Vittoria, Zanche, Flamineo and Lodovico is “quite explicitly the arbitrary *mors repentina* which the medieval imagination had found so terrifying” (34). He suggests that Webster, in his construction of their dying scenes, is therefore following the “new philosophy of death”, which rejects the “ritualized drama of confession and absolution” traditionally associated with the deathbed. Such rituals:

reduced the dying person to a passive sufferer whose only role was willingly to surrender the last frail trappings of selfhood; by contrast, to those who were ready to meet it, the once dreaded

*mors improvisa* provided the occasion for an improvisational theatre of defiance in which the power of death was subordinated to self-display. (*Issues of Death* 34-35)

Leggatt points to the contrast between Flamineo's "flash of defiance" and the "deliberate limpness of Vittoria's last words"; he argues that the effect "is not of a single, definitive reaction to death but of persistent shifting and variety. Flamineo and Vittoria are thinking, feeling, protesting and changing, right up to the end" (*English Drama* 158).

Although Flamineo is the last to die onstage, Lodovico is apprehended and condemned at the end of the play. He accepts his fate when he hears the arrival of the English Ambassador:

Ha, are wee betraid;  
 Why then lets constantly dye all together,  
 And having finisht this most noble deede,  
 Defy the worst of fate; not feare to bleed. (*White Devil* 5.6.272-75)

Lodovico emphasizes the collective nature of the quarrel in his phrase "dye all together", and appears to have almost anticipated his own death. He evidently feels that his life is worth losing in the service of revenge, for he speaks of the quarrel as "this most noble deede"; he defies fate – implying that the outcome has been inevitable – and refuses to acknowledge bloodshed as an occasion for fear. Shot and wounded, he admits to having "feare I shall be tane", but his last speech is an unflinching expression of defiance, a clear instance of willful self-fashioning:

I do glory yet,  
 That I can call this act mine owne: For my part,

The racke, the gallowes, and the torturing wheele  
 Shall bee but sound sleepes to me; here's my rest:

„I limb'd this night-peece and it was my best. (277, 288-92)

Lodovico represents his dark achievement as an artistic masterpiece, a visually arresting tableau of dead bodies that may be viewed by the audience. As Leggatt observes, Lodovico is “an artist in murder”; like Vindice, he is “content to die if he can go with style” (*English Drama* 155). Yet his final speech is valedictory, and the audience does not see him punished; moreover, we have only his inflated claim to fearlessness as he is led offstage. If this is an unsettling conclusion, it is also inevitable, for Flamineo's two deaths – the fake one and the ‘real’ one – constitute the most compelling treatment of dying speeches in the play. After this, Lodovico's echo of defiance can only appear to be an empty promise.

As in *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* features similar shifts in the nuances of the dying speech, particularly that of Bosola. In a further resemblance to the earlier play, there are deaths in *The Duchess of Malfi* which are treated briefly, with few last words, as well as more spectacular deaths, characterized by the impressiveness of the characters' dying speeches. Among the minor deaths are those of Cariola (the Duchess's waiting-woman), Julia (the Cardinal's mistress) and Antonio (the Duchess's husband). In addition to that of Bosola, the more notable deaths include those of the Duchess, Ferdinand, and the Cardinal.

Cariola – unlike Zanche in *The White Devil* – exhibits a great fear of death, and repeatedly attempts to escape her fate by pleading with her captors. She witnesses the strangulation of the Duchess and the order for the children to be likewise dispatched; she then addresses Bosola with the words, “Oh you are damn'd / Perpetually for this: My turne is next, / Is't not so ordered?” (*Duchess*

4.2.227-29). He replies, “Yes, and I am glad / You are so well prepared for’t.”

She immediately disabuses him of this notion:

You are deceiv’d Sir,

I am not prepar’d for’t, I will not die,

I will first come to my answere; and know

How I have offended. (230-33)

Her plea for justice ignored, Cariola next argues that she “will not” and “must not” die, for she is “contracted / To a young Gentle-man” (235-36). The executioner presents her with a wedding ring in the form of a noose; she “bites: and scratches”, then tries another strategy: “If you kill me now / I am damn’d: I have not bin at Confession / This two yeeres” (239-41). Her final attempt – “I am quicke with child” (241) – was a legitimate plea for female prisoners condemned to death; as Vanessa McMahon observes, ‘pleading the belly’ could at least defer the death penalty until the woman had given birth (150). In each of these instances, her appeals are ones that, in the context of a judicial execution, might well alter or at least delay her fate; desperate to live, however, she fails to comprehend that she is the victim in a scenario in which the usual rules do not apply. No mercy can be expected, and Cariola is – like her mistress – strangled.

The death of Julia becomes expedient for the Cardinal once he has confessed to her that the Duchess and two of her children have been murdered at his instigation, for she tells him that she cannot conceal the knowledge. She kisses the poisoned bible pressed upon her by the Cardinal, so that she may swear secrecy; when Bosola appears and admonishes her, “Oh foolish woman, / Couldst not thou have poyson’d him?”, her response is also her final speech: “’Tis weaknesse, / Too much to thinke what should have bin done, / I go, I know not

whether” (*Duchess* 5.2.277-80). Her uncertainty as to her destination after death – an echo of Vittoria’s storm-tossed soul in *The White Devil* – reflects her dilemma: loyalty to the Cardinal ought to be safe, given his position of authority, but to preserve the secret of his crime would be to court the destruction of her own soul by becoming an accessory to murder.

Antonio’s accidental death occurs when, in the darkness, Bosola mistakes him for the Cardinal, and delivers him a mortal stab wound. While still feigning to work for the Cardinal, Bosola, ironically, had earlier expressed pity for Antonio’s plight, vowing, “I’ll seeke thee out; and all my care shall be / To put thee into safety from the reach / Of these most cruell biters” (5.2.330-32). When the wounded Antonio identifies himself, however, Bosola names him “The man I would have sav’d e’bove mine owne life” (5.4.53). He employs a rather cruel strategy in order to prevent a lingering death – “I’ll whisper one thing in thy dying eare, / Shall make thy heart breake quickly” – and tells him that the Duchess and his two children have been murdered (56-57). Antonio’s final speech is full of grief and resignation:

Some men have wish’d to die  
 At the hearing of sad tydings: I am glad  
 That I shall do’t in sadnes: I would not now  
 Wish my wounds balm’d, nor heal’d: for I have no use  
 To put my life to. (60-64)

He determines that the “Pleasure of life” is “Onely the good houres / Of an Ague”, and “meerely a preparative to rest, / To endure vexation” (67-69). His last line – “And let my Sonne, flie the Courts of Princes” (71) – recalls Vittoria’s final two

lines in *The White Devil*: “O happy they that never saw the Court, / „Nor ever knew Great man but by report” (5.6.256-57).

Although the Duchess’s death is ordained by the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Bosola is one of her executioners. Like Vittoria, she refuses to exhibit signs of fear at the prospect of being killed, yet her dying lines are distinctively different from those of Webster’s earlier heroine. Her quiet dignity in the face of her murderers is given particular emphasis, for Bosola – like Lodovico in *The White Devil* – directly addresses the issue of fear:

BOSOLA. Doth not death fright you?

DUCHESS. Who would be afraid on’t?

Knowing to meete such excellent company

In th’other world.

BOSOLA. Yet, me thinkes,

The manner of your death should much afflict you,

This cord should terrifie you?

DUCHESS. Not a whit,

What would it pleasure me, to have my throate cut

With diamonds? or to be smothered

With Cassia? or to be shot to death, with pearles?

I know death hath ten thousand severall doores

For men, to take their *Exits*: and ’tis found

They go on such strange geometricall hinges,

You may open them both wayes: any way, (for God sake)

So I were out of your whispering. Tell my brothers,

That I perceive death, (now I am well awake)

Best guift is, they can give, or I can take. (*Duchess* 4.2.198-  
212)

Her magnificent speech combines personal dignity with a calm acceptance of her fate, regardless of the form in which death appears for her. Her musings on the “doores” and “*Exits*” of death are followed by an expression of irritation with all the “whispering” at court; weary of her life and resigned to her inescapable fate at her brothers’ hands, the Duchess wishes merely for the pain to be past. Her clarity of thought, characterized as a form of wakefulness, allows her to perceive death with objectivity, to welcome it as a “guift”. From this same position of quiet self-command, she requests of the executioner, “Dispose my breath, how please you, but my body / Bestow upon my women, will you?” (215-16). She advises him to “Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength / Must pull downe heaven upon me”; she then pauses, observing, “heaven gates are not so highly arch’d / As Princes pallaces, they that enter there / Must go upon their knees” (217-21).

The Duchess’s language of Christian humility contrasts with Vittoria’s dying speech; she is confident in her assertions, and careful in the phrasing of her lines. Leggatt points out that her act of kneeling has a “double effect”: it “signals her humility before heaven, and it forces her executioners to change position in order to accommodate her.” As such, it is “the culmination of her effort to maintain control over her life” (*English Drama* 160). In her kneeling position, then, she exhibits both devoutness and a form of determined non-compliance. Carnegie argues that although actors’ interpretations of the role of the Duchess may vary, her death “must be more than dignified martyrdom. Whether with

Christian humility, existential courage, or pagan defiance, she must die transcendent” (418).

In the posture of submission, yet orchestrating her final moments on her own terms, the Duchess consciously prepares herself for what must follow:

“Come violent death, / Serve for *Mandragora*, to make me sleepe; / Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out, / They then may feede in quiet” (*Duchess* 4.2.221-24). Bosola and the executioner strangle her, then immediately do the same to Cariola.

The bodies of the Duchess and Cariola before them on the stage, Bosola and Ferdinand argue at length over the “reward” that Bosola expects for his “service” (281), and only after Ferdinand exits does Bosola become aware that the Duchess is still alive. She calls for Antonio, and Bosola – who by this time has apparently undergone a change of heart and completely shifted his allegiance to the woman whose murder he has just assisted – assures her that her husband is living and is reconciled to her brothers. This is a curious circumstance, *vis-à-vis* his later strategy during Antonio’s dying scene; belated compassion for the Duchess prompts him to ease her passage across the threshold. Whereas his brutal honesty with her husband hastens death and thereby reduces his period of suffering, this final piece of welcome news imparted by Bosola permits the Duchess a sense of release so that she may die. In an exhalation of relief, she speaks her last two syllables: “Mercy” (340).

Bosola draws the audience’s attention to the fact that he weeps for the Duchess’s death. Overcome by “manly sorrow”, he sees his own transformation as form of internal release:

. . .My estate is suncke

Below the degree of feare: where were

These penitent fountaines, while she was living?

Oh, they were frozen up . . . (4.2.348, 350-53)

He determines to carry out the Duchess's last will, then "I'll poast to *Millaine*, / Where somewhat I will speedily enact / Worth my dejection" (360-62).

Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola all die in the last scene of the play. Deranged by lycanthropy, Ferdinand hallucinates, believing that he is in battle. In a sense, his situation is similar to that of Brachiano, for as the duke's speech is shaped by his body's physiological response to the poison he has ingested, so Ferdinand's lycanthropy functions as a form of script, which significantly modifies his speech and, therefore, the pattern of death. He attacks and wounds the Cardinal, and – as indicated in the stage directions – "*(in the scuffle) gives Bosola his death wound*" (5.5.52). Still raving about Caesar and Pompey in the field, Ferdinand offers his perspective on death:

. . . the paine's nothing: paine

many times, is taken away, with the apprehension of greater, (as the tooth-ache with the sight of a Barbor, that comes to pull it out:)

there's Philosophy for you. (58-61)<sup>69</sup>

Bosola seizes the moment, declaring his revenge "perfect" (62), and turns on Ferdinand, mortally wounding him. In the exchange that follows, Bosola notes the dying man's sudden return to lucidity, that displaces his mental confusion as the lycanthropy relaxes its grip on its victim:

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<sup>69</sup> The same sentiment appears in Philippe de Mornay's *A Discourse of Life and Death* (1592), translated by the Countess of Pembroke: "We doe as litle children, who all the day complayne, and when the medicine is brought them, are no longer sicke: as they who all the weeke long runne vp and downe the streetes with payne of the teeth, and seeing the Barber comming to pull them out, feele no more payne . . ." (A2v).

FERDINAND. Give me some wet hay, I am broken-winded:

I do account this world but a dog-kennel;

I will vault credit, and affect high pleasures,

Beyond death.

BOSOLA. He seemes to come to himselfe,

Now he's so neere the bottom.

FERDINAND. My sister, oh! my sister, there's the cause on't:

“Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust,

“Like Diamonds, we are cut with our owne dust. (*Duchess* 65-72)

In the first part of this speech, Ferdinand perceives himself as a wounded animal, aspiring to some sort of afterlife; his wolfishness recalls his sister's dying words, that he and his brother may “feed” upon her after she is dead. Her words are further recalled in his reference to diamonds – she asks, “What would it pleasure me, to have my throate cut / With diamonds?” (4.2.203-204), while for Ferdinand the diamond signifies the human capacity for self-destructiveness. Weis observes that Ferdinand's line is a paraphrase of the proverbial ‘Diamonds cut diamonds’, suggesting that man “is man's worst enemy”, and that the Latin phrasing for this, “*homo homini lupus* (man is a wolf to man), may dictate the lycanthropic nature of Ferdinand's train of thought” (402n72).

The context for the Cardinal's demise is theatrical, insofar as it involves an unwitting performance of death which is witnessed – on an auditory level, at least – by the nobles at court. In order to be alone so that he may convey Julia's body to her lodging, the Cardinal assures them that the ailing Ferdinand is “very well recover'd” and does not require their care (*Duchess* 5.4.2). He urges them,

I pray, all to bed,  
 And though you heare him in his violent fit,  
 Do not rise, I intreate you. (5-7)

To ensure their compliance, he warns them,

It may be to make triall of your promise  
 When he's a sleepe, my selfe will rise, and faigne  
 Some of his mad trickes, and crie out for helpe,  
 And faigne my selfe in danger. (13-16)

The Cardinal assures them that he will be acting, which is emphasized twice by the word 'faigne'. Malateste assures him, "If your throate were cutting, / I'll'd not come at you, now I have protested against it" (16-17). Alone and admitting to a guilty conscience, but unable to repent, the Cardinal is confronted by Bosola, and cries for help while the lords listen from up above. Bosola stabs him twice, at which point Ferdinand arrives and joins the scuffle. The Cardinal's death is, in the end, abrupt; his final lines, if not quite repentant, do at least gesture toward a desire for self-effacement:

Looke to my brother:  
 He gave us these large wounds, as we were struggling  
 Here i'th'rushes: And now, I pray, let me  
 Be layd by, and never thought of. (5.5.86-89)

Just as Flamineo's mock performance of dying was quickly but unexpectedly followed by actual death, so does the Cardinal's attempt at diverting a secret plan end – for himself, at least – disastrously. Rather than pretending to perform a scenario of distress, however, his situation is the inverse: what is intended to be a contrived performance becomes, for him, frighteningly real.

The final death in *Duchess* is that of Bosola. While the Duchess distinguishes herself in the face of violent and unjust death, Bosola is remarkable for his defection from one side of the ‘good quarrel’ to the other, and the internal transformation that he appears to undergo when confronted with his own death.

Bosola is already wounded when he kills Ferdinand, with the words, “sinke (thou maine cause / Of my undoing) . . . The last part of my life / Hath done me best service” (5.5.62-64). When the Cardinal observes, “Thou hast thy payment too”, Bosola agrees:

Yes, I hold my weary soule, in my teeth,  
 ’Tis ready to part from me: I do glory  
 That thou, which stood’st like a huge Piramid  
 Begun upon a large, and ample base,  
 Shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing. (73-78)

Bosola finds a form of redemption in the service of the dead Duchess, and is prepared for death as the culmination of his quest for revenge on her behalf. Lisa Hopkins observes that the Duchess’s death in the fourth act, rather than the fifth, “confirms her status” as the embodiment of the play’s “ethos of interiority”; her earlier demise is necessary to the overall structure of the play, for it effects a form of conversion in Bosola, changing his allegiance, and it also influences Bosola’s own musings on the subject of death as he is dying (*Female Hero* 131).

In explaining events to the nobles who witness the deaths of Ferdinand and the Cardinal, Bosola is clear that in killing them both he has taken revenge for the Duchess, for Antonio, for Julia, and for himself. Like Flamineo, he sees himself as a player in an unfolding drama, directed by someone else; he thus draws attention to the fictional, theatrical quality of the revenger’s world, and the

characters' awareness of their own artifice. He implies a guilty regret at his roles of murderer and spy when he describes himself as "an Actor in the maine of all / Much 'gainst mine owne good nature" (*Duchess* 5.5.84-85), and he refers to the accidental death of Antonio as "Such a mistake, as I have often seene / In a play" (94-95).

Bosola's preoccupation with theatrical manipulation recalls his earlier assumption of the role of tormenter and executioner of the Duchess, when he assures her, "My trade is to flatter the dead, not the living: / I am a tombe-maker" (4.2.136-37). With the arrival of the coffin, cords and bell, he declares himself to be "the common Bell-man, / That usually is sent to condemn'd persons, / The night before they suffer", with the purpose of bringing the Duchess "By degrees to mortification" (160-62, 164). The whole of this carefully constructed scene – stage managed by Bosola – is intended to manipulate the Duchess into a state in which death is perceived as a "*hideous storme of terror*", each phase building ominously upon the last, from the performances of the madmen to the arrival of the executioners (176). As demonstrated earlier, Bosola is unprepared for the courage and dignity with which the Duchess faces death, and these unexpected qualities are instrumental in effecting Bosola's altered perspective on revenge.

