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Staging Executions: The Theater of Punishment in Early Modern England

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“STAGING EXECUTIONS: THE THEATER OF PUNISHMENT IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND”

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, titled “Staging Executions: The Theater of Punishment in Early Modern England,” attempts to historicize the notion of the public execution and come to a deeper understanding of the spectacle of the condemned man or woman by examining the ways in which it is manifested in printed literature and drama. Public executions were popular occasions of ritual festivity, widely attended by people from all socio-economic backgrounds. Yet despite our modern notions of the brutality of such events, these ceremonies were elaborately staged and exquisitely paced ritual dramas seething with suspense, tension, crisis, reversals, and revelations. Above all, they were breathtaking spectacles.

Accounts of murders and executions were sometimes printed and sold for a few pennies, and this genre of cheap print was wildly popular. These published accounts give us great insight into the workings of an early modern execution, and the ways in which the spectators viewed the event. This material is analyzed in my first chapter. In addition to cheap print, the spectacle of the condemned man or woman occurs quite often in the drama of the day. My second chapter deals with Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and Middleton’s The Revenger’s Tragedy as examples of onstage executions and violence that presents itself as entertainment, and this chapter examines more fully the similarities between the scaffold and the stage. My third chapter focuses on the treatment of the “dead” body on the stage. Specifically in Middleton’s The Lady’s Tragedy and Marston’s The Insatiate Countess, the female body is treated as an eroticized object. This chapter centers on the metatheatrical nature of such plays, as well as the early modern curiosity about the inner workings of the body. In the final chapter, dealing with Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, I investigate the effects of the disrupted state spectacle and the play’s direct link to the extraordinarily theatrical “execution” of the Main Plotters in 1604.

In looking at the event of an execution itself, its publications in cheap printed media, and its representations on the stage, I attempt to understand more fully the extent to which public execution was a part of the daily lives of early modern peoples, as well as how the pamphleteers and dramatists utilized the spectacle to both corroborate and question the nature of authority.
INTRODUCTION

EXECUTIONS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND:
PRACTICES, CONVENTIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND INTERPRETATIONS

I have heard sundry men oft times dispute
Of trees, that in one year will twice bear fruit. But if a man note Tyburn, ‘will appear,
That that’s a tree that bears twelve times a year.

--John Taylor, “The Description of Tyburn” (1630)

Well they’re building a gallows outside my cell I’ve got 25 minutes to go.

--Johnny Cash

In 1571, the first permanent structure for public hangings was constructed at Tyburn. Attending public hangings at “Tyburn tree,” as well as other forms of public punishment was a popular pastime in Elizabethan and Stuart England. Events we would now call “entertainment” in early modern England were fairly limited. London’s theater districts provided most of the opportunities for leisure to city dwellers. In addition to the theater itself, violent pastimes like bear- and bull-baiting flourished in Southwark and the suburbs of London, areas that lay outside official jurisdiction of the city. Public executions were also popular occasions of ritual festivity, and like the theaters were built outside the official boundaries of the city. Yet despite our modern notions of the brutality of such events, these ceremonies were elaborately staged and exquisitely paced rituals seething with suspense, tension, crisis, reversals, and revelations. Above all, they were breathtaking spectacles. Historicizing the event of an early modern execution is integral to understanding the way in which it is represented in early modern literature and drama.

Although the upper classes might be executed in private or in Tower Yard, murderers, thieves, and other common criminals were hanged at Tyburn’s “fatal tree,” or some other area dictated by the judges. At Tyburn, seats were available for a small fee, but most spectators stood or sat around the structure itself. Hawkers sold fruits and pies, and spectators could even buy a pamphlet or ballad that recounted the various crimes and depraved lives of the criminals being hanged. These elements certainly evoke comparisons with the theater. Although public execution was not “theater” in the technical sense, they were fundamentally similar. Each had as

1 Tyburn was the principle site for hangings, but many took place at or near the scene of the person’s crime. Heretics, witches, and women who murdered their husbands were usually burned to death in West Smithfield.
its central feature a presentation by one or more individuals who spoke directly to the crowd, each attracted large numbers of people from every class and background, and both had action that was played out on a raised wooden structure, or “scaffold” (Mitchell 16). Even the condemned man or woman followed a sort of “script” on the scaffold, no doubt creating some sort of connection between the two forms in the minds of both theatrical audiences and spectators at the execution.

Thomas Platter, a Swiss traveler visiting London in 1599, offers us an account of London executions in his diary:

Especially every quarter when the law courts sit in London and they throng from all parts of England for the terms to litigate in numerous matters which have occurred in the interim, for everything is saved up till that time; then there is a slaughtering and a hanging, and from all the prisons … people are taken and tried; when the trial is over, those condemned to the rope are placed on a cart, each one with a rope about his neck, and the hangman drives with them out of the town to the gallows, called Tyburn, almost an hour away from the city; there he fastens them up one after another by the rope and drives the cart off under the gallows, which is not very high off the ground; then the criminals’ friends come and draw them down by their feet, that they may die all the sooner. Rarely does a law day in London in all the four sessions pass without some twenty to thirty persons — both men and women — being gibbeted. (Thomas Platter's Travels in England, trans. Clare Williams [London: Jonathan Cape, 1937])

Platter’s diary entry gives us valuable insight into the actual workings of an execution. He also mentions the practice of the London courts. There were many courts in London, but they would only convene around four times a year. Outside London, the important cases had to wait for traveling courts to make their rounds. The assizes, for example, were criminal and civil trial sessions that were held periodically in specific locations throughout England by a judge of a superior court. Yet it was Tyburn and the possibility of a multiple public execution that captured the attention of Londoners. In his poem “Description of Tyburn,” John Taylor offers an account of the other possible places of execution:

There are inferior Gallows which bear
(According to the season) twice a year:
And there's a kind of watrish *Tree* at *Wapping*,
Whereas Sea-thieves or *Pirates* are catched napping:
But *Tyburn* doth deserve before them all
The title and addition capital,
Of *Arch* or great Grand *Gallows* of our Land,
Whilst all the rest like ragged Lackeys stand.

Taylor mentions the “inferior gallows,” which would have been the places outside of the metropolis of early modern London that must wait for the assizes to be held. He also mentions the practice of hanging pirates on the docks at Wapping, but it is obvious that Tyburn is seen as the ultimate location of punishment and site of state power. He even seems reverent in his lines, treating Tyburn as a place of great wonder and excitement, deserving the title of “Grand Gallows” as the most spectacular site for public punishment.

This multi-court system does make the attempts made by scholars today to collate, document, and measure crime and executions difficult. Tudor and Stuart England saw the executions of thousands of people accused of political treason, religious heresy, murder, and even lesser crimes against property. Although an exact number is nearly impossible to tabulate, according to the books of the Mayor’s Court, one of the many courts in London, 151 sentences of death were handed out from 1570-1620 (Griffiths 13). In *Crime in Early Modern England 1550-1750*, J.A. Sharpe attempts to “reconstruct a pattern of punishment” (90). His work is devoted to gaining insight into the changing nature of legal proceedings in London, and in his estimation around 150 felons were hanged annually during the reign of James I (Sharpe 92). These executions, when held in public, were widely attended, and were “the site or sites for a variety of ideological and emotional struggles” (Lake and Questier 269). Recent critical works, like Charles Mitchell’s *Shakespeare and Public Execution* and Malcolm Gaskill’s *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* have attested to the importance of these events in the context of historical and cultural studies, and have identified the trends and evolution of public punishment as it developed in early modern England.

Public executions represented the state’s dominance and control over the individual’s body and remained “one of the principal methods by which the power of the state was demonstrated” (Sharpe “Last Dying Speeches,” 161). Hangings were carried out for the majority of death sentences, but upper class individuals might receive the more “humane” death by
beheading. Traitors were given a more serious punishment, “drawing and quartering,” in which a man was hanged until half dead, had his bowels and private members cut off and burned before his eyes, and was quartered alive. The severed body parts of criminals were then displayed as “a lasting reminder of the events of the scaffold, and were thus posted as the execution text” (Royer 69). Heads of traitors were exhibited on London Bridge and on the Great Stone Gate near Southwark, London’s theater district. Shakespeare himself lived near Cripplegate, a place where the quarters of traitors were displayed. The bodies of lower-class criminals were displayed in gibbets in many areas surrounding the city.

The displaying of the criminal body is important in understanding early modern executions and the ways in which they are to be understood in the literature. The body of the condemned, when alive, was taken on a cart to Tyburn or some other place of execution. Here, crowds could see the man or woman even if they might not attend the actual event. At the execution site, crowds would gather to again witness the state’s justice. As J.A. Sharpe notes, “it is significant that the authorities were happy to allow large crowds to assemble to witness these executions in a period when the coming together of several hundreds or several thousands of people of the lower orders was not regularly encouraged” (“Last,” 161). Of course the ritual of punishment was a much more powerful and effective deterrent against crime if it was able to be viewed publicly. The early modern view of the body (whether alive, dead, or on display in various ways) signifies the power of the state.

Of course, an execution is a carefully managed dramatic performance, and it is impossible to deny the importance of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* as an exemplary text in understanding this notion of the execution. In his well known study, Foucault delineates his idea of the solemn state “theater of punishment,” explaining the public execution as “not only as a judicial, but also a political ritual. It belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested” (47). His theory hinges on the idea that these brutal public displays relentlessly repress the populace, with the criminal body serving as a carrier or perpetuator of state ideology. The central actor is the condemned man, and it is his performance and his body that represents and signifies in a Foucauldian reading of an execution. At the same time, Foucault does allow for a species of the carnivalesque, acknowledging that:

the public execution allowed the luxury of these momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish. Under the protection of imminent death, the
criminal could say everything and the crowd cheered….In these executions, which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince, there was a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes (60-1).

For Foucault, the theater of punishment is open to some subversive potential, but this does not take away from the overwhelming display of the ultimate expression of state power. The carnivalesque nature of public punishment is fully analyzed in Thomas Laqueur’s “Crowds, Carnival and the State in English Executions.” Laqueur refutes Foucault’s notion of the severe state that terrifies the common people with public violence. He views the execution as a genuinely popular and festive occasion, a carnivalesque display of popular energy and inversion that escaped the scripted performance, allowing for the subversion of the “official” message of a public execution. Laqueur is, of course, speaking directly to the case of English executions, whereas Foucault’s emphasis is on French and other continental execution practices. In his distinction between these two cultures, Laqueur offers accounts of near-coercion by continental religious and secular authorities in order to force the condemned to repent and play a specific role in the proceedings of public execution. England, however, did little to ensure a “proper” death. Laqueur cites this as a “testimony to the cultural power of the normative role, to its capacity to take over the condemned’s psyche” (317). Many people in England did die as they were supposed to die, penitently and calmly. Yet some did not, and it is this potential for laughter or festivity that interests Laqueur.

The crowds that gathered at British executions are what Laqueur calls “specifically a carnival crowd. It was so generically because executions bore a quite specific structural resemblance to carnival” (339). Carnival is a time in which the grotesque body of the people is made manifest. The criminal himself is a sort of carnival king, but in an execution the traditional “King of Misrule” ends up dead. In the Laqueurian carnivalesque execution, there exists a theater of greater fluidity. The crowd, and particularly the carnivalesque crowd, was the central actor in English executions. Public carnivalesque executions, though not executions as carnival, ceased, for reasons fully articulated only in the debate over their abolition, only when the crowd came to have a new relationship to the power of the state. (Laqueur 309)
In Foucauldian terms, the emphasis is on the condemned body, for Laqueur, the emphasis is on the crowd, the gathered mass who interpret the event. The courts, of course, were heavy with rituals and displays of the power of the law, but were mostly hidden from public view. The execution, although public, took place well outside the city. Tyburn itself was one of the “unlikeliest venues for displaying the power of the state” (311). It was just outside a barnyard, far from London proper. The fairly pastoral area had farmhouses where people lived, and some would rent out wooden structures to people so that they might see the event from afar. Again the Foucauldian template of the grave state theater of punishment is called into question within the context of early modern England.

It is the experience of the audience that is of particular interest to this thesis, and inspired an examination of both drama and cheap print in order to gain an understanding of the early modern reactions and interpretations of executions. The crowds were active members of such events, and were thus active consumers of execution pamphlets and dramatic interpretations of death and punishment. There is “no shortage of evidence of a wide variety of audience participation in the theater of the gallows” (Lake and Questier 270). The crowd was famously fickle, and allegiance could swing depending particularly on the performance of the condemned on the scaffold. The condemned were expected to “die well,” and in doing so legitimized the workings of the judicial system, by behaving in a certain manner and making a final speech to the crowd explaining the sinfulness of their ways and acceptance of the punishment.

Printed accounts and dramatic interpretations of these events offer another avenue to analyze the ideology that informed public punishment. Some provide examples of obedience on the part of the condemned, but others explore the notion that the condemned was not a willing actor of his or her convention or prescribed part. How do these specific situations inform our understandings of these rituals? There are elements of both a Foucauldian theater of punishment and a Laqueurian carnival, yet the freedom of the carnivalesque could be a threat to order, thus allowing for the possibility that the violence of the state “could clearly prompt and occasion, if not quite legitimate, the symbolic violence of the people” (Lake and Questier 274). If the execution and subsequent displaying of the dead body did not always terrify the populace into a frightened and subdued mass, what where the political motives? J.A. Sharpe reminds us to consider this in asking, “how effective were the executions, the spectacle of the condemned felon, the gallows speech he or she made before being ‘turned off’?” (Sharpe 167). People
continued to commit crimes, so the deterrent effects of public punishment may easily be overstated. Regardless, the spectacle entered the popular mindset and affected the ways in which people viewed state power. The Tyburn gallows reinforced the notion of an execution as a form of entertainment and the pamphlet accounts offered their readers yet another chance to interpret the events that occurred at the execution.

Scaffold speeches and accounts of execution were often printed and sold. These works usually emphasized the penance (or lack thereof) done by the deceased, his last speeches, the manner of execution sometimes told in gory detail, and include a moral lesson in the end. In pamphlets that included criminal biographies, punishment and/or execution was the tragic and inevitable result of sinful and violent acts. One such pamphlet, Henry Goodcole’s 1635 *Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry sent after Lust and Murder*, tells the sensational story of the murderers Elizabeth Evens and Thomas Sherwood (or “Canberry Bess” and “Country Tom,” as they were popularly known), and revels in the graphic detail of the murders and the requisite punishment of the two killers. I look at such pamphlets, those that refer to particular criminals and/or executions, as one manifestation of the social and ideological workings of early modern England. How did pamphleteers cover such events? How did these tracts function as entertainment? What did the authors emphasize in specific cases? Were these accounts merely sensationalist tales meant to sell, or do they contain information about how people viewed the situation, spectacle, and body of the criminal and condemned person? I address and answer these questions in the first chapter of this thesis.

The early modern execution was reported in pamphlets and dramatized on the stage. In examining these printed scaffold speeches, I relate the accounts of the condemned and their subsequent execution to the contemporary drama. The spectacle of the condemned man or woman occurs in tragic drama quite often. The importance of scaffold speeches or last words refers to the early modern religious trend towards *individual* salvation and the power of the word as a vehicle affecting entry into the afterlife. This rhetoric found its way onto the early modern stage. Also, when speaking the condemned actively place themselves as subjects in the social and political arena. The Foucauldian idea of the criminal body that ceases to belong to the individual, but instead is transformed into a site for the exhibition of state power exercised over both the individual and the community, is an important insight, but I argue that the dramatic interpretations of execution or public punishment complicate the issue by serving as a sort of
play within a play, or more specifically, a spectacle within a spectacle, and often invoke the carnivalesque atmosphere of the execution.

In revenge tragedy, murder is an important part of the plot, usually with one murder as the impetus for revenge and another murder as the act of revenge itself that ends the play. Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* is the first revenge tragedy and first great masterpiece of the Elizabethan stage. The similarity between the scaffold and the theater has been noted. Both were forms of entertainment, both were attended by both the wealthy and the poor, and both involved spectatorship as a key element to the accomplishment of the event. The success of Kyd’s play is attributed in part to the author’s ingenious transference of the spectacle of public execution from the socio-political to the cultural world. In the on-stage hangings of Horatio and Pedringano, Kyd recalls and manipulates his audience’s familiarity with the spectacle of execution. In the play within the play specifically, the script calls for murder, but the murders turn out to be real and the “actors” actually die. Such a scene again recalls the idea of the scaffold as a stage, and the actors as condemned men about to die. In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, Thomas Middleton provides another version of the spectacle of death. Both Middleton and Kyd’s blatant representation of death as entertainment raises questions about such an association, and the “theater’s status as framed spectacle” (Smith, “Theater and the Scaffold” 231) complicates the notion of death as public entertainment.

In line with execution itself and its representation on stage is the use or treatment of the dead (usually murdered or executed) body on the early modern stage, and I explore this more fully in the third chapter of this thesis. Without curtains, lights to dim, etc., the “dead” body was a problematic subject to represent on the stage. I am specifically interested in the ways in which an execution was carried out on the stage, and how the spectacle of public execution can be used to contextualize moments in early modern drama concerning death and murder.

Jonathan Sawday’s *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body* explores the connections between the new science of anatomy, a curiosity about the workings of the human body, and the poetic and rhetorical tropes associated with discovery. Hillary M. Nunn’s recent study, *Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Tragedy in Early Stuart Drama*, builds on Sawday’s assertions, and approaches the issue of anatomy’s influence on the early Stuart stage. She traces the role of public dissection in London’s anatomy theaters and the representations of dissected bodies on stage. These studies provide insight into the way the body of a criminal was viewed.
Often the “dead” body was carried off stage by a character, but in plays that end in a stage full of corpses, the audience would see the metatheatrical moment where the resurrected actor would rise, take a final bow and leave the stage. In Thomas Middleton, the eroticization of the murdered (female) body is most palpable in *The Lady’s Tragedy*. John Marston’s *The Insatiate Countess* deals with female sexuality and death as well, specifically the ways in which sexually transgressive women were expected to die as penitent sinners. The play also features yet another onstage execution, this time by beheading, that ends the life of Isabella. In the third chapter I will investigate moments that treat the body as a sexual object, referring to specific accounts of executions of women, and how they differed from other publications about the executions of men to add the aspect of gender roles to the study.

In a chapter dealing with Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, I look at the effects of a disrupted spectacle. I investigate the role of the Duke in the disordered nature of the arrest, penitence, and punishment of the “criminal” characters in the play. In the Duke’s manipulation of the system, I argue that Shakespeare engages in a sort of meta-commentary on the ritual of punishment and execution. The final scene, in which the Duke pardons all offenders, is also reminiscent of an actual historical event, the 1603 trial and pardoning of the Main Plotters, who attempted to oust King James I and place Arabella Stuart on the throne. The similarities between this event and the final scene in *Measure for Measure* are compelling, and provide an interesting commentary on state power and the treatment of the condemned, and the way this current event was represented on the stage. The “execution” seems to be treated as a species of festive comedy, with the audience expecting a last minute pardon to arrive. The play demystifies not only the workings of state power, but also the way that the state uses the threat of punishment as a tool.

In essence, it is just these points of interchange between actual events, popular publications, and popular entertainment that I will examine. Through this thesis, I hope to answer the questions concerning the role of pamphlet literature in the arena of public execution, as well as investigating the ways in which the drama responded to and explored themes of death and punishment. While sensationalist pamphlets relate most directly to sensationalist revenge tragedies, many plays investigate the related issues of the body on the stage as it is signified as condemned, as it is killed, and as it lays lifeless. When the scaffold becomes a stage in ritual socio-political ceremonies of capitol punishment, the role of spectator is as complicated as an
audience member watching a dramatic performance, in which audiences are called upon to occasionally imagine the stage as a scaffold. How did this change the role of the spectator as it was understood in early modern England? How were these deaths performed? And ultimately, how can we better understand the experience of the early modern spectator of an execution by putting these events within the context of other forms of popular entertainment?
CHAPTER 1

“BLOOD IS AN INCESSANT CRIER”: SENSATIONALIST ACCOUNTS OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN EARLY MODERN PRINT CULTURE

Dying men’s words are ever remarkable, and their last deeds memorable for succeeding posterities, by them to be instructed what virtues or vices they followed and embraced, and by them learn to imitate that which was good, and to eschew evil.

--Henry Goodcole, A True Declaration of the Happy Conversion, Contrition, and Christian Preparation of Francis Robinson, Gentleman (1618)

Scaffold speeches and accounts of execution were printed as quickly as possible to capitalize on the popularity of the events and the curiosity of the public, and this niche market was thriving in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Selling for a few pence, they provided the literate populations of London with more information on particular criminals, with detailed accounts of their crimes and last moments of life. If only a few hundred people actually watched an execution, it would be a minor event. Yet when literacy rates rose and printed accounts of crime and punishment began to circulate, the pamphlets proved both popular with the public and useful to the state. These works conform to a certain generic style, usually emphasizing the penance (or lack thereof) done by the deceased, his or her last speeches, the manner of execution (often told in gory detail), and some sort of moral lesson in the end. Pamphlets often included criminal biographies, and presented the execution as the tragic and inevitable result of sinful and violent acts that began earlier in the person’s life. The emphasis on sinfulness is extremely common in the accounts, and if a violent crime took place, those details are usually explained in great detail as well. As an extension of the spectacle of the execution, I look to these pamphlets referring to particular criminals and executions to offer insight into the social and ideological workings of early modern England.

Murder and execution pamphlets are, however, not accurate historical records. John Weatherford reminds us that “accounts in the pamphlets are too informative to ignore, and too inhibited by authority to be swallowed whole” (3). All printed materials were subject to censorship, and could be heavily altered if the censors believed that the account was incendiary in any way. Also, only the more sensational or bizarre crimes would receive treatment in the pamphlets, and just like today, “popular interest in murder was inversely proportional to its
incidence” (Gaskill 206). Even so, cheap print offers scholars a unique view into the ways in which early modern English audiences interpreted crime and punishment. How did pamphleteers cover such events? What did the authors emphasize in specific cases? Ultimately, these accounts were lurid tales written to sell, but they also contain useful information about how people viewed the situation, spectacle, and body of the criminal or condemned individual.