Like the framing of Flamineo's actual death by his mock performance of dying, Bosola's death scene is shaped by his own belated response to his earlier role-playing with the Duchess. Weis observes that in his sympathy toward the Duchess and her children, Bosola's "moral nature surfaces *in extremis* (and too late)" (xxii), and from one perspective this is certainly true. Yet if her death has finally awakened a sense of compassion in him, then this transformation must alter, to some extent, the audience's perception of his death; more importantly, her

own conduct throughout her dying scene becomes a very direct and profound influence upon Bosola's own.

Close to his final moment, Bosola sees himself as already "gone" (5.5.95), obliquely referring to the Duchess in his metaphor of humans as "dead wals, or vaulted graves, / That ruin'd, yeilds no eccho" (96-97). The implication is, that in contrast to the echoes at her tomb in 5.3, Bosola's own grave shall have no such posthumous resonance, but will diminish instead into the "kind of nothing" that characterized the Cardinal's end.<sup>70</sup>

The final part of his last speech indirectly recalls his own earlier probing of the Duchess on the issue of fear, as he – like the Duchess – appears to perceive the event of his death with a certain detachment:

Oh this gloomy world,  
 In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,  
 Doth (womanish, and fearefull) mankind live?  
 Let worthy mindes, nere stagger in distrust  
 To suffer death, or shame for what is just:  
 Mine is an other voyage. (*Duchess* 99-104)

His "voyage" recalls the image of Vittoria's storm-tossed soul in *The White Devil*; he appears to approach this transport of death with equanimity, perhaps even a touch of curiosity, perceiving it as merely "another" form of transition from one state to the next. Now that death is so close, Bosola seems to find himself, paradoxically, removed from the customary human fears of dying, as if viewing

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<sup>70</sup> Neill argues that the tomb scene is part of the necessary context for appreciating the "full significance of the Duchess's death." Whereas in *The White Devil* "Death had been left in unchallenged possession of the stage", the Duchess's "monument of fame" stands for the "eternizing artifice of the play itself" (330-31).

the gloominess and shadow of mortal existence from a place of clarity and light. He strives for a “worthy” mind, accepting the imminence of death and removing his consciousness beyond the awareness of shame or struggle. He focuses on the “voyage”, rather than meditating upon what awaits him in the afterlife; and he appears to feel that his death represents the end of the quarrel – the inevitability of what is “just” – in which he has participated on both sides.

In his discussion of Webster, Leggatt argues that it is through the construction of a performance that “characters in this fragmented world can find integrity” (*English Drama* 155). Paradoxically, it is through the construction of performance and the sudden unexpected reversals they experience that Flamineo and Bosola project outward the interiority of their deaths, so that the audience may briefly glimpse the character behind the role. When the self-consciously theatrical approach to dying is broken down by the imminence of actual death, these characters appear to fully inhabit their dying moments, discovering in them an odd form of selfhood. The self-sufficiency demonstrated by Flamineo and Bosola as they die is completely at odds with the rituals of Christian preparation for death, such as Thetis expects of Tymethes. While there may be an unacknowledged longing for the neatness and safety of the Christian formulas from which they are excluded, these characters do not pity themselves; as characters watching death’s approach, they embody the creative spirit of the dramatist who conceived them, by expanding the context of the dying scene and opening up exciting possibilities for the expression of last words.

In contrast to the type of dying speeches associated, in the drama, with public execution and with domestic murders, the final words spoken by characters in revenge plays tend toward the improbable and excessive. The fictional world

of revenge makes experimentation possible, as the events at court are presided over by the genius of retribution, rather than God's providence. Moreover, while the dying scenes focus on the resolution or conclusion of the good quarrel, through some form of equivalence in bringing the villain to an appropriate end, there is a necessary distinction to be made between the way in which the corrupt nobles die, and the manner in which the revenge heroes meet their deaths. The violence inflicted by the revenger upon the villain represents a seizure of control with the intention of forcing the enemy into a state of humiliated submission; when the revenger dies, however, he tends to absorb that violence, transforming his response to death into a conscious demonstration of self-possession. In his avenging role, the hero creates this distinction through bold and single-minded manipulation of his enemy's dying moments, variously using the strategies of silencing and scripting to prevent or distort the dying utterance and thus to make a 'good' death impossible. The dying speech is an essential means of assessing the success of revenge stratagems, and the displacement of Christian formulas by the demands of the 'good' quarrel means that the overall context of the dying utterance is significantly altered.

The changing context of last words, however, is not the exclusive domain of revenge heroes. The next chapter will focus on characters who choose the time and means of their own deaths. The stage permits representations of suicide that in real life remain hidden; as I will demonstrate, playwrights seize the opportunity to explore the possibilities for self-expression in those whose words would be either unspoken or unheard. In doing so – and through the medium of last words – they offer audiences intriguing glimpses into the interiority of characters who choose to die.

## Chapter Four

### ‘Self and Violent Hands’: Self-Murder<sup>71</sup>

You that have care of innocents be my guard  
 Least I commit some outrage on my selfe.  
 For such an overture, and flood of woes  
 Surroundes me . . .

*The Vow Breaker* (D4r)

Ha, ha, has – he hang’d himselfe, and sav’d justice a labor!

*The Vow Breaker* (E3r)

In the burial scene in *Hamlet*, in which the priest pronounces Ophelia’s death “doubtful”, he gives voice to the prevailing early modern attitude toward self-murder; at the same time, he refers to the burial rites denied those choosing this option. Had not “great command” decreed it, he says pointedly to Laertes,

She should in ground unsanctified been lodged  
 Till the last trumpet: for charitable prayers,  
 Flints and pebbles should be thrown on her.  
 Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,  
 Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home  
 Of bell and burial. (5.1.218-23)<sup>72</sup>

The priest goes on to claim, “We should profane the service of the dead / To sing a requiem and such rest to her / As to peace-parted souls” (225-27). In *Sleepless Souls*, Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy write that in early modern England, killing oneself was “a species of murder, a felony in criminal law and a

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<sup>71</sup> At the conclusion of *Macbeth*, Malcolm reports that Lady Macbeth appears to have, “by self and violent hands / Took off her life” (5.11.36-37).

<sup>72</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, this, and subsequent quotations from *Hamlet* in this chapter, are from the Arden 3 edition (2006).

desperate sin in the eyes of the church” (15). Considered from this unforgiving perspective, Laertes’ compassion for his sister is immoral and unjustified; the tension between himself and the priest illustrates the widely divergent attitudes held by contemporaries on the issue of suicide in early modern England.

Hamlet himself expresses the wish that “the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon ’gainst self-slaughter” (1.2.131-32). According to G. R. Hibbard, the term ‘self-slaughter’ appears to be “a Shakespearian coinage” (162), and is a variation on similar designations for suicide during the early modern period. Indeed, the *OED* records the first usages of the word ‘suicide’ – referring to the *act* of taking one’s own life – in 1651 and 1656; the word was not used in reference to the *person* who performs the act until as late as 1732 and 1769. Emotive alternatives to the word ‘suicide’, including ‘self-murder’ and ‘self-slaughter’, seem to emphasize the transgressive nature of the act, suggesting an inherent condemnation of brutal violence turned, unnaturally, inward.

As a prelude to the discussion of self-murder on the stage, I shall first explore the concept of suicidal despair, both from the perspective of social history, and drawing upon Rowland Wymer’s study of the topic, *Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama*. This will be supplemented by material from instructional, non-dramatic texts from the early modern period, which exemplify the harshness of contemporary views on the subject. I will then turn to scenes of self-murder in the theatre, briefly identifying categories of suicides on the stage. The central discussion of the chapter will be represented by a selection of less canonical plays, by Thomas Dekker and John Webster; Christopher Marlowe; William Sampson; George Chapman; and John Fletcher and Philip Massinger. These scenes range from an embodiment of the orthodox Christian perspective to

instances that are clearly intended to elicit sympathy for the plight of the suicidal character. They are also considered on the basis that they share some form of dying speech and that the act of suicide appears to be intended as an onstage performance.<sup>73</sup>

Ralph Houlbrooke observes that, from the clerical perspective in early modern England, self-murder was fundamentally condemned as the “worst death of all” (*Death, Religion* 26). In his lengthy work on the subject of suicide, *Lifes Preservative Against Self-killing* (1637), John Sym observes that “whatsoever is to be thought of the vile quality, and of the damnable deserts of *murder* in generall, is to be conceived to be due, and much worse, to *self-murder* in speciall”, for “if it be horrible to murder another man, it is much more odious to kill ones *selfe*” (47-48). He continues, “for a man to doe an *act* upon himselfe, which he knowes to be both mortall, and unlawfull; and yet will doe it, with purpose and intent to bereave himselfe of his own life, it cannot be denyed to be *murder* in the highest degree, and he a murderer that doth it” (49).

Taking one’s own life was a manifestation of sinfulness, a lack of faith in God, and evidence of the influence of the devil. The clergyman Robert Hill, in his 1613 treatise *A Direction to Die Well*, maintains that “for a man to take away his own life, though it may seem sometimes to proceed from the greatnes of a mans courage, yet it cannot but be a great sin”, and he lists the weaknesses and erroneous assumptions implied by such a desperate act:

1. It argues madnesse for a man to lay violent hands vpon himselfe.

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<sup>73</sup> The one exception is the suicide of Anne in Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker*, which occurs offstage. Her death is included in the discussion, however, because it is directly linked to that of Young Bateman, and because of the lengthy and descriptive detail which describes the event before it occurs.

2. Impatience, that he cannot wait the leisure of God.
  3. Cowardlinesse, that he wil not endure that which might be inflicted vpon him.
  4. Unthankfulnesse, not to preserue this Jewell which is bestowed vpon him. And in a word, such a practise causeth not onely the actors, but their actions, profession, posteritie, and Countrie to bee euill spoken of.
- (133-34)

Hill's acknowledgement that self-murder may be attributed to "the greatnes of a mans courage" offers the briefest glimpse of an alternative perspective on the subject, yet this dangerous assumption is swiftly corrected and the motivations for suicide are instead argued to be the very antithesis of courageousness. It is characteristic of orthodox arguments against suicide that the "actors" are perceived not merely as damaging to themselves, but also to their "profession, posteritie, and Countrie", for persons who commit suicide are seen to violate their responsibilities toward both family and the wider community. Sym argues that, "by killing himselfe, a man wrongs *God, himselfe, the Church and Commonwealth*; in bereaving them of that service and good, which they all might have by his life" (81-82).

Lisa Lieberman notes that the increased intolerance toward suicides lasted for a period of roughly a hundred years, beginning around the middle of the sixteenth century (13). According to MacDonald and Murphy, before 1500, "suicide was seldom punished; after about 1660, it was gradually secularized and decriminalized" (16). The Reformation "intensified religious hostility to self-murder in England", in part because the Protestant clergy "fully endorsed the rites of desecration": moreover, the "absolute unlawfulness of suicide was stressed in

sermons, devotional works, treatises, and didactic literature by writers of every hue in the Protestant theological spectrum” (2, 31).

This antipathy resulted in serious consequences, both in terms of the handling of the victim’s body and in the legal implications for surviving family members. Lieberman writes that the conception of suicide “as a sign of diabolic possession” heightened fears and created a climate in which “popular superstitions, Christian doctrine, and civil legislation were united as church and state worked together to extend their influence over the people” (13).

A posthumous coroner’s jury determined whether or not a suicide was to be convicted as a self-murderer: a person pronounced sane was “returned a *felo de se*, a felon of himself”, while a person considered insane was “proclaimed *non compos mentis*, not of sound mind” (McDonald and Murphy 16). Sym states that those who are “destitute of *understanding*” are not guilty of self-murder, because they “cannot judge *morally*, nor sometimes naturally, of their owne actions; *neither* are able rightly to direct them, in a *state* of that impotency of understanding.” He includes in this category “a *child* without discretion, a naturall *foole*, a mad man in his mad fits, one in his sleepe; *or* in such fits or sicknesse as is accompanied with a *delirium* or phrensey” (172). In the case of a *felo de se* verdict, the suicide’s “moveable goods . . . were forfeited to the crown”, entailing a potentially serious loss of property for the family, whereas a verdict of *non compos mentis* meant that the victim and family alike were “spared both the secular and religious penalties” (MacDonald and Murphy 15-16).

Burial practices for suicides during the early modern period reflect the anxiety and hostility that was felt toward those who took their own lives.

MacDonald and Murphy write:

Self-murderers were denied Christian burials; their bodies were interred profanely, with a macabre ceremony prescribed by popular custom. The night following the inquest, officials of the parish, the churchwardens and their helpers, carried the corpse to a crossroads and threw it naked into a pit. A wooden stake was hammered through the body, pinioning it in the grave, and the hole was filled in. No prayers for the dead were repeated; the minister did not attend. These rituals were occasionally modified or suspended, but some form of profane burial was routinely ordered in cases of self-murder (15).

The authors add that these “rites of desecration” were “genuine popular customs, accepted by the church and the state as an essential part of punishing suicide but not enjoined by either institution” (20).

Sym maintains that suicides “kill themselves upon the same reasons that the *heathen* doe”, so that “in this point they have nothing of *Christians*, but the name, and otherwise are *heathens*; and in that respect are justly to be debarred *Christian buriall*” (180). Yet aspects of folklore and superstition were intrinsic to burial customs: Richard L. Greaves suggests a possible connection between night burials and the association of the goddess Hecate with darkness (534), while Clare Gittings writes that a crossroads was chosen “in order to diffuse the evil influence of the body in several different directions, thus rendering it less harmful; the stake was to prevent the ghost from walking” (73), for the “ghosts of suicides were believed to be restless and malevolent” (MacDonald, Introduction, *Lives Preservative* xix). Gittings also points out that, from the perspective of the local authorities, the treatment of the body was intended to function as a deterrent

against other potential suicides (72), in much the same way that the ritual of public execution was used, not merely to punish, but to discourage similar instances of criminality. While these burial customs were derived from pagan beliefs, however, there was also a Christian rationale for such behaviour. MacDonald and Murphy suggest that the stake “may have come in time to serve as a means of preventing the resurrection of the suicide’s body at the Last Judgement” (44-45).

To some extent, the harsh attitudes toward suicide originated in a belief in diabolic possession, the “profound conviction that self-murder was a supernaturally evil act” instigated by the devil (MacDonald and Murphy 20). Although suicides were sometimes perceived as having “social and psychological” causes (59), the teaching of the clergy disseminated in *artes moriendi* treatises – offering instruction on how to die well – included dire warnings about the dangers posed by Satan to the wavering soul, and the essential importance of faith in overcoming his incursions into the human heart and conscience, for to submit to despair was to lose any hope of salvation in the afterlife.

The puritan divine Richard Greenham suggests that the despairing Christian, in failing to fully consider the fate of his soul in the hereafter, places himself in as perilous a position as the misguided pagan. He laments the “heathen men” who erroneously believed that “death was the end of all miserie: the perswasion whereof made them . . . to make an end of themselues, and hasten their own death; as Satan doth make many now adaies to doe”; these unfortunates, he warns, are “ignorant of the hels, which is a place of farre greater paines then any they can suffer in this world whatsoeuer” (238-39). Sym’s judgement of

intentional suicides is unequivocal: “*all, and every of them that so murder themselves; are certainly, and infallibly damned soule and body for evermore without redemption*” (291-92).

In the Epistle to his treatise entitled *Physicke to Cure the Most Dangerous Disease of Desperation* (1604), the clergyman William Willymat acknowledges that sinners are in danger from Satan “most of all at the hower of death, when man is at the weakest, and most unfit and unable to withstand him”; weakened in body and mind, he is vulnerable to the “foule feende” who is quick to “vexe, trouble, disquiet, to turmoyle men, and to worke blasphemie and desperation in their heartes by laying before the eyes of their consciences al their former sinfull maner of lyuing” (A2v). For those inclined to suicide, this desperation is of immediate danger in that it leads directly to the desire to willfully and sinfully bring about the “hower of death” in defiance of God.

Willymat carefully distinguishes between “holy” and “wicked” despair: the former refers to a positive form “of the minde & heart or conscience”, in which a man questions his “owne power in the obtayning of eternall life, conceyued and wrought by a sense or feeling of a mans owne defectes, infirmitie, and corruptions” (2-3). In the latter form, however, the sinner experiences a destructive “Desperation of Gods promises, power, goodnes & mercie towards sinners” (3). For the individual who was genuinely depressed, the line between ‘holy’ and ‘wicked’ despair must have been very fine indeed; for those for whom faith was either inaccessible or insufficient to banish the heavy oppression of their spirits, the admonitory tone that is characteristic of such texts must have been, rather than reassuring and liberating, instead profoundly isolating. Many who did commit suicide were undoubtedly ‘unsound’, but for those who wished to make a

rational choice and who found life to be – for whatever reason – insupportable, the choice of self-destruction was associated with a burden of guilt and fear imposed by those who could neither comprehend the intensity of the suicide’s psychological suffering, nor understand how death might appear to be genuinely preferable to the continuance of a painful existence.

The form of despair that Willymat terms ‘wicked’, then, is considered evidence of Satan’s activity; the “Diuell himselfe” is the “chiefest causer, and cause, of this horrible soule murdering Disperation” (13). As Celesta Wine writes, this is the despair suffered by Marlowe’s Faustus, and exemplified in the figure of Francesco Spiera (1502-48). Spiera was an Italian lawyer whose recantation of the Protestant faith – motivated by “complaints of his heresy” – led both to a profound despair “from which he could not be aroused”, and attempts on his own life (663-64). Spiera’s popular story was the subject of numerous publications; he was a convenient vehicle of instruction for Protestant divines who wished to point out the dangers of rejecting the godly religion, and his longing for extinction represented a perfect example of the type of despair one most needed to avoid (666).