The explosion of printed news in the 1580s has its roots in earlier publications that circulated throughout England. Medieval accounts of punishments focused on the body of the accused, and gave little attention to the psychology or behavior of the criminal offender. Katherine Royer writes of the medieval tracts, in which the attention is given to the crime, not the criminal. In these texts, “each cut had a purpose, and the punishment commemorated the crime” (Royer 69). Late medieval narratives treated the body of the criminal as “a map of their crime,” and after death the bodies continued to speak and signify (69). The limbs of traitors were displayed on the gates of the city and their heads placed on London Bridge, a practice that continued into the early modern period. The ways in which the authors of the execution narratives chose to tell the story of the scaffold “illuminates the changing ways punishment was presented to society over the course of several centuries” (78). The focus in medieval narrative is punishment as retribution, in which the punishment commemorated the crime or the sin. In the 16th century, however, published accounts of execution began to offer a more complete picture of the condemned man. We see more details about the man or woman’s behavior on the scaffold, and their repentance or performance at the gallows or place of punishment is emphasized. The 16th century execution narrative stresses subjectivity, and is “filled with speeches, farewells, prayers, and descriptions of the demeanor of the condemned” (71). Such a change places the condemned in a new position; the person must not only physically, but mentally or behaviorally submit to the state’s punishment.

An anonymous 1610 pamphlet, *The Terrible and Deserved Death of Francis Ravilliack*, tells the story of François Ravaillac, who stabbed to death French king Henry IV on 14 May 1610, while the king’s carriage was stopped in traffic on the rue de la Ferronnerie in Paris. Combining the popular genre of the execution pamphlet with the added appeal of foreign news, the pamphlet gives us a graphic account of the punishment for regicide, “drawing and quartering.” Although the account is of a French punishment, English traitors were also punished in this fashion. Murders and executions were described with appropriate apologues or,
as in the case of Ravaillac’s tortures, with harrowing and imaginary details of a particular
punishment. The punishment for regicide detailed in the pamphlet is nearly identical to the 1757
execution of Robert-François Damiens, who unsuccessfully tried to kill Louis XV of France,
and whose tortures were made famous as an example of severe state violence in the first chapter
of Michel Foucault’s *Crime and Punishment*. According to the 1610 pamphlet, the manner of
Ravaillac’s death was to serve as “an example of terror made known to the world to convert all
bloody minded traitors from the like enterprise” (4). Most of the pamphlet is devoted to
recounting Ravaillac’s torments in almost pornographic detail:

The hand with the knife chained to it (wherewith he slew the king) and half the
arm was put into an artificial furnace, then flaming with fire…and yet nothing at
all would he confess, but yelled out with such horrible cries as if it had been a
Devil, or some tormented soul in hell…. With tongs and iron pincers made red hot
in the same furnace, the appointed executioners pinched and seared the dugs of
his breasts, the brawns of his arms and thighs, with the calves of his legs and other
fleshy parts of his body, cutting out collops of flesh and burned them before his
face…yet he would reveal nothing but that he did [the murder] of himself by the
instigation of the devil…because the king tolerated two religions in his kingdom.

(4-5)

The seemingly overwhelming torments continue. The executioners pour molten lead in
Ravaillac’s mouth and try to quarter him by tying him to four horses, “but so strong was his flesh
and joints knit together, that of long time these four horses could not dismember him, nor any
way tear one joint from the other, so that one of the horses fainted” (5). This scene is the
inspiration for the illustration on the frontispiece, which shows a man tied to four horses (fig. 1).
His executioners are forced to cut his joints and he is torn into pieces, “which being done the
rage of the people grew so violent, that they snatched the dismembered carcass out of the
executioner’s hands, some beat it in sunder against the ground, others cut it in pieces with
knives, so that there was nothing left but bones” (5). What is left of his body is burned and
scattered in the wind, because he was “unworthy” of a Christian burial. His father and mother
were banished from France upon pain of hanging, and “all his kindred never to take upon the
name of Ravaillac, to take to themselves some other name, upon the like pain of punishment, as a
name unworthy of our country” (6). The complete and utter destruction of the criminal’s body,
and even the criminal’s name, is representative of continental punishments for regicide. The pamphlet was translated and circulated to a British audience within the same year the event occurred, and contained the kind of gruesome details and scandalous story that would appealed to the literate lower and middle classes.²

**A Text and A Commodity**

In many ways, murder and execution pamphlets represent the birth of printed news. Both Tessa Watt³ and John Weatherford have indicated that these works serve as “an ancestor of newspapers” (Weatherford 2). Much like our modern newspapers, these pamphlets touting domestic or foreign news were fairly disposable and made to sell quickly. This timeliness put pressure on writers and printers, who sometimes would use a generic account or pieces of other pamphlets that could be recycled to supplement the current story. The murder pamphlet serves as both a text and a commodity, a piece of ephemera that functions as more of a quickly consumed and disposable product than a “timeless” piece of literature. The stock format of many pamphlets dealing with murder suggests that a distinct market niche had been discovered, and the stories became a staple of cheap print by the late 16th century (Lake 258). Then, like today, sex and violence made money. Executions could garner a great deal attention, and the condemned man or woman became something of a celebrity, their death a culmination of a life made famous by the pamphlet accounts hurriedly printed and sold, sometimes sold the very day of the person’s execution. The pamphlet may be constructed with exaggerated details to create a full narrative of a sinful life and tragic downfall. Execution or murder pamphlets, purportedly giving a “true” account, cannot be considered completely journalistic in the modern sense, as they are often quite didactic in tone and rather formulaic. The gallows literature “illustrates the way in which the civil and religious authorities designed the execution spectacle to articulate a particular set of values, inculcate a certain behavioral model and bolster a social order perceived as threatened” (Sharpe 148). Authors were often either members of the clergy or writers working in publishing houses producing what people wanted or expected to hear from the genre, with violence.

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² This regicide inspired at least one mention in contemporaneous drama. In Middleton’s *The Lady’s Tragedy* (1611), the Tyrant threatens Govianus, who has just poisoned him, with “a death / Beyond the Frenchman’s tortures” (5.2.130-1). In the 1978 Revels edition of the play, Anne Lancashire points out that the line was altered to read “the extremest tortures,” most likely due to the parallels between the Ravilliac and Govianus, who commits his regicide in a court similar to that of James I (Lancashire 14).

³ Tessa Watt’s *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge UP, 1993) deals more specifically with the way that popular and Protestant religious beliefs were distributed throughout post-Reformation England via cheap printed materials.
yet “these old pamphlets, sold for a few pence to artisans, shopkeepers and their servants, contain some intriguing evidence about the nature of ideological control in Stuart England” (148).

These works pander to popular taste and exploit the notoriety of the subject matter in order to make a profit, but must do all this quickly to capitalize on the ephemeral nature of readers’ interest and fascination with the story. A pamphlet was only so good as its appeal and marketability, which was dictated by the immediacy of the event. Some pamphleteers were members of the clergy, who had special access to the condemned. The comparison with newspapers gives us an understanding as to why so few were ever reprinted; no one wanted to read yesterday’s news. In their sensationalism, these pamphlets are much like today’s magazines that tout “breaking news” or exclusive stories and interviews. Henry Goodcole, who served as the Ordinary of Newgate Prison, wrote a number of pamphlets concerning the executions of people he himself ministered to and spoke with. His position as a prison chaplain allowed him unprecedented access to his favored subject matter. Audiences were fascinated with underground criminal life, and tales of murderers and other criminals were popular. Authors like Thomas Kyd and Robert Greene made occasional forays into cheap printed literature. Robert Greene authored a number of “coney-catching” pamphlets and other publications that detail the lives and practices of London’s criminal underworld. In his 1592 “rogue” pamphlet, A Notable Discovery of Cozenage, he showcases the specialization developed by London’s criminals and the way that “crime” had already become “entertainment” (Barrett and Harris 42). Greene begins with an inventory of the dialect of London’s criminals. In a section on “Cross-biting,” or cozening by whores, Greene explains the process to his readers: “The whore, the traffic; the man that is brought in, the simpler; the villainies that take them, the cross-biters.” The emphasis on the slang terminology would be of great interest to prospective buyers as an exciting view into the unknown and seedy underbelly of London’s thieves, rogues, and rascals.

Henry Goodcole’s Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry Sent after Lust and Murder (1635) taps into similar issues and tells the story of two criminals, Thomas Sherwood and Elizabeth Evans. These lovers, popularly known as “Country Tom” and “Canberry Bess,” were accused of murdering two men in London. The renaming of the criminals again attests to their popularity and celebrity, as they become almost larger than life. The fascination with such characters is what promoted the sales of these works. Goodcole claims in his preface that his “intention is to make the vulgar ignorants so wise as to walk warily and circumspectly.” Goodcole even gives
us a list of the places the two frequented, so that his readers may avoid such locations. First on the list are playhouses, followed by taverns, inns, alehouses, and the open streets. Goodcole claims that the two were “of very good parentage descended,” but that Bess was “tempted unto folly” by Tom. The narrative in *Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry* is straightforwardly moralistic, but Goodcole seems aware that the appeal of this text comes from scandalous details, to which he quickly refers.

The pair engaged in “Cross-biting,” the practice Robert Greene explained in *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage*. Bess’ routine was to wander the streets looking for a certain type of man to serve as a victim and lure him to an isolated area with the promise of sexual favors. Her accomplice, Thomas Sherwood, would then attack and rob the man. In one such struggle, Tom beat to death Thomas Claxton with a “truncheon of iron,” and “they both fell to rifling the pockets, and uncivilly stripped, (all humanity laying aside) the body bare and naked.” The title page illustration (fig. 2) includes an image of Tom’s weapon, represented below the figures of a man and a woman hanging from a gallows. Interestingly, the truncheon is represented again on the page explaining the manner of Claxton’s death, reiterating the brutality of the weapon and the violent manner of his death.

Continuing their murderous escapade, Tom beats to death another man, Mr. Holt. His body is displayed on the streets for identification, and in a moment of ultimate hubris, Tom approaches the man to admire his handiwork. Unfortunately, or perhaps providentially, “Sherwood’s nose immediately gushed out with such issues of blood that he feared thereby to be discovered, and returning unto [Bess] said, ‘I have suffered such a thing this day about Master Holt, we must out of necessity leave this course of life’” (C3r). The pair makes plans to leave the city, but are apprehended when Tom tries to sell the clothes of the dead man. Evans supposedly died “very penitent, and after her execution was conveyed to Barber-Surgeons’ Hall for a skeleton, having her bones reserved in a perfect form” (C4v). Sherwood “was hanged in chains near St. Pancras Church, being a just reward for his vile attempts” (C4v). The displaying of his body, however, does not work as a deterrent as it should have. Soon after he is put on display, two men attempt to rob a butcher, and seeing he had no money, tied him naked to Tom’s gibbet. Goodcole seems distressed by the event:
Oh pity! Still running on to more mischief, having such a fearful spectacle before their eyes as Country Tom, which should rather have frightened and hindered them from doing this bold and insolent act. (C4v)

The inhabitants of the street demanded the body’s removal as they were “much damnified and annoyed by his hanging there” (C5v). He was moved twice, first to Gray’s Inn Fields and then to King’s Cross.

The details about prostitution and extreme brutality in *Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry* exemplifies the way that sensationalism could be used as a selling point. Short, cheap pamphlets depended on catchy titles and crudely evocative woodcuts to entice readers. Publications concerning murder and executions were a reliable commercial enterprise. The pamphlets not only described notorious murders but also the sometimes providential means by which the culprit was captured and condemned. The appeal of publications concerning criminals and their arrest was based on their ability to shock and titillate, and the more bizarre or grotesque the case the better. In many pamphlets, there is no shortage of violence and sex. A 1635 pamphlet attributed to Richard More, *A True Relation of a barbarous and most cruel Murder, committed by one Enoch ap Evan, who cut off his own natural Mother’s Head, and his Brother’s*, provides a good example of a thrilling tale of atrocity. As can be gathered from the title, ap Evan beheaded his mother and brother. The actual text of the short pamphlet is actually not terribly graphic. It includes Biblical passages concerning murder and a general note on the evils of killing one’s own family members. What is most remarkable about this publication is the woodcut on the title page (fig. 3). It was created specifically for this story, and was not a stock image recycled and used for other works. The woodcut shows the two decapitated bodies of a man and a woman, with crudely represented blood flowing from their necks. The murder weapon, an axe, lies on the floor of the house. On the right, a figure representing ap Evan leaves the house with the two heads wrapped in a cloth. Through the open doorway we see another figure hanging from a gallows, an ominous foreshadowing of ap Evan’s own execution. This image, coupled with such a descriptive title, ensured that this pamphlet would sell.

The examples demonstrate just how commercially minded many publishers and pamphleteers were. It is no accident that the woodcut images tended towards graphic depictions

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4 The case of ap Evan is especially interesting as it inspired two pamphlets, which is an unusual amount of coverage for a single event. The other is Peter Studley’s account, *A True Relation of the Murders Committed in the Parish of Clune...by Enoch ap Evans* (London, 1641).
of some of the more violent aspects of any given narrative. The best stories were often the most exploitive, but the commodification of the printed word that begins in the late 16th and early 17th centuries represents the birth of a particular form of popular entertainment. The advent of print makes the distribution of these stories a commercial enterprise, and this desire to purchase and consume entertainment in the form of these pamphlets originates with the early modern period’s print culture. Without the means of producing texts so quickly and for so little money, these early serial publications would not have had a chance to develop as a particular mixture of journalism, moral instruction, and entertainment.

Aesthetic and Moral Conventions

That the murder and execution narratives represent a specific and successful genre of printed literature is undeniable. There are certain similarities in structure, focus, and emphasis that are found in nearly every example. In *The Crying Murder: Containing the Cruel and most Horrible Butchery of Mr. Trat*, a 1624 murder pamphlet, the author explains what is to be expected within its pages:

We may methodically consider five circumstances. First, the person murdered, and the persons murdering; Second, the motives which did induce them to commit this murder; Thirdly, the manner of committing and executing of it; Fourthly, the means and presumptive evidences by which it was discovered; Fifthly, the arraignment, judgment, and execution. Of all which considerations, severally I mean to relate, in their several orders, according to that intelligence which I have received from credible persons engaged in their trial.

This passage neatly sums up the methodology of many murder pamphlets. The goal of many of these works is to tell a complete narrative, with background information on both the victim and the criminal. Of course, the author also mentions the “manner of committing” the crime itself and dwells on the salacious details readers obviously enjoyed. This pamphlet and others show the way in which “popular writers, and presumably their audiences, shaped the facts of actuality into patterns convenient (and useful) to their imaginations. Each was made to conform to a preexisting type, as certain features of their lives were emphasized, played down, or suppressed, and ‘facts’ were often invented” (Faller 2). Thus the market dictates the form and, to some extent, the content of the pamphlets.
The promise of a “true” account serves as an important initial statement in murder pamphlets. Often, this would be included in the titles itself, as in Kyd’s *The Truth of the most wicked and secret Murdering of John Brewen, committed by his own wife*, from 1592. Even so, “despite titular protestations that accounts were ‘true,’ ‘exact,’ or ‘faithful,’ it was only really important that they remained faithful to the genre of the murder pamphlet” (Gaskill 214). Kyd’s pamphlet is extremely detailed, and reads like a domestic drama. It tells the story of Anne Welles, a beautiful woman pursued by two men, John Parker and John Brewen. Brewen was a wealthy goldsmith, but “no man was so high in her books as Parker” (2). She married Brewen after he showered her with gold and jewels, but Parker convinced Anne to poison her new husband. Parker bought the poison, and Anne put it in sugar sops and fed them to Brewen. He became ill, “gripping his inward parts…never ceasing vomiting till his entrails were all shrunk and broken within him (as is since supposed)” (4). Brewen died, and Parker moved in with Anne. Parker, however, “became jealous, that had she looked but merely upon a man, she should have known the price thereof” (5). Parker began to abuse Anne and refused to marry her, even though she was with child. The two argued loudly in their house, and Kyd invents more dialogue between the two. In a lengthy section, Parker calls Anne a strumpet, and she replies that “she had never been a strumpet but for him” (6). Parker accuses, “Thou wouldst marry me to the end thou mightest poison me, as thou didst thy husband” (6). To which the murdering wife protests, “Thou gavest me the poison, and after thy direction I did minister it unto him” (6). Neighbors heard the two arguing about the husband’s slaying and sent for the magistrates to arrest them. In custody, neither would confess anything, until Anne was told that Parker had confessed. She was taken to the country to have her child, and afterwards was brought back to hear her sentence. She was burned in Smithfield, and Parker “hanged in the same place before her eyes” on 28 June 1592, over two years after the murder.

Kyd’s pamphlet voices the early modern belief that murder ultimately revealed itself, and concludes with this statement:

The Lord give all men grace by their example to shun the hateful sin of murder, for be it kept never so close, and done never so secret, yet at length the Lord will bring it out; for blood is an incessant crier in the ears of the Lord, and he will not leave so wild a thing unpunished. (6)
This notion of God or providence having a role in the discovery of murder is widely reported in other pamphlets, and true stories about murderers and their capture provided evidence that this was so. The loud argument overheard by neighbors is a fairly mundane reason for the capture of a criminal but may be presented as providential nonetheless. A few pamphlets invoke the early modern notion of cruentation, in which the body of a deceased individual (usually the victim of a murder) continues to bleed when his or her murderer approaches. In *Sundry strange and inhumane murders lately committed* (1591), the author gives an account of the bodies of murdered children who bleed afresh when the killer returns. As the author explains, such evidence is miraculously provided when there is “no body to accuse the murderer” (B3). In *Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry* (1635), it is the murderer who bleeds from the nose when he passes his own victim in the street. In emphasizing the hand of God in these pamphlets, the authors again are able to elevate their subject matter above the level of sensationalized violence. Examples of gore and blood are balanced with that same blood “crying out” and revealing the murderer in a fashion reminiscent of the biblical story of Cain and Abel.

Many pamphleteers are careful to indicate that the reason for publishing these murder pamphlets is to warn others about the dangerous wages of sin. Ostensibly, the explicitly stated function of the pamphlets is not to titillate, even though the pamphlets almost always involve some sort of extreme behavior or sensationalistic subject matter. The suggestion that these pamphlets serve as moral lessons is echoed in Henry Goodcole’s 1618 publication, *A True Declaration of the happy Conversion, contrition, and Christian Preparation of Francis Robinson, Gentleman*. This pamphlet centers on Robinson, who counterfeited the Great Seal of England and was hanged and quartered. In the final lines, Goodcole expresses his wish “that his downfall may make all others wary and careful to fly sin, the reward whereof, and to the delighters therein, you have heard.” Written by a “preacher of the word of God, and [Robinson’s] daily visitor during his imprisonment,” as Goodcole states on the title page, this pamphlet is preoccupied with his own successes with the prisoner’s soul. This same pamphlet begins with his proclamation that we are “to be instructed what virtues or vices they [the criminals] followed and embraced, and by them learn to imitate that which was good, and to eschew evil” (A4). Yet to be instructed of their vices, the pamphleteers must inventory the crimes these people committed.
Avowedly based on fact, most of the “true” stories were more concerned with telling a
good story while simultaneously titillating the reader. The great paradox of murder pamphlets is
that the moral education of the populace can only be carried out through a recounting of the gory
and sensational details of murders. Crime and execution pamphlets featured graphic details of
bloodshed, along with hyperbolic and moralistic commentary, in order to provoke terror and
wonder (Raymond 118). A 1624 text attributed to “C.W.,” *The Crying Murder* serves as an
ultimate example of this fascination with the grotesque. The pamphlet describes a dispute over
ecclesiastical patronage that suddenly becomes an unusually bizarre murder. According to the
title page, the victim, Mr. Trat, is murdered, cut up, and pickled. A lengthy section of the
pamphlet is given to a detailed description of the crime:

There these Butchers with their hands already soaking in his blood, did cut up his
carcass, unbowel and quarter it; then did they burn his dead and privy members,
parboil his flesh and salt it up; that so the sudden stink and putrefaction being
hindered, the murderers might the longer be free from discovery…His arms, legs,
thighs, and bowels were powdered up into two earthen steins or pots in a lower
room of the house, close adjoining unto the wall, the bulk of his carcass was
placed in a fat or tube, covered over with a cloth in a chamber over head, all
which members thus dissevered were so artificially jointed, laid and handled, that
if these devils had been Butchers they could not have done it more orderly and
cunningly. (B3v)

The author has no trouble relishing the details. As Peter Lake has humorously remarked,
pamphlets such as these are “the literary equivalent of a John Carpenter film” (259). With *The
Crying Murder* it is easy to see what he means. In a further narrative twist, Cyril Austin, one of
the murderers, is caught by strange and yet almost clichéd providential means. While in public,
he takes out a bloody handkerchief to wipe his face. A woman sees it and asks him by what
means it became so bloody, and he arouses more suspicion when he “tears [the handkerchief] in
two pieces, and buries it in the dirt” (C3r). He is pursued by a group of men but escapes. Again
our narrator directly invokes the idea of providence, stating that “though he ran like Cain from
the presence of man, yet mark how the finger of God doth fasten on him” (C3r). He escapes to a
nearby town, where someone recognizes him and he is apprehended. This exciting story of a
criminal on the lamb again emphasizes the power of sensationalism, and sets forth an anecdotal narrative technique that emerges in many other pamphlets.

The title page woodcut is also quite compelling (fig. 4). The image features the four murderers disposing of the body. One man holds a leg above a barrel, and a woman seems to be adding salt in preparation for the pickling. Another man brandishes a knife and holds the severed head of Mr. Trat. The central figure is the torso of the victim, his entrails spilling out of his belly. As mentioned before, graphic depictions of crimes were always vital pieces of advertising, and it is easy to imagine the popularity of such a work. Interestingly, the image is recycled nearly ten years later on the title page of A cruel murder committed lately upon the body of Abraham Gearsy (1635). The depiction of drawing and quartering does not even fit the narrative in this particular ballad, in which two brothers kill a man and are executed; one was hanged and the other pressed to death. The ballad also uses another stock image of the hanged man that occurs quite frequently in early 17th century execution publications (fig. 5). The power of these woodcuts as selling points was apparently so great that printers might be less concerned about the fidelity of the image to actual events if such a shocking, attention-getting image might be used.

Exploitative elements and disgusting acts were ostensibly for the moral education of the reader, but they also “engender that frisson of horror laced with disapproval which allows both pleasure and excitement at the enormities described to be combined with a reconfirmed sense of the reader’s own sense of moral superiority” (Lake 262). A pamphlet is at once a thrilling story, an evangelical text, and an active participant in the state’s ideological agenda.

“The people expect a confession always”:
Scaffold Speeches in Execution Pamphlets

In early modern execution pamphlets, the last words of deceased individuals were of great interest to readers. In A Declaration of the Happy Conversion of Francis Robinson, Henry Goodcole writes, “The people expect a confession always at the time of any man’s execution.” This “last dying speech” represented the culmination of the person’s life and the climactic finale invoked by the early modern justice system. It was at once punishment and theater, a harrowing spectacle and the culmination of legal proceedings. The man was to behave on the scaffold as an actor on a stage, and to speak of his life and impending death with sincerity and penitence. The
ceremony of public executions crucially depended on cooperation from the condemned individual. J.A. Sharpe describes the phenomenon of the scaffold speech:

The set piece was a dramatic performance in a milieu where, it has been claimed, the notion of the world as stage and the men as actors performing their roles upon it had gained a strong hold upon the imagination. Rarely has this part been played more effectively than by English felons going to their deaths in the early modern period. (162)

The crowds anticipated a farewell speech on the scaffold, and the speeches were all quite similar in tone. The condemned, of course, admitted to their guilt but also gave a “general account of past sinfulness and delinquency” (Sharpe 150). This notion reflects the early modern audience’s expectations of a public execution. The speech was to be an acceptance of the punishment and therefore an acceptance of the legal system as a whole. In the pamphlet accounts, “it is striking that the condemned was not merely expected to die bravely, but that there was the expectation, seemingly often fulfilled, that they should play the part allotted to them through the medium of a very stereotyped farewell speech” (Sharpe 163). They were also expected to calmly and willingly accept the punishment of the state, and moreover admit that they deserved death as a punishment for their crimes. These speeches legitimized the punishment, but also the entire structure of state authority.

All condemned criminals were expected to perform this role, and almost all of them did. Thus the condemned were “willing central participants in a theatre of punishment, which offered not merely a spectacle but also a reinforcement of certain values” (Sharpe 156). The ideology of punishment and internalization of obedience were incredibly powerful in early modern England. It is important to remember that these events were not “merely displays of brutality,” but were also involved in the state’s ideology and reinforced conformity and obedience (Sharpe 158). The notion of “dying well” was of great importance to both the spectators and, it would seem, to the condemned individual, who likely believed that the fate of his eternal soul was on the line. Bravery on the scaffold was expressed through a penitent end. In this moment, the condemned’s interior state of mind was supposedly made public, and his eternal soul was made available for forgiveness. In A Declaration of the Happy Conversion of Francis Robinson, Henry Goodcole writes extensively of Robinson’s journey to repentance. Initially, Robinson does not seem to
desire confession. Goodcole takes this as an opportunity to recount the events he has witnessed in which men and women did not make a good end:

I do perceive they make a scoff and scorn, to think in that manner of dying they die valiantly, when that it is indeed most desperate, devilish and damnable...to boast and brag of the same, to be the full height of a reprobate soul. (B1v)

Goodcole’s emphasis on such a poor manner of death is quite telling. As a minister, of course, he would want some sort of assurance that the soul of the condemned would be safe. He seemed to have been successful with Robinson, and in the final pages of the pamphlet, Goodcole writes of Robinson’s last speech and manner of death:

he was heartily sorry, and craved pardon, willing to render up his life, acknowledging his death to be deserved; and further saying, that if he were never so much to be tortured, he deserved the same, and contentedly embraced the same, that so his Majesty’s just wrath might be appeased.... Like a Lamb going to the slaughter so went he unto his death, prepared before to suffer the same, willingly, patiently, and joyfully: and our confidence is such of him, that he is received into the Fold of that most blessed heavenly Flock. (C4v)

This performance fits the mold of the ideal manner of death. Robinson accepts the punishment and the authority of the state. The idea of returning to the “heavenly Flock” was key to understanding the nature and importance of Protestant forgiveness and mercy. The man on the scaffold was both punished and offered a chance to repent and save his or her soul. Goodcole, of course, stresses these moment in his pamphlets as proof of his role in saving the eternal souls of sinners.

Although these pamphlets served as gruesome entertainment and an excuse for writers and readers to express moral disapprobation, “the emphasis on last-minute conversion and salvation for even the lower dregs of society may have been comforting” (Watt 108). If such horrible criminals might be able to die well, then how much better might their own deaths be? Spectators and readers were acutely aware of the set speeches and appropriate behavior. Many people would confess to more than the crime for which they were being punished. The day of Country Tom’s execution and his last speech is reported in the pamphlet Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry Sent after Lust and Murder. While at the gallows, Tom confesses to one more murder, as well as admitting to his generally sinful past. Goodcole reports that he speaks to the crowd,
praying for them heartily, withal admonishing all that did see him that day, to 
beware of Whores, for they were the worst Company in the World, wishing all to 
beware by his fall, and not to be seduced, or blindfolded, as he was by such 
bewitching creatures, to irrevocable ruin. In the Posture of his Body, he 
expressed true Humility… I asked him if he was willing to die, to which he made 
answer, most welcome death was unto him; for all the while he lived, his life was 
as a kind of Hell unto him… his death he joyfully embraced. (C1r)

The sentiment is similar to the speech Robinson made. Both men say that death is welcome, and 
that they deserve the worst punishments for their sins. However harshly the author treated Tom 
in the section concerning his crimes, in the passage concerning his last speech he almost seems a 
sympathetic figure. Public execution was not a simple display of brutality intended to amuse, 
terrify, or deter some animalistic mob but was a ceremonial spectacle, and “the reactions which 
they aimed to excite among spectators were evidently more complicated than mere terror” 
(Sharpe 146).

Apparently, both Francis Robinson and Country Tom Sherwood were perfect actors on 
the scaffold, following the conventional script, but in another of Goodcole’s pamphlets we see a 
prisoner who displays a more convoluted path to repentance. In The Adulteress’ Funeral Day: in 
Flaming, Scorching, and Consuming Fire, or, The Burning Down to Ashes of Alice Clarke 
(1635), Goodcole first tells the reader of the crime. Clarke was the wife of an abusive husband, 
and with the help of her lover she poisoned him with mercury. She is tried and sentenced to burn 
in Smithfield. The day of her death, however, she seems to work against her prescribed role. In 
her cell at Newgate, “multitudes of people came to see her, and some conferred with her, but 
little good they did on her, for she was of a stout angry disposition, suddenly enraged” (C1r). In 
a somewhat desperate attempt to elicit a confession, Goodcole then “made as though I should 
have excluded her thence, in denying the benefit of the Holy Communion5… whereupon it 
pleased God to mollify her heart, that tears from her eyes and the truth from her tongue 
proceeded” (C2v). Clarke makes a dramatic confession at the very place of her execution just

5 Until the 14th century, the condemned could be denied confession. Pope Clement V forbade practice of denying 
criminals confession in 1312, for to die without confession meant eternal damnation of the soul as well as 
punishment of the mortal body. As Mitchell Merback states in The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the 
Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, “Long before modern humanitarianism, then, an 
observable process of ‘rehumanizing’ criminals was set in motion to accompany the growth of lay piety in the late 
Middle Ages” (149).
moments before she dies, and after her speech, “she was by it the better prepared unto death, with comfort, and willingness to suffer the same” (C2r). Her countenance becomes “ruddy” and Goodcole sees this as a confirmation of “her inward new begotten cheerfulness” (C2r). Such a last minute change of heart made for a thrilling spectacle and an exciting story, the spectators and clergymen satisfied by the performance. In *The Crying Murder*, however, we actually do read of an account in which men die without the stereotypical speech of penitence. All four murderers convicted of killing, cutting up, and pickling Mr. Trat do not confess their crime. “They suffered by the hand of Justice,” the pamphleteer writes, “and died obstinate and unrepenting sinners” (C5v). The event is apparently so distressing that it sparks the author to inventory possible reasons for this lack of confession:

The causes wherefore they would not confess were thought to be these: First, the obligation of their vow [to keep the secret of the murder]; Second, the conceived fear of a more terrible punishment; Third, the hope of impunity, or a reprieve at the last, since as they thought the proofs were not sufficient against them. (C5v)

This is followed by a rather lengthy and heavily moralized treatise on the evils of murder and the power of the law. Furthermore, to deny the state and the spectators a final word of remorse or regret upsets the entire ritual. The totality of *The Crying Murder* is concerned with presenting the criminals as devilish sinners, and in the end there is no redemption, no kind words to offer on their behalf.

Both of these accounts speak directly to the nature of spectatorship. If it is horrific to look upon an unconfessed death, then it is satisfying to view the spectacle of the criminal dying like a penitent Christian. Mitchell Merback calls this “the power of a salvific spectacle: the body in pain as both redeemed and redeeming to all who gazed upon it” (150). The final speech not only legitimizes the state’s authority, but also the spectator’s role. It is not only a case of viewing the punishment and understanding the power of the law but also a chance to view a person who had fallen into sin and is ultimately released from this earth after paying for their mistakes, only to return to that proverbial heavenly flock.

**The “Bloody Murders” at Yorkshire:**

**Principles of Interchange Between the Page and the Stage**

The pamphlets discussed in this chapter represent more than a commodity or a reinforcement of religious beliefs. Playwrights were readily aware of the popularity and
dramatic potential of many of these stories. A number of pamphlet narratives made the transition to the stage and indeed received further memorialization in play texts very often based quite closely on their pamphlet precursors (Lake 260). In 1621, Henry Goodcole wrote *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch, Late of Edmonton*. The execution of Sawyer was apparently an extremely well attended event that captured the popular imagination, inspiring Goodcole and a number of balladeers and playwrights. Goodcole writes in the preface of the popular appeal of the story and complains about other authors capitalizing on the sensational events:

> I wonder that such lewd Balladmongers should be suffered to creep into the Printers presses and people’s ears…most base and false ballads which were sung at the time of our returning from the witch’s execution. In them I was ashamed to see and hear such ridiculous fictions. (A4v)

Goodcole was, as always, concerned with presenting only the “truest” of accounts in any pamphlet he authored and became annoyed by the “ridiculous fictions,” and perhaps the competition that such ballads would pose to his own publication’s success. Soon after the events of Sawyer’s arraignment and death, the tale emerges in yet another manifestation. The play version of the story, *The Witch of Edmonton*, was collectively written by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, and John Ford, and published in 1653, but evidence shows that it was performed as early as 1623 (Mitchell 129). Such rapid production attests to the fact that the case and the pamphlet were quite popular and sparked curiosity and interest amongst the population of London.

A certain murder in Yorkshire had a similar stronghold on the popular imagination. Mr. Walter Caverley, a gentleman, was a wastrel and rake. Although he married a wealthy woman, he had squandered much of the family fortune. He was convicted of murdering two of his own young children and seriously injuring his wife on 23 April 1605. Such an exciting and disturbing tale would have been an easy choice for a pamphlet account. Indeed, the event sparked two pamphlets and two plays.

The most detailed account was published in 1605, the same year as the murder, by an anonymous author. In *Two Most Unnatural and Bloody Murders*, the story of Caverley and his family is recounted from the very beginning. This pamphlet is much less concerned with moralizing than some of the others addressed in this chapter. The author seems more interested
in relating the story with great specificity. The people involved in the story are given particular characterization: the wife is exceedingly good and pure; Caverley is increasingly agitated and violent. In the pamphlet, we are offered this analysis of Caverley’s downward spiral into madness:

Saw he the extirpation of his family, the ruin of his ancient house, which hundreds of years together had been Gentlemen of the best reputation in Yorkshire, and every one of these out of their several objects did create a several distraction in him...[and he would] break out into this lamentation: I am the most wretched man that ever mother received the feed of...I have begot my children to eat their bread in bitterness, made a wife to be nothing but lamentation...he was thus tormented in the remembrance of his own folly. (13)

In the pamphlet, Caverley publicly insults his wife and children. On the day of the murder, Caverley enters his son’s room and the pamphleteer offers us a fairly gory account of the killing:

So he being overwhelmed by the violence of his passion, all natural love was forgot in his remembrance, caught his child up by the neck, and striking at him with his dagger, the child lent him such a look would have driven a hand seven years prentice unto murder to an ague. Yet he (oh, would it never been done, it might never have been told), though his arm seemed twice to remember him of his monstrousness of the fact, he struck the lovely infant into the head and holding the bleeding child at arms length that the blood might not sprinkle his clothes, which had stained his heart and honor. (13)

Of course, the author would have no way of knowing these details. How the murders were exactly committed or what motives lead Caverley to such desperate acts are purely speculative. They seem to have been largely invented in an attempt to create a full and complex prose narrative.

This same story inspired two dramatic versions in an attempt to cash in on the popularity of the event. 6  A Yorkshire Tragedy was entered into Stationers’ register on 2 May, 1608. Although now attributed to Thomas Middleton, when it was published later that year it was credited to William Shakespeare, and the title page states that it was acted at the Globe. The

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6 George Wilkins’ The Miseries of Enforced Marriage (1607) is of less interest to this study. Wilkins alters the basic story and omits the murders altogether to bring his play to a happy ending.
The short play follows its pamphlet source extremely closely. *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is made up of ten scenes and delights in the same criminal analysis. The characters are not named in the play but called “Husband,” “Wife,” “Child,” and so on. This creates an allegorical feeling to the text that aligns it closely with a morality play. As in the pamphlet, Caverley’s behavior, verbal abuse, and murder of his children are represented as self-destructive acts. Both accounts present Caverley / The Husband as completely mad due to his own anxieties and delusions about his life and the sins he has committed. He berates his innocent wife and children with verbal abuse: “I hate the very hour I chose a wife, a trouble, trouble, three children like three evils hang upon me! Fie, fie, fie, strumpet and bastards, strumpet and bastards!” (B1v). He suffers from intense guilt and depression due to his large debts. In the play, much more attention is paid to Caverley’s subjectivity and motivations. The husband begins as a stereotypical, clichéd wastrel or prodigal, but as the play continues he becomes more complex and tragic. In a speech that directly echoes the pamphlet’s sentiments, the Husband rants about his downfall:

> My lands showed like a full moon about me, but now the moon’s i’ th’ last quarter, waning, waning. And I am mad to think that moon was mine: mine and my father’s, and my forefathers’, generations, generations. Down goes the house of us, down, down, it sinks. Now is the name a beggar, begs in me that name which hundreds of years has made this shire famous: in me, and my posterity runs out. In my seed five are made miserable besides myself. My riot is now … my wife’s sighing, my three boys' penury, and mine own confusion. (C2r)

The Husband then murders his first child by stabbing him, crying out “Bleed, bleed, rather than beg, beg” (C3v) as his son dies. The Husband stabs the second child in the Wife’s arms. As he is caught riding to the home of a nurse to murder his third child, the authorities ask him why he committed the crime. In the pamphlet, Caverley answers, “I have done that sir I rejoice at, and repent this, that I had not killed the other; I had brought them to beggary and am resolved I could not have pleased God better then by freeing them from it” (C2r). In the play, the Husband answers the same question in a similar manner: “My glory ‘tis to have my action known. / I grieve for nothing, but I misse’d of one” (D1r). Both accounts of the event also end in Caverley’s repentance for the murders, due to his wife’s kindness to him even though he
murdered her children. The play offers up the suggestion that the Husband was somehow possessed, and as he repents he says, “Now glides the devil from / Me, departs at every joint” (D3v). The title woodcut from Two Most Unnatural and Bloody Murders seems to highlight this sentiment as well, featuring Caverley holding a club aloft, standing over three presumably dead bodies, while a black devil figure looks on (fig. 6). The remorse that Caverley feels in the pamphlet is specifically what makes the play a tragedy. As his wife screams out, “Oh, my repentant husband!” in the final scene, the audience is assured that he is a changed man. He offers up a soliloquy about his remorse; standing over his dead sons he cries, “Here’s weight enough to make a heartstring crack!” and promises that he “will unto [his] end repentant live!” His penitent end is complicated, however, by the onstage murders of his two children. The audience sees the Husband kill innocent children and then the spectators are given an opportunity to decide if they understand and forgive the character.

The appeal of a play like A Yorkshire Tragedy is ultimately linked to the appeal of murder and execution pamphlets. Such a play serves a similar function, titillating the audience by reenacting real events—especially an event so gruesome as child murder. The real story, rumors about the event, and pamphlets recounting the tale culminate in the presentation of the material on the stage. By placing the event on the stage and giving it treatment in the ultimate form of popular entertainment, it becomes the most spectacular form of entertainment the early modern period has to offer. Although A Yorkshire Tragedy is exceptional in its direct link and timely treatment of actual events, many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays share similar traits. Plays that were sometimes set at court made sensational court scandal into public and popular events. Plays like The Spanish Tragedy and The Revenger’s Tragedy are set in Spain and Italy but are essentially about the machinations of courtly life and politics. The geographical distance allows the audience to enjoy the play without obvious subversive overtones. Even so, the use of actual events transposed to the early modern stage dramatizes the present to itself, and offers an interesting view into understanding the ways in which early modern authors and audiences treated recent crimes, scandals, and gossip.

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7 Although Caverley died under the peine forte et dure at York on 5 August 1605, both the play and the pamphlet omit the details of his death.
Pamphlets: Enforcing or Subverting State Message?

Reviewing and reading murder and execution pamphlets poses certain difficulties. Although they report on certain events, the pamphlets are also involved in and affected by ideological issues. English audiences obviously had a desire to read about crime and punishment, just as people do today. Pamphleteers covered the events according to a specific set of generic conventions style, and the surfeit of violence and scandal were important to the commercial viability of the works. The emphasis on the last words of the criminal was both interesting to readers and crucial to the system of law and punishment. But is there room for subversion in these works? The moralization and emphasis on repentance or damnation of the condemned seems to close off any opportunity for subversive or festive readings. Yet the works would not have been popular if they were wholly didactic. In his study of pamphleteering in early modern England, Joad Raymond understands the pamphlet as illustrating “the heterogeneity of the form: this was neither an arena of unimpugnable punishment, nor a carnivalesque celebration of inversion, but a literary genre rooted in commercial exchange, combining entertainment and instruction, open to divergent uses” (Raymond 121). This carnivalesque aspect is of particular interest, as it allows for a subversive function for these texts.

Returning to some of the woodcut images will offer insight into this distinction. On the title page of *The Terrible and Deserved Death of Francis Ravilliack* (fig. 1), we are confronted with a classic example of a Foucauldian theater of punishment. A criminal is punished in a harsh and harrowing manner in a type of arena, while spectators (possibly the executioner himself and two other gentlemen) look on. Compare this to the title page of *The Crying Murder* (fig. 4) with its strangely jaunty and animated corpse. The body of Mr. Trat is obviously being butchered in an extreme fashion, but there is something decidedly non-harrowing about his mutilated body, as it seems to balance and dance on the page. It is strangely amusing, a carnivalesque grotesque body that is at once disgusting and harmless. One figure holds the head aloft in the manner of an executioner after a decapitation, a slight smile on his lips. The four murderers work together in a scene more reminiscent of Peter Bruegel’s scenes of peasant life and cooperation than a homicidal rampage.

Of course *The Crying Murder* focuses on the crime, while the pamphlet on Ravaillac is about his punishment. The pamphlets are also representative of a product and a form of entertainment. Yet even actual executions contained elements of the carnivalesque.
Greenblatt, in his imaginative biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World*, gives an account of the execution of convicted traitor Rodrigo Lopez, the Queen’s doctor accused of attempting to poison her in 1594. The execution was a very important and well-attended event. Greenblatt quotes contemporary historian William Camden, as he tells us that Lopez apparently uttered that he “loved his queen as he loved Jesus Christ…which coming from a man of the Jewish profession moved no small laughter in the standers-by” (277). Laughter as a reaction to such a supposedly solemn event is surprising, especially considering that the last dying speech was considered to be one of the most honest pronouncements of any man’s life. Even the standard account of Christ’s crucifixion, the ultimate execution, contained carnivalesque elements. As Jesus walked to his place of crucifixion, the crowds jeered him. He was crowned, but ironically with thorns, and soldiers amused themselves by playing dice and gambling for his clothes as he died above them.

The pamphlets recounting early modern executions were established as both a way to present news, entertain, and further particular ideological issues concerning the place of the body in relation to state power. Thomas Laqueur has written of the festive readings of executions, and in *Carnival and Theater*, Michael Bristol explains the social function of festivity. An essential element of the festive includes some sort of rite of passage; these can include personal events that represent maturation or seasonal events like a harvest. In such festivals, there is a release from the drudgery of daily life and a suspension of societal hierarchy for the momentary collective experience. Bristol also utilizes René Girard’s festive model, in which festivals “reenact an historically specific act of violence in which a substitute victim is murdered in order to ward off a more terrifying, indiscriminate violence among the members of the same community” (Bristol 33). Laqueur sees this as a way to understand the execution itself and complicate the Foucauldian notion of execution as the display of terrifying state power. For written accounts of executions, there is a mixture of these two ideas. Peter Lake writes that “the genre itself was in part structured by precisely the same sort of carnivalesque inversions which Laqueur had discerned in the swaying, surging body of the crowds that attended the executions” (276). Pamphlets offered a mixture of edification, moral instruction, titillation, and morbid curiosity that had to be held in balance. A space for the carnivalesque exists in printed accounts of a murder or execution because they were presented, in some way, as a form of entertainment. Festivity and leisure are linked together, in these pamphlet accounts and an actual early modern
execution. There is an element of the festive in the pastoral, rural setting of the Tyburn gallows, in which families would picnic and spend the day in the country. This festivity is also the reason why a man is tied to Country Tom’s gibbet as a joke, why the image of the dead man is strangely lively in the woodcut of *The Crying Murder*, and the reason why harrowing murderous rampages can become popular theatrical productions.
CHAPTER 2

“VIOLENCE PREVAILS”: DEATH ON THE STAGE IN KYD’S *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY* 
AND MIDDLETON’S *THE REVENGER’S TRAGEDY*

The similarities that can be drawn between the scaffold and the stage are plentiful: both events were attended by a large number of people from nearly every social and economic class, both depended on spectatorship to exist, and both featured a raised platform to make the dramatic performance more easily visible. Indeed, the workings of the state depended on performance and spectacle. Queen Elizabeth, for instance, cultivated an image of herself as Gloriana, a larger than life figure of public reverence. To stabilize power and present an awe-inspiring image of themselves, Tudor and Stuart monarchs actively cultivated such public roles. This tendency towards the dramatic is also involved in public punishments, and trial and execution inherently present a quasi-dramatic structure (Cunningham 210). In the previous chapter I have explored the workings of the early modern execution and the ways in which it was manifested in popular print, yet the theater, as the most popular form of live entertainment, offers another way to understand the position and role of the early modern spectator. The printed accounts are concerned with reporting and recounting the events and last words, and thus often serve as a facilitator to the model of stability and containment the state fostered. Transferring death from the executioner’s scaffold to the theater’s, however, allows for an emblematic echo of actual public punishments, but also introduces the possibility of ambiguities within the spectacle of the condemned and executed man because of the “defamiliarization” that the stage offers (Cunningham 213-4). Both Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* offer such examples of death and violence as “play.” Metatheatrical modes invoke the inherent voyeurism in watching suffering and death, and both plays utilize the ideological and visual experience of public punishment and execution to dramatize both the event of execution and the audiences’ role as spectators of that event.