Like Hill, Willymat links this feeling of hopelessness directly to the act of suicide, for the devil draws sinners

through despaire of finding mercie & forgiuenes to shorten their liues, by killing and murdering themselues, by poysoning, by stabbing, by throat-cutting, by drowning, by *Iudas*-like hanging of themselues; and finally by casting off all vse of Fayth, all vse of Hope, and so quite to despaire of Gods mercie: then the which,

what can be a more dangerous course for any man to yeelde vnto?

(7)

Rather than prompting pity or compassion for the inability to transcend such a crisis, Willymat voices the orthodox position that condemns it as the worst of sins:

O horrible & greeuous is this last sinne of Despayring, which thou addest to thy former sinnes. So haynous, so hurtfull and pernicious, is this thy sinne of Diffidence and Distrust in Gods mercies to be obtayned, according to his promised Word, that I may say of thee, as *S. Augustine* sayd of *Iudas* the traytor . . . Not so much the sinne which thou hast done, as thy despaire of forgiuenes, hath vtterly cast thee away (5-6).

In addition to the suicide's failure to overcome despair, self-murder was further condemned as "unchristian" on the grounds that it represented both a violation of providence and of the image of God in the individual. Rather than overcoming adversity by perceiving it as part of God's larger design, the self-murderer shortened the "time to repent and obtain saving grace" (Greaves 532). Sym writes that each human being is "the subject, or seate of Gods *Image*, and *therefore*, a man, in killing of his owne *body*, not only dishonours, but also, in a sort, doth what in him lieth, to kill *God* himselfe; as he is *similitudinarily* in him, and incurreth the horrible crime of *Læsæ majestatis divinæ*; or treason against the sacred *Majesty of God*" (82). Such "wicked *persons*," he continues later, "are factiously-rebellious against *God*, and disturbers of the peace and tranquillity of all the *frame of nature and grace*, contrary to the *Lawes and ordinances of God*" (185). Greaves thus summarizes the position of the church: "Anglicans and Puritans condemned suicide as a violation of the sixth commandment, the

effacement of the *imago Dei*, the contravening of natural law, and the premature termination of the period for repentance and salvation” (537).

If self-murder led inevitably to perpetual damnation of the soul, it also condemned its perpetrator for violating his or her relationship to family, friends and neighbours. A consideration of the traditional deathbed scenario in *artes moriendi* treatises draws attention to the suicide’s self-exclusion from the community of the living. The death of *moriens* was perceived not as an individual facing death alone, but as an event in which various members of the community were active participants. As a dying *scene*, with distinctly theatrical overtones, the process of dying was inseparable from the social network in which the dying person had lived, and involved a series of mutual obligations for both the living and for *moriens*. An essential element in the deathbed rituals was the expectation on the part of the living that the dying person would speak meaningful last words before expiring, while *moriens* was aware that – if possible – it was desirable to speak to those present, to indicate that his or her soul was in a state of preparedness for death, and to communicate any important last-minute wishes. The support and encouragement of family and friends was integral to the deathbed drama, for it was essential for the living to ensure that the loved one died as exemplary a Christian death as possible.

For the person who contemplated suicide, however, this type of deathbed scenario was utterly out of reach, and those who possessed enough presence of mind to understand their position in relation to Christian and community imperatives would have been aware that even meditating upon the possibility of taking their own lives represented a dangerous risk. Sym urges his readers to “abhorre and reject all unnaturall *motions*, or resolutions of *self-murder*”, for one

to “entertaine the thoughts of his owne destruction” is like “*a viper* conceiving and fomenting such an issue, as in the birth thereof destroyes the parent that gave it being.” He warns, “The *thoughts of evill*, that a man doth at first but dally withall, and fearelesly beholds in his mind . . . at length possesse him, and master him” (18). Just as the act of murder is often perceived as the end product of a ‘chain of sins’, so suicide is the culmination of a deadly process:

*self-murder* comes *ague-like*, by *fits* . . . very few doe fall into that horrible sinne to accomplish it upon themselves, but by *degrees*.

*For*, no man at an instant falls into the fowlest crimes in the highest degree; *but* by *meanes*, from step to step, as he is able to overcome the opposition of *reason* and *grace*, that stands in his way. (Sym 261)

Most significantly, those who contemplated suicide were inevitably deprived of any Christian formula for dying. Even the victim of murder – such as George Sanders in *A Warning for Fair Women* – might retain sufficient self-composure to appeal to God’s mercy in those precious last moments before death; the condemned prisoner on the public scaffold was encouraged to take the opportunity to make a good Christian end by repenting of the crime committed and preparing spiritually for death. In contrast, the suicidal person was denied even these (admittedly, often remote) possibilities, and could not hope for God’s mercy. Sym is clear that it is impossible for “an indivertibly-resolved *self-murderer*” to “make, or be at peace with *God*”, because he knows that his crime is “directly contrary to Gods will, and to his own salvation. *Neither* can any mans precedent *prayer* be effectuall with *God*, for to obtaine pardon of a vile enormious

sin, that he desperately and unresistably intends to perpetrate against the *will of God*” (307).

While a combination of clerical condemnation, civil laws and cultural anxieties contributed to the prevailing attitude of harsh intolerance toward suicides, this position of inflexibility was tempered and challenged by more compassionate views, so that opinions and responses to self-murder in early modern England appear to have become increasingly polarized. The orthodox Christian position was to some extent undermined by famous classical examples of suicide, in which issues of personal honour and integrity as motivating factors offered an alternative to the Christian insistence upon the primary importance of the soul.

Hence, MacDonald writes that attitudes toward suicide were actually “complex and contradictory” (Introduction, *Lifes Preservative* xxiv). “Even as administrative and religious reform intensified the conviction that suicide was a diabolical crime, the revival of classical philosophy and science fostered renewed awareness of more tolerant attitudes” (MacDonald and Murphy 86). The extreme burial customs discussed earlier could be avoided in some cases, either by claiming the suicide as an accident, or by insisting that the deceased was *non compos mentis*. Macdonald and Murphy consider it likely that “the law of self-murder was only enforced when it was unavoidable to do so”; local authorities, although they “may have abhorred suicide itself”, appear to have “preferred to acquit self-killers, rather than to deprive their heirs, possibly impoverishing a family” (23). Jeffrey R. Watt observes that, during this period, “magistrates became more reluctant to pass such sentences against suicides”, and suggests moreover that Londoners “showed a certain leniency toward voluntary death that

anticipated by generations the changing opinions on suicide that would eventually spread throughout England” (4-5).

Self-murder is distinguished from the other categories of dying discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis, because of the suicide’s position of isolation. First of all, the victim presumably felt alone in his or her personal suffering, without the hope of finding relief in difficult circumstances. Secondly, awareness of the conventional Christian rituals associated with dying – and knowledge of the harsh treatment of suicides – reminded persons who contemplated self-murder that to follow through on these thoughts would mean the forfeiture of Christian hope, and estrangement from the community that condemned the act. Moreover, this also meant, of course, that there was no helpful manual of instruction to aid in the process of dying, for the decision to take one’s own life clearly indicated that the dire warnings issued against suicide were, in such cases, ineffectual. Fundamentally, then, to choose suicide was to consent to dying alone, with neither aid or comfort, nor witnesses to record or report one’s final utterance.

The isolation of the self-murderer, however, is altered when suicides are dramatized on the stage. In the real world, the clandestine nature of suicide may prompt urgent questions for those left behind, an attempt to understand the suicide’s motivations. As Lieberman observes, “The death desired, the ending sought, the final scene staged in the mind before it is performed, holds too much meaning to remain private . . . Melancholy or angry, cowardly or heroic: suicide is a statement that cries out to be deciphered” (6-7). In the theatre, it is this very process of decipherment in which the audience imaginatively engages, through being made privy to speeches and acts that would normally remain hidden.

Spectators are given the opportunity to witness suicide in a much wider context: the audience sees the circumstances leading up to the act, then witnesses – in some cases, at least – the character’s last spoken words, followed by the suicide itself.

This expanded context permits a more probing examination of self-murder – both the motivations for choosing death and the implications of the way in which the death is performed. Moreover, dramatizations of suicide in the theatre shift the focus from the community to the individual, thus increasing the potential for interrogating and subverting the prevailing views on suicide. Noble deaths of classical provenance provided playwrights with rich material for development on the stage, with the celebration of such figures as Cato, Lucrece, Brutus, Mark Antony and Cleopatra permitting opportunities for impressive instances of self-fashioning that posed a distinct challenge to Christian orthodoxy. Indeed, Clifford Ronan argues that the popularity of suicides on the early modern stage reflected “a safe vicarious indulgence in forbidden options that at least seemed to extend personal empowerment” (89).

Lieberman writes of the “disruptive potential” of suicide, of the “power of individuals to use death as a weapon in order to undermine the authority of states or to bring into question the cherished values of societies and institutions” (7). In *The Subject of Tragedy*, Catherine Belsey observes – in the early modern context – that because suicide constituted “a refusal to acknowledge God’s right to determine the moment of death”, taking one’s own life was indeed an act of defiance, “the crowning affirmation of the supremacy of the self” (124). She adds, “In the absolute act of suicide the subject itself is momentarily absolute. As an individual action, therefore, suicide is a threat to the control of the state” (125).

Paul S. Seaver acknowledges the role of the theatre in debates on suicide, arguing that it challenged the teachings of the church, and that those who attended plays were exposed to “a variety of dramatic responses, of ways of experiencing and understanding an act that remained officially condemned” (42). Indeed, many dramatists appear to have been keenly aware of the potentially theatrical nature of suicide, and thus exploited the dying speech and the representation of the act of self-murder for maximum impact on audiences.

Whether the person intends it or not, the act of self-destruction makes a statement to the rest of the community, for in the absence of last words, of explanation, the body remains behind as a silent assertion of the suicide’s personal will. Responses to the death may be ambivalent, combining sadness and compassion with anger and a sense of being manipulated. The varied responses to suicide that Seaver suggests, then, may be explored in finer detail on the stage, through the inclusion of a dying speech and the performance of the act itself. In some instances, a letter may suffice to explain the reason for choosing death – as Antonio’s wife provides in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*<sup>74</sup> – but the scenes which dramatize the act as an immediate event tend to encourage more ambivalent responses due to their complexity and inherent contradictions.

Greaves writes that in the ‘real’ world of early modern England, “mental illness, insecurity, stormy marriages, loneliness . . . and sexual conflicts” were the motivating factors for women committing suicide, while for men the most

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<sup>74</sup> Antonio’s wife swallows poison after having been raped by Junior Brother. A prayer-book is “the pillow to her cheek”, and she holds another in her hand, “with a leaf tucked up / Pointing to these words: / *Melius virtute mori, quam per dedecus vivere.*” (1.4.13-17). In a footnote, the line is translated as ‘Better to die in virtue than to live with dishonour’ (557). Robert William Dent, in his *Proverbial Language*, notes Middleton’s usage of the phrase, as well as paraphrases of the same sentiment in Lyly, Jonson and Marlowe (427).

significant causes also included “financial pressures, thwarted ambition, personal disgrace, and frustrated romance” (536-37). These elements may also be identified in the drama, although there are three major motivations for self-murder in plays, each of which – as Wymer demonstrates – stems from a particular form of despair.

First of all, those who suffer from the pangs of romantic love and cannot bear the loss of the beloved choose death in order to release themselves from their grief and loneliness; the exemplars in this category include Romeo and Juliet, and Antony and Cleopatra. While these are examples of double suicides, other grief-motivated suicides occur in more isolated circumstances, such as the deaths of Zabina in *Tamburlaine I* and Olympia in *Tamburlaine II*. Such characters envision themselves as being ‘left behind’, and choose suicide in order to immediately join their departed loved ones in a ‘better place’ – death is preferable to continued existence without the lover. Karl S. Guthke rightly observes that these deaths pose a challenge to the notion of the good Christian death, because as the lovers die, “each has the beloved foremost in mind; in the last words of each, the beloved’s name takes the place of the Lord’s” (*Last Words* 45). He points out that, particularly in *Antony and Cleopatra*, this substitution may be interpreted as a “pointedly secularized variation” on the concept of “proper preparedness” for death in a Christian context (47).

Secondly, characters overwhelmed by guilt and remorse tend to succumb to the form of religious despair described earlier in the chapter. When the victim fears that the transgression committed places him or her beyond God’s forgiveness, and salvation is unattainable, then death becomes preferable to life of ever-accumulating sins. As noted earlier, the deep despondency associated with

the belief in inevitable damnation is that suffered by Marlowe's Faustus; it is also the focus of Nathaniel Woodes's morality play, *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581).

Bevington and Rasmussen note that Woodes's play is based on the "spiritual biography" of Spiera, and was issued twice in the same year, with "alternative endings in repentance or damnation" (10).<sup>75</sup> In the first issue, the name "Frauncis Spera" is printed on the title page, and ends with the announcement that the character (named Philologus) "by deepe dispaire hath hanged himselfe with coard", after having suffered for "thirty weekes" with an "afflicted mynde" (lines 2412, 2418). The final line concludes that, "his owne hand, now at the last, hath wrought his endles paine" (2424). Perhaps considered too bleak an ending for an "excellent new Commedie", the second issue alters the text of the last scene, so that the "dolefull newes" of the first version becomes the "joyfull newes" that Philologus, "that would haue hangde himselfe with coard, / Is nowe conuerted unto God", so that "nowef the Lord, in mercy great hath easde him of his payne" (I4r). Celesta Wine notes that soon after his death in 1548, Spiera was "reported to have committed suicide, although the early narratives did not give warrant for such a report" (666). The details of his death were "not accurately known", but it was thought "that his despair had not been relieved" (665). She observes that Woodes's play does not appear to have been performed (661), yet its subject of sinful despair and suicide had wide appeal for his contemporaries; there appears to have been an inherent fascination in figures such

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<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of the possible connection between Marlowe's and Woodes's plays, see Lily B. Campbell's "*Doctor Faustus: A Case of Conscience*", in which she considers Faustus's situation alongside that of Spiera. See also Celesta Wine's "*Nathaniel Wood's Conflict of Conscience*", and Macdonald and Murphy's references to Spiera and to Woodes's work as a play "that has not survived in the literary canon" (39).

as Faustus and Spiera/Philologus, in that they lose all hope of repentance and salvation (666).

In the third category of stage suicides, honour is valued more than life itself. This type of self-murder includes notable Roman deaths embraced for political reasons, such as that of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. Ronan observes that, while the suicides of Socrates and Seneca were “pro forma”, the “heroic suicide proper was dictated variously by despair, self-affirmation, or personal loyalty”, and was “endowed with an ambivalent attractiveness” to early modern theatre-goers (87-88). Moreover, Roman suicide on the Renaissance stage was increasingly associated with “resolution or constancy”, a quality which, by the 1580s, was “axiomatically regarded as simultaneously royal, Stoical, and Roman”, so that the “overall effect of transmission from history or literature into drama” was an “increase in the dignity and glamor of self-chosen death” (92-93). For female characters, such as Shakespeare’s Lucrece (a non-dramatic but pre-eminent example), suicide represents a means of expunging the crime of rape and its associated dishonour.

Classically-derived scenes of suicide thus focus on issues of honour, and often draw upon Senecan, Stoic arguments that suggest the possibility of suicide as a rational option. This shift in perspective away from the harsh inflexibility of the Christian position represented a form of philosophical ‘instruction’ as an alternative to the specific advice given in *artes moriendi* treatises.<sup>76</sup>

While I acknowledge the importance of the Roman perspective for early modern English playwrights, I shall focus primarily on alternative representations

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<sup>76</sup> Ronan observes that “the number of times that stage Roman suicides refer to classrooms is truly remarkable and without parallel” (96). For a discussion of the “metadramatic pedagogy” of suicide in English Roman plays, see 91-99.

of self-murder in this chapter, rather than adding to the substantial quantity of existing scholarship on suicides in classical contexts. Amongst my examples there is only one that draws directly upon Stoic principles, and even in this scene my intention is not to examine the suicide *vis-à-vis* other Roman plays, but rather to discuss the extent to which the protagonist ultimately departs from the Stoic principles he espouses.

In my discussions of individual scenes, I will consider the intended effect of the self-murder upon the living, through analysis of the character's last speeches before dying. Most importantly, however, I will argue that the depiction of memorable suicides on the stage offered to viewers a unique form of 'instruction' in the art of suicide, demonstrating how it was possible to absent oneself from Christian consolation, yet still die with a measure of dignity and with personal integrity intact. In this sense, such scenes may have performed the cultural function of acknowledging those who were seriously considering suicide as an option, and who were therefore excluded from any possibility of Christian hope or consolation.

The publication dates of the plays included in this chapter range from 1590 to 1636, a period of forty-six years. Rather than considering each one in chronological order, I will instead discuss them as a cross-section of responses and attitudes in relation to the prevailing early modern condemnation of self-murder. Since much critical material already exists on Shakespeare's famous suicides – notably *Romeo and Juliet* and the Roman plays – my primary focus will be the scenes in the plays of other dramatists, whose characters' onstage suicides have received little or no attention in the specific context of dying words.

I will thus begin with the character of Homes from Dekker and Webster's *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (1607) as an embodiment of what was considered, in early modern England, to be the worst form of despair.<sup>77</sup> I will then consider Marlovian examples of suicide in *Tamburlaine, Parts I and II* (1590) and *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1594), which exploit the theatrical potential of self-murder and include elements of deception or trickery on the part of the willful suicide.<sup>78</sup> This will be followed by a focus on William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* (1636), and the chapter will conclude with discussions of Clermont D'Ambois in Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (1613)<sup>79</sup> and Leidenberch in Fletcher and Massinger's *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelte* (1619).