Though theater was subject to censorship, subversive elements abound in these two plays. State power and its representation in a theatrical setting are potentially transgressive and complicated. As James Shapiro has noted, “Elizabethan theater’s relationship to political and
judicial authority was more complex than either subverting or confirming state power; the theater’s boundaries as a judicial institution were especially problematic” (99). In the onstage hangings of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd demystifies and reevaluates the spectacle of public punishment and the workings of the state, mimetically representing the practices of executions that the audience would have been quite familiar with. Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* complicates some of the issues Kyd explores, specifically the use of dead bodies on the stage and the emphasis on parodying state rituals. Each play explores execution and the symbolism of desecrating the body of the criminal either through manner of death or the display of the dead body. Through the condemnation of an individual in the beginning of each play, the works imitate the structure of a state theater of punishment only to call it into question. Punishment is a communicative act that speaks to other issues – politics, morality, social order, etc. Foucauldian models of punishment define executions as a dramatization of the power of the state over the disobedient individual through mutilation or mortification of the body. In this model, the behavior of the condemned should ideally legitimize the act and willingly accept the punishment and the degraded social identity through a final speech that justifies the punitive measure. The early modern execution performance was much like a morality play with “justice, humility and the threat of death displayed in order to warn and edify spectators” (Phillip Smith 241). In this view of an execution performance as a text, there leaves room for some sort of deviant performance. The victim could turn the solemn ritual into a farce or a scene of heroic resistance and engender veneration or respect amongst the spectators, or the performer could insist on innocence and piety so extremely that the spectators would be moved to pity (Phillip Smith 241). Both the theater and the scaffold also provided “occasions for communal festivities,” and the influence of the scaffold may also account for a “general dramatic fascination with the spectacle of death evident throughout the late 16th and early 17th centuries” (Smith 220). Theater is inherently festive but depends on establishing distance between spectacle and spectator, while an actual carnivalesque celebration implicitly or explicitly invokes the festive frame to separate itself from everyday living. Although the theater did depend upon keeping boundaries between the audience and the players and suspending disbelief, metatheatrical traditions complicated the frame and diminished that distance.
Violence of the State in *The Spanish Tragedy*

Thomas Kyd’s 1587 play *The Spanish Tragedy* has been noted as the first great Elizabethan tragedy, and is usually discussed in terms of the influence it had over Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The play has often been heralded as the beginning of the revenge tragedy genre, and the extreme violence has been attributed to the Senecan model due to the theme of revenge in the plot, the numerous deaths, and the use of ghosts; but it also contains elements of the medieval morality play through the personification of Revenge (Baker 27). Even so, it was a runaway hit when it appeared, and was continually performed for many years. The success of Kyd’s play may be attributed to his use of extreme violence, something that early modern audiences obviously enjoyed, but it may also be due to its ties with public execution, and “the author’s ingenious transference of the spectacle of public execution with all its ambiguities from the socio-political to the cultural worlds” (Smith 229). Although tragedy could be quite bloody, the playwrights usually did not represent exact mimeses of state-performed violence like hanging, decapitation, or burning (Shapiro 100). An important exception to this rule is *The Spanish Tragedy*, featuring two representations of state punishment in the hanging of Pedringano and the near torture and burning to death of Alexandro. *The Spanish Tragedy* explores revenge, of course, but offers two differing types of retribution and justice. The play analyzes private revenge or vendetta and publicly sanctioned vengeance upon the body of a criminal by way of formal execution (Brooke 5). We begin with warfare, another public and valid form of death that extends into peacetime with the ghost of Don Andrea and the allegorical character of Revenge. The illicit murder of Horatio moves his father Hieronimo to seek his own personal vengeance, yet war—licensed public killing—still spurs Andrea to revenge just as much.

*The Spanish Tragedy* is full of characters that recount or report on sufferings and offer vivid descriptions of torments, violence, and death. If an act of violence occurs offstage, we hear about it at length and in colorful detail from the characters. Indeed, the play begins with the ghost of Don Andrea, entering in the first scene to tell us of his death and experiences in the afterlife. Our first image of violence comes in the form of his Dante-esque description of the tortures of the underworld:

Where bloody Furies shake their whips of steel,
And poor Ixion turns an endless wheel;
Where usurers are choked with melting gold,
And wantons embraced with ugly snakes,
And murderers groan with never-killing wounds, [...] 
And all foul sins with torments overwhelmed. (1.1.65-71)

The vivid descriptions of mythical torments have echoes of public punishments. The “whips of steel” obviously refer to flogging, and the usurers chocked with melting gold could refer to the practice of pouring molten lead down a criminal’s throat, as noted in the account of François Ravaillac’s execution. Ixion’s “endless wheel” could have conjured up images of “breaking on the wheel,” in which a criminal (alive or dead) would have his arms and legs placed within the slats of a wheel and broken (Merbeck 160). Don Andrea is accompanied by Revenge, a character that represents a type of personal retributive justice for his death. At the end of the first scene, Revenge speaks and discloses the event that will ultimately end their revenge plot. As the two take their seats in the upper lever, Revenge tells Don Andrea, “thou shalt see the author of thy death, / Don Balthazar, the Prince of Portingale, / Deprived of life by Bel-imperia” (1.1.87-9). This act of condemnation has definite echoes of early modern judgment and execution. Within the first few moments of the play, the audience is already aware of and anticipating the death that will end the tale. The play itself is thus an execution spectacle – we know from the beginning that Balthazar will be killed because Revenge tells us this is akin to the way that a spectator at an execution is aware of the individuals that would be put to death. He is a condemned man from the start, and we see many more condemned men throughout the play. Each time Balthazar comes on the stage, he is a man marked for death by Revenge herself, and the stage direction suggests that Don Andrea and Revenge remain onstage throughout the play as a constant and ominous reminder of the punishment and death that will undoubtedly ensue. That they linger on the upper level to watch the proceedings is also reminiscent of an execution, in which people might pay for seating to enjoy the drama of a man or woman’s death in comfort. Yet more importantly, they are our fellow spectators, and to watch them watch the rather bloody action of the play is to consider our own role in the spectacle of theater.

In the second scene, we receive more tales of violence, this time as the Spanish general tells the King the events of the battle. This scene, like the last, is made up of long poetic speeches about suffering, pain, death, and violence. In his vivid lyricism, the general performs his speech for the King and his men. Numerous times the play’s characters recount the events of some sort of violent event, over and over, to the delight of the listeners (both onstage and off).
Molly Smith has suggested that these early scenes capture “the value of death as entertainment” (223). In his lengthy speech, the general begins speaking of the “armies in their proud array” (1.2.24) on a grand scale but quickly narrows his focus, zooming in on the gory details of a hectic fight, giving meticulous and poetic weight to the grotesque scene of the battlefield:

On every side drop captains to the ground,
And soldiers, some ill-maimed, some slain outright:
Here falls a body scindered from his head,
There legs and arms lie bleeding on the grass,
Mingled with weapons and unbowelled steeds
That scattering overspread the purple plain. (1.2.57-62)

His account of the battle is horrific. Bodies are mutilated and bleeding, and become physically and lyrically mixed with the flesh of animals to create a vividly grotesque and repulsive “purple plain” that throbs and seethes with pain and death. Like Don Andrea’s speech, the general switches to present tense even though he is speaking of past events, giving an immediacy to this portion of his speech as he asks the audience to gaze upon the scene of broken and misshapen bodies that invoke images of decapitated heads and quarters that were displayed around London. The King seems pleased after the general’s striking speech. Both the general and Don Andrea speak about macabre spectacles they witnessed in places unfamiliar to the audience. The torments of the afterlife or the chaos and bloodshed of a battle are painted in words at such length that the audience can commiserate with the experience even though it takes place offstage. The death and violence onstage, however, soon takes precedence, yet these accounts establish the idea that death is entertaining, and that bloodshed will be the focus of this tragedy.

Onstage Violence in The Spanish Tragedy: The Hanged Man and Voyeuristic Spectatorship

Kyd’s play features two onstage hangings, Horatio’s murder and Pedringano’s execution. The murder of Horatio is in many ways the focus of the play. Jealous of his relationship with Bel-imperia, Balthazar and her brother Lorenzo plan to murder Horatio. As Horatio and Bel-imperia walk and woo each other, Pedringano, Serberine, Balthazar, and Lorenzo discover the lovers and attack Horatio while Balthazar restrains Bel-imperia. In a few quick moments Pedringano and Serberine hang him and then, because death by hanging could take a long time, stab him to expedite his death. The exact staging of the execution is something of a mystery.
Horatio is supposedly hanged “in the arbor” (SD 2.4.23), and there are references to him hanging high up that suggest the use of a stage-prop tree that remains on the stage for the totality of the action, possibly serving as Pedringano’s gallows or Alexandro’s stake. Lorenzo makes a comment about the “fruits of love” that puns morbidly on the notion of the gallows as a tree, yet on the title page of the 1615 quarto of the play (fig. 7), Horatio is hanging on what looks like a trellis archway, which might have served the same purpose.

In representing a hanging on the stage, the audience must have been reminded of any actual hangings that they had seen. Kyd’s treatment of Horatio’s death also plays with the spectacle-spectator relationship. Pedringano plays the part of the hangman, and the stage directions indicate that he is in disguise, covering his face much like an actual hangman. Bel-imperia is a witness to the act, and is a spectator to death just as the audience members are spectators. This double-framing of the event, in which we watch Bel-imperia watch Horatio’s death, highlights Kyd’s creation a spectacle (of a hanging) within a spectacle (of a theatrical performance). With these framing devices utilized throughout the play, Kyd “heightens the ambivalence of a public hanging as a spectacle” and weakens the frames “that separated spectators from the spectacle” (Smith, *Boundaries* 26). As spectators, members of the audience are both witnessing a play and an execution, and by representing execution in a play, Kyd invokes the similarities between the scaffold and the stage and the audience’s relationship to each.

Horatio’s body is pivotal to the tragedy. Although it is Don Andrea whose death begins the play, Horatio is hanged and murdered on stage, and thus it is his death that is the most important, even more important than Don Andrea’s. Don Andrea only *tells* us about the way he died, and therefore his death is removed from the onstage action. As Lorenzo states while he plans Horatio’s murder, “Where words prevail not, violence prevails” (2.1.108). It is Horatio’s murder that truly spurs on Hieronimo’s revenge plot, which becomes central to the play. After Horatio is hanged and stabbed, the stage directions tell us that the murderers take Bel-imperia and leave the body hanging and on display before Hieronimo enters to find the “murd’rous spectacle” (2.4.71). As he mourns and speaks directly to his dead son, he calls him a “bloody corpse dishonoured” (2.4.83) because only base criminals were hanged and displayed in such a fashion. Hieronimo quickly becomes obsessed with revenge, as is to be expected of a tragic hero, but he also becomes fixated on remembering his dead son. Throughout his speeches,
Hieronimo repeatedly conjures up the vision of Horatio’s dead body. We are never allowed to forget it.

Hieronimo becomes preoccupied specifically with memorializing the event of his son’s death in some concrete way. He takes Horatio’s handkerchief and dips it in his son’s blood, an act reminiscent of the early modern practice of dipping cloth in the blood spilled at an execution as the blood of the victim was thought to contain magical powers that could protect the owner or cure diseases (Smith 225). Hieronimo also requests that a painting be made of the murder in one of the additional passages from the 1602 version of the play. Hieronimo asks the painter Bazardo to create a series of paintings depicting the stages of Horatio’s murder. He asks Bazardo if he can “paint me a tear, or a wound, or a groan, or a sigh?” (Addition, 3.13.112-13). Hieronimo continues, asking more and more of the painter, wanting him to not only represent the murder and forthcoming revenge on a canvas, but to actually re-create the events, complete with sounds, words, and movement obviously beyond a painter’s ability. The scene implies that painting will never capture the true horror of the event, much like language falls short in other scenes. Hieronimo becomes frustrated with the painter as he begins to understand the impossibility of his request. He does not want an image of Horatio’s death, and he does not want a memento mori; he wants to experience it in full. When Hieronimo demands to “behold a man hanging, and tottering and tottering, as you know the wind / will weave a man” (Addition, 3.13.148-49), he offers us yet another invocation of the hanging we have just witnessed in rather grotesque detail.

Horatio’s death, although it invokes public execution, is not state-sanctioned violence and is thus not as subversive as the two other instances of public punishment, where Kyd directly invokes and possibly critiques the justice system and forms of punishment. The near killing of Alexandro provides our first look into the workings of official punishment. After Villuppo’s false accusations, Alexandro is charged with the murder of Balthazar and given a death sentence on the spot: “If Balthazar is dead, he shall not live” (1.4.91). In the scene directly following Horatio’s murder, the Viceroy of Portugal begins the execution of the “traitor” Alexandro. He is allowed to speak his last words, which protest his innocence:

thus I die suspected of a sin

Whereof, as heavens have known my secret thoughts,

So am I free from this suggestion. (3.1.44-46)
Alexandro’s speech is true, of course, as the audience is aware that Balthazar is not dead. Still, the Viceroy is annoyed by the protestations of innocence. Men on a scaffold are supposed to admit their sins and accept the punishment, and Alexandro does not comply. His punishment commences quickly. The Viceroy cries out, “To the tortures! When! / Bind him, and burn his body in those flames” (3.1.47-8) as men tie Alexandro to the stake. Alexandro’s death and the image of the stake is possibly an imitation of the burning deaths of criminals in Smithfield. Alexandro, accused of killing Balthazar, would have been associated with a servant killing his master. Such a crime, along with witchcraft and the murder of a husband, was punishable by burning in early modern England. Of course a pardon is issued at the last minute, again invoking the dramatic gesture that was always possible at an actual execution. As Alexandro is about to be killed, an ambassador enters with news that Balthazar is alive. After Villuppo admits that he has “shamelessly hazarded [Alexandro’s] life” by lying about Balthazar’s death in hopes that he would be preferred, the Viceroy sentences him to death “with the bitterest torments and extremes/ That may be yet invented for thine end” (3.1.96, 100-01). Villuppo’s end occurs offstage, as he is lead away under guard to presumably be tortured to death for manipulating the justice system. In the space of a short scene, Balthazar and Alexandro are resurrected, and Villuppo is marked for death.

The most outstanding and subversive representation of execution in *The Spanish Tragedy* is the hanging of Pedringano. Horatio’s onstage hanging was a murder, but Pedringano is condemned to die by the state in an authorized and official punishment. His death explores the carnivalesque possibilities of public execution, and the disturbingly comic scene stands in opposition to Horatio’s tragic and lamentable end. It is a scene that “simultaneously exploits and satirizes the value of the public hanging as a reiteration of justice” (Smith 226). The play moves from the serious and solemn nature of Don Andrea’s tale of death and warfare to the ironic and macabre gallows humor of Pedringano on the scaffold. The key to understanding the humor of the scene comes from our knowledge that the reprieve Lorenzo promised will never arrive. In the preceding scene, the page peeks in the box he must carry to the gallows and finds it empty. In his small part, he ironically expresses a “grotesque enactment of state justice” (Smith 227) and he assists by playing his part to perfection. He realizes that his role will assure Pedringano’s death, and yet it amuses him to think on the upcoming scene:

I cannot choose
but smile to think how the villain will flout the gallows, scorn the audience, and descant on the hangman, and all presuming of his pardon from hence. Will’t not be an odd jest for me to stand and grace every jest he makes, pointing my finger at this box, as who would say, ‘Mock on, here’s thy warrant.’ Is’t not a scurvy jest that a man should jest himself to death? (3.5.9-15)

Pedringano does end up jesting himself to death, sure that the pardon will come at any moment. He taunts his hangman and the officers, defiantly mocking his punishment and playing a part in his execution as if it were a comic performance. His version of a dying speech is similarly indifferent and defiant, as he is expecting to be set free: “First I confess—nor fear I death therefore—/ I am the man, ’twas I slew Serberine” (3.6.29-30). Pedringano treats his hanging like theater because he feels he is in no danger. Because of this the act of execution and state power itself is demystified and parodied (Shapiro 103). There is little symbolic meaning in his death; it is merely a farce with an unhappy ending for a clownish carnival king.

As the hangman comes on to the stage, Pedringano turns all his energy towards mocking his office. When the hangman expresses his impatience, Pedringano asks him, “What, do you hang by the hour?” (3.6.58). As they exchange more witty banter, the hangman is left to exclaim in surprise that Pedringano is “the merriest piece of man’s flesh that / e’er groaned at my office door!” (3.6.80-1). The proper behavior expected at an execution is completely turned on its head in the scene. Men on the gallows were supposed to be contrite, remorseful, and ask for forgiveness through prayer at the site. Pedringano sarcastically asks the hangman to “request this good company to pray with me,” which the hangman, heretofore disturbed by Pedringano’s joking, applauds, calling him a “good fellow” (3.6.85, 87). Pedringano’s mention of the “good company” seems to suggest he is addressing the spectators, but the only people on the stage in the scene are the hangman, a deputy, and Hieronimo. Such language suggests that the actor playing Pedringano may be referring or gesturing to the theatrical audience, again invoking the formal procedure at an execution, in which the condemned would address the crowd and ask for prayers. The prayers, however, never come as Pedringano remembers that he has “no great need” of prayer with his pardon so securely established (3.6.89). He becomes a “version of the grinning skeleton in the *danse macabre* as he exposes the futility of the human endeavor” (Smith 227). The audience feels the anxiety of the gallows closely; in part because we know that there
is no pardon and Pedringano would no doubt act differently if he believed that his life was actually at stake, and in part because any laughter we may have expressed is apprehensive and tainted with that knowledge.

The scene turns suddenly and quickly serious. Hieronimo leaves the stage as the hangman prepares to execute the sentence, again invoking Horatio’s hanging as such a painful memory that he cannot bear to see another man hanged. As the hangman readies his noose, Pedringano senses the inevitability of his death and becomes nervous, exclaiming, “Nay, soft, no haste” (3.6.100). In an instant, and with no solemnity, the hangman “turns him off [the ladder]” (SD 3.6.104). The direction indicates that Pedringano is hanged in full view of the audience, and unlike Horatio his death is not expedited by stabbing. It is difficult to know how the hanging would have been performed: would Pedringano’s death be anti-naturalistic? Would he have struggled for an uncomfortable minute, imitating the death throes of an actual hanging victim? Either way, the audience viewing the theatrical representation of execution that, in reality, utilized theatrics conflates the two spectacles. The lines and boundaries that separate state and theatrical violence are blurred as Kyd “tests the boundaries between the prerogatives of the state and those of the theater” (Shapiro 100). The action of the scene situates itself on this boundary between violence performed in theatrical conventions and the violence of the state. Pedringano’s death is at once a part of the revenge plot of the play and a commentary on the violence of the state’s display of power. Kyd seems to suggest through Pedringano’s death that the carnivalesque potential of an execution can quickly turn grim. Pedringano jests his way to his own doom, encouraging the audience to laugh along with him until the very instant of his death. His demise is both an act of retributive justice and the grisly punch line to his lengthy comic routine.

“That was bravely done!”: Metatheatrical Finale in *The Spanish Tragedy*

The extravagant coup de theater that ends the play is especially useful in understanding Kyd’s treatment of state violence and theatrical violence. Hieronimo devises a plan with Belimperia to include his enemies Lorenzo and Balthazar in his version of *Soliman and Perseda*, a violent play which eerily reflects the actions of *The Spanish Tragedy*. The staged murders in Hieronimo’s play, however, will be real. The ensuing violence of his play is completely independent of language as well, as Hieronimo stipulates that “each one of us must act his part / In unknown languages” (4.1.166-7). In opposition to the flowery speeches of Don Andrea and
the general describing offstage violence, Hieronimo will focus solely on the visual spectacle of violence and death. His casting of noble and royal persons in the play also contains a seditious element. If royal and political power was manifested theatrically, then the theater becomes potentially subversive. In the play-within-a-play, Balthazar seems shocked that he, a prince, would be asked to perform: “What, would you have us play a tragedy?” (4.1.86). He is incredulous because princes are always playing a part, so to actually play a different role brings up uncomfortable parallels with the “role” a prince must play at all times. Much like the effect of Pedringano’s hanging, in which he plays a certain role as a criminal, Hieronimo’s play exposes the theatricality of other social customs.