The suicide of the minor character of Homes in *Sir Thomas Wyatt* is a conscious analogue of the suicide of Judas Iscariot. In Willymat's phrase, quoted earlier, the hanging of oneself is considered "Judas-like" (7), for the disciple's "decision to hang himself after the betrayal of Christ became the standard example of sinful despair" (Wymer 21). Medieval play cycles contained scenes of Judas's betrayal; in the N-Town version (or *Ludus Coventraie*), Play No. 30 contains his – presumably onstage – suicide, after four remorseful lines of alternating rhyme:

I, Judas, haue synnyd, and treson haue don,

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<sup>77</sup> For an account of the 1607 and 1612 quartos of the play, see Fredson Bowers, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker* Vol.1, 399-404.

<sup>78</sup> For a discussion of the dating of Marlowe's plays, see Laurie E. Maguire's "Marlovian Texts and Authorship". While *Tamburlaine* was printed in 1590, it appears to have been first acted in 1587 (41-42). Sara Munson Deats draws attention to the scholarly disputes regarding the date of *Dido*. Although the date of first publication was 1594, the play was "probably composed around 1585-6" (194).

<sup>79</sup> Katharine Eisaman Maus notes that the play was "first performed in 1610 or 1611" (*Four Revenge Tragedies* xxiii).

For I haue betrayd þis rythful blood.

Here is þoure mony aȝen, all and som.

For sorwe and thowth I am wax wood! (lines 25-28)

When Judas's attempt to return his payment is refused, the stage direction states that he "*castyth down þh mony, and goth and hangyth hymself*" (32).<sup>80</sup>

The death of Homes initially appears to be an orthodox representation of a shameful act of self-destruction, after he has betrayed his master, the Duke of Suffolk. Yet this seemingly uncomplicated treatment of the event is ultimately challenged by the implications of the play as a whole; by the end of *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, Homes's suicide emerges as a significant episode in the drama.

Condemned for supporting his daughter, Lady Jane Grey, as heir to the English throne, Suffolk is forced into hiding. He is dependent upon Homes, his "protesting seruant", to supply his needs while he suffers the discomforts of his "hard lodging" (2.3.2-3). The opening of the scene sets up a context for betrayal, as Homes arrives, bearing provisions and informing Suffolk of what has happened to him. He tells his master that his house was searched and he was threatened with the rack "if I did not yeeld / Your gracious selfe into their gracelesse hands"

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<sup>80</sup> Judas also appears in the York Cycle, and the Chester and Towneley Cycles. Rosemary Woolf observes that the "characterization of Judas in the plays is exceptional", for he is "unique among the villains in being neither arrogantly boastful nor coarse-tongued." Despite his association with the devil, he is portrayed primarily as a flawed human being, so that "his fate . . . arouses a mixture of horror and compassion" (240). In terms of his onstage suicide, Woolf observes that "it remains possible that there was a brief dumb show in which Judas mimed his suicide or, more probably, in which an image of Judas was at this point strung up" (243). The death is not represented in either the York or Chester cycles, but the York cycle does contain a play entitled *The Remorse of Judas*, which includes a relatively lengthy final speech. In it, Judas states that he will "aske no mercy, for none mon Y gete", and finishes with, "Allas, who may I mene to? / Shall I me take non othir reede? / Miselffe in haste I schall fordoo, / And take me nowe vnto my dede" (lines 304, 313-16).

(20-21). Suffolk fears that Homes has been disloyal, whereupon his servant exclaims,

Done it! o betraie you? O noe!  
 First would I see my loued wife and Children  
 Murdered, and tos'd on speares, before I would  
 Deliuier your grace vnto their handes,  
 For they intend your death. (23-27)

He further relates that he was offered a thousand crowns to be an informant, “Which I beseech may stop my Vitall breath, / When I am feede with golde to worke your death” (32-33).

At this point, the Sheriff and his officers arrive, and as Homes kisses Suffolk’s hand, the Sheriff comments, “So Iudas kist his Maister: ceaze the Duke” (38). Suffolk assumes that he and Homes have both been victimized, and he requests a single kindness before he is led away, that “You would be good vnto my Seruant *Homes*, / Where in releeuing me, hath but performde / The duetie of a seruant to his Lord” (44-46). The Sheriff disabuses the duke and gives Homes a portion of his promised payment, while Suffolk is devastated that Homes has “such a tongue, / So smoothly oilde” (52-53). Homes asks for pardon, and Suffolk’s simple yet gracious response has enormous and immediate impact on Homes:

God pardon thee,  
 And lay not to thy soule this greeuous sinne:  
 Farwell. And when thou spendest this ill got golde  
 Remember how thy Maisters life was solde.  
 Thy Lord that gaue thee Lordships, made thee great,

Yet thou betraidst him as he sat at meate.

On to my graue, tis time that I were dead,

When he that held my heart betraies my head. (56-63)

The “ill got golde”, the repetition of the word ‘Lord’, and the betrayal taking place as Suffolk “sat at meate” – all recall Judas’s betrayal of Christ; their hastily shared meal before the Duke’s arrest becomes a humble parallel to the Last Supper.<sup>81</sup>

Suffolk’s words prompt a powerful upsurge of remorse in Homes, and he cries out, “O God, O God, that euer I was borne, / This deede hath made me (slaue) to abiect scorne” (64-65).

Although at this point in the scene he already intends to take his own life, the suicide itself does not take place immediately. Instead, he exits the stage; the character of the Clown enters and is delighted to discover the “vittailles” where Homes has left them (69). The stage direction indicates that Homes returns “*with a Halter about his necke*” (70), which is, along with the dagger, the classic emblem of suicidal despair on the stage (Wymer 23).<sup>82</sup> The Clown recognizes him – “How, with a Halter about his necke? I hope hee doth not meane to hang himselfe?” (*Wyatt* 2.3.72-73). He steps quietly aside and thus willingly becomes a witness to Homes’s last words and suicide. Rather than Homes’s final speech being voiced in the solitude he supposes, this scene – for the audience – becomes instead an expression of despair punctuated by unsympathetic commentary:

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<sup>81</sup> Woolf points out that the dramatist of the *Ludus Coventriae* follows the “tradition that Judas actually took communion from Christ”, and the “unnaturalness” of this act is emphasized by the gloating devil figure onstage, who witnesses Judas’s hanging (243). In *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, the character of the Clown observes Homes’s hanging, and – like the devil – has the last, unsympathetic word in the scene.

<sup>82</sup> See also Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson’s *Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642*, 64 and 108-109.

HOMES. This is the place, where I betraide my Lord,  
 This is the place where oft I haue releeu'd:  
 And villaine I, betraide him to the Iawes of death.  
 But heere before I further will proceede  
 Heere will I burie this inticing gould,  
 Lye there damn'd fiend neuer serue humaine more.

CLOWN. This is rare, now in this moode hee would hang  
 himselfe  
 twere excellent. (75-82)

Homes determines to kill himself on the spot where Suffolk was arrested. He frames his suicide as a form of self-execution, for public hangings were often performed at the location at which the original crime was committed. Before killing himself, however, he buries the money he was paid for informing on his master. This action, combined with his choice of death by hanging, clearly evokes Judas and the burial of his thirty pieces of silver. The Clown's interpolation is followed by Homes's final two lines: "Shall I aske mercie? no it is too late, / Heauen will not heare, and I am desperate" (83-84). Homes's words encapsulate a refusal to believe in the possibility of divine forgiveness and personal salvation, indicating that he has been gripped by 'wicked' desperation, the "euill through which a man . . . is past all hope of the good will of God" (Willymat 2). Homes asks the appropriate question – "Shall I aske mercie?" – but too quickly and despairingly answers it; the stage direction at the conclusion of his speech notes that he "*strangles himselfe*" (Wyatt 2.3.84).

In a recent, rare production of this play in Wellington, New Zealand – directed by David Lawrence – the impact achieved by the onstage performance of

Homes's suicide demonstrated how the theatrical representation of self-murder might encourage the audience toward a more compassionate perception of the desperate character, even if the initial response is one of aversion. The actor, Tommy Davis, stood centre stage with a noose around his neck, pulling the rope up behind his head with both hands. His contorted face as he positioned the rope signaled his agitation, and this was followed by several long moments which graphically represented the effort and strain of his strangulation. At the moment of death, he collapsed to the floor.<sup>83</sup>

Homes is clearly determined to die, yet the scene is complicated by the inclusion of the Clown, who is content to watch without displaying any impulse toward intervention. He clearly considers self-murder to be a just and appropriate punishment for Homes's treachery: "So, so, a very good ending, would all falce Seruants might drinke of the same sauce" (*Wyatt* 85-86). Of course, Homes's "good ending" is purely ironic in this context, for his instantaneous remorse and self-punishment are not sufficient – from the orthodox point of view – to mitigate the sinfulness of either his treachery or his suicide. The Clown exits with Homes's body, but not before availing himself of the gold; as he exits the stage, he remarks, "I doe not care if I throwe this Dog in a Ditch: come away dissembler . . ." (89-90). From the Clown's comments, and his attitude toward the act he has witnessed, it is safe to assume that he will dispose of the body face down in a ditch.

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<sup>83</sup> In his introduction to *A Warning For Fair Women*, Cannon addresses the issue of staged hangings on the early modern stage, suggesting that a hood might have shrouded the head and upper body of the victim, or that a "harness-like device" may have been used to support "almost all the weight of the body even though there was a rope about the person's neck" (54).

At this point in the play, it appears that the orthodox view of suicide prevails. The presence of the Clown provides an element of comic relief, but it also raises questions about his refusal to become involved in Homes's crisis. Insofar as the Clown is implicated as a witness, this refusal also implicates the theatre audience, as they too observe the suicide. The double audience frames the act of self-murder as a mode of performance, a form of public proclamation of guilt and remorse.

However, it is also significant that Homes, a minor character who appears only in this one scene, is given a dramatic onstage death – the executions of Thomas Wyatt, Lady Jane Grey and Guilford Dudley all occur offstage. Moreover, the suicide is placed in the middle of the play, with eight scenes on either side, thus dividing the brief reign of Lady Jane in the first half from Mary's accession to the throne at the beginning of the second half. In a drama of political instability and shifting allegiances, Homes emerges – by the end of the play – in counterpoint to the group of nobles at court, who adapt to changing circumstances by transferring their loyalties in the interests of political expediency and self-preservation. Despite the low profile conferred by his inferior social position, Homes responds to his conscience and refuses to live with the agonizing awareness of his own treachery. He thus offers the audience an example of how self-destruction may, in specific circumstances, be interpreted as a demonstration of personal integrity.

Opposed political factions also form the backdrop to the suicides of the Turkish Emperor Bajazeth and his wife Zabina in *Tamburlaine I*. Their circumstances are more constrained than that of Homes, and in a sense more abject, in that they take place in humiliating circumstances of captivity at the

hands of Tamburlaine. Whereas Bajazeth's suicide is motivated by issues of political and personal honour, Zabina's death is indirectly political, for it is rather an immediate and devastated response to the loss of her husband.

For Bajazeth, self-murder is the only acceptable option after being defeated by Tamburlaine and subjected to the indignity of being caged and used as a footstool (4.2). Tamburlaine decrees that Bajazeth will remain caged, "And where I go be thus in triumph drawn"; Zabina is instructed to feed her husband "with the scraps / My servitors shall bring thee from my board" (4.2.86-88). Faint with hunger, Bajazeth weakens and accepts food, and does not appear at this point to be considering suicide: "My veins are pale, my sinews hard and dry, / My joints benumbed; unless I eat, I die" (4.4.103-104).

Bajazeth's instinct for self-preservation quickly expires, however, along with his hopes for release. In the scene containing his and Zabina's suicides, both curse Tamburlaine bitterly after he has left the stage to meet the Soldan and the Arabian king in battle. Bajazeth then enters a more contemplative state, in which he admits the pointlessness of cursing and faces the reality of their situation, observing that they possess "no hope" of ending their "ecstasies" (5.1.238). He laments that "my crown, my honour, and my name" are "Thrust under yoke and thralldom of a thief" (260-61), and appears to be tormented by the suffering that has been inflicted upon Zabina, who is now "thrown to rooms of black abjection, / Smearèd with blots of basest drudgery, / And villeiness to shame, disdain, and misery" (267-69). He wishes to "cheer Zabina's heart", but "Sharp hunger bites upon and gripes the root / From whence the issues of my thoughts do break." (271-74).

By this time, Bajazeth has inwardly resolved to bring about his own death, so that the final words he addresses to his wife are both an expression of his love for her and a means of sending her from him for long enough that he may commit suicide:

O poor Zabina, O my Queen, my Queen,  
 Fetch me some water for my burning breast,  
 To cool and comfort me with longer date,  
 That, in the shortened sequel of my life,  
 I may pour forth my soul into thine arms  
 With words of love, whose moaning intercourse  
 Hath hitherto been stayed with wrath and hate  
 Of our expressless banned inflictions. (275-82)

Bajazeth's "words of love" are his covert farewell to Zabina, in a situation that does not permit him to elaborate; his wife's temporary absence ensures that she can neither remonstrate with him nor attempt to physically deflect him from his chosen course of action.

Upon her exit he immediately signals his intention:

Now, Bajazeth, abridge thy baneful days  
 And beat thy brains out of thy conquered head,  
 Since other means are all forbidden me  
 That may be ministers of my decay. (286-89)

He calls upon Jove to hide his act in darkness: "Accursèd day, infected with my griefs, / Hide now thy stainèd face in endless night / And shut the windows of the lightsome heavens" (291-93), but the image of "ugly darkness with her rusty

coach / Engirt with tempests” transforms into an appeal for vengeance against Tamburlaine, as he continues:

And let her horses from their nostrils breathe  
 Rebellious winds and dreadful thunderclaps:  
 That in this terror Tamburlaine may live,  
 And my pined soul, resolved in liquid air,  
 May still excruciate his tormented thoughts. (294-301)

In his final three lines, he seeks death as a release for his tormented soul: “Then let the stony dart of senseless cold / Pierce through the centre of my withered heart / And make a passage for my loathèd life” (302-304).

Bajazeth’s intensely physical imagery of the heart pierced by “senseless cold” suggests the escape of the spirit from the confines of the earthly body, but the only weapon by which he can effect this release is the very cage that has held him captive; he brains himself on the bars of his prison. The context is outrageous: his captivity and the manner of his death are equally absurd, yet in spite of this – or rather, because of this – Bajazeth’s suicide is a powerful and impressive act. So intolerable is his situation that he not only welcomes death, but is determined to summon the necessary physical strength to ensure that his self-destruction is complete. While he is fuelled by frustration, rage and hopelessness, his urgency to kill himself is also increased by the knowledge that by the time Zabina returns, he must already be dead.

Although Bajazeth’s suicide implies the need for artful staging, the reaction of Zabina to the spectacle of her husband’s body indicates clearly enough the horror of his mode of death, even if the full visual details are obscured for the

audience. When she re-enters the stage, she is devastated to discover what he has done:

What do my eyes behold? My husband dead!  
 His skull all riven in twain, his brains dashed out!  
 The brains of Bajazeth, my lord and sovereign!  
 O Bajazeth, my husband and my lord,  
 O Bajazeth, O Turk, O Emperor – ” (305-309)

Her shock and desolation are expressed in the repetition of her words, themselves a prelude to the anguished remainder of what becomes her own pre-suicide speech:

– give him his liquor?  
 Not I. Bring milk and fire, and my blood I bring him  
 again, tear me in pieces, give me the sword with a ball of  
 wild-fire upon it. Down with him, down with him! Go  
 to my child, away, away, away. Ah, save that infant,  
 save him, save him! I, even I, speak to her. The sun was  
 down. Streamers white, red, black, here, here, here. Fling  
 the meat in his face. Tamburlaine, Tamburlaine! Let the  
 soldiers be buried. Hell, death, Tamburlaine, hell! Make  
 ready my coach, my chair, my jewels, I come, I come, I  
 come! (309-19)

The stage directions indicate that Zabina “*runs against the cage and brains herself*” (319). The small but significant detail of Zabina *running* against the cage is entirely appropriate for the particular sort of desperation she experiences, and the wildness of this movement contrasts with Bajazeth’s apparently more

stationary act of self-destruction. Whereas Bajazeth's approach to taking his own life is relatively calm and reasoned – or at least resigned and methodical – Zabina is entirely unhinged by her husband's death, and her suicide is therefore less an act of political significance than an expression of intense personal anguish and grief.

The contrast between husband and wife is evident in the differing structures of their final speeches. Bajazeth is logical, formal and self-consciously poetic; his words are carefully chosen to create a dying utterance that expresses inner turmoil yet aspires to the grandeur of tragedy. Although he is alone onstage, he delivers his speech as he would before spectators, determined to die with his own sense of dignity undiminished. Zabina's speech is quite the opposite. She speaks in prose, for her words are unplanned, a spontaneous upwelling of emotion that is expressed without consideration of a possible audience. Zabina lacks the self-command to consciously structure her words, and her speech is therefore disjointed, emotional and obsessively repetitive. Her opening lines represent her attempt to absorb the knowledge of Bajazeth's suicide, but once she has done so, her thought processes become fragmented as she is overwhelmed by the enormity of her loss. Her speech is a tortured jumble of phrases saturated with the horror of recent events, of large-scale destruction and widespread human suffering. The "Streamers white, red, black", referred to by the messenger in 4.1, reflect the progression of Tamburlaine's military campaign, from initial "mildness" to the uncompromising infliction of violence and death (4.1.49-63).

The images of destruction in Zabina's speech – of fire, blood and sword, of the endangered infant and unburied soldiers – give way at the end to a vision of splendour, as she calls for "my coach, my chair, my jewels". Thus, once she has

been fully inhabited by the horror and grief that have overtaken her, Zabina retreats into a private space, in which the external world is blocked out and her evocation of an empress's earlier stateliness becomes the necessary impetus for accomplishing her own death. Calling for her imagined finery, she sees herself exclusively in her last moments as the wife who hastens to embark on the journey to rejoin her husband – her final phrase “I come, I come, I come!” is that of the estranged and grieving lover eagerly responding to the silent summons of the dead.

From the early modern audience's Christian perspective, Zabina bears a slighter responsibility for her act of self-murder than does Bajazeth, precisely because of the madness that descends upon her immediately prior to her suicide. According to Sym's terminology, she appears to suffer from a “phrensey” (172); as a “*phrentick*” person, Zabina “cannot *justly* be said to be a *direct self-murderer*”, because her suicide is motivated by “a *bruit passion*, or unreasonable internall *impulsion*” rather than an “act of the *practicall understanding*” (174). As a scene of double suicide, the self-braining of the Turkish emperor and his wife offers a form of novelty to aficionados of unusual deaths, as London audiences clearly were. The scene is made more complex, however, through an exploration of the differences between Bajazeth and Zabina, particularly in the expression of their final speeches.

The plight of Olympia in *Tamburlaine II* is similar to that of the captive Zabina. Like Zabina, Olympia desires death due to the loss of her husband, the Captain, who is killed by a “deadly bullet” wound received in battle (3.4.4). Although his dying speech is – for the purposes of this chapter – merely a catalyst

for Olympia's intention to commit suicide, it is worth quoting here as an entertaining example of an implausibly descriptive dying speech:

I cannot live.

I feel my liver pierced, and all my veins  
That there begin and nourish every part,  
Mangled and torn, and all my entrails bathed  
In blood that straineth from their orifex. (5-9)

After this helpful description of his internal injuries, he expires with the line, "Farewell, sweet wife, sweet son, farewell, I die" (10). However disappointing this speech may be to the skeptical spectator, for Olympia the effect is galvanizing. She immediately apostrophizes Death, lamenting that she has been left behind as a survivor:

Come back again, sweet Death, and strike us both!  
One minute end our days, and one sepulchre  
Contain our bodies. Death, why com'st thou not? (12-14)

She expresses her suicidal intention by drawing a dagger and instructing "ugly Death" to carry – not merely her own – but the soul of her son, too, to join that of the Captain (16-17). She asks of her son, "art thou content to die?" as she advises him of the likelihood of torture at the hands of the "barbarous Scythians" (18-19) and Moors, and urges him to

. . . die by thy loving mother's hand,  
Who gently now will lance thy ivory throat  
And quickly rid thee both of pain and life. (23-25)

Her son displays an eager willingness to die, declaring himself prepared to take his own life if she does not dispatch him. She stabs him as she utters the prayer,

“Ah, sacred Mahomet, if this be sin, / Entreat a pardon of the God of heaven, / And purge my soul before it come to thee!” (31-33). Although clearly aware of the peril attached to the act of suicide, she refuses to allow emotion to cloud her single-minded purpose. The same resolution that enables her to kill her son also prompts her to burn their two bodies; despite the urgency of her own desire to die, she finds it necessary to perform this ritual, a final act of love toward her husband and son.

Olympia’s decision to do this, however, has serious consequences. She loses the opportunity to quickly and efficiently take her own life, for Theridamas and Techelles enter and prevent her (33). When asked what she is doing, she clearly expresses her intention:

Killing myself, as I have done my son,  
Whose body, with his father’s, I have burnt,  
Lest cruel Scythians should dismember him. (35-37)<sup>84</sup>

She consents to go with Theridamas to meet Tamburlaine, despite the former’s declaration of love for her; she requests of him, “let the end of this my fatal journey / Be likewise end to my accursèd life” (80-81).

Olympia returns to the stage in 4.2, opening the scene with a soliloquy in which she laments her captivity. Her eyes are red with weeping, and her sequestration from the sun has made her so pale that she looks “like Death” (4.2.4). By this time she is aware of Theridamas’s desire for her, and that she must be cunning in order to evade his advances. Olympia continues to be

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<sup>84</sup> Kate Chedgzoy observes that, in performing this rite, Olympia “upholds, in the face of the barbarian onslaught, civilized values that derive ultimately from the European classical heritage; that a Muslim woman is chosen to be the defender of some of the core values of Marlowe’s cultural world is remarkable” (250).

thwarted in her longing for death; there are “no herbs” or “Contagious smells and vapours” to kill her, and neither does she have access to a sword – for these reasons, she must rely upon “invention” to effect her escape (9-13). Theridamas, entering, continues to importune her, but she is steadfast, for to “meditate on death” is a “fitter subject for a pensive soul” (26-27). She requests that he release her from her misery: “Ah, pity me, my lord, and draw your sword, / Making a passage for my troubled soul, / Which beats against this prison to get out / And meet my husband and my loving son” (33-36). She insists upon the futility of his promises of riches, insisting that “No such discourse is pleasant in mine ears, / But that where every period ends with death, / And every line begins with death again: / I cannot love to be an emperess” (46-49).

When Theridamas attempts to force her, she swiftly changes her strategy; promising him “a present of such price / As all the world cannot afford the like”, she tells him that it is an enchanted ointment prepared by a “cunning alchemist”, and that “if you but ’noint your tender skin, / Nor pistol, sword, nor lance, can pierce your flesh” (56-66). Theridamas is initially both skeptical and suspicious, demanding to know why she failed to use such an efficacious preparation to save her mortally wounded husband. She responds that his death was too sudden, and she rather quickly wins Theridamas over when she offers, as an “easy proof”, to let him test the ointment on herself (75). Her throat anointed, she speaks her two final lines: “Now stab, my lord, and mark your weapon’s point, / That will be blunted if the blow be great” (79-80).

The scene does not invite straightforward interpretation: the implausible nature of Olympia’s deception and Theridamas’s astonishing gullibility threaten to topple the scene into comedy. If we can momentarily suspend disbelief,

however, and accept – from an early modern perspective, at least – the notion of an alchemical potion containing the properties Olympia describes, then the issue of credibility recedes and the focus of the scene becomes the extremes to which Olympia is forced to go in order to achieve her own death.

In the Marlowe Project's 2004 production of the play (directed by Jeff S. Dailey), Matthew Greenfield reports that, "in a startling but convincing moment, before Olympia tricked Theridamas into stabbing her in the throat, she ran her hands over his bare chest as if he had succeeded in winning her affections. This seductive gesture underlined the failed or displaced eroticism of the stabbing itself" (126). Chedgzoy describes Olympia's as a "shockingly sexualized end", but one which restores to her "some agency" by enabling her to avoid Theridamas's "sexual advances, which she literally considers to be a fate worse than death" (250). The "seductive gesture" described by Greenfield increases the plausibility of the scene in performance, accounting for Olympia's success in duping Theridamas. With few resources available, and no personal freedom, she must suppress her grief and consciously perform a role that will permit her to triumph over her captor. Yet, while her gestures may be those of a lover – to delight Theridamas and encourage the assumption that her resolve has now weakened – it is the soldier in Theridamas that she targets with her offer of the ointment, for the alchemical preparation promises to provide him with a unique form of physical protection. Theridamas must initially be charmed by Olympia's changed demeanor toward him, and then snared by the novelty of the gift; when he kills her he laments the mistake that he has made, but for the remainder of the play he resumes his support of Tamburlaine, and no further mention is made of the woman who outwitted him.

Olympia's death defies the usual categories of suicide: although she is intent upon dying and entirely prepared to take her own life, Theridamas's consistent thwarting of her attempts render this impossible. Neither can hers be considered an 'assisted' suicide – in the usual sense of the word, at least – for Theridamas does not consciously and willingly assist in the act. Marlowe's emphasis is on both the extremity of Olympia's circumstances and the novelty of the situation; her death is achieved through clever manipulation of her adversary, and represents an impressive metatheatrical device within the play. The determination with which she pursues her own death, and the manner in which she ensures that it is performed, finally eclipses the double bereavement which was its original motivation.

The eponymous heroine of *Dido, Queen of Carthage* also employs elements of trickery in order to accomplish her own death, but in contrast to the scene of Olympia's suicide, in *Dido* there is a greater emphasis on self-murder, as the movement of the entire play culminates in the highly theatrical suicide of its protagonist.

Dido, bewitched with love for Aeneas and grief-stricken at his departure from Carthage, feels further trapped and abandoned by the "oversight" that Aeneas has left in Dido's ships, so that she is unable to follow him (5.1.269). Distracted by grief, Dido muses, "Ay, I must be the murderer of myself: / No, but I am not; yet I will be straight", and she bids her sister Anna be glad, "now have I found a mean / To rid me from these thoughts of lunacy" (270-73). She calls for fire to be brought in, and cuts off Iarbus's protestations of love by issuing him instructions:

Lay to thy hands, and help me make a fire

That shall consume all that this stranger left;  
 For I intend a private sacrifice,  
 To cure my mind that melts for unkind love. (284-87)

Assured by Dido that – if he helps her – she will requite his love, Iarbus unwittingly assists her in the construction of her own funeral pyre. Earlier, she had vowed that she would frame for herself “wings of wax like Icarus”, and “soar unto the sun, / That they may melt and I fall in his arms” (243-45); in the speech above, her mind “melts for unkind love”, in another prefiguring of her death. She instructs Iarbus to leave, and “let none approach this place” (291); his exit is followed by her final soliloquy.

In contrast to her earlier representation of herself to Anna and Iarbus as a distraught victim of Aeneas’s cruelty, there is a discernible shift in the opening of her final speech, of vindictiveness toward Aeneas:

Now, Dido, with these relics burn thyself,  
 And make Aeneas famous through the world  
 For perjury and slaughter of a queen. (292-94)

She throws into the flames the sword on which he swore his love; this is followed by the garment in which Dido clothed him upon his arrival in Carthage. Finally, she destroys all the “letters, lines, and perjured papers” associated with him (300). Her bitter wrath is increased with each item consumed by the flames, until she calls upon the gods to inflict suffering, not merely upon Aeneas, but on all the Trojans:

Grant, though the traitors land in Italy,  
 They may be still tormented with unrest,  
 And from mine ashes let a conqueror rise,

That may revenge this treason to a queen

By ploughing up his countries with the sword! (304-308)

Dido translates her grievance into an issue of epic dimensions, using her emotional turmoil to fuel her solitary act of defiance. Yet precisely because of her prominence as Queen, her suicide cannot be solitary, and neither does she intend it to be so; despite her absorption in her own grief, Dido is keenly aware of her act of self-murder as the opportunity for an impressive theatrical performance. Even when she is alone onstage, she is a woman performing her final role of jilted and tormented lover for an imaginary audience, accustomed as she is to being the protagonist of her own life; the play audience, of course, is privy to this ‘solitary’ act, and the convention that she is performing it ‘alone’ intensifies the impact of her death. Dido decrees that between Carthage and Italy there will “be never league”, and in a quotation drawn from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, she calls down “a feud between them and us to the last generation” (309-311).<sup>85</sup>

In Sym’s terms, Dido’s essential preoccupations are with the “rage of *Anger*, and the unsatiable desire of *revenge*”, which are

most furious *passions*, that most spoile, and are least subject to the command of *reason*, or *religion*; and can most hardly be supprest, or kept within any due compasse: which, when they cannot ease themselves, by vent upon others, will reflect upon the *subject* wherein they are, to destroy the same. (232)

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<sup>85</sup> The lines from Virgil (4.28-29) are ‘*Litora litoribus contraria, fluctibus undas / Imprecor; arma armis; pugnent ipsique nepotes*’. In the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *The Aeneid*, C. Day Lewis translates these lines as: ‘Shore to shore, sea to sea, weapon to weapon opposed – / I call down a feud between them and us to the last generation! (114).

He adds that this form of self-murder is “most incident to persons of the weakest *sexe*, and worst disposition and condition; such as be *women*, and *servants*, and *men sympathizing* with them in qualities”, and is confident that such persons “doe die in implacable malice, and are certainly damned by their owne act and manner of concluding their life” (236-37). Interestingly, Sym equates “implacable malice” with weakness of character, but this frailty does not absolve the vengeful suicide from blame. Neither does Sym appear to consider excessive passion a form of madness – temporary or otherwise – deserving of a verdict of *non compos mentis*. Rather, from his perspective, Dido is fully responsible for her own conduct, as her decision to take her own life is directly attributable to her refusal to control her passions, and to her willful desire for revenge. However extreme Dido’s passions may be, then, prior to her suicide, they do not indicate the same degree of mental and emotional disorder suffered by Zabina in *Tamburlaine*; whereas Zabina is clearly “*phrentick*” in her final moments, Dido remains capable of “*practicall understanding*” (Sym 174), as well as self-conscious action and coherent speech.

Although Marlowe’s version of events differs significantly from that of his source, both his own and Virgil’s representations of Dido are at odds with Sym’s perspective on the vengeful suicide. In Virgil’s text, Dido calls down curses upon Aeneas’s head, and her suicidal thoughts are clearly manifestations of madness and internal darkness:

. . . overmastered by grief, she conceived a criminal madness  
 And doomed herself to death, she worked out the time and method  
 In secret . . . (Aen. 4.474-76)

Dido is “overmastered”, her grief at this stage destructively internalized. Anna is instructed by her sister to build up the funeral pyre and lay on it Aeneas’s arms and “all relics of him, and the marriage-bed / That was the ruin of me” (496-97), claiming that she is following the advice of an enchantress. After Dido has cursed Aeneas and his people, she tries to “think of every expedient, / Seeking the quickest way out of the life she hated” (630-31). The fire burning, Virgil’s Dido is “trembling, distraught by the terrible thing she was doing”; her eyes are “bloodshot”; she has “hectic blotches” on her “quivering cheeks”, yet she is “pale with the shade of advancing death” (642-44). The enormity of what she is about to do is registered in this description of Dido’s face. She sends off the nurse, and in the “innermost court of the palace” she climbs the “lofty / Pyre, frantic at heart” (645-46), fixated upon the relics left by Aeneas. She lies upon the bed and speaks “her very last words” (650); she draws Aeneas’s sword, but rather than throw it onto the fire – as Marlowe’s Dido does – she falls upon it, “the blood spouting up over / The blade, and her hands spattered” (664-65). Anna, horrified to discover what Dido has done, also scales the “towering pyre”, and attempts to revive her sister; Juno, however, takes pity upon Dido’s suffering and parts “the agonized soul from the body that still clung to it” (685, 695). The narrator draws attention to the fact that Dido’s was a “desperate and untimely” death, and that she was “driven to it / By a crazed impulse” (697-98).

In Marlowe’s play, the scene of Dido’s suicide is shortened, and the detail of the bed is omitted. The emphasis is on her sadness as she handles each of Aeneas’s “relics” and sacrifices them on the fire; the curses she calls down upon him are similarly abbreviated, and although Marlowe borrows part of the Latin text directly from Virgil, one line curses, but the single line that emphasizes

Dido's willingness to die is that which immediately precedes her plunge into the heart of the fire.<sup>86</sup>

Marlowe also departs from his source by crowding three suicides into the final scene of the play. Anna and Iarbus follow Dido, throwing themselves into the fire, each surrendering immediately to an overwhelming experience of grief at the loss of their beloved.

Marlowe, then, incorporates excerpts from the *Aeneid* into his own text, Dido's final two lines concluding with Virgil's words: "Live, false Aeneas! Truest Dido dies; / *Sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras.*"<sup>87</sup> The stage direction, "*Casts herself into the flames*" (*Dido* 5.1.313), is quickly followed by the two rather impulsive suicides of Iarbus and Anna. While these two deaths undermine the impact of Dido's suicide as a single event, on one level they do function as a repeated echo of her death, and that very impulsiveness provides a contrast to the systematic and determined manner in which Dido prepares for her own suicide. She carefully stage-manages the event, manipulating the actions of others in order to ensure that her plan will meet with no impediments. Significantly, she also has ample time to reconsider her decision, but chooses not to. Moreover, the transfer of Dido from Virgil's poem to Marlowe's play ensures that her chosen mode of suicide is placed in the cultural context of contemporary martyrdoms, particularly the graphic depictions of Protestant martyrs in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*.

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<sup>86</sup> In his discussion of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, Steven Mullaney observes that immolation was "culturally encoded as the most shameful way to be put to death", because it was "indiscriminate both in its treatment of the body, leaving nothing recognizable behind, and in its application to the status of the victim" ("Reforming Resistance" 239). Dido, of course, subverts this entirely, turning her self-chosen immolation into an impressive performance of rage and grief.

<sup>87</sup> Lewis translates this line as, 'Thus, thus! I go to the dark, go gladly.' This is followed by, 'May he look long, from out there on the deep, at my flaming pyre, / The heartless! And may my death-fires signal bad luck for his voyage!' (lines 60-62).

Dido strives for the numinous quality of a personal martyrdom in a secular, pagan context, dying for thwarted love and injured pride. Her pre-suicide ritual, in which she feeds the fire with the emblems of her relationship with Aeneas, represents a form of purgation and purification before death, preparation for both a private and a public sacrifice. The dramatic quality of her performance of self-destruction points to the contradictions inherent in her death: while she laments to others her grief at losing Aeneas, her solitary speech before casting herself into the flames reveals a woman who is determined to draw upon the majesty of death in order to proclaim that grief to the world, and to simultaneously punish Aeneas for his abandonment of her.