As Hieronimo prepares for the performance of his play, we see him hide Horatio’s corpse behind a curtain. After hearing about the body of his son in nearly every one of his scenes, the body resurfaces physically, perhaps even represented by the live actor who played Horatio earlier. As the play begins, Hieronimo, playing the murderous bashaw, uses the theater’s assumed artifice to actually kill Lorenzo, yet the play continues and Bel-imperia stabs Balthazar and then herself. In this courtly entertainment, the mimetic deaths turn out to be real, another “dance of death” (Brooke 5) that is reminiscent of late medieval morality plays made up largely of “violent moral farce” (7). The onstage audience to Hieronimo’s play (the King, the Viceroy, the Duke), unaware that the play is anything more than a play, is very pleased, and initially applauds the realism:

KING. Well said! — Old Marshal, that was bravely done!
HIERONIMO. But Bel-imperia plays Perseda well!
VICEROY. Were this in earnest, Bel-imperia,
You would be better to my son than so.
KING. But now what follows for Hieronimo? (4.4.68-72)

The King's confusion in the last line is telling. He wants to know what happens to Hieronimo’s character, but he has conflated Hieronimo with his role in a way that unknowingly reflects Hieronimo’s plan to confute the act of stage violence with actual violence. This conflation is also echoed, with sardonic double-entendre, in Hieronimo’s line noting that Bel-imperia “plays Perseda well.” Nobody can play a dead person better than a corpse.

Hieronimo’s play becomes an agent of change by breaking the boundaries between theater and action, and thus invoking the framing devices that theater depends on:
Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,
that this is fabulously counterfeit,
And that we do as all tragedians do:
To die today, for fashioning our scene,
The death of Ajax or some Roman peer,
An in a minute starting up again,
Revive to please tomorrow’s audience.
No, princes. (4.4.76-83)

In calling the theatrical presentation into question, Hieronimo exposes what was thought of as mimesis for the real thing. Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Bel-imperia will not perform their play again because the play was not a performance. When Hieronimo shows his dead son, he cries out, “See here my show, look on this spectacle!” (4.4.88). Words like “show” and “spectacle” take on a more sinister meaning in the scene, and directly invoke the shared terminology between the scaffold and the stage. Revealing that the murders were real causes the frame of tragedy to be questioned and manipulated. Once aware of this, the onstage audience condemns the play that they so thoroughly enjoyed before. Hieronimo metatheatrically exposes the reliance of tragedy on gore and death, and the onstage audience (and to some extent the theatrical audience) is left with the anxiety produced by their enjoyment of the scene for that brief moment that it actually was a scene and not a murder-suicide. Kyd experiments with theatrical framing devices that expose the reliance of the revenge tragedy on spectacular deaths, and in “problematizing boundaries, Kyd’s tragedy imitates the scaffold most vividly” (Smith 228). After a long speech explaining that he was the “author and actor of this tragedy” (4.4.146), Hieronimo attempts to hang himself, but is stopped by guards. His final speech disrupted, he bites out his own tongue, steals a knife and kills himself.

The King, the Viceroy, and the Duke watching Hieronimo's play represent the audience to itself once again, and therefore the King's fatuous misreading of the play serves as a warning to the theater’s audience. Kyd blurs the lines between actual death and a performance of death by examining “the potential indistinguishability of theatrical and state violence” (Shapiro 107). Theatrical framing is manipulated and the play-within-a-play exposes the play’s “reliance on the drama of terror” (Smith 221). The thing that is most disturbing about the theatrical representation of violence is that there is no way of knowing whether the event is real or not.
Within *The Spanish Tragedy*, the question of “real” death is addressed in Hieronimo’s play, and yet within the levels of metatheatricality at work in the staging, the theatrical audiences is confronted with artifice of these characters as actors. James Shapiro reminds us that real violence surrounded the theater in bear and bull baiting rings, prisons, and the corpses displayed around the city (103). “What distinguishes these executions from official ones,” Shapiro asks, “except that these take place in the theater?” (105). In Kyd’s play, the theatrical nature of the deaths expose similar theatrics in the actual event, and indeed the line between real death and a mimesis of death is utterly confounded.

In the final scene, the audience watches Don Andrea’s ghost watch the characters in the play watch Hieronimo’s play. Andrea seems pleased with the finale, but that implicitly asks the same question of the audience. As Don Andrea catalogues the carnage for us, he affirms that the nine murders and deaths “were spectacles to please my soul!” (4.5.12). He ends with his hopes for even more horrible punishments in Hell for the evil characters: “Place Don Lorenzo on Ixion’s wheel…Hang Balthazar about Chimera’s neck…Let [Pedringano] be dragged through boiling Acheron” (4.5.36-43). Once again we are presented with similar imagery of punishments, these taking place in the afterlife. None of the characters were allowed the opportunity to repent or redeem themselves as in a state execution, but Andrea’s vengeance hinges on torments that remain unseen. The final line is given to Revenge, a promise that although death has “ended their misery” the afterlife will “begin their endless tragedy” (4.5.48). The sentence of death that was handed out to Balthazar in the first scene has been fulfilled.

In one of the darker ironies of the period, a playwright who explored so insightfully the workings of state violence became its unwitting victim (Shapiro 102). Kyd was arrested in 1593 on order of the Privy Council, suspected of writing a series of xenophobic “libels” urging apprentices to attack the city’s foreign workers. In the attempt to find the papers in Kyd’s rooms, the investigators instead found supposedly atheistical tracts and “vile heretical conceits denying the deity of Jesus” (Braden 184). As atheism was a serious capital offense, Kyd was immediately arrested despite his protestations that the papers were Marlowe’s. In a letter written in his own defense, he denies the charge of atheism as “a deadly thing which I was undeserved charged withal” (qtd. in Braden 185), claiming the papers had been shuffled in with his own papers when he and Marlowe were sharing a room in 1591. His life imitated his art in the end. His position mirrors that of Alexandro, the innocent man accused of a crime and nearly tortured
and killed in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Unlike Alexandro, however, Kyd did not receive a last-minute reprieve. Marlowe was stabbed to death in a tavern brawl before he was able to appear before the council. Kyd’s interrogation seems to have included the use of torture while he was imprisoned at Bridewell, but he was ultimately freed due to lack of evidence. He spent the last year of his life in abject poverty and died in August of 1593. His play, an examination of authorized state violence, was being performed simultaneous to its author’s victimization at the hands of that same institution.

“When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good”: 
*The Revenger’s Tragedy* and the Performance of Death

Nearly twenty years after *The Spanish Tragedy* was initially performed, Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* took to the stage to explore similar themes. There is evidence that *The Spanish Tragedy* was still fairly popular and was still being performed on the Jacobean stage, yet in many ways Middleton reacts to and scrutinizes the precepts of Kyd’s tragedy and reinterprets them for a new audience. Middleton’s play is arguably the period’s most macabre work, and like Kyd’s it represents and parodies the various workings of the state. *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, however, takes the parodying to an extreme. It invokes elements of execution specifically in its use of the corpse. The play is preoccupied with the corporeality of dead bodies, with Gloriana’s skull as the focal point for intricate and erotic attachment to earthly remains. Dead bodies in the play represent both the horrific and the ridiculous. In *Horrid Laughter*, Nicholas Brooke undertakes an analysis of tragedies that “exploit rather than silence the relation of tears to laughter” (Brooke 5). Much like Pedringano jesting until the moment of his death, the jokes and puns in Middleton’s play undercut the horror of the events. Vindice, in switching back and forth between tragic speeches and bawdy jokes, raises a sort of uncomfortable laughter because his humor is “the humor of the grinning skull, in marvelously bad taste” (Brooke 14).

The play begins with an extended *memento mori* exercise. Vindice, holding the skull of his dead lover Gloriana, begins eulogizing her and “sighing o’er death’s vizard” (1.1.49). He also takes the time in his first speech to swear his revenge on her murderer, the Duke, much like Don Andrea’s statement that Balthazar must die to pay for his crime of murder. Yet Gloriana’s skull occupies a strange place for Vindice; it is “perversely seductive” and the object of an extreme erotic obsession for him (Coddon 72). The way he carries it around, speaks to it, and
then dresses it up as a country lass to seduce the Duke, however, speaks to the “comic grotesque of the skeleton” (Spinrad 229). Jonathan Dollimore identifies Vindice’s facetiousness and mockery as a type of “subversive black camp…[that] celebrates the artificial and the delinquent; it delights in a play full of innuendo, perversity and subversion” (117). When Vindice, in disguise as Piato, speaks with Lussurioso he tells him he is a “bone-setter” (1.3.43). When Lussurioso asks him to clarify, he responds, “A bawd, my lord; one that sets bones together” (45). The joke is both figurative and literal; Vindice will become a “bone setter” soon enough, placing corpses around the stage and using skulls to commit murder. His disguise, like that of Pedringano, invokes the image of the executioner who hides his face, and his macabre humor allows us to witness his specific type of simultaneous humor and terror. Once his plan is in motion, Vindice seems incapable of telling the two apart. Throughout the play this tension is one of its driving forces:

The opposed possibilities of laughter and horror are both fully established. But paradoxically they hardly seem to be opposed: they are so closely allied that laughter becomes the only possible expression of the horror, not, in any possible sense, a relief. It is always of Vindice’s kind, horrified laughter, the cackle of skulls…Revulsion and fascination meet in a very nasty joking. (Brooke 24)

The Duke seems to be aware of the possibility for inappropriate laughter. At the trial of Junior Brother, he exclaims, “That which would seem treason in our lives / Is laughter when we’re dead” (1.2.7-8). His statement expresses the anxiety of a scandal becoming fodder for satire after his death. Yet Vindice realizes that laughter is the only appropriate reaction to the horrific situations he is confronted with, and especially the ones that he authors.

In Junior Brother’s rape trial, Middleton arranges the first major instance of comedy inappropriate to the seriousness of the situation. Junior Brother is convicted of rape and faces death, yet continually jokes and jests, much like Pedringano at the gallows. When the judge asks Junior Brother why he raped Antonio’s wife, he answers, “Why, flesh and blood, my lord; / What should move men unto a woman else?” (1.2.48-50). Lussurioso immediately advises his bother: “O do not jest thy doom…play not with thy death” (49,53). Junior Brother, however, does not heed the advice, and continues to mock the court proceedings. Nicholas Brooke sees a “dangerous defiance” in his jesting (15). As the judge again attempts to communicate the seriousness of the crime, Junior Brother responds with more humor and insolence: “Her beauty
was ordained to be my scaffold. / And yet, methinks I might be easier ‘essed— / My fault being
sport, let me but die in jest.” (1.2.64-6).

His banter does not serve him well, and Junior Brother is sent to prison to await his
sentence. Vindice tricks Lussurioso into almost killing the Duke and is placed in the same
prison. When Ambitioso and Supervacuo arrive with a warrant of death they believe will be for
Lussurioso, they explain that he is to die in seclusion:

Pray let him die as private as he may;
Do him that favour, for the gaping people
Will but trouble him at his prayers
And make him curse and swear, and so die black. (3.3.19-22)

The brothers, of course, want Lussurioso executed privately to ensure no one intervenes. Even
so, the idea that the condemned man should be kept calm and unruffled by the “gaping people” is
related to the expected behavior of the scaffold. A condemned man who is upset by a crowd
may not perform as expected, or may not have the desire or willingness to repent his sins. As a
Duke’s son, Lussorioso would not be expected to die in front of a crowd. However, the plan
backfires in a plot twist concerning which son of the Duke must suffer. Supervacuo and
Ambitioso planned to pardon Junior Brother, and send him a letter explaining that he would soon
be released. There is a mix up, however, and the jailers execute him instead of Lussurioso.
Junior Brother’s execution is once again parodic and contains echoes of Pedringano’s behavior at
the gallows. When faced with death, Junior makes no prayers, but instead curses: “Since I must /
through brothers’ perjury die, O let me venom / Their souls with curses” (3.4.76-8). Much like
Kyd, Middleton exposes the standard script of the early modern execution and subverts it by
having his condemned man not only jest, but actively work against the prescribed penitence and
contrition.

In a following scene, Ambitioso and Supervacuo are presented with a severed head
covered in cloth that they assume is Lussurioso’s. In *Horrid Laughter*, Nicholas Brooke refers to
the two brothers as a “comic duo,” playing scenes that verge on “camp comedy” (20). The scene
begins with a genuinely comic exchange between the brothers and the officer. Despite the
officer’s insistence that Brother Junior died cursing their names, they persist with maudlin
dramatics:

OFFICER. We could not woo him once to pray.
AMBITIOSO. He showed himself a gentleman in that, 
give him his due.

OFFICER. But in the stead of prayer, 
he drew forth oaths.

SUPERVACUO. Then he did pray, dear heart, 
Although you understood him not.

OFFICER. My lords, 
E’en at his last, with pardon be it spoke, 
He cursed you both.

SUPERVACUO. He cursed us? ‘las good soul. (3.6.45-51)

The scene reaches a comic climax as the very much alive Lussurioso enters, leaving the two 
brothers bewildered and dazed. The Officer then removes the cloth and uncovers Junior 
Brother’s head. The grotesque treatment of the body continues as Supervacuo stands 
“brandishing the head” (SD 3.6.77), chasing the officer around screaming “Villain, I’ll brain 
thee with it!” (77). In another comic inversion, the two are left to speak to the severed head of 
Junior Brother, much as Vindice directly addresses Gloriana’s skull. Their speech is not as 
grandiose or poetic as those of Vindice, but it conveys similar sentiments about the need to 
revenge a wrong. Yet whereas Vindice embraces and eulogizes his dead lover’s remains, the 
brothers are decidedly less ceremonial. It is interesting to note that both heads are treated as 
tools of a sort. The scene with the brothers comes directly after the scene in which Vindice 
poisons Gloriana’s skull to murder the Duke. Whereas Gloriana’s skull offers a poisonous 
“grave look,” Junior Brother’s head will be used to “brain” the officer. Both of the severed heads 
in The Revenger’s Tragedy are treated as weapons; they are not to be immediately buried or 
encrypted, but to continue to instigate and participate in the action and plot of the play.

No character dies without resurfacing. Antonio’s wife commits suicide by drinking 
poison, and her lifeless physical remains are re-presented for the audience (both onstage and 
off-stage) to view and discuss. “Draw nearer, lords, and be sad witnesses” (1.4.1), Antonio asks 
of us in his scene of affected and ostentatious grief. The Duke also resurfaces after his murder, 
dressed in Piato’s clothing and placed back on the stage. Death does not mean that the body is to 
be hidden away, but that it will come back in some form to serve a purpose. An early modern
The audience would have been used to seeing the remains of corpses, whether they be the body of a thief hanged in a gibbet as a warning or the heads of traitors displayed on London Bridge. The bodies in the play, like those displayed around London, are made to continue to signify because they are still of use. In Karin Coddon’s definition of the dead body, “the corpse is at once a thing, materially present yet marked by the absolute absence of subjectivity—and a no-thing, a signifier severed from its referent, its ‘owner’” (74). Yet in this play and in early modern London, the corpse never really loses its significance, only the referent changes. The heads and body parts on display in London were to serve as a deterrent; the body (and its significance) merely changes hands. Whereas a body once signified the person it belonged to, it would now signify the state, justice, punishment, and the law. The bodies in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* have a similarly complicated signification, at once a horrible *memento mori* and a ridiculous and grotesque comic symbol.

Although she lacks a body and therefore the elements of traditional sexual gratification, Gloriana can still use her sexuality to do harm. Yet it is no longer a sexuality that is possessed inherently in her physical remains, as it is Vindice who must layer signification onto the skull when it is masked and “dressed up in tires” (SD 3.2.43). The skull kills with a kiss, the “lips” representing a sort of *vagina dentata* (Coddon 76). Despite the fact that Gloriana is only a skull her kiss can kill, but it is Vindice who poisons the kiss in yet another appropriation of Gloriana’s remains. The skull of his dead lover, although he repeatedly speaks to it as if it were Gloriana, has become an extension of himself; no longer Gloriana, the skull is a tool for revenge, a remnant of a dead body that mutates into a murder weapon. For Vindice, however, “skulls and corpses have become the only reality for him: he creates them in order to mock them. But because he has made a skull live for him, life and death become hopelessly confused in his mind” (Spinrad 233). His dependence and obsession with dead flesh allows him to forget the life that once belonged to the skull. The great irony of the Duke’s murder is the use of Gloriana’s skull. She died because she refused to submit to his sexual overtures, and yet Vindice garishly paints her up and prostitutes her remains to avenge her and allow her to rest in peace.

**Finale: The Danse Macabre**

In images representing the *Danse Macabre*, or Dance of Death, grinning skeletons gleefully frolic in “grotesque good cheer” while their victims look on (Spinrad 214). The final scene of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is Vindice’s “final mockery: a parody of the Dance of Death.”
He and Hippolito impersonate masquers and dance towards the banquet table, ending their performance by stabbing Lussurioso. Such a stylized and theatrical murder is reminiscent of Hieronimo’s play in *The Spanish Tragedy*. A courtly entertainment is again subverted and used as a vehicle for vengeance in each play. The spectacle that is presumably for entertainment becomes a deadly dance culminating in a mass murder. The Jacobean spectacle, “situated as it is in a liminal position between the emblematic and mimetic—between theatricality and interpretation—undermines its own ostensible truth value by foregrounding the instability yet opacity of appearances” (Coddon 72). *The Revenger’s Tragedy* most definitely complicates those seemingly most obvious of all distinctions: that between life and death, between an animated being and a carcass.

For Vindice, his final act is so successful that he is left with no one to kill but himself. Antonio enters the scene, and seeing the murdered bodies of the Duke’s cruel sons at once exclaims, “Just is the law above” (5.3.90). Antonio suggests that if the men were killed by providence then he must applaud the deaths. Yet when Vindice admits that it was he who murdered the Duke, Antonio has him arrested and sentenced to death. Vindice is acutely aware of the irony, that although their enemies are all dead, “’Tis time to die, when we are ourselves our foes” (5.3.109). Phoebe Spinrad sees Vindice’s last lines, the equivalent of his last dying speech, spoken in the manner of an epilogue to a comedy (293), citing his smiling exit and rhyming verse:

> We have enough,
> I’faith, we’re well: our mother turned, our sister true,
> We die after a nest of dukes—adieu. (5.3.123-5)

Like Pedringano, Vindice goes to his execution boasting and almost gleeful. He, however, is fully aware of his impending death, and in that Middleton’s play is much different than Kyd’s. In many ways it is the more extreme and graphic. Instead of continually bringing up the dead, Middleton presents their corpse, or what is left of them, on the stage for the audience to see. In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the dead can adequately mimic life, and a sentient character like Vindice can deliberately march to his death with a smirk and a sneer.
The criminal body, as we have seen, has been used as a signifier by the state. In displaying the body, the power of the monarch and the justice system was cemented. The association between the deceased execution victim and the body politic is an important part of understanding early modern notions of identity and corporeality. The gallows performance of the condemned, and the remains (whether intact or in parts) displayed in and around the city of London, inspired and influenced playwrights. Yet in Stuart England another opportunity presented itself to view the body of the criminal: the anatomy theaters. A body’s use in an anatomy lesson was frequently the final chapter of a tragedy that began at the public gallows. In 1540, Henry VIII allowed the Barber-Surgeons’ Company access to four corpses of executed criminals each year, and in 1565 Elizabeth did the same for the College of Physicians. By 1583, Physicians’ Hall began hosting official anatomy lectures that could be attended with a special invitation, and the same practice soon followed at the Barbers-Surgeons’ Company. Initially, the public anatomies were held in the large hall of the company, and temporary seating was built to accommodate the growing number of spectators (Cregan 42). The gory spectacle that the viewers confronted was reminiscent of both public executions and the Jacobean theater.

Death was a public and socially performed process; whether it was witnessed during a public execution or in the Anatomy Theater of Barber-Surgeons, “the deceased human form was both ritualistically and publicly explored and explained” (Cregan 39). Jonathan Sawday sees in Stuart England the rise of a “culture of dissection” that extended not only to science, but also society and aesthetics, as the fragmentation of the dead body in anatomy theatres correlated to the desire to objectify and partition the world (2-3). Bodies are explored not only in execution narratives, as we have seen, but in drama as well. This culture of dissection was about acquiring
the knowledge of the *interior* mystery of the human body. “As anatomy became a greater part of London’s cultural life, plays—and revenge tragedies in particular—used their theatrical ability to reanimate supposedly dead flesh to explore questions of what made human bodies alive, feeling, and capable of action” (Zimmerman 66).

In 1636 Inigo Jones designed the official freestanding Anatomy Theater for the Barber-Surgeons’ Company that bore great resemblance to a playhouse and encouraged “festive” atmosphere (fig. 8). Links between Jones's anatomy theatre and indoor hall playhouse design are plentiful. Actors and anatomists played to similar audiences in similar venues. Like playhouses, anatomy theatres placed their performers, in this instance a cadaver and an anatomist, on a central raised platform surrounded by seating for spectators. The spectator’s proximity to the performance depended upon economic and social status. Commentary upon the anatomical demonstration was guided by a sort of “script” in the form of a published anatomy handbook (Billing 9).

The anatomists even utilized theatrical tropes to enhance the performance and impress the audience. The stewards prepared the body behind a curtain, keeping it in a type of “discovery space” until the moment the surgeon called it forth. Yet in this theater, “the death was real. The corpse of the executed criminal, the final actor, was eviscerated, flayed, and the flesh systematically removed from his or her bones” (Cregan 48). Lectures followed a set procedure, with a dissection held over three days: one day each for the visceral, muscular, and osteological lectures (Cregan 46). The lectures were held four times a year, undoubtedly occurring after the quarterly assizes but also creating the equivalent of an “anatomy season” that occurred at those times during the year that bodies were available. The body of the anatomical subject was at the center of a set of commercial relations that defined the body of the criminal as a consumerable object, inspiring John Taylor’s characterization of the bodies at the gallows as “dead commodities.”

If the anatomy theaters took cues from the theater, then the theater began to do the same. The bond between the Jacobean theater and anatomy lectures extend beyond the similar environments or viewing experiences. We have already discussed scenes that mimetically enact incidents of punishment and violation, and how that allowed for the audience to recall and judge the theater of punishment in early modern England. Similarly, in presenting lifeless flesh on the stage the theatrical audience could examine the body and all the ideological, theological, or
sexual connotations. This is especially pronounced in the use of “female” bodies. Although female characters were represented by male actors in the most obvious metatheatrical convention in these plays, this is compounded by the image of and representation of the dead woman. In *The Lady's Tragedy*, the dead woman becomes an erotic object. In *The Insatiate Countess*, the title character is executed on the stage as punishment for her dangerous sexuality. These plays depend on the use of a representation of death on the stage, and the body as a sexualized and eroticized object. Playwrights also included dead bodies to satisfy audience’s curiosity about anatomy, causes of death, and the role of the spirit or soul in relation to the dead body.