The death that follows Dido's final spoken words poses a challenge, of course, in performance. In recent productions of the play, various methods have been devised to symbolically represent Dido's immolation. In a production at Shakespeare's Globe in 2003, directed by Tim Carroll, Dido held "a handful of sparklers, with Iarbus and Anna each taking one in turn"; Annaliese Connolly observes that, as a result, Dido's death "is one of muted triumph as she isn't given the last word", and "members of the audience hesitated to clap, unsure in fact whether it was the end" (n. pag.). Mary-Kay Gamel pronounces the use of sparklers "a pretty but non-tragic effect" (622). Of the American Repertory Theatre production in Boston in 2005, directed by Neil Bartlett, Gamel reports that "a trap downstage was opened and smoke issued from it; on Dido's last line, *sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras*, she walked slowly and steadily down stairs into it. Here Anna rushed in, calling to Iarbas, who entered and stabbed himself; Anna slit her wrists, lay down and wrapped her arms around him, and grew still" (622). While this staging of Dido's descent into darkness is appropriate in terms of her

last words, Diana E. Henderson laments that Dido's "final hopping descent down into a center-stage trapdoor" is "especially anticlimactic" (57). In the 2009 production of the play, presented by the Royal National Theatre in London and directed by James MacDonald, Peter Kirwan describes yet another approach to Dido's suicide: "In her final moments, she piled her bed sheets and Aeneas's confiscated oars into a makeshift pyre, sat quietly atop it, and poured fuel over herself. Striking a match, the auditorium plunged into darkness. This calm death was the fitting conclusion to an intimate production that sacrificed the rest of the play to the story of the doomed queen" (659).

Martin Wiggins addresses the problem of staging, observing the lack of stage directions for the suicides of Dido, Iarbas and Anna; the three deaths are "literally a series of exits – but probably not in a conventional direction . . . the characters destroy themselves by disappearing downwards through the stage, accompanied with an imagined . . . sizzle as appropriate" ("When Did Marlowe" 539). The attempt to represent suicide by immolation, then, runs the risk of disappointing the audience's expectation of a spectacular death – or, at least, demands that spectators are willing to imaginatively fill in the visual gap left by the absence of the funeral pyre. For, despite the curses she invokes against Aeneas and his countrymen, Dido's final wish is, after all, for darkness.

Although vastly different from *Dido*, and a much later play, Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* also features a character who chooses to die after being thwarted in love. The play contains two interesting onstage representations of suicide, both of which are tinged by the supernatural. Kathleen Tillotson points out that the

story of Young Bateman appeared in various ballad versions, and may have been based on a play, no longer extant, entitled *Black Batman of the North* (377).<sup>88</sup>

In Sampson's play, Young Bateman is betrothed to Anne, but leaves his community temporarily, to distinguish himself through a period of military service. Reassured by Anne's protestations of unshakeable love and fidelity, he is devastated upon his return to discover that his betrothed has married the elderly suitor, German, on the very day of his arrival. Bateman's impending suicide is broadly hinted at, for his emotional turmoil is increased by Anne's cruel insensitivity toward him. When she suggests that he might wait for her until German is dead, he exclaims,

Ah monstrous; she plaies with my disasters  
As boyes with bubbles blowne up into aire,  
You that have care of innocents be my guard  
Least *I* commit some outrage on my selfe." (D4r)

A little later, he continues, "Hold swelling heart, for thou art tumbling downe / A hill of desperation; darke thoughts / Assaults my goodnes . . ." (D4r-D4v). Young Bateman is given a long speech prior to his suicide, which begins from the moment that he enters the stage with "*a halter about his necke*" (E1v). He explains that "life is too burthensome" (E1v), and muses, "It is my terrour that I live to thinke / I beare a life that is offensive to me" (E2r).

In the next twenty-four lines he apostrophizes Death, branding him a "Pale" and "cowardly monster", and lamenting that Death has failed to come forward and claim him, despite his willingness to be taken. "Come," he

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<sup>88</sup> For information on *Black Batman* (or *Bateman*), see the Lost Plays Database, which includes discussion of sources, references to the play, and a link to one of the ballad versions of the Bateman story.

challenges, “and affront me; fill thy unpauncht nerves / With my harts bloud; till  
with the overture / Thy never satisfied maw be sated”; he regrets that “thou  
approchest none / But those that fly thee”, and continues,

Tis said thou art not partiall, and dost winde  
The Prince, the begger, and the potentate  
All in one mould; but they doe falsifie  
That say thou art so tiranously just,  
For I have sought thee through the unpend groves,  
The shady cells where melancholly walkes,  
And eccho-like thou answerst me with Death,  
But darst not show thy face . . . (E2r)

Throughout both the medieval period and the Renaissance, the perception of Death as a leveller was commonplace.<sup>89</sup> Young Bateman’s conventional invocation is followed by a more personal statement about his search for death amongst the “unpend groves” and “shady cells” – wild and dark locations that appear to have mirrored his emotional state and intensified his sense of isolation.

Young Bateman’s desire for death does not immediately lead him to suicide as the most logical solution to his suffering, and his hesitation suggests that he is aware of the gravity of the choice he is finally prompted to make. His suicide – however hastily it appears to happen onstage – seems for Young Bateman to be the only option when he is confronted with continued and unalleviated emotional pain. Shocked by what has happened, and apparently not sufficiently wise to accept his suffering as a temporary state, he suppresses any

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<sup>89</sup> The same sentiment is expressed in the verse that accompanies Holbein’s illustration ‘Bones of All Men’ in *The Dance of Death*: “Woe! woe! inhabitants of Earth, / Where blighting cares so keenly strike, / And, spite of rank, or wealth, or worth, / Death – Death will visit all alike” (110).

qualms he may have in terms of the consequences of his act and chooses release rather than redemption.

His passive lament ended, he makes his decision: “Since thou disdainst me, I disdain thy power, / There be a thousand waies to cozen Death”<sup>90</sup>, and he purposefully turns his attention to a nearby “fruitlesse Tree”, describing the misleading quiet of the evening but also – significantly – tormented by the thought of his beloved enjoying her wedding night:

The night seemes silent, sleepe charmes the house,  
 And now the periurd woman is a topping,  
 I’le clime as high as she, yet i’le not rest,  
 My airy ghoast shall find her where she lyes,  
 And to her face divulge her perjuries. (E2r)

Whereas in the earlier part of his speech Young Bateman is absorbed in his own melancholy thoughts and longings for death, here he turns his resentment outwards, desiring vengeance against the unfaithful Anne. His crude choice of words, “now the perjurd woman is a topping”, conveys his anger and disgust toward her, as well as his keen sense of exclusion and loss. He imagines himself as already dead, his ghost seeking her out and directly confronting her. His final lines before he hangs himself are in the form of couplets, marking a transition from the vulgarity of his previous lines to a more self-consciously poetic turn of phrase in readiness for death:

Night be auspicious, draw thy sable weedes,

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<sup>90</sup> This line recalls the proverbial “Death has a thousand doors to let out life” (Tilley D140), expressed by Webster’s Duchess of Malfi as, “I know death hath ten thousand severall doores / For men, to take their *Exits*: and ’tis found / They go on such strange geometricall hinges, / You may open them both wayes” (4.2.206-209).

For day-light is a asham'd of her blacke deeds

One twich will do't, and then I shall be wed

As firme unto my grave, as to her bed. (E2r-E2v)

In his last two lines Young Bateman's grave becomes the marriage bed he should have shared with Anne; the night closes in to cover up her "blacke deeds" rather than obscure the shame of his suicide. Any initial hesitation in taking his own life is now completely subsumed, as he is possessed of the desire to inflict equal emotional suffering upon her. The absence of Christian concerns in this context acquires greater significance later in the play, in direct relation to Anne's 'doubtful' death. In the meantime, however, the post-suicide discovery of Young Bateman's hanged body by his father recalls the parallel scene in which Hieronimo finds the murdered body of his son Horatio in the harbour (*Spanish Tragedy* 2.4.63-95).

If the influence of Kyd is discernible in this scene, the debt to Shakespeare is even more prominent, in *The Vow Breaker's* numerous verbal echoes of *Hamlet*. While Young Bateman's restless ghost recalls that of the senior Hamlet's spirit, the descriptions associated with the suicide of Anne later in the play bear a clear resemblance to the mysterious circumstances of Ophelia's death.

Anne's death later in the play – like that of Ophelia – is rather more ambiguous than that of Young Bateman, although there are definite indications that she has, at least on some level, chosen to die. She is haunted by the spirit of her former love after his suicide, despite Old Bateman having informed her that "I nail'd him to the Earth / Riveted a stake quite through his bosome" (*Vow Breaker* G1v). Interestingly, the Ghost informs the pregnant Anne, "Thy time is not yet come; i'm now exild / I may not touch thee while thou art with chil'd" (F1v).

Anne expresses a wish to visit Old Bateman, for she feels an “inward sorrow” at having scorned him at the time of his son’s death, and adds, “My *Genius* tells me, I shall have no rest / Till I have made contrition” (F1v-F2r). Her father is worried: “She beares a Plurisie of greifes about her, / And much I feare the weakenes of her braine / Should draw her to some ominous exigent!” (F2r). Believed mad because of her sightings of the Ghost (G1r), she takes no joy in her child when it is born: “I might have taken comfort / In this pretty babe; now it is too late”, and she alerts the women attending her, “I pray be vigilant, / For if you slumber, or shut your eie-lids, / You never shall behold my living corps” (H1r). Her warning recalls Sym’s observation that an intended suicide may be signaled through the “*speeches and actions* of such persons immediately before the fact: which are some words of *threatning* or *fore-telling* something that may import so much . . . which is a sufficient warning what he will do, if it be not seasonably prevented” (260-61).

Anne’s vivid dream of her own death clearly recalls that of Ophelia, for she walks along “verdant banks”, and despite the winter weather, gathers roses, pansies, pinks, daffodils, daisies, cowslips, harebells and marigolds (*Vow Breaker* H1v). This recalls Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s “fantastic garlands” made from “crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples” (*Hamlet* 4.7.166-67). Just as Ophelia laments that the violets “withered all when my father died” (4.5.177-78), so Anne reports that there was “not one bending *Violet* to be seene” (*Vow Breaker* H1v). This echo of Ophelia’s dying scenario also calls attention to the ‘doubtful’ nature of her death: in *Hamlet*, Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s last minutes of life is suspiciously polished and poetic, a kind of set-piece which has interesting implications. I would suggest that Gertrude ‘performs’ her carefully

prepared speech (*Hamlet* 4.7.164-81) in order to ensure that Ophelia is buried in consecrated ground with funeral rites intact, producing a neatly-packaged account of her death that invites sympathy for the victimized girl and simultaneously sidesteps the issue of responsibility which Ophelia may bear for her own death.

In *The Vow Breaker*, Anne's precarious mental state is carefully commented upon, suggesting that she is not her usual self; just as Ophelia is distressed and disordered by the death of her father and her estrangement from Hamlet, so Anne appears to be unhinged by belated remorse for her treatment of Young Bateman and her experience of being haunted by his ghost. As Ophelia comes to inhabit her own interior reality, so too does Anne experience an alternative reality within her dream – which is, for her, more compelling and immediate than her actual circumstances. Greenham warns against dreams of evil, which “shew some euill in the heart, either in some sinne already committed, or in some sinne which may bee shortly committed: if the dreame be terrible, it is good to auoide al the occasions of that euill, and to giue our selues to praier, & not to giue too great credite to dreames, least they weaken faith” (17).

To the objective observer, Greenham's advice would appear to be particularly pertinent in Anne's case, for she clearly demonstrates her absorption in her own dream. In the next part of her speech she reports that she was drawn to the beckoning figure of a “lovely person, / Whose countenance was full of splendancy”, and who “went upon the water, / As firmly as on land”; when she followed, she “Leap'd into th'water, and so dround my selfe.” In a perfect example of Sym's warning, she admonishes the women who are there to assist her, “Pray watch me well this night; for if you sleepe, / I shall goe gather *Flowers*, and then youle weepe” (*Vow Breaker* H1v). The indirect allusion to Ophelia

suggests the ambiguity of her impending ‘suicide’, while the mysterious form she follows – whose gender is unspecified – is an intriguing and ambiguous element in the scenario. On the one hand, its ability to walk on water would suggest that it is Christ-like; on the other, her mesmerized following of it leads her to her death. Thus the figure may be seen as either a “spirit of health” or a “goblin damned” (*Hamlet* 1.4.40), either signalling her death as a divine decree or enticing her toward the supernatural predations of Young Bateman’s restless ghost. Either way, she has indeed been summoned, and she obviously feels that – when the time comes – she will be unable to resist that summons. The ambiguity of the dream is not entirely dispelled by her seeming admission that she “Leap’d into th’water” and thereby “drounde my selfe”; while this act appears voluntary, the context of the dream and its irresistible fascination for her do suggest that she is at the mercy of forces beyond her control.

Inevitably, of course, the women who are meant to be watching over Anne fall asleep, leaving her vulnerable to her supernatural former lover. The Ghost of Young Bateman returns and is no longer ‘exild’ from her – because she has given birth – and echoes the summons experienced in her dream: “Awake fond mortall ne’re to sleepe againe, / Now is the time I come to claime my promise, / Alive or dead I must, and will enjoy thee.” Anne accepts the inevitable: “Then my decreed houre is here set downe / I must away?” (*Vow Breaker* H2v). The Ghost confirms it; but if Anne perceived the figure in her dream as Christ-like, this image is banished by the Ghost’s promises of what awaits her in a pagan Hell: the “Ferry-man” will “waft thee into *Tartary*, / Where perjury, and false-hood finds reward / There shalt thou reade thy history of faults, / And mong’st the furies finde just recompence.” Moreover, he vows,

I'le lead thee to the ever-flaming Furnace,  
 That like a Feaver fed by opposite meates,  
 Engenders, and consumes it selfe with heate.  
 I'le peirce the Aire as with a thunder bolt,  
 And make thy passage free; make speede away  
 Thy broken contract, now thou goest to pay. (H2v)

Anne's final lines, spoken as she leaves her bed, are full of fear and uncertainty:  
 "O helpe, succour: helpe! wives, cozens, Mid-wives, / Good Angels guard me, I  
 goe, but cannot tell, / Whether my journey be, to Heaven or hell" (H3r).

Just as Gertrude reports the drowning of Ophelia, so Ursula prefaces the  
 report of Anne's death with the words, "Behold the saddest spectacle of woe, /  
 That ever mortall eies tooke notice off" (H3v). Another of the women then  
 recounts what has happened:

We trac'd her through the Snow, step, by step,  
 Vntill we came unto the River side,  
 Where like a cunning *Hare* she had indented  
 To cozen her persuers, and cozen'd her selfe  
 For dround we found her on the River side  
 Nigh Collicke Ferry. (H3v)

Anne invokes Christian angels but is thrown into confusion by the Ghost's  
 references to the ferryman and to Tartary; if her dream seemed to hold out the  
 promise of a Christian paradise in response to her belated remorse, this is  
 threatened in the last minutes of her life by the Ghost's clear association with the  
 underworld and his influence in framing her punishment.

In his pagan associations, Young Bateman is remarkably similar to the vengeful Don Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedy*; both await their anticipated prey, and both ensure that there can be no Christian consolation at the time of death. Moreover, the spectator is given the impression that, just as Don Andrea's enemies must suffer perpetual punishment in a pagan afterlife, so Anne will be unable to atone for her betrayal of Young Bateman, even after death. In this sense, *The Vow Breaker* is akin to the revenge plays in its rejection of the providentialist perspective that is so characteristic of the domestic murder plays; Young Bateman assumes a form of control and is capable of manipulating circumstances even from beyond the grave. Like Hamlet's father, Young Bateman has the ability to communicate after death with the one living person from whom he expects a particular form of retribution. These two spirits, in bursting the cerecloth and defying the stake, destabilize the concept of dying words by continuing to speak when they should remain silenced. On a fundamental level, they point to the inadequacy of last words to encapsulate all that a dying man might wish to say, emphasizing the potency of urgent last words that were never uttered.

In Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, Clermont represents a direct contrast to the ghostly and vengeful figure of Young Bateman, for he is determined to live and die by Stoic principles. Throughout the play, Clermont has discoursed at length on the subject of Stoicism, with considerably more enthusiasm than he has demonstrated toward the task of avenging his brother's death. Significantly, he chooses to commit suicide after successfully attaining revenge against Montsurry for the murder of Bussy, and his reasons for this choice have little to do with the machinations of revenge plots.

Earlier in the play, Clermont voices both his fearlessness of death and the perceived need for moderation:

I shall approve how vile I value fear  
 Of death at all times; but to be too rash,  
 Without both will and care to shun the worst  
 (It being in power to do, well and with cheer)  
 Is stupid negligence, and worse than fear. (Vol. 1, 3.4.32-36)

As Gordon Braden notes, Stoicism's "central strength is its calculus of adaptation to unchangeable realities", one of which is death (*Renaissance Tragedy* 17). Stoic reasoning maintained that as a natural, inevitable occurrence, death should be faced with equanimity and that to succumb to anxiety over one's own death – or to grieve for the death of another – was to defy rationality by wallowing in excessive passion.<sup>91</sup> Thus Clermont continues philosophizing on the theme of acceptance:

He that strives t'invert  
 The Universal's course with his poor way,  
 Not only dust-like shivers with the sway,  
 But, crossing God in his great work, all earth  
 Bears not so cursed and so damn'd a birth.  
 (*Revenge of Bussy* 3.4.71-75)

Clermont maintains his Stoic equanimity as he is led away under arrest:

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<sup>91</sup> R. W. Sharples offers an illustration of the level of detachment considered appropriate: "Stoic ethics indicated that if a perfectly wise, i.e. virtuous, man saw his child in danger of drowning . . . he would try to save it; but that if he failed he would accept this without feeling distress or pity, and without his happiness being diminished. Since everything that happens is governed by divine providence, his failure must have been for the best, even if he could not understand why" (852).

Chance what can chance me, well or ill is equal  
 In my acceptance, since I joy in neither,  
 But go with sway of all the world together.  
 In all successes Fortune and the day  
 To me alike are; I am fix'd, be she  
 Never so fickle; and will there repose,  
 Far past the reach of any die she throws. (159-65)

Guise, urging the King to sign for Clermont's release, praises Clermont at length as a "Senecal man": "He may with heaven's immortal powers compare, / To whom the day and fortune equal are; / Come fair or foul, whatever chance can fall, / Fix'd in himself, he still is one to all" (4.4.42-46). In an acknowledgement of the importance of Stoic principles to the play, Peter Bement observes, "Serenity comes when we are free from the passions (such as hope or fear), which are false opinions about the importance of external events, and are able to accept things as they are" (349).

So distraught is the Countess of Cambrai when she hears the news of Clermont's arrest and imprisonment that she is struck blind after excessive weeping (*Revenge of Bussy* 5.1.144-48). When Clermont hears of this, he appears quite unperturbed by the news, while Guise's suggestion that Clermont might "Marry thy worthiest mistress now being blind" (168) becomes an occasion for Clermont to discourse at length on his relationships with women and men respectively. He denies that "any man doth love" in marriage, for

. . . what excites the bed's desire in blood,  
 By no means justly can be constru'd love;  
 For when love kindles any knowing spirit,

It ends in virtue and effects divine,

And is in friendship chaste and masculine. (169-70, 184-88)

Guise responds, rather provocatively, with the words, “Thou shalt my mistress be; methinks my blood / Is taken up to all love with thy virtues” (189-90). Both Clermont and Guise represent for each other the ideal of male friendship, but as Leggatt points out, the metaphor of the “mistress” suggests a sexual interest, as well as “a strong emotional attachment, rather than a sharing of intellectual values” (“Tragedy of Clermont” 533). While this terminology may not indicate an active sexual relationship between the two men, it does imply a strong undercurrent of homoeroticism in their mutual attachment.

Despite the sympathy that exists between the two friends, each of them muses rather differently on the subject of death. Guise aspires to the emotional detachment he perceives in Clermont, but is unable to achieve it. A presentiment of his own death prompts him to ask, “Who says that death is natural, when nature / Is with the only thought of it dismay’d?” (*Revenge of Bussy* 5.4.1-2). He acknowledges his fear of death, berating himself for his weakness: “I hate myself, that, seeking to rule kings, / I cannot curb my slave” (10-11). He calls upon the absent Clermont, in the moments before his summons by the King:

O Clermont D’Ambois, wert thou here to chide

This softness from my flesh, far as my reason,

Far as my resolution not to stir

One foot out of the way, for death and hell!

Let my false man by falsehood perish here;

There’s no way else to set my true man clear. (20-25)

Ambushed and struck down immediately after this, Guise's last words before dying are also addressed to Clermont:

Clermont, farewell, O didst thou see but this!  
 But it is better; see by this the ice  
 Broke to thine own blood, which thou wilt despise,  
 When thou hear'st mine shed. Is there no friend here  
 Will bear my love to him? (66-70)

Aumale promises to do so, and Guise concludes his speech with the lines, "Thanks with my last breath: recommend me, then, / To the most worthy of the race of men" (71-72).

This exchange is placed just prior to Clermont's confrontation and combat with Montsurry in 5.5; Montsurry's dying words, and Clermont's response to them, are worth noting here, as each occurs in a specifically Christian context, in contrast to the deaths of Guise before, and Clermont after him. Clermont is impressed by Montsurry's conduct when he has fallen, for his erstwhile enemy blesses both his wife Tamyra and Clermont in his last words. Clermont pronounces him "Noble and Christian" (5.5.113), then continues:

... for all faults found in him before,  
 These words, this end, makes full amends and more.  
 Rest, worthy soul; and with it the dear spirit  
 Of my lov'd brother rest in endless peace!  
 Soft lie thy bones, Heaven be your soul's abode,  
 And to your ashes be the earth no load! (115-19)

Montsurry's exemplary death signals the successful fulfillment of Clermont's revenge mission, but is immediately followed by the entrance of Bussy's Ghost,

along with the ghosts of Guise, Monsieur, Cardinal Guise and Chatillon. Their appearance alerts Clermont to the death of his dearest friend, which is confirmed by Aumale (139); he communicates Guise's dying message, prompting Clermont to withdraw:

The worst, and most accursed of things creeping  
 On earth's sad bosom. Let me pray ye all  
 A little to forbear, and let me use  
 Freely mine own mind in lamenting him.  
 I'll call ye straight again. (144-48)

Left alone, Clermont begins his lament with the words, "Shall I live, and he / Dead, that alone gave means of life to me?" (149-50). Reflecting that he could "play the worldling" and thus survive, he immediately rejects this option, for "friendship is the cement of two minds, / As of one man the soul and body is, / Of which one cannot sever, but the other / Suffers a needful separation" (153-60). The loss of Guise is thus perceived to be the equivalent of death itself, which likewise entails the final separation of soul from body.

From the Stoic perspective, Clermont appears to succumb to dangerous passion; as Beverly Clack points out, passions "such as anger or grief occur when reason is impaired or improperly used", and this means that they can be "changed and controlled" (112). Despite the seeming rationality of his words, however, by this early stage Clermont has already determined to die. Invoking Guise just as the Duke called upon him before death, he seeks a means to release himself from his earthly existence, imploring, "Guise, O my lord, how shall I cast from me / The bands and coverts hind'ring me from thee?" (*Revenge of Bussy* 5.5.168-69).

This release is envisioned as a systematic, almost ritualistic stripping away of the layers of mortality:

The garment or the cover of the mind,  
 The human soul is; of the soul, the spirit  
 The proper robe is; of the spirit, the blood;  
 And of the blood, the body is the shroud.  
 With that must I begin then to unclothe,  
 And come at th'other. (170-75)

The clothing metaphor, introduced with the “bands and coverts” that function as restraints to keep Clermont from Guise, is sustained in the words “garment”, “cover”, “robe”, and even “shroud”, as the body’s final garment in death. The removal of the covers that conceal each of the parts comprising the human psyche – body, blood, spirit, soul and mind<sup>92</sup> – represents the liberation of Clermont’s essence in a spiritual context, but it also recalls Guise’s use of the word “mistress” to express his attachment to Clermont, for this intimate incursion into the depths of Clermont’s interior is the means by which he will “unclothe” himself and finally stand revealed before his friend. The ghostly appearance of Guise prior to

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<sup>92</sup> Julia Annas writes that, according to Stoic beliefs, the soul is a physical entity comprised of eight parts: the five senses, voice and reproduction, and the *hēgemonikon* (61). The latter part is that which governs the soul: it “receives input from all the other parts, registers, unifies, and makes sense of it” (63). From this perspective, the *hēgemonikon* may be considered to be the mind, “and the Stoic theory of the soul as a theory of our mental life” (64). A. A. Long explains that the *hēgemonikon* is located in the heart, and the blood gives nutrients to the soul; body and soul thus come together in the heart, although they are separate substances (*Stoic Studies* 243-44). For detailed discussions of the Stoic concepts of mind, body and soul, see Long’s *Hellenistic Philosophy* and *Stoic Studies*, and Annas’s *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind*. In his speech Clermont distinguishes between mind and soul, apparently referring to the *hēgemonikon* as the “mind”.

Clermont's pre-suicide speech reinforces the impression of his invisible proximity to Clermont; Clermont appears to imagine that the duke awaits him close by.

At this point in his soliloquy, Clermont makes a transition from the inward, personal metaphor of relinquishing the garments of existence to a wider assessment of life as an ocean voyage. Petrus Luccensis (also known as Pietro da Lucca), in his treatise *A Dialogue of Dying Wel* (1603), cites Seneca on the importance of maintaining consciousness of death, drawing upon a nautical metaphor:

And Seneca, not disagreeing from this our purpose saith, nothing helpeth so much to temperance in all things as the often thinking vpon death, wheerwith thou maiest direct thy whole lyfe, euen as the gouernour of a ship doth direct his vessel, who, desirous to bring it wel home into the hauen, setteth himself at the sterne in the end therof. So putting thy self by consideration into the end of thy life, thou shalt guide thy soule to the hauen of health. (qtd. in Atkinson 214)

For Clermont, the vessel of earthly existence – and, more specifically, of engagement with life at court – touches at “strange and far-removed shores”, while the crew go ashore seeking “Fresh water, victuals, precious stones, and pearl”. All are “intentive”, however, to “when the master calls”, so that they are prepared to leave their “greediest labours, lest they there be left / To thieves or beasts, or be the country's slaves” (*Revenge of Bussy* 5.5.176-82).

Despite the similarity to the Seneca excerpt as it appears in Luccensis, Clermont's speech is modeled more closely on a passage from the *Encheiridion* of Epictetus, which is worth quoting here in its entirety:

Just as on a voyage, when your ship has anchored, if you should go on shore to get fresh water, you may pick up a small shell-fish or little bulb on the way, but you have to keep your attention fixed on the ship, and turn about frequently for fear lest the captain should call; and if he calls, you must give up all these things, if you would escape being thrown on board all tied up like the sheep. So it is also in life: If there be given you, instead of a little bulb and a small shell-fish, a little wife and child, there will be no objection to that; only, if the Captain calls, give up all these things and run to the ship, without even turning around to look back. And if you are an old man, never even get very far away from the ship, for fear that when He calls you may be missing. (489-91)

In the passage by Seneca, the individual is master of his own vessel, consciously taking control of his life and steering the soul wisely to its rightful home.

Epictetus, however – and Clermont after him – envisions the individual as a crew member who must be alert to the Captain's summons.

The first half of Clermont's speech is essentially a poetic paraphrase of the earlier text, but the second half contains significant differences:

So, now my master calls, my ship, my venture,  
 All in one bottom put, all quite put off,  
 Gone under sail, and I left negligent,  
 To all the horrors of the vicious time,  
 The far-remov'd shores to all virtuous aims,  
 None favouring goodness, none but he respecting  
 Piety or manhood – (*Revenge of Bussy* 5.5.183-89)

Whereas Epictetus implies divine control of the vessel, Clermont considers Guise to be his Captain; he experiences horror at the thought of being left behind in hostile territory, bereft of his closest companion. He thus positions himself as the duke's subordinate, to whose silent summons Clermont is deeply attentive.

The most radical departure from the Greek original, however, is in the attitude to loved ones left behind. Epictetus has “no objection” to a wife and child, but he specifically instructs the reader that when the summons comes, he must “give up all these things and run to the ship, without even turning around to look back.” The crucial instruction is to remain aware that such attachments are only temporary, and that it is necessary to regard them with detachment if one is to be ready for death when it arrives. In his final five lines, however, Clermont loses this Stoic perspective completely. He appears to speak with mounting panic, through an upsurge of emotion that prompts him to impulsive action:

— shall I here survive,

Not cast me after him into the sea,

Rather than here live, ready every hour

To feed thieves, beasts, and be the slave of power?

I come, my lord! Clermont, thy creature, comes. (189-93)

The stage direction indicates only that Clermont “*kills himself*”, but without specifying the means; presumably he stabs himself. His self-murder becomes a determined act of escape, as he figuratively plunges into the sea in pursuit of Guise's departed vessel. Whereas the metaphor in Epictetus is simple, calm and detached, Clermont shows himself to be both distraught by grief and embittered by the aftermath of recent circumstances, introducing the emotive words “horrors”, “vicious”, “thieves”, “beasts” and “slave”.

In his *Theatre of Gods Judgements*, Thomas Beard employs a similar metaphor to argue against suicide: "We are here set in this life as souldiers in a station, without the licence of our Captaine wee must not depart: our soule is married to the bodie by the appointment of God, none must presume to put asunder those whome God hath coupled: and our life is committed to vs as a thing in trust, wee must not redeliuer it, nor part with it, vntill hee require it againe at our hands that gaue it into our handes" (306).

As Leggatt maintains, Clermont is "not content with saying that he is finished with this world; he wants to rejoin his friend in death", his submission and attachment to Guise expressed in the word "creature" ("Tragedy of Clermont" 535). Leggatt points out that in two other contexts in which this term is used – by Bosola in *The White Devil* and De Flores in *The Changeling* – the implication is "not just loss of freedom but actual degradation" ("Tragedy of Clermont" 536); while Clermont does not degrade himself as these characters do, his identification of himself as Guise's "creature" does suggest his total surrender to his absent friend, not unlike the submission of a "mistress" to her "lord". Thus, despite the impression of relative detachment in the earlier part of Clermont's final speech, he ultimately fails to enact his suicide according to Stoic principles.<sup>93</sup> Rather than striving to accept the death of his friend with conscious philosophical equanimity, he dies for love, and his "I come, my lord" suggests the same breathless haste of the bereaved Zabina for Bajazeth. From the Senecan perspective, as Clack writes,

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<sup>93</sup>Clermont's confrontation with death may be compared to the violent pre-execution scene of Chapman's Byron, discussed briefly in the chapter on executions. While Byron ultimately faces death with Stoic dignity, the first part of his scaffold speech is characterized by rage and physical aggression, his anger representing a form of passion comparable to Clermont's passion of grief. In both cases, the final speech indicates the extreme difficulty of excluding emotion, whether the circumstances of death are imposed or chosen.

“ . . . if one does take one’s own life it should not be because the passions have excited one to act. Rather, it should occur after one has made a reasoned response to the facts of one’s existence – if, in the circumstances, it is the best thing to do” (121). Leggatt agrees: “Normally we would expect a Stoic suicide to be a final demonstration of independence,” he writes, but Clermont’s death is “just the opposite”; it is “a final, definitive statement” of Clermont’s “dependence on another man” (“Tragedy of Clermont” 535).

The level of expectation associated with Stoic death is perhaps unreasonable, precisely because its success is evaluated primarily in terms of emotional detachment; the decision to die must be rational, made without passion. Lieberman challenges the very notion of ‘rational suicide’: “Given the complexity of human behavior, isn’t it more realistic to acknowledge that rational and emotional motivations can and do exist in the minds of individuals contemplating self-destruction than to insist on pure rationality as the grounds for granting the right to die?” (40). However much his suicide signals the compromise of his Stoic aspirations, then, Clermont’s death balances his earlier, sometimes difficult stance of detached intellectualism. In his final moments, philosophy relents and Clermont is humanized.

Earlier in this thesis, in the chapter on beheadings, I discussed the scene from Fletcher and Massinger’s *Sir John Van Olden Barnaveit* in which is featured a representation of the public beheading of the historical Oldenbarnevelt, executed for treason in Holland in 1619. In a creative rearrangement of actual circumstances, the playwrights place the dead and coffined body of Leidenberch

on the scaffold on the day of Barnavelt's execution<sup>94</sup>; despite Leidenberch's suicide during his imprisonment, his remains are still subjected to public punishment, and in the play become part of the ritual of torment endured by Oldenbarnavelt prior to his death. This posthumous introduction to the figure of Leidenberch was brief and necessarily wordless, at least from the point of view of his dying speech. In this chapter, I will examine the long scene of his suicide, heavy with pathos, which is clearly intended by the playwrights to elicit a sympathetic response from the spectator.

The model of the Stoic death, integral to Clermont's suicide, is ultimately of diminished importance in the scene of Leidenberch's self-destruction, despite the political context in which it occurs. The 1619 pamphlet enumerates the treasonous offences of "Geilis van Ledenberch, *sometime Secretarie to the States of Vtrecht*" (A2r), and draws to its conclusion with an account of his suicide:

And at last being apprehended, fearing least hee should be compelled to discover and disclose the ground thereof, and to shew the cause why such proceedings were in that sort vsed, and to what end the aforesaid designe should at last haue come, as also to shun the punishment which he thereby had deserued, he purposed secretly to murther himselfe; And to that end, with premeditated courage, vpon the 17 of *September* 1618 *Stilo veteri*, he wrote a small letter in French with his owne hand, the contents thereof being, that to shun and preuent confrontings with his best friends, torments, ignominious sentence, and confiscation of all his Lands

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<sup>94</sup> According to the pamphlet *A discourse of those treasons of which he was a practiser* (STC 15352a), judgement was pronounced and "executed vpon his dead body on the 15 of May, 1619" (A2r), nearly eight months after Leidenberch's suicide.

and goods, he was determined to kill himselfe, giuing the letter to *Ioost* his sonne, that vnderstood no French, and as then was suffered to be with him to helpe him, and so that, and the next day making no shew at all of any bad intent, that way, between the 18 and 19 daies of *September* aforesaid, in the night he murdered himselfe, with a knife, some daies before laid purposely aside to that end, with two stabs in his belly, and cut off his — ” (D4r-D4v)

The abrupt and mysterious severing leaves the narrative oddly unresolved; it is curious that this final detail resembles the accidental removal of two of Barnavelt’s fingers at the time of his decapitation. The pamphlet account emphasizes the secrecy and deviousness with which Leidenberch conducted his suicide, his determination to escape punishment, but also his “premeditated courage”, a seeming oxymoron conveying both moral judgement and a form of grudging respect.

In the play, an essential part of the preparation for Leidenberch’s impending suicide is the scene in which Barnavelt visits his colleague in prison, berating him for having made a confession to the authorities (3.4.51-71). Wilhelmina P. Frijlinck observes that it would have been “impossible” for the historical Oldenbarnevelt to “visit Leidenberch in prison and instigate him to suicide”, as he himself was a prisoner, but she notes both that Leidenberch was “much depressed” and that his suicide would have been, at the time, considered proof of his guilt (cxliv). The playwrights’ decision to include this scene implicates Barnavelt by making him partially responsible for his colleague’s death; it encourages a correspondingly compassionate response toward

Leidenberch by suggesting that he takes his own life because he feels that he has no other option.

In the letter written in French by the historical Leidenberch (as acknowledged, too, in the above excerpt), he clearly states his motivation for suicide: “against a dead man there can be pronounced no sentence of confiscation of property” (qtd. in Frijlinck cxliv). Whereas he was clearly attempting to prevent the seizure of his property in the hope of sparing his family from financial distress, the character in the play does not express his concerns in a specifically legal context. Rather, his preoccupation with family manifests as a deeply personal and emotional anxiety, associated with the son who stays with him in prison.