**The Dead Body and the Anima**

Lingering associations between the physical body and the soul or spirit were still prevalent in early modern England. The dead body was linked with the life of the individual. The state relied on this connection when displaying executed criminals to send a message about the consequences of criminal life. The exhibition of dead bodies had an appeal for early modern Londoners, as the corpses displayed around the city or in anatomy theaters offered a chance to explore the body or satisfy corporeal curiosity. This same desire is reflected in popular entertainments like the theater or cheap print. When corpses bleed in the presence of their murderer, for example, the dead body is suddenly imbued with a life force, an energy that allows it to act and communicate in a way that transcends death. Yet while anatomists worked to discourage this view, dramas often utilized and took advantage of this association between dead flesh and the animating spirit. As we have seen in sensationalist murder pamphlets, the corpse *could* have an effect over the living world. In Henry Goodecole’s *Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry*, recounting the murderous exploits of Elizabeth Evans and Thomas Sherwood, there is a striking example of a corpse holding power over the living. When Tom returns to view the body of Master Holt, his victim, his nose begins to bleed. The story suggests that the body of a dead person possesses the mysterious power to draw blood from the living. Although technically just a body, Holt’s corpse communicates and affects the living world in a very physical way. A corpse that bleeds in the presence of its murderer again seems to suggest that although the soul or spirit has fled the mortal remains, there is something inherent within the flesh that is almost animate.

First published in England in 1545, Andreas Vesalius’ *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica* includes illustrations of studies of the body in various stages of dissection. Yet whether the body
exposes muscles, organs, or bones and is obviously dead, it is presented in naturalistic stances, often in a pleasant outdoor scene (fig. 9). The trope of presenting anatomical subjects as seemingly alive creates the effect that the cadaver is complicit in the act of dissection. The Crying Murder, the pamphlet detailing the mutilation, dismembering, and pickling of a man, hints at anatomical dissection. On the woodcut image that accompanies the tale, the body of the victim is being disemboweled and we see a crude representation of his intestines spilling out of his torso (fig. 4). Much like Vesalius’ musclemen figures, the victim’s body is seemingly animated and alive, even locomotive, despite the violent butchery done to the corpse.

Such bodies represented in an anatomy text are much like the body that is placed on the scaffold. Both are on display, the criminal body on the scaffold signifying the state’s power and the anatomized figure open and exposed for view. Both hold a certain fascination for the spectator, as they allow for the examination of the human form. Both occupy a liminal space between death and life. The condemned man or woman, once brought to the place of execution, was on the threshold of death and both physically and ideologically did not possess independent control over their own body once they were condemned, which makes them a sort of “dead man walking.” The representations of anatomized figures are usually standing or walking as though they were alive, but that condition would obviously be impossible (fig. 9).

Anatomy was still a new science, and with any new breakthrough there is a period of transition between the old views and the new. The dissections performed in anatomy theaters sought to explore inner truths about the workings of the human body. This desire to know what is inside of another person, in body and in mind, is a staple of Jacobean drama. Even the authors of execution narratives explored interior truth, often citing the countenance of the condemned person as evidence of their penitence and contrition. The stage already contained graphic representations of death and dismemberment in plays like Titus Andronicus, The Spanish Tragedy, and The Revenger’s Tragedy, but theatrical violations of the body “grew more common—and often bolder—as the practice of dissection gradually gained acceptance within the English medical community” (Nunn 4). Stuart theater especially relishes blood and gore, mirroring both the process of the public execution and the influence of anatomy theaters.

Cadavers carried a complicated signification. All cadavers collected for dissection were executed criminals, and their use reveals a “willingness to find public uses for the bodies that, when alive, had been considered worthy only of scorn and ostracism” (Nunn 64). The
desecration of the body was a further punishment, but the anatomy theaters were not built to complete such a task and did not wish to be associated with a form of further punishment. They claimed, rather, to dissect bodies in the name of science, the contradiction being that this new science was ultimately associated with scenes of punishment. Although the anatomy theaters sought to distance themselves from this association, anatomists relied on the corpse’s criminal background to legitimize its dissection (Nunn 64). Corpses of criminals were the only source of cadavers. No matter how much scientific knowledge can be gained by dissection, it was still a messy affair that smacked of desecrating the flesh. It was easier for people to know that the body was merely that of a criminal, a person so unlawful that they were put to death by the state for their crimes.

Representations of the Female Corpse

The anatomized female is almost always shown in terms of her gender. While the male is predominantly shown as an animated corpse flayed to various degrees in order to expose muscular or skeletal systems, when a female body was anatomized, it was principally to examine the organs of generation (Cregan 58). The frontispiece of Vesalius’ *De Corporis humani fabrica*, with the female figure lying on the table with her internal sexual organs exposed, offers an example of this (fig. 10). The woman being dissected is positioned “with her genitals facing the reader, her legs parted, her breasts bare, and in a position that invites entry (Cregan 55). Within the rowdy and crowded theater, Vesalius places his hand on the woman’s abdomen to explain his lesson, which this day is obviously about the generative parts of women. Sawday has stated that the female cadaver gazes at Vesalius in a manner that suggests that she “desires dissection” (123). Even a dead female is sexually charged and eroticized, open for the view of the mostly male spectators.

In London, at the Barber-Surgeons’ lectures, conceptions of masculinity and femininity were “disseminated, exhorted in pedagogic rhetoric, visually framed by the illustrations embedded in anatomical texts, and meditated through the example on the table” (Cregan 40). In an anonymous and brief 1559 anatomy treatise, *Interiorum corporis humani partium viva delineatio, or The anatomy of the inward parts of man*, we are presented with yet another construction of male and female anatomy. On the first page, a man and a woman sit side by side on a bench almost completely naked (fig. 11). The woman holds a sign that reads, “know thyself,” and indeed in the next image we are presented with the exposed interior organs of both
the man and the woman (fig. 12). The two exhibit the organs and inner workings of their bodies, and we can see the lungs, heart, stomach, and other inner workings, but it is the sexual organs that are the focus. The piece of cloth draped over the figures’ laps seems almost ridiculous considering the interior view of the sexual organs. If we look closely at the woman’s body, we can see her womb and other sexual organs clearly and notice that the anatomized woman is pregnant, the cross-section of her organs exposing the mystery of sexuality, the womb and reproduction (fig. 13). Furthermore, the figures in these illustrations carry the hint of life with them, unlike the very dead woman on the frontispiece of Vesalius. Still, the anatomy texts and the illustrations that they provide construct a notion of gender and sexuality that could be displayed in the anatomy theaters.

Such constructions of gender and sexuality were also carried out in the early modern theater. The playgoer’s curiosity about the inner workings of the body was exploited for both the effect of horror and to invoke the prevalent curiosity concerning the body and its significance. Some of the more gory tragedies use the dead body to invite spectators to “peer into a character’s flesh, offering up the actor’s body so that the audience might examining the inner reaches of a character to judge his true nature” (Zimmerman 3). Female character’s deaths are almost always coupled with a commentary on her chastity. In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, for example, Antonio’s wife and Gloriana commit suicide after unwanted sexual advances, and in *The Lady’s Tragedy* the Lady stabs herself when told she must marry the Tyrant. The early Stuart stage’s “dead” “female” bodies can serve as symbols of virtue which often become “stage properties for the male characters who use them in enacting their individual schemes” (Nunn 87). In *The Insatiate Countess*, Isabella is executed for using her sexuality to manipulate Don Sago into killing her former lovers. Her onstage beheading allows for the possibility that a woman’s sexuality is not only something that should be examined or manipulated, but that it can be destructive and deadly.

“The house is hers; the soul is but a tenant”:

**The Corpse, Identity, and Eroticization in *The Lady’s Tragedy***

There is an inherent metatheatricality to the early modern theater, with all performances occurring in the middle of the day, many on a stage open to the elements with little or no scenery, performed by an all-male cast. Considering that any good tragedy featured plenty of corpses, this adds yet another metatheatrical layer. Severed body parts and corpses, although
unable to move themselves, still find their way back to the stage to take part in the action. This situation is most complex with the death of a female character on the stage. The boy actor must portray a female and must portray a corpse, called upon to “represent the unrepresentable on several levels, in what might be called the consummate instance of metatheatricality” (Zimmerman 93). If we add to this the “erotic charge of gender ambiguity,” then the ‘femaleness’ and ‘deadness’ of the actor are simultaneously eroticized, or at least have the potential to become erotic (93-4). This situation is extraordinarily and vividly made manifest in The Lady’s Tragedy. Through the use of the Lady’s body, and later even her spirit or ghost, the female form becomes a “dead commodity” much like the executed criminals who were sent to the anatomy theaters. Her corpse is manipulated and closely examined in front of the theatrical audience in much the same fashion as an anatomy lecture, yet the added figure of her ghost complicates the scientific notion of the body as a completely dead and inactive thing that can be used for study. The Lady’s Tragedy focuses on “the transgressive desires of protagonists who insist on the re/generative potential of the corpse” (Zimmerman 90), and thereby questions the signification of a “dead” body.

In life, the Lady is willing to die to avoid marrying the Tyrant. She begs Govianus to end her suffering, but as he is incapable of killing her, she then stabs herself in the third act. The Lady believes that death will protect her from the sexual advances of the Tyrant, but this is not the case. After her death, she seems just as desirable to the Tyrant, who steals her body from her tomb and develops a necrophilic attachment to her corpse. He fetishizes her dead body, and nearly anything else having to do with the Lady. As he enters the tomb, he exclaims that “The monument woos me: I must run and kiss it” (4.4.9). When the Tyrant forces his way into the Lady’s tomb, it is yet another representation of sexual violation, a forcible entry into the Lady’s chamber for a specific erotic purpose. Upon seeing her corpse, he claims that “she’s only pale” (64) and removes her body. The first time we see the Lady’s corpse on the stage, she is treated as a piece of property and a site of erotic fascination. Of course, grave-robbing is a form of sacrilege, and the Tyrant, as Zimmerman has stated, uses her dead body to create an idol. He worships the body of the Lady, and even finds a precedent for his behavior in the story of Herod:

whose affection

Pursued a virgin’s love, as I did thine.

Who for the hate she showed him killed herself…
Yet he preserved her body dead in honey,
And kept her long after her funeral. (4.3.116-21)

Zimmerman aligns the Tyrant with Herod, who worshipped the corpse of the dead Mariamne for seven years. The corporeality of the Lady offers the Tyrant a way to possess her, yet in the following scene, when Govianus enters to mourn his love, the Lady reappears as a ghost. The Lady’s body, we know, was just carried off stage by the Tyrant, yet her presence only a few moments later highlights the metatheatricality of the theater and introduces the notion of the Lady’s body and her spirit as entities that are both separate and identical.

There is an extraordinary ideological confusion between the Lady’s Ghost and her corpse. The ghost represents her spirit or her soul, and therefore her body is a mere lifeless shell. When referring to her mortal remains, although they are physically divided, the Lady’s Ghost does not say that her body is gone, but rather “I am not here” (4.5.40). She killed herself to escape the Tyrant, yet the Lady is desperate to have her corpse back in the tomb and still seems to fear rape. The fact that he possesses her body in death disturbs her greatly and even affects her spirit. Yet it seems that although she committed suicide, she exists as a spirit in some heavenly realm. The stage directions state that her ghost enters amidst “a great white light” and is dressed “all in white” (SD 4.5.42). When the Lady explains that she has come to tell him of the wrongs that have been committed against her, Govianus rightly exclaims that the Lady is “above the injuries of blood” (4.5.55). She insists, however, that because her body has been robbed and (possibly sexually) violated, “the peace that death allows me is not mine” (4.5.60). She insists that the physical violation of her body has some bearing on the status of her everlasting soul. Her description of the Tyrant’s behavior with her corpse is indeed distressing:

In his own private chamber. There he woos me
And plies his suit to me with as serious pains
As if the short flame of mortality
Were lighted up again in my cold breast,
Folds me within his arms and often sets
A sinful kiss upon my senseless lip. (4.5.66-72)

The Tyrant obviously has a necrophilic and disturbing attachment to the Lady’s corpse, and the Lady hints that he has already sexually violated the body in some fashion. The Lady’s own
behavior affects Govianus and the Tyrant in their desire to possess her body: she makes it
desirable by establishing her corpse as a trophy. She denies the Tyrant access to her body, and
he becomes so desperate for her that he is willing to become a grave robber to possess her
physical form. Similarly, Govianus enacts his revenge on the Tyrant by trying to possess the
Lady’s spiritual form and allow her ghost to rest in peace.

The combined character of the Lady / Lady’s ghost is a trifecta of metatheatrical
representation; a boy actor portraying a female, a live actor portraying a corpse, and a corporeal
body portraying a spirit. We might assume that one boy actor played the Lady and her Ghost,
but the Lady’s body in the painting scene cannot be the same actor. In the scene, the corpse is
presented on the stage and cosmeticized in front of the audience, calling attention to the many
layers of artifice in the figures multiple layers of significance: the male actor as female, the
living actor as corpse. The Tyrant has propped up her body in a chair, and has Govianus (in
disguise) paint her face to resemble a life-like appearance. Govianus is instructed to “force
beauty on yon lady’s face, / Though death sit frowning on ‘t (5.2.99-101). Much like Vindice,
Govianus must “redeem the Lady’s corpse by desecrating it” (Zimmerman 99). He paints the
Lady’s face as the Tyrant commands, but he also poisons her lips. As he finishes the Tyrant,
overcome by her beauty, claims:

O, she lives again!
She’ll presently speak to me. Keep her up,
I’ll have her swoon no more: there’s treachery in ‘t
Does she not feel warm to thee? (104-7).

His insistence on her inner life force, even to the point of warm skin, is indicative of his
depravity, but is also confuses the statuses of living and dead. The Lady’s corpse is displayed on
the stage and invites inspection and assessment, much like a body in an anatomy theater. Of
course, the statement that she feels warm is another instance of metatheater. Thus this scene
calls attention to the artifice of the female who is played by a male and of the dead body
portrayed by a live body. When the Lady’s Ghost enters the scene, this again calls attention to
the artifice of the theater; now there are two bodies signifying the Lady on one stage. The actor
who played the Lady when she was alive most likely would play her Ghost, which means that the
body in the chair was not actually the actor whom we have previously seen playing the Lady.
Again the view of the “real” Lady calls upon the audience to look closely at her corpse. How an
early modern theatrical production would signify death is not known. The male actor portraying the Lady’s corpse may have used face paint to signify his female-ness, and possibly also used white paint to signify death. Many people in the audience would have seen actual dead bodies after hangings or in anatomy theaters. The reasons for featuring dead bodies on the stage could very well be to invoke sensationalism.

As the Tyrant dies, the Lady’s ghost enters “dressed in the same form as her body in the chair” (SD 5.2.143), meaning that her spirit is now clad in a black dress. The black connects the ghost to the earlier body of the Lady in mourning, and the depraved and violated body that the Tyrant created. This signals a reunification of the spirit and the body, but it also “implies the ghost in the wanton and unnatural degradation of the now murderous corpse” (Zimmerman 104). When Govianus is restored as King, he has the Lady’s body propped up next to him on the throne and crowned in yet another bizarre ritual. As the Lady’s ghost reappears next to the body and follows it to the tomb, we understand that the dead body and the soul will come together.

Death and gender both represent theatrical artifice in early modern theater, but the signification of death in The Lady’s Tragedy is difficult to visualize. The line between male and female is crossed just as is the line between life and death, and physical and spiritual. In a time when the bodies of criminals were displayed and investigated, the view of the corpse as retaining some sort of animation, even if it is a ghost that follows the corpse around, reflects the popular beliefs concerning the body as still possessing some sort of influence over the world of the living. Middleton, of course, is playing with the notions of gender and corporeality, but in doing so explores the ways in which different characters view the body and how these opinions affect their actions. For the Tyrant, “the soul is but a tenant” (5.2.3) in the body, and therefore he should be able to possess it in full.

**The Insatiable Countess: Female Sexuality and Execution**

*The Insatiate Countess* features one of the more spectacular executions on the stage. Punished for her “insatiate lust” that is “sire still to murder” (4.2.75), Isabella’s execution again offers a mimesis of state punishment like those we have seen in chapter two. Her death, however, not only offers comparisons to plays involving onstage execution, but also to the onstage representations of femininity and the inherent sexuality of women. Her behavior on the scaffold betrays certain notions about women and death, and death and sexuality. Isabella is killed as a result of her voracious and compulsive sexuality. She opens the play in mourning for
her husband, and over the course of the play acquires four lovers. The dangers of female sexuality and female agency come together in the execution scene, in which Isabella performs her final lines in a superficially penitent fashion, yet retains an element of subversive agency in the scenes leading up to her death.

Don Sago murders Rogero for Isabella in exchange for love and sex, yet he is pardoned because it was she who tempted him to kill for her. Don Sago gives an impassioned scaffold speech, in which he confesses, shows repentance (with great pathos), and is pardoned at the scaffold because he plays his part so well as the condemned man. The Duke of Medina, overseeing the trial, asks Don Sago if he can “repent this heinous act / And learn to loathe that killing cockatrice?” (5.1.14-15). Don Sago, of course, is more than willing to play his part and condemn Isabella even further. In his scaffold speech, he confesses to murdering Rogero and addresses his corpse:

DON SAGO. O cease to weep in blood, or teach me too.
   The bubbling wounds do murmur for revenge.
   This is the end of lust, where men may see
   Murder’s shadow of adultery,
   And follows it to death.

MEDINA. But, hopeful lord, we do commiserate
   Thy bewitched fortunes, a free pardon give
   On this thy true and noble penitence. (5.1.23-30)

Medina offers Don Sago a way to escape his death sentence, and that is simply to blame Isabella for bewitching him with her feminine wiles. Rogero’s body contains “bubbling wounds” that suggest the bleeding corpse is indicating its murderer. His full pardon is problematic, as the entire fault is placed on Isabella.

As Isabella enters in the next scene, she is confronted with the scaffold and her behavior is not unlike Pedringano’s in The Spanish Tragedy. She begins to joke with the Cardinal, telling him, “I sent today to my physician, / And as he says, he finds no sign of death” (5.1.71-2). The Cardinal, in charge of saving her soul, is obviously upset by her behavior. “Good madam, do not jest away your soul” (73) he insists, in a line reminiscent of Pedringano, who would “jest himself to death” (ST 3.5.15) and Junior Brother, who would “jest [his] doom” (RT 1.2.19). Isabella does not enter as repentant as Don Sago. She merely gives the Cardinal money “for the poor,” but he
says it is “but a branch of charity, / an ostentation or a liberal pride” (5.1.93). Isabella proves a manipulative execution victim. We find that she sent Medina twenty thousand pounds to assure her pardon (5.1.48) as a bribe, and then she bribes the cardinal. She then tries flattery, telling Medina to “show thy creator’s image” and calls him “Father of mercy” (5.1.138-9). When Medina refuses, she immediately curses him as the “teacher of the Furies’ cruelty” (143).

Isabella’s conduct does shift after Roberto enters and redeems her with his oaths of continuing love and forgiveness. Yet as Margaret Owens has noted, her expressions of repentance “are interspersed with less-than-humble references to her physical charms” (134). When the executioner asks her to tie up her hair, she cannot do so without commenting on its beauty:

O these golden nets
That have ensnared so many wanton youths,
No one but had been held a thread of life
And superstitiously depended on. (5.2.201-4)

Despite her apparent penitence, Isabella cannot resist invoking her physical charms, the very thing that she used to seduce so many men. Owens calls this moment evidence of her “ambiguous characterization,” evidence of “an unwillingness to allow an adulteress to appear to transcend her iniquity” (134). Isabella’s vanity and carnality are expressed in this “unstable mode of penitence,” therefore condemning Isabella to the category of whore (Owens 134). In the play, murder can be forgiven, but aggressive female sexuality cannot.

Isabella’s conduct on the scaffold is at odds with the ideal behavior of the condemned man or woman. She invokes her femininity and sexuality, refuses to repent, bribes, flatters, and curses before finally acquiescing to her fate. Lucinda Becker sees death in the early modern period as a gendered experience, citing the *ars morendi* manuals on how to die well. These books explain the fundamentals of a good death, yet there is a disparity between “the prerequisites of a good death and the continuing requirements of femininity” (43). People were supposed to face death with bravery and courage, treating it as a final battle, yet this stands in direct contrast to popular notions of feminine weakness and passivity. Isabella dies bravely, and for the majority of her death scene is anything but weak and passive.
Canberry Bess and Isabella

In the first chapter, I analyzed the last speech of Thomas Sherwood, or Country Tom, as indicative the last words spoken at an early modern execution. Yet it is the figure of Elizabeth Evans, or Canberry Bess, that is of more interest to this chapter. A prostitute accused of assisting in the murder of her clients, her situation holds a similar place as Isabella in the matrix of sex and violence. In *Heaven’s Speedy Hue and Cry sent after Lust and Murder*, Henry Goodcole seems at a loss to make sense of Bess and her role in the murders that lead to her execution. Even though her confederate Thomas Sherwood actually committed the crimes of beating to death three men, Bess presents an even more disturbing person for Goodcole and nearly every other early modern man. Traditional female characteristics, such as passivity and weakness that were supposedly “inherent” to all women, are violently overturned in Bess’ tale, and Goodcole awkwardly “struggles to reconcile Evan’s feminine body with her violent crimes” (Nunn 92). At one point in the narrative, Bess is “tempted unto folly” by Tom, yet in the preface she plays a more active role, seizing on men and using her “deceitful smiles” to lead them to slaughter “like a decoy duck”(A1v). Hillary Nunn has aligned the tale of Canberry Bess with that of the Duchess in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. Indeed the Duchess takes independent action and in many ways defies sexual propriety by secretly marrying after her husband dies. Although the comparison is interesting and brings up many strong parallels, I am more inclined to view Bess in relation to Isabella from *The Insatiate Countess*. Both women are sexual creatures, both use their sexuality to inflict various degrees of harm, and both have strikingly similar views critiquing the status of criminal women in male-dominated societies.