In the earlier scene, then, Barnavelt suggests to his colleague that there is “But one way left, / But that thy base feare dares not let thee look on”, and hints that he is willing to take this course himself, in order to ultimately attain “smyling peace, and honour” (*Barnavelt* 3.4.77-81). He urges Leidenberch to “Dye uncompelld”, “Dye sodainely and bravely”, and maintains that they may be their “owne Justice”, refusing to allow the fatal compromise of their honour (83, 85, 98-102). Under Barnavelt’s influence, then, Leidenberch is persuaded of the necessity of his death, promising that he will “tread strongly” the path Barnavelt has suggested to him, “Redeeme what I have lost, and so nobely / The world shall yet confes, at least I loved ye” (115-17). Interestingly, his stated motivation here is couched in terms of his loyalty to Barnavelt, rather than to the state; the emphasis is personal rather than political.

The scene of Leidenberch's suicide thus opens in prison, where his son is staying with him (3.6).<sup>95</sup> The setting recalls Donne's famous admission, in the preface of his *Biathanatos*, that "whensoever any affliction assails me, methinks I have the keys of my prison in mine own hand, and no remedy presents itself so soon to my heart as mine own sword" (lines 1100-1102). Both Leidenberch and his son weep, each oppressed by sadness and foreboding; the father sends his son tenderly to bed, and when he is alone he begins what is essentially a two-part soliloquy in which he faces the prospect of his own self-inflicted death. Although he has accepted Barnavelt's argument that suicide will preserve his honour, nearly half of the first part of his speech is concerned with his son, rather than his reputation:

To dye were nothing: simply to leave the light,  
 No more then going to our beds, and sleeping:  
 But to leave all these dearnesses behind us,  
 These figures of our selves, that we call blessings  
 Is that which troubles: Can man beget a thing  
 That shalbe deerer then himself unto him? (*Barnavelt* 3.6.29-34)

What "troubles" Leidenberch is not his reputation in political circles – or even Barnavelt's opinion of him; moreover, there is no sense that he fears damnation in a Christian context for what he is about to perform. Rather, it is his love for his son that weighs most heavily upon him; the thoughts of his progeny are powerful enough to displace concerns for his own spiritual welfare.

In an attempt to master his emotions, he admonishes himself, "Tush,  
*Leidenberch* thinck what thou art to doe: / Not to play *Niobe*, weeping ore hir

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<sup>95</sup> Fredson Bowers, editor of *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ascribes this scene to Massinger (598-99).

Children, / Unles that *Barnavelt* appeere again / And chide thy dull-cold nature” (35-38). The thought of *Barnavelt* strengthens his resolve; he looks in upon his son again to ensure that he is sleeping, then invokes the “soule of *Cato*” and “you brave Romaine speritts, famous more / For your true resolutions on your selves, / Then Conquest of the world” (44-47). He imagines them as a silent audience to the performance of his suicide:

behold, and see me

An old man, and a gowne man, with as much hast

And gladnes entertaine this steele, that meetes me,

As ever longing lover, did his Mistris.

So, so: yet further: soe. (47-51)

Whereas the three complete lines in this quotation each contain eleven syllables, the final, truncated line possesses only six. The first two syllables are probably intended to be spondaic, each ‘so’ given equal emphasis. The disruption to the rhythm of the previous lines draws attention to the practical difficulty of the task that *Leidenberch* has accepted, for – as spectators – we become very aware of the movement of the blade and its deep inward passage into *Leidenberch*’s flesh. The monosyllables of the final line emphasize both the physical pain and the necessarily experimental nature of the act. The partial line thus raises the issue of how to accomplish one’s own death effectively, and the awareness that *Leidenberch* consciously seeks a model on which to base his own act of self-annihilation. If his naming of himself as a “gowne man” refers to an adult Roman (as suggested by the *OED*’s definition of ‘gownsmen’), then he deliberately places himself in the company of these previous Roman suicides. Yet he also describes

his own stabbing as an act of love, the “steele” acting as the medium through which he achieves his desired death, as “ever longing lover, did his Mistris”.

Leidenberch’s speech is essentially divided into two parts, pre- and post-wounding. The shorter, second part is initiated at the very moment of Leidenberch’s self-destruction, marking a transition from reluctant but resigned determination to intensified urgency and panic. At the very moment he stabs himself, his son cries out from the adjoining room, so that the father seeks to hasten his death: “He dreames: and starts with frightings: / I bleed a pace, but cannot fall: ’tis here, / This will make wider roome” (53-55). Leidenberch’s predicament recalls that of Antony’s suicide scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which he is portrayed “running into death prematurely, like a sexually inexperienced young bridegroom” (Ronan 5). Antony fails in his initial attempt to kill himself, and despite his appeal to the guards to dispatch him – “I have done my work ill, friends. O, make an end / Of what I have begun!” (*Ant.* 4.15.105-106) – they all refuse. Instead, Antony is taken to Cleopatra in her monument, and raised up toward her so that the two may kiss; only when he has spoken his farewell does he finally die. Whereas Antony’s suicide attempt occurs in a semi-public context, however, Leidenberch’s takes place in isolation.

As Leidenberch enlarges his wound, he draws attention again to the physical act of self-destruction. The process of dying is protracted as the spectator’s attention is directed back to the damaged body; the pathos of the scene is increased by the reminder of the strong bond between father and son, as the boy cries out in his sleep. The sympathy of the audience is further prompted when Leidenberch’s thoughts revert from the “brave Romaine speritts” back to his son: “Sleep gentle Child / And do not looke upon thy bloody Father, / Nor more

remember him, then fitts thy fortune” (*Barnavelt* 3.6.55-57). In his final lines death overtakes him, and his words are mingled with groans: “I now I faint: mine eies begin to hunt / For that they have lost for ever: this worlds beutie: / O, oh, ô oh: my long sleepe now h’as ceizd me” (60-62).

Thus, although Leidenberch’s ostensible motive for committing suicide is the preservation of his honour, his final speech does little more than acknowledge the notion of the Stoic Roman death, undertaken for political reasons. He appears to have no last-minute guilty preoccupation with having made a confession, but is instead emotionally absorbed in the difficult process of taking leave of his family. Compassion for both is encouraged when the boy enters after his father’s last words and discovers the body, “dead, and bequeathd no blessing” (65); distraught, he has to be forcibly taken from the cell by the Provost when his father is pronounced “stone cold dead” (72). Rather than emphasizing the sinfulness of suicide, the scene of Leidenberch’s self-murder focuses instead upon the man as father, rather than statesman. At the same time, his last words suggest that he is unaware of the extent to which his motives of honour are displaced by family preoccupations; his conscious summoning of Roman spirits appears forced and half-hearted, as though he speaks the words without true conviction. For Leidenberch in his final moments, then, paternity displaces politics.

I have chosen to conclude my discussion of self-murder with the scene of Leidenberch’s self-destruction because of its compassionate perspective on the subject of suicide; this in itself might be considered a daring treatment of a recent event, given that public opinion in England at the time was strongly divided on the issue of Oldenbarnevelt and his colleagues. Considered collectively, however, the nine scenarios discussed in this chapter cover a spectrum of attitudes toward

suicide in early modern England, and the characters' dying speeches range from the simple and direct, through the self-consciously theatrical, to the allusive and affective. The Clown in *Sir Thomas Wyatt* embodies the orthodox position on the subject, while Homes succumbs to despair yet invites sympathy for his plight in choosing death as an act of atonement. In contrast to his humble death is the Marlovian emphasis on graphic self-destruction, using extraordinary methods of dispatch, in which last words are uttered in extreme circumstances imposed by others. Sampson's play employs elements of the supernatural in his perspective on self-murder; for him, the emotional devastation leading to suicide is powerful enough to motivate a restless spirit from beyond the grave. Finally, the self-inflicted deaths of Clermont D'Ambois, and particularly Leidenberch, are less stylized than the previous examples. In contrast to the excessive emotionalism of Young Bateman's self-destruction, for instance, the dying speech of each indicates that he follows a process of reasoning that leads to the decision to die, even though they are both motivated, ultimately, by their own forms of desperation.

With the exception of Anne in *The Vow Breaker*, then, each of the scenes discussed offers the character's last words together with a full performance of the physical act of suicide, so that the spectator becomes the witness to circumstances that are normally clandestine. In borrowing elements from both classical and medieval traditions, but experimentally and creatively re-inventing the act of self-murder in varying contexts, early modern playwrights participated in an ongoing cultural reassessment of the nature of suicide. As they produced impressive scenes of self-destruction on the stage, they were also, simultaneously, exploiting and developing the possibilities inherent in the genre of the dying speech.

## Conclusion

In Sampson's *Vow Breaker*, one of the young men who goes to war with Young Bateman is the naive Joshua, "a Painter-stainer by Art, and a limner by profession" (B3v). He is dismayed to learn how dangerous warfare will be, for he has brought his cat along with him, and thus berates himself for bringing "poore Pusse forth to dy by a Gun" (C1v). His solicitude is clearly diminished, however, when he makes a later appearance onstage with "*his cat in a string*", for he has determined that the hapless Tybert must be hanged, as punishment for killing a mouse on Sunday (F2r-F2v).

Joshua pronounces doom upon the creature, demanding of her, "what sayst thou for thy selfe? guilty or not guilty? hah." One of his companions responds, "Would she could mew *non* guilty", yet Joshua insists that her "silence argues guilt", and he "*Offers to hang her*" (F3r). Although the cat effects an escape at this point, it is suggested later in the play that, due to a state of advanced inebriation, Joshua has carried out his threat. One of his companions observes that if Joshua were sober, it would have been otherwise: ". . . aske him why he did it? in sincerity, it was not he, it was his drinke" (I1v).

Of all the unusual and often bizarre situations that have been discussed in this thesis, that of Tybert is unique. On one level, the doom pronounced on the cat by Joshua is a ludicrous echo of Young Bateman's suicide by hanging, but her abbreviated trial and sentencing also participate, from a comic perspective, in the discourse of execution in early modern England. Tybert is condemned for obeying her animal instincts, and is judged according to human laws; she becomes subject to the specific rituals of public execution, and the associated expectations

of appropriate conduct on the scaffold. At this juncture, her greatest disadvantage is her inability to speak, for she can neither defend her actions, nor deliver a dying speech as a moving conclusion to her feline exploits.

Ridiculous as this is, it also embodies a form of truth in a human context. From the early modern perspective, not only were human prisoners able to speak, but at the time of execution they were expected to speak, and to demonstrate, by doing so, that they were prepared for death and would conduct themselves on the threshold in as exemplary a manner as possible.

This is, at least, the ideal that is embodied in the *artes moriendi*, and urged by both Catholic and Protestant divines, from the medieval period and into the early modern era. The plays covered in this thesis date from the 1590s through to the third decade of the seventeenth century, a period identified by social historians as one in which cultural attitudes toward death were subject to significant changes, and in which the genre of the dying speech was variously influenced by earlier, classical models of dying, with their grand and impressive gestures, as well as an increasing orientation toward more self-conscious, individualistic expression at the time of death.

From the literary perspective, the dying speech was subject to creative experimentation, as playwrights ventured beyond the safe and familiar Christian formulas for the good death. In the real world, the scaffold speech – even before it was uttered – was essentially scripted. Molded into an acceptable shape by restrictions and prohibitions, it was defined by the prisoner's obligations to the state and the exhortations of the clergy to seek the soul's salvation; the speech was the verbal component of the role of the penitent and remorseful sinner. Not all scaffold speeches in Renaissance plays are subversive, just as not all scaffold

speeches in the real world were exemplary. Whereas outside the theatre elements of subversion could have serious consequences for the prisoner's family, however, playwrights could, despite considerations of censorship, take greater liberties with such speeches in the mouths of their characters.

If the scaffold speech left little room for self-expression, the traditional deathbed scenario was scarcely more encouraging. Writers of spiritual tracts encouraged a form of scripting in this context as well, as the dying person was admonished to prepare for a good Christian death, focused upon the afterlife. Such advice shaped communication with loved ones through its insistence on ritualized responses and prayers.

This thesis necessarily acknowledges the vital importance of this idealized form of dying, although the scenes discussed represent the opposite extreme. In *The White Devil*, the dying Brachiano longingly apostrophizes "thou soft naturall death, that art joint-twin / To sweetest slumber", as he succumbs to the horror of poisoning (5.3.29-30). Like the Duke, however, few characters in Renaissance tragedy are permitted the tranquil death that is denied him: each of the contexts I have included – execution, murder, revenge and suicide – represents a situation in which the individual faces an enforced confrontation, an unnaturally early encounter, with death. They also trace – as do the chapters in this thesis – a movement from the public to the progressively more private. In the 'real' world of early modern England, each of these contexts is characterized by its own form of constraint.

The condemned on the scaffold might attempt to break the script and cry out something defiant, but was quite likely to be stifled; *moriens* on the deathbed might wish to share an urgent message, but may have felt equally compelled to

reassure family members by demonstrating readiness for death – and may also, indeed, have had genuine concerns about personal salvation.

Those who were the victims of sudden death – through accident or murder – had little or no time to make a graceful, verbal exit. In such circumstances, all that could be reasonably expected was a visceral response to the physicality of dying, with the accompanying awareness that divine judgement would follow death, whether the soul was prepared for it or not. In these cases, one's last words were unlikely to be heard or, at least, recorded, and the victim could only hope for God's mercy. In the theatre, Borachio in *The Atheist's Tragedy* embodies a comic but very pithy example of such awareness: stabbed, his final words are, "Zounds, unsaved I think" (4.3.27).

According to contemporary vilifiers of suicide, those who took their own lives could expect no clemency whatsoever. These were, perhaps, the most lonely of deaths; while the person might leave an explanatory note or letter behind, there could be, of course, no expectation of a dying speech.

Such scenarios indicate why the writers of the *artes moriendi* so strenuously urged upon their readers the necessity of preparation for death. To live virtuously and to be consciously ready for death at any time, they maintained, is the only formula for ensuring both a peaceful mind and salvation after death.

To conform and die well, then, meant that the speaker was obliged to adhere as closely as possible to pre-established formulas. From this perspective, the dying person was a victim of paradox: the last speech was expected to fulfill specific requirements, and to represent as consummate a performance as possible, yet it had to be made under the most difficult of circumstances, when the speaker was aware of the brevity of time left, and was at the mercy of the physical

symptoms which were the cause of death. If the hope that the speech would somehow encapsulate something of the speaker's essence or personality was added to this, then the expectations associated with the dying speech became increasingly unrealistic and difficult to achieve.

In this sense, the genre of the dying speech is inherently flawed: how can it hold together such conflicting impulses and expectations? How can something as large and intractable as death be adequately, satisfactorily confronted and contained by a last-minute grouping of words? For the uneasy fact remains that we are human, and that death is inimical to our sense of selfhood, to the awareness of our own individual consciousness. What might the individual be moved to say, if some of these constraints were removed, if the weight of guilt and fear and expectation were lifted?

Renaissance playwrights were part of a society that valued last words, one that had been indoctrinated with religious rituals and the concomitant fear of what would happen if those rituals were not adhered to. Yet if there was hope of a different type of communication – a validation of authentic speech, even when it did not conform to conventions – then this affirmation of possibilities existed in the early modern theatre. The stage permitted the representation of both exemplary and dubious deaths, and the exploration of new possibilities for the dying speech was an essential part of the innovative, experimental approach taken by dramatists in the production of plays. Playwrights often defied orthodoxy and – in an increasingly secularized world – refused to adhere to unappealing formulas that no doubt appeared less meaningful through constant repetition. Chapman's Byron embodies just this sort of recalcitrance on the scaffold.

As the chapters in this thesis chart a movement from the most public to more private scenes of dying, they also correspond to necessarily imaginative approaches to final speeches. On a fundamental level, the more visible the death, the more the speaker's last words will be hampered by the constraints of formula, because the dying speech becomes the locus of a social exchange. In contrast, the speaker whose death occurs in solitude is not obliged to acknowledge established models for dying, and is, moreover, usually in a position which, for various reasons, excludes him or her from the possibility of Christian consolation.

Playwrights, therefore, seized the opportunity to create strange and imaginative scenarios of dying. In the theatre, it was possible to depict events which in real life remained hidden: in the plays that I have discussed, characters cry out their last words as they are murdered in full view of the audience; revenge stratagems that are only belatedly understood by the other characters in the play are revealed in all their sinister glory, as the villains are energetically dispatched onstage; and spectators are permitted to overhear the final speeches of self-murderers as a prelude to witnessing their deaths. The dying character's last words are inseparable from the death itself, and the fullness of these scenes increases the intensity of their impact.

With the removal or transcendence of formula and convention, those characters who utter dying speeches on the stage may hint at some form of nostalgia for the good Christian death, even as they acknowledge themselves to be beyond it. Yet what fills that empty space, what gives form to those final words, is an ultimate reliance on the self, a form of acceptance which is not Christian submissiveness, but represents instead an intensive and self-conscious inhabiting of the last moments of life in the midst of a fuller awareness of who one is. As

Flamineo asserts, perhaps with the surprise of discovery, “Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end” (5.6.253).

What these vocal, physically shocking scenes of dying offer us is both a celebration of the memorable exit, and an acknowledgement – both playful, and profoundly serious – of the fruitlessness of trying to conceive of a perfect last speech. Yet, repeatedly on the early modern stage, and despite the improbability of many of the scenarios, we are offered intriguing glimpses which take us beyond the expected, conventional insights into dying. To make the transition from life to death is enormous and frightening, and Renaissance scenes of dying answer our persistent desire to have this acknowledged. As we respond to the character’s last spoken words, and watch them enact the moment of passing, we do so in the midst of our own fears of death, our own wishes to deny our mortality. In spite of these constrictions, however, these scenes entice us to look again, to allow ourselves another vicarious confrontation with the enemy – and to attempt to decide, between Death and dying speaker, who has had the last word.

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