In writing of the two criminals’ confessions, Goodcole seems confused that Bess’ confession is not perfectly in alignment with Tom’s, and that they “should be so contradictory to one another” (C3v). Whereas Tom is initially presented as a violent man who may have corrupted Bess, Goodcole seems unsure about her role in the crimes. He emphasizes that “a woman was she that died, for whose weak and timorous sex’s sake, something must be allowed tolerable” (C3v). When Goodcole tells us of Tom’s final speech, and his warning to “beware of Whores,” the author goes into great detail about his penitent behavior and stirring advice to the spectators. Goodcole engages with Tom and steers the reader to a particular interpretation of the words he speaks. His confession was typical of the time and, according to Goodcole, quite
appropriate and satisfying. For Evans, however, Goodcole writes less than half of what he wrote for Tom, and seems mystified by what she says:

Yet something in her I found worthy of note at the time of her confession, a perfect hate and exclamation against all Thieves, which caused her destruction. And furthermore in sign of her detestation of such unholy courses proceeded from her mouth a most serious request unto all then present assembled, advising all poor simple women to marry an honest man…rather than a lewd man or a Thief, rendering the reason of such her earnest admonition, because an honest man may make an evil woman turn from her evil ways, but it was hard for an evil man to make a wicked woman good. (C3v)

Her “perfect hate” seems to puzzle Goodcole, and he offers no interpretation of her words, only mustering that it was “worthy of note” (C3v). Her advice to women considering marriage does not seem to contain an apology, and Bess does not weep at the scaffold, she curses. In her speech, Evans exposes the problematic place of a woman in relation to a man, reminding her audience that it is through men that women’s virtue is molded (Nunn 98). Goodcole offers little commentary on Evans’ speech because she does not say anything truly penitent that he can praise, nor does she say anything ostensibly radical or blasphemous. He provides us with almost no information about her behavior at the end of her life, and seems to cut short his observations about her speech, concluding that she spoke “diverse other admonitions to the wonder of the standers by, considering what a life she had lived in” (C3v). The authors of pamphlets tend to silence or suppress anything potentially troubling, but the works can be unintentionally transgressive. Goodcole and other authors were recording an event that may have been witnessed by his readers, and his credibility was based on recounting facts in an honest and accurate manner. His silence about Bess’ final words speaks to Goodcole’s resistance to printing anything truly subversive, yet that silence hints that Bess may have indeed spoken out against the social or ideological values Goodcole elsewhere uplifts.

Isabella also is punished for her deadly sexuality. Like Bess, she was never active in the murders, but was guilty of inspiring or facilitating them. Like Bess, her speech of repentance showcases the ways in which men were to be held accountable for women’s vices. Although she calls herself “loathed,” her speech continues to reveal the implicit fault of men. She says to Roberto at her death:
Had I with you enjoyed the lawful pleasure
To which belongs not fear nor public shame
I might have lived in honour, died in fame. (5.1.185-7)

The final moments of Isabella’s life seem at odds with everything that came before. After cursing Medina and defying all propriety and scripted roles, all Robert has to do is forgive her and she is suddenly willing to die, and “fall to rise” above her sexual crimes.

As a noblewoman, Isabella is executed by beheading. The stage direction is merely “Isabella is executed” (SD 5.1.224). Staging a hanging is much simpler than representing an execution. The actors could have put forth an emblematic or anti-naturalistic action, or had some sort of rudimentary special effects. Isabella may have been facing away from the audience with her head out of view. She then could have been “beheaded” with the audience seeing only the axe falling and her body go limp. After her death, a curtain is pulled over the scaffold to hide her body from view in the next scene. There is no display of her corpse, it is merely covered up and hidden from view, and will receive a funeral.

Canberry Bess, however, is a poor, lower-class woman whose body suffers a much more grim fate. She is iconic of the nexus of sex, criminality, death, and display (Cregan 40). The pamphlet recounting her story as a prostitute and accessory to murder insists on her flawed moral nature, and although she dies appropriately, is not saved from her fate as a cadaver at Barber-Surgeons’ anatomy theater. Goodcole tells us that Evans supposedly died “very penitent, and after her execution was conveyed to Barber-Surgeons’ Hall for a skeleton, having her bones reserved in a perfect form” (C3r). Canberry Bess becomes an emblem of feminine corruption, and after her dissection she was made into a permanent display in the hall. The rhetoric surrounding her sinful life and deserved death and subsequent anatomization casts her fate as a just end to a sinful career. Goodcole’s pamphlet concludes with yet another announcement, almost like an advertisement, to see for ourselves that the “devilish allurer to sin and confusion was dissected and her dried carcass or skeleton of bones and gristles is reserved, in proportion to be seen in Barber-Surgeons’ Hall” (C4r).
CHAPTER 4

MEASURE FOR MEASURE: DISRUPTED RITUAL AND
JAMES I’s THEATER OF LEADERSHIP

But unto one fault is all the common people of this Kingdome subject, as well burgh as
land; which is, to judge and speak rashly of their Prince…. For remedy whereof (besides
the execution of Laws that are to be used against unreverent speakers) I know no better
mean, then so to rule, as may justly stop their mouths from all such idle unreverent
speeches.

–James I, Basilicon Doron

In 1581, Master of Revels Edmund Tilney was commissioned to become not only the
purveyor of royal entertainment, but also the official state censor of dramatic works. That same
year, Parliament passed “An Act Against Seditious Words and Rumors Uttered Against the
Queen’s Most Excellent Majesty” (Clare 175). In a time of increasing print circulation, the state
was becoming more and more sensitive to the power of the written and spoken word. The
censorship of plays deemed slanderous or transgressive in any way was common. Playwrights
were asked to omit lines, speeches, or even entire scenes from production or printing.
Shakespeare’s plays have often been aligned with contemporaneous political events or ideas, but
such inspiration could be dangerous. If playwrights like Shakespeare were indeed aware of the
imminent review of their work by the Master of Revels, then this would have no doubt
influenced their writing. Even so, Measure for Measure remains an invective play about
contemporary politics and the importance of theatricality in the role of the monarch and his
power to punish offenders. The fact that the Duke seems most intolerant of crimes of speech
betrays his associations with James I and the staging of power and the British body politic.

Measure for Measure, a play extremely aware of the problems of slanderous speech, has
a certain “blasting and scandalous breath” (5.1.122) of its own. Written within the first full year
of James I’s reign, the play contains a remarkable commentary on the new king and the political
situation of late 1603. His awareness and sensitivity to slander and the defamation of his
character was extremely heightened, even before his ascension to the throne of England. In his
1599 treatise on ruling, Basilicon Doron, he writes that the one problem with all subjects is their
tendency to “judge and speak rashly of their King” (31). In tracing the slandering or criticizing
of rulers and the rulers’ attempts to prevent or control that criticism, we can come closer to

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understanding the situation of writing and performance in early modern England. The Duke’s role in Measure for Measure cleverly reflects James and his actions in the Main Plot trials of late 1603, essentially exposing the theatricality of kingship and radically demystifying the workings of the state. In both the play and the Main Plot execution, the rulers actively and knowingly stage a Foucauldian theater of punishment. This idea of punishment as theater is supposed to create order and allow the ruler to display his power, yet in both instances the rulers undercut and expose their role in the theatrical demonstration of authority. The spectacle of execution is disrupted when the mass-pardoning suddenly turn what might have been a tragedy into a comedy, and in doing so draws attention to the way in which the state uses the public staging of the body (both criminal and royal), the threat of death, and the possibility of pardon as a tool for social control and manipulation.

In the summer of 1603, the then-new king of England, James I, had already arrested a group of men in relation to two plots to overthrow him. The larger plot, known as the “Main Plot,” set out to place Arabella Stuart on the throne in place of James, and make peace with Spain. Many officials, including Sir Walter Ralegh, were supposedly involved in the planned coup. The smaller, and in many ways more radical and bizarre “Bye Plot” was carried out by two Catholic priests, who planned to kidnap James and convince him to adopt a kinder policy towards Catholics. The events of these trials, wrapped up in false accusations, courtroom drama, pleas for mercy, confusing executions, and unexpected pardons, captivated the city of London. Six months after this spectacle, Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure opened in theaters, with those events still fresh in everyone’s mind. By placing the play, which was singularly about slander and the nature of spoken words as defamation, into a socio-political context, parallels between actual events and the events of the play become clear. In Measure for Measure, Shakespeare is able to derive inspiration from a recent political event and re-imagine it on a stage, and allowing the audience to re-examine the event as spectators in a different sort of theater. In a play about slander, judgment, and the role of theatricality in leadership, the similarities between the Duke and James, and between Lucio and Sir Walter Ralegh, come together in the climactic final scene that reflects the dramatic pardons and spectacular denouement of the Main Plot trials.
Courtroom Drama and The “Execution” of the Main Plotters

Sir Walter Ralegh and three other men, Sir Griffin Markham, Lord Grey, and Lord Cobham, were arrested for treason in late 1603 and charged with an attempt to overthrow the king. The plot involved a payment of 160,000 crowns from Spain to assist in the plan to oust James. At the time, Ralegh was not a popular man—he openly hated Essex, who had become a sort of hero, was a possible atheist, and represented the old reign of Elizabeth. On his way to the Tower in November 1603, crowds were said to have jeered him (Bernthal 247). The theaters had been closed from plague for months, and the trial captivated the imagination of London’s citizens. Although he was the most famous man accused of treason, most historians now agree that his involvement in the plot was most likely non-existent. The questionable evidence that supposedly proved Ralegh’s guilt corroborates this assumption. Lord Cobham, as a fellow conspirator, accused Ralegh of involvement and gave the state pretext for Ralegh’s arrest in a desperate effort to save himself. In a letter, and during questioning, Cobham claimed that Ralegh had knowledge of the Bye plot and took bribes from Spain. According to his account, Cobham claimed that Ralegh had forced him to go see Phillip III of Spain in order to borrow money to overthrow James and even claimed Ralegh instigated the plot (Lee 272). Cobham’s participation in the plot was readily apparent, but evidence of Ralegh’s involvement was merely a testimony from a known traitor.

In this way, Ralegh was “slandered” by the evidence brought against him by Cobham. Defamation was a powerful political force, yet the evidence presented by Cobham was not altogether reliable. His story changed several times over the course of the trial and he was not a well-liked man at court. The question remains as to why the court accepted such a suspicious tale as the most important, and indeed only evidence against Ralegh. It was as if the state would accept the uses of slander if and when it suited their needs. But can authority or the state commit “slander” if they create the legal definition? Such circumstantial and unreliable evidence would have usually ended in an acquittal, but the trial was problematic and wrapped up in James’ own preoccupation with Ralegh and with slanderous speeches. Ralegh demanded that Cobham, his accuser, be brought to his hearing so that Ralegh might question him. The judges, however, denied him this right, even though the law stated that “no man shall be condemned of treason unless he be accused by two lawful men” (qtd. in Lee 278). The trial proceeded, but Raleigh’s quick tongue and famous wit did little to persuade the judges. His supposed conspirators were
all condemned to death. In the courtroom, Ralegh heard his guilty verdict, and the sentence for treason: “to be hanged, cut down alive, your members to be cut off and cast into the fire, your bowels burnt before you, your head smitten off, and your body quartered and divided at the king’s will” (qtd. in Kendall 33).

In a letter to his friends written from the Tower on August 13th, the day after the famously vitriolic prosecutor Sir Edward Coke examined him, Ralegh refutes his accuser, Lord Cobham, and seems aware of the absurd trial. He refers to himself as a man “who has lost my estate and the King’s favor upon one man’s word” (253). One man’s word was enough for the court to convict Ralegh, and the judges delivered a death sentence. In a dramatic shift in public opinion, however, the people rallied around Ralegh. Even with the amount of evidence the state produced, the case was comprehensively seen as the invention that it was. Popular opinion shifted, and he was suddenly painted as an innocent man, a victim of the corrupt court. James was taken aback by this shift and his role in inadvertently creating a public hero. This placed James in a difficult position. He could not execute Ralegh because it would risk besmirching the king’s image. In the execution of the Bye Plotters, James had been criticized for his harshness. James had taken the sentence for treason quite literally, it would seem. One contemporary account states that the executions of the two priests “were very bloodily handled; for they were cut down alive” (qtd in Lee 288). Yet to simply set Ralegh free would be to admit he and his associates had made a mistake and bent the law to suit their purposes. An execution date of December 7th had been set for Cobham, Markham, and Grey, and Ralegh’s death warrant had been written up, although left unsigned by the king. As Craig Bernthal speculates, James was probably pretending to be perplexed about whether he should extend mercy, but had already decided to pardon the offenders in an attempt to embody both justice and mercy and recuperate his reputation (252).

The drama of the Main Plot trials reached its carefully planned climax on the execution day. The prisoners were first given a two-day stay of execution, but on December 9, 1603, the men were preparing to die. An excellent account of this cruel melodrama remains in the form of a letter from Dudley Carleton (reprinted in Lee 288-91). As Ralegh watched from his cell, Markham was brought to the Tower Yard in front of a crowd of London’s citizens. He openly complained that he was not ready for death because his preparations had been interrupted. The execution went as planned until Markham was about to be killed. Suddenly, a royal messenger
appeared to deliver news of a two hours’ respite from death so that Markham might prepare. He was removed to his cell, and Grey came out to the scaffold. He appeared calm and made a prayer and a speech. Once again, however, a messenger arrived with the news that the King had decided to change the order of execution at the last minute, and Grey was led away. Lord Cobham was brought out next, and likewise began to make his final speech. Abruptly, however, the sheriff brought out Markham and Grey, whom Cobham had thought dead. Amidst the confusion, another royal messenger arrived with a proclamation from the King. They were read a speech that apparently came directly from James. It started out with a litany of questions: “are not your offences heinous? Have you not been justly tried?” After each man had confessed that this was indeed the case, the messenger then read the last line of the letter: “See the mercy of your Prince, who himself hath sent hither a countermand, and hath given you your life!” (qtd. in Bernthal 253). All three had been pardoned, and Ralegh was given an indefinite stay of execution.

Contemporary accounts of the crowd’s reaction to these dramatically staged pardons are mixed. Some sources claim that as the pardon was read, the crowd erupted in cheers and cried “God Save the King!” No doubt the pardons were popular, as the public had become disillusioned by news of the trial, and such a sudden reversal was no doubt exciting. Some accounts, however, reflect that that the spectators were more disturbed and confused by the strange show (Brown 64). The expectations inherent in public execution were disrupted, and the three men, already preparing for death and behaving with contrition and acceptance, are suddenly called upon to change their position and their roles as condemned men, their bodies suddenly belonging to them once again. The theatricality of Ralegh’s trial was equaled by that of James’ pardons. As established through this extraordinary piece of political theater, state power can be demonstrated through the ability to put on a trial to convict and execute anyone, or, if that goes awry (like Ralegh’s case) the state can assert its authority another way and fix its mistake by showing mercy and magnanimity. In the end, “even the recognition of injustice can be turned to the benefit of those in power” (Bernthal 250). James was known for his reputation as rather bookish scholar, disliking the public arena. In the Basilicon Doron, he wrote:

It is a true old saying, that a King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly do behold…the people, who seeth but the outward part, will ever judge of the substance, by the circumstances; and
according to the outward appearance...will conceive pre-occupied conceits of the Kings inward intention...and prejudged conceits will, in the meantime, breed contempt, the mother of rebellion and disorder. (49)

It seems that by 1603, however, James had overcome his unwillingness to play a public role before his subjects, and fully embraced that “stage” upon which he could act as a king. Still, rather than rivaling Elizabeth’s persona Gloriana, James did not appear at the trial of the “executions,” proving himself to be more of a script-writer and director than an actor set on a stage. The parallels between the pardoning of the Main Plotters and the pardons at the end of Measure for Measure are striking, and Shakespeare must have contrived this event for the final scene of the play. But was Shakespeare commending James, or was he creating “conceits of the Kings inward intention” that were meant to bring up questions about the new sovereign?

The Duke and James I: The Theatrics of Leadership

If Measure for Measure is indeed a play that praises James, then the mercy of the Duke can possibly be viewed as a commemoration and celebration of James’ mercy toward Cobham, Markham, and Grey in the fall of the previous year (Bernthal 255). The Duke and James have many similarities. As stated above, James and the Duke share an aversion to public display and love study. In lines reminiscent of James’ own in the Basilicon Doron, the Duke declares, “I love the people, / but do not like to stage me in their eyes; / Though it do well, I do not relish well / Their loud applause” (1.1.67-70). Both the Duke and James have the problem of determining who they can and cannot trust in their own court, and both are willing to stage shows of power to improve their public image. In another positive reading, everything seems to work out in the end of the play, although as a problem comedy Measure for Measure does leave some unanswered questions. In an Anti-James reading, the play unmasks the ways in which the “political theater is used to create state power” (Bernthal 257). The play may be exposing political theatrics for what they are, an elaborate and carefully planned drama written to allow the Duke to demonstrate his power publicly. The audience is placed in a privileged position, and sees the Duke scrambling behind the scenes to set up the glorious pardoning scene. There is no element of surprise for us as there most likely was for everyone in attendance at the execution of the Main Plotters, except perhaps when the Duke’s plot goes awry and Lucio “un-hoods” him. In this moment in the play, the true identity of the Duke is revealed to the crowd of other characters, but this comes as no surprise to the audience. The Duke is then forced to leave his
script and improvise instead. Yet we still see the Duke as an impotent figure, unable to rule effectively before the opening of the play and viewing it necessary to script and stage any authority and political prowess because he is unable to do otherwise. The play becomes less about the nature of mercy and more about the importance of the theatrical in politics. The appearance of good leadership is more important than the reality.

The Duke and James are comparable figures. Each seems exceedingly preoccupied with the threat of a maligned name. The Duke openly states that it is his nature “never in the fight / T’allow in slander” (1.3.42-43). When King of Scotland in 1585, James passed a law that made slander a treasonous offence. Both James and the Duke also have a tendency to grant positions of power to favorites. The Duke allows the unqualified Angelo to rule in his stead, and James was famous for granting titles and positions to his own court favorites. One of which, the Earl of Arran, was appointed to both Parliament and the Privy Council in Scotland. Carolyn Brown has aligned the Earl of Arran in particular with Angelo, citing the government abuse that Arran was accused of and James’ ultimate pardoning of all his offences (56).

There is also a disturbing element of sadism in both the Duke and James. To allow people to languish under a sentence of death when it is well known that they will be ultimately pardoned is to parade sadism as altruism. In the Main Plot trials, James played with terrified people as though they were “pawns or puppets in a macabre dramatic production” in much the same fashion as the Duke (Brown 72). In Measure for Measure, Shakespeare reveals this cruelty and makes it even more disturbing, directly questioning a monarch’s abuse of power. The Duke allows Claudio and Juliet to live in a prison cell, tells Angelo he will die, allows Mariana to marry her love only to be informed of his death sentence, allows Isabella to think Claudio dead and that she is directly responsible for Angelo’s imminent death, and makes Lucio wait until the very end to find out his own fate. Is this really mercy? James had an established pattern of “threatening subjects with the most frightening and severe sentences and letting them languish under them, and then relieving the sentence or canceling it all together” (Brown 57). Cruelty and mercy become conflated in the play as well. The Duke compares himself to a father “Having bound up the threat’ning twigs of birch / Only to stick it in their children’s sight / For terror, not to use (1.3.23-26). James’ involvement in witch trials is historically corroborated, and both he and the Duke seem aware of the terror their actions cause on the part of their subjects by exercising their power and kingly influence over the lives of others.
As an allegory of the Main Plot, *Measure for Measure* also includes a compelling allusion to Sir Walter Ralegh in the character of Lucio. From his first scene, Lucio demonstrates his propensity for wit and cleverness, and later claims to be an “inward” (3.2.155), which may mean he is a courtier like Ralegh. He also shares some of Ralegh’s flamboyant qualities, his arrogance, his flippancy and irreverence, his humor, and his flare for theatrics. Most importantly, both suffer from the anger and antipathy of their rulers for so-called crimes against the state (Brown 66). In reality, however, both men are punished because of their rulers’ oversensitivity to slander. We never know if Lucio’s accusations against the Duke are correct. He claims that the Duke is a fornicator, but also frequently wishes that the Duke would return. In addition, he is not an unlikable character. Lucio is the only character in the play taking an active role in freeing Claudio. With this, Shakespeare makes the audience react to Lucio as the spectators reacted to Ralegh at his trial. Just as Ralegh’s fate was saved for the end, so is Lucio’s. He must see all the other characters condemned and ultimately pardoned, and is made to suffer and to hope for similar treatment. Ralegh’s anxiety must have also been prolonged as he watched Cobham, Markham, and Grey from his window. In a letter to the Lord Commissioners for the Trial dated December 9, 1603 (the day of the pardons), Ralegh writes that he has “beheld a work of great mercy” (266). Aware of his own execution that was set for December 12, he continues, “although my self have not yet been brought so near the very brink of the grave, yet I trust that so great a compassion will extend it self towards me also, every way being as hopeless as the rest” (266-7). The angst Ralegh felt at being saved for last is clear in his letter, as are his hopes that mercy might be extended to him as well.

Though Lucio is a figure that garners sympathy, he is still a slanderer. Especially in Lucio’s scene with the Duke disguised as a friar, the absurdity of the Duke being both the victim and the listener seems to complicate the Duke’s reasons for prosecuting Lucio. Though his words are probably lies, we can never be sure, and they are spoken in private to one other person. The only offensive thing Lucio says of the Duke is that he is a fornicator, something Lucio imagines will help Claudio’s case: “[The Duke] had some feeling of the sport, he knew the service, and that instructed him to mercy” (3.1.362-3). Moreover, the scene seems to be less about Lucio spreading rumors and more about teasing the Friar. Lucio notices the Friar-Duke’s fascination with the Duke, and goes about to provoke him. He says he knows the reason why the Duke left, but when the Friar-Duke asks, he replies that it “is a secret must be locked within the
teeth and the lips” (375-6). Lucio’s slander is truly subversive because it is motiveless. He has “nothing practical to gain by it and there is all the less reason for a hearer to suppose it to be untrue” (Bennett 75). Nonetheless, Lucio’s characterization of his ruler as the “old fantastical Duke of dark corners” (4.3.147) does not seem so far from the truth. The Friar-Duke refutes Lucio’s words, but Lucio simply replies, “I know what I know” (3.1.390). He again teases the Friar-Duke with more gossip as he leaves: “The Duke, I say to thee again, would eat mutton on Friday’s. He’s not past it yet, and, I say to thee, he would mouth with a beggar….Say that I said so” (412-15). The Duke, however, can only think of his own, supposedly unsullied reputation after this exchange:

No might nor greatness in mortality
Can censure scape; back-wounding calumny
The whitest virtue strikes. What king so strong
Can tie the gall up in the slanderous tongue? (416-19).

The Duke identifies himself as possessing this “whitest virtue,” and acknowledges the problem of controlling slanderers like Lucio, but to control slanderous language may be impossible, and the Duke reveals he is at a loss as to how to silence Lucio.

**Piety and the Prison**

The central problem in the play is Claudio’s death sentence for engaging in premarital sex. Such a harsh sentence is obviously not an appropriate punishment for his crime, but the Duke counted on Angelo’s extreme reaction. Claudio spends almost the entire play in prison, while his visitors attempt to force him to accept his fate. Claudio’s death row scenes allow the Duke and Isabella to proffer views on the proper way to die. The Duke, disguised as the Friar, visits Claudio and speaks the “Be absolute for death” speech (3.1.5-41). Phoebe Spinrad has called the speech a “compendium of many traditional Christian exhortations on the vanities of life” (165). Many of the maxims are indeed clichés taken from *ars moriendi* that Claudio only superficially accepts (Watson 141). Indeed, coming from the Duke dressed as a Friar, there is something absurd about his “piety,” as he delivers the speech not to comfort Claudio, but to explain, through clichés, obvious or recursive statements about life and death:

Be absolute for death. Either death or life
Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life.
If I do lose thee, I loose but a thing
That none but fools would keep (3.1.5-8)
The speech is obviously not meant to prepare Claudio for a repentant death. With lines stating that if Claudio loses his life, he “looses but a thing” are not terribly comforting. The Duke’s speech also avoids any mention of the afterlife, only stating that Claudio should welcome the sleep of death. Claudio, however, is not weary of his life and desperately wishes to live. Even so, Claudio accepts the Duke’s speech and allows the “Friar” to believes that he is prepared for death and whatever awaits him. “Let it come on,” he says to the Duke (43).

Of course Claudio is not entirely without hope for a pardon. As Isabella enters a few lines later, Claudio has great hopes that she persuaded Angelo to set him free. His preparation for death oscillates between acceptance and desperation to live. The moment he believe that Isabella will be able to offer him a way to leave the prison, he forgets all apparent contrition. At one moment he will face death and “hug it in mine arms,” (3.1.83) and later he is begging Isabella to sleep with Angelo so that he might live. Claudio’s situation as the condemned man is not a simple acceptance of the extreme punishment for his crime, but most likely a more realistic view of a preparation for impending death. Not as simple as some of the pamphlet accounts of the criminal moving towards perfect penitence, Claudio does not seem sorry for this sin of fornication, and his atonement and acceptance of death, and therefore the state of his soul, is continually in flux.

Barnardine is the only legitimate criminal that is in prison and that is threatened with death, yet he is also one of the few characters that have a happy ending in Measure for Measure. His role as prisoner and condemned man is that of the uncooperative subject who simply refuses to consent to his own execution. The importance of the condemned man’s complicity in any execution was integral to the success of the execution ritual. We do hear that Barnardine did not deny his crime, but when the Duke asks if he is a penitent prisoner, the Provost answers with an answer the Duke does not expect:

A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but
as a drunken sleep; careless, reckless, and fearless of what’s past
present, or to come; insensible of mortality, and desperately
mortal. (4.2.132-5)

Barnardine may have admitted the crime, but does not admit his guilt. The Provost continues to say that Barnardine has “the liberty of the prison. Give him leave to escape hence, he would
not.” (38). He sits in the prison drunk and uncaring of his fate. To attempt to force him into a state of contrition, the Provost remembers that he has “oft awakened him as if to carry him to execution, and showed him a seeming warrant for it; it hath not moved him at all.” (139-40). He is impervious to the threat of death it would seem, but we next see him officially condemned. The Duke, in hoping to spare Claudio, suggests that Barnardine be executed the next morning to take his place. When the hangman (the interestingly named Abhorson) enters the prison to fetch Barnardine for his execution date, he is asleep. The ceremony of execution cannot begin without the complicity of the accused. His sleeping signifies his outright refusal to acknowledge the state and is an extreme form of passive resistance (Kendall 36). Pompey the clown, and executioner’s new assistant, calls to the murderer, “You must rise and be hanged, Master Barnardine!” (4.3.18-9). The criminal’s first words are a curse, “A pox o’ your throats! Who makes that noise there? (21-22). We then hear that he has been drinking all night and is “not fitted” for death (37). His sloth and drunkenness illustrates that it is “the weaknesses of Barnardine’s flesh resist the state’s attempts to make that flesh an emblem of its power” (Kendall 36). The Duke, disguised as the Friar, attempts to pray with him, he flatly states, “I will not consent to die this day, that’s certain” (48-9). He simply denies his role in the ceremony of punishment in order to escape it, and in doing so exists just outside of the limits of the authority of the state.

“For those earthly faults, I quit them all”: Pronouncements of Pardon

The final scene in Measure for Measure allows the Duke to reveal all of his plotting in a climactic pardoning scene. The pardons in the end of the play again reinforce the Duke’s staging of punishment and redemption, as he casts himself as the all-powerful sovereign. Lawful executions are associated with comedies, and any real violence or sinister behavior must be reigned in at the end of a play (Kendall 34). Yet in Measure for Measure, there exists an undercurrent of violence and cruelty that, in the end, does not fit neatly into the formula for comedy.

Of course the preoccupation with slander is the Duke’s flaw. Interestingly, the two accused slanderers in the play are Lucio and the Duke himself (as the Friar). In the scene, as the Duke returns as himself, he asks Isabella to explain her case to him, knowing all the details well. Lucio interrupts her, but the Duke quickly controls Lucio’s speech and his own role in the interrogation, saying, “You were not bid to speak” (5.1.79). When Lucio says “Right” to agree with Isabella a few lines later, the Duke again silences him: “It may be right, but you are i’the
wrong to speak before your time” (86-7). The Duke immediately creates a situation in which he can again exert absolute control over individuals. Another parallel can here be drawn with Ralegh, as he was not allowed to speak to his accuser Cobham in court for fear of destroying him as a witness or finding holes in his argument. The words of a supposed slanderer take on a strange power in the scene. Lucio is not allowed to speak much, and later, when the Duke returns in the Friar’s habit, claiming that Vienna is corrupt, Escalus, desperate to get rid of him, cries “slander to th’ state! Away with him to prison.” (5.1.317-18). When the Friar-Duke attempts to speak again, Escalus frantically repeats himself:

Such a fellow is not to be talked withal. Away with him to prison! Where is the Provost? Away with him to prison! Lay bolts enough upon him: let him speak no more. (5.1.341-44)

Once they are accused of slander, both Lucio and the Friar-Duke are immediately silenced. Their speech must be controlled to limit any damage, and the fear of slander and its ramifications is very real in the play.

Lucio’s punishment is particularly problematic. Angelo and Claudio are pardoned for fornication and either forced or allowed to marry their lovers. All of these pardons occur before Lucio is even accused of his official crime. When the Duke finally does confront him about his slanders, Lucio claims that he merely “spoke it according to the trick” (5.1.498), meaning that he was only saying what was being said by everyone else, acting more like a gossip than a slanderer. The Duke, in his usual sadistic fashion, first gives Lucio his sentence: to marry a whore, then to be whipped and hanged. But then, after Lucio’s pleadings, the Duke pardons him:

Thy slanders I forgive, and therewithal
Remit thy other forfeits. – Take him to prison,
And see our pleasure herein executed. (512-514)

The Duke’s ominous choice in the word “executed” is interesting. Even though he ostensibly punishes Lucio for fornication, when Lucio complains about being forced to marry a whore, the Duke reveals that he is actually being punished for something else: “slandering a prince deserves it” (517). Does he really forgive Lucio’s slanders? After the line, Lucio is removed from the stage by guards, although the Duke just formally pardoned him. Death is both assigned arbitrarily (in the case of Claudio) and then pardoned in equally arbitrary fashion
The Duke pardons Barnardine, a murderer, and thus slander is treated in the scene as a crime worse than murder. The reasons that the Duke pardons Barnardine are equally confounding:

Thou art said to have a stubborn soul
That apprehends no further than this world,
And squar’st thy life according. Thou’rt condemned;
But, for those earthly faults, I quit them all
And pray thee take this mercy to provide
For better times to come. (474-9)

The audience must have noticed the discrepancy here, as the Duke seems to perversely reward immorality and indifference (Watson 148). A murderer with a stubborn soul who the Duke admits is condemned in the afterlife will leave his prison a free man, and in his rationale the Duke seems to take this as reason enough that he should be pardoned. Yet Lucio is the “one in place” that the Duke “cannot pardon” (493). In *Measure for Measure* the politics of execution clearly show the limits of state power, and how that state power is sometimes subject to the whims of the monarch. Lucio’s sentence betrays the Duke’s and James’ preoccupation with slander, and Shakespeare covertly suggests the harshness of punishing such a crime and explores the line between slander and treason, absolute power and staged performance.

For the state to condemn theatricality is to condemn its own use of the theatrical to expose or punish offenders. The poet and the state, therefore, must exist alongside one another. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare abandons the binary of secure and transgressive speech, and everything becomes gray and muddy, specifically in the ambiguous ending lines. The Duke has, on the surface, set everything right and created three marriages – the classic comedy ending. Yet each marriage is most likely unhappy for at least one person in each pair. Especially through the case of Isabella’s silence upon learning of her marriage to the Duke, the audience has an opportunity to interpret the situation. The play is one which calls upon the audience to judge and to decide whether the Duke was correct in his actions, and whether the other characters deserve his punishments.

*Measure for Measure* represents an innovative self-censoring by Shakespeare. His ability to write a sort of “double play” that ostensibly elevates the figure of the Duke as a problem solver and allows him to show ultimate power in pardoning the offenders. Conversely,
however, Shakespeare represents the Duke’s cruel mercy in a subversive and potentially slanderous manner. *Measure for Measure* demystifies the political theater in the actual theater. Shakespeare punctures holes in the “saintly façade by allowing his audience to be privy to the Duke’s preparations for the spectacular denouement in act 5 and not to be impressed by them” (Brown 78). The spectators in the play see both the planning and the manipulation of benevolence and forgiveness to meet the Duke’s own political ends, something an audience may have associated with James.

In essence, *Measure for Measure* is a play that slanders and defames James himself and his role as director of the theater of punishment. It was even performed before him in the winter of 1604 without any incident. Still, would James have recognized himself in the Duke? It is possible that he may have noticed, but was flattered by the representation. A court performance, with the King in the audience, may have called for the image of a corrupt or sneaky Duke to be tempered. Given James’ interest in slander, he may have also enjoyed the figure of Lucio as he digs his own grave by slandering the Duke, unknowingly, to his very face. However, even assuming that James did recognize himself as insulted, the slanderous play protects itself. Elizabeth’s famous saying, “I am Richard II,” only admits her similarity to the figure as a monarch who is in danger of being usurped. There is not an indictment of her character if she acknowledges the parallel. But James could never say “I am Duke Vincenzo,” because doing so he would acknowledge that he was not a virtuous ruler, that he used trickery to stage his own power, and that he was, like the Duke, hyperaware of any maligning of his character. Shakespeare thus safeguards the poet’s role and protects himself by placing James in an impossible position. In openly stating in any way his unhappiness with the performance, James would essentially become the hapless gentleman Lucio tricks into admitting a rumor about himself: “I think I have done myself wrong, have I not?” (1.2.38).
CONCLUSION

“THE ROYAL ACTOR”: THE EXECUTION OF CHARLES I

I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown; where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the world.

--Charles I, on the day of his execution (1649)

The figure of the condemned person in Jacobean tragedy occurs with great frequency. Violent and macabre plays featuring death and execution might be dismissed as sensationalist, relying on shock value to entertain an unruly audience. Yet by examining the way in which the state publicly performed violence upon the criminal body, it is easy to understand writers’ fascination with depicting events of execution on the early modern stage. A preoccupation with the corporeality of dead flesh similarly belies complicated and potentially disturbing instances of death on display in Elizabethan and Jacobean London. Fashioning the body as a text allowed that body to be interpreted and understood as a signifier of law and state control before and after death. Pamphlet accounts participated in furthering this notion of interpreting the criminal person and his or her body, as well as the activities that lead to the punishment.

Just as pamphlets recorded the events for posterity, plays dramatized violent acts in a clear alignment of death and entertainment. The boundary between the execution as drama and the drama of staging an execution oscillates most notably in plays like The Spanish Tragedy, with the onstage hanging of Pedringano. Literal representations of executions on stage still contain the festivity of a theatrical performance, and echo the potential festivity of viewing an actual execution. In the plays analyzed in this thesis, characters are condemned to death and executed, but often return to the stage as either a dead body or a spirit. Death and life become intertwined representationally, as the actor playing a live character in one scene and a dead body in the next. The bodies of dead characters continue to signify onstage, often serving as the impetus for revenge. By placing the dead body on the stage, it becomes the focus for investigation and observation. These “corpses” are rhetorically anatomized and analyzed in a search for their signification. In a play like The Lady's Tragedy, the Lady’s dead body is both her and not her, and the line, “I am not here” (4.5.40) is a nod to the artifice of theater and the place of the body in relation to spiritual substance. Even so, her body, once it is presented to the audience, continues to take part in the action of the play, and she comes to signify (literally and
physically) the ties between sexuality and death. The physical remains in these plays enter a realm of metaphoric and theological interpretation. They are not hidden away or entombed, but brought back in various ways both to shock the audience and offer an opportunity to meditate upon the violence done to the flesh.

Transgressing the boundaries between public punitive measures and dramatic representations of punishment and death culminate in one of the most spectacularly and consciously theatrical executions, the 1649 decapitation of Charles I. Witnesses recorded Charles’ death, and he was the subject of pamphlets and poems for many years after. His transition into an almost mythic character reveals the power of the spectacle and the ways in which public execution and its cultural representations change after his death.

On 30 January 1649, the English people killed their own king. After Charles I was defeated in the English Civil War, he was subsequently tried, convicted, and executed for high treason. In an anonymous 1660 publication, *England’s black tribunal set forth in the trial of K. Charles I*, we receive an account of Charles’ death. His warrant read:

Charles Stuart King of England, is, and standeth Convicted, Attained and Condemned of high Treason, and other high Crimes, and Sentence upon Saturday last was pronounced against him by this Court, to be put to death by the severing of his head from his body. (29)

He was lead to a scaffold outside of his Banqueting house and faced a huge crowd, who remained silent and reverent in the presence of their king. The executioner and his assistant were heavily disguised in fear of any possible retribution from the people. The king laid his head down on the block, he told the executioner to wait for his sign, “and after a very little pause, the King stretching forth his hands. The Executioner at one blow severed his head from his body, the head being off, the Executioner held it up, and shewed it to the people” (39). As the axe fell and struck his head from his body, it is said that a large groan went up throughout the crowd. In the realm of public executions, the death of a king represents an extreme, a shift in the power balance between king and country. The year of Charles’ execution represents the end of an era for the close alliance between theater and public execution. The influence that public punishment held over the theater suffered its own coup de grace, and Charles’ death represents the tragic and spectacular dénouement to an age of early modern drama.
In prior executions, the people were aware that the condemned man or woman had indeed committed some sort of crime in the eyes of the law. When the Tyburn Tree was erected in 1571, public punishment had its first official and permanent structure for hanging criminals. The shadow of the gallows affected London’s population, allowing for a standard format for execution and a permanent place for the staging of justice and retribution. The body of the criminal perpetuated state ideology and reinforced state power. The death of a king, however, disrupts the paradigm. Charles I represented the state and the monarchy, and thus was the power system embodied. His conviction and status as a traitor was complicated by the fact that he was tried and executed while still holding the title of king, the monarchy that was to be officially abolished a week after his death.

Just as the theater borrowed from the rituals of public punishment, public punishment inherently evokes comparisons to the theater. Andrew Marvell’s “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland” (1650) remains one of the most famous accounts of Charles I’s execution. Marvell uses theatrical metaphors to great effect:

That thence the Royal actor borne
The tragic scaffold might adorn:
While round the armed bands
Did clap their bloody hands.
He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable scene…
Nor call’d the Gods, with vulgar spite,
To vindicate his helpless right (53-63)

Charles is presented as the ultimate tragic actor in the poem. He also remains calm and resigned until the end a perfect condemned man. He did not curse or swear, but rather, “bow’d his comely head / Down, as upon a bed” (64-5). The “royal actor” must play one last part, as an compliant and tragic victim of violent death. Andrew Lacey has traced the commemorative verses that were written about Charles I soon after his death, noticing patterns in texts that participate in the “cult of Charles the Martyr” (225). His death was part of a political restructuring of the country and an abolishment of the monarchy that stood until 1660. The execution as martyrdom was not terribly common in the majority of Stuart executions, in which convicted criminals admitted their guilt and faced their death as an act of justice and deserved
punishment. Charles, however, is aligned with a saint rather than a (however repentant) sinner that we see in execution pamphlets. Included in England’s black tribunal set forth in the trial of K. Charles I is the anonymous poem “An Elegie On the Sufferings and Death of K. Charles I.” In the lines, there is clear indication that the people of England were in mourning for their king:

Tongues cannot speak; this Grief knows no such vent,
Nothing but Silence, can be Eloquent.
Words are not here significant; in This
Our Sighs, our Groans bear all the Emphasis. (44)

The author writes of speechlessness, and indicates that the tragedy is so great that words do not serve to capture the terrible event. The extreme pathos of the poem and other accounts of Charles’ execution represent that vision of the king as a martyr.

The associations between this execution and theater are also present in the publications concerning Richard Brandon. Brandon was the Common Hangman of London, and there is debate about his role in the execution of the king. Even so, we find popular accounts that suggest he was indeed the man who struck the death’s blow. He died a few months after Charles’ death, on 20 June 1649. In a publication from the same year, The Confession of Richard Brandon (fig. 14), Brandon’s last days are detailed, and it includes mentions of his guilt over killing the king. His death follows a long sickness, during which time “his Conscience was much troubled, and exceedingly perplexed in mind, yet little shew of repentance” (2). Brandon’s life and death receive quite similar treatment as murderers in execution pamphlets. He is initially glad for the thirty pounds he receives, and even sells the “orange stuck with cloves, and a handkerchief out of the King’s pocket” (2) after the execution. His “vicious vice” (2) that the author hints lead to Brandon’s death are unclear, but seem to stem from his involvement in the king’s death. When he does die, his body is met by “a great multitude of people stood waiting to see his corpse carried to the church-yard, some crying out, ‘Hang him, Rogue! Bury him in the Dung-hill’; others pressing upon him, saying they would quarter him for executing the King” (3).

Much like the providentialist messages encountered in previous pamphlet examples, the author ends with a note that “even at the very point of time when he was to give the blow, a great pain & ache took him round the neck, and hath ever since continued” (6). Brandon’s pain stems from or is a direct result of his role in Charles’ death, and is presented as a sort of punishment for his “crime.”
The actualized theater of Charles’ trial and execution thus culminates a period of intense experimentation with the notions of ‘theater,’ ‘play,’ and ‘distance’ in the Renaissance (Smith 129). Politically sanctioned violence in the form of Charles’ execution is the culmination of theatrical experimentation with portraying executions on stage. Authors like Kyd, Middleton, and Marston experimented with bringing the theater to the scaffold and causing the audience to question their status as spectators. With Charles’ execution it would seem that the event crosses the boundary between theater and public punishment. In another publication concerning his executioner, *A Dialogue, or: A Dispute between the late Hangman and Death*, Richard Brandon is presented as a fellow actor on the scaffold / stage. Death and Richard Brandon have a conversation about his role in Charles’ death before he dies. At one point Death says to him: “Thy part is play’d and thou go’st off the Stage / The bloodiest Actor in this present Age.” Both Charles the “royal actor” and Brandon the “bloody actor” play their parts in the most spectacular culmination of this extraordinary and bloody period of English drama.
FIGURES

Fig. 1
Woodcut image from The terrible and deserved death of Francis Ravilliack showing the manner of his strange torments. London: Printed by R. Blower and E. Allde, 1610.

Fig. 2
Woodcut image from Heavens speedy hue and cry sent after lust and murder manifested upon the sudden apprehending of Thomas Sherwood, and Elizabeth Evans. London: Printed by N. & I. Okes, 1635.
Fig. 3
Woodcut image from *A true relation of a barbarous and most cruel murder committed by one Enoch ap Evan, who cut off his own natural mother’s head, and his brother’s*. London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1633.

Fig. 4
Woodcut image from *The Crying Murder, Containing the cruel and most horrible butchery of Mr. Trat, curate of old Cleave*. London: Printed by E. Allen, 1624.
Fig. 5
Woodcut image from *A cruel murder committed lately upon the body of Abraham Gearsy.*

Fig. 6
Woodcut image from *Two Most Unnatural and Bloody Murders.* London: 1605
The Spanish Tragedie:

OR,

Hieronimo is mad againe.

Containing the lamentable end of Don Horatio, and Belimperia; with the pittifull death of Hieronimo.

Newly corrected, amended, and enlarged with new additions of the Painter's part, and others, as it hath of late been divers times acted.

LONDON,
Printed by W. White, for I. White and T. Langley, and are to be sold at their Shop over against the Sarazens head without New-gate. 1615.

Fig. 7

Title page from The Spanish tragedy: or, Hieronimo is mad again. London: Printed by W. White, for I. White and T. Langley, 1615.
Fig. 8
Plans and Elevation of Inigo Jones’s design for the Barber-Surgeons’ Anatomy Theatre. (1636)
Fig. 9
Image of a “muscle man” from Andreas Vesalius’ *De Humani corporis fabrica* (1555)
Fig. 10
Title page to the second edition of Andreas Vesalius’ *De Humani corporis fabrica* (1555).
(The anatomy of the inward parts of man)
Figure and detail from *Interiorum corporis humani partium viva delineatio*. London: ca. 1559.
*(The anatomy of the inward parts of man)*
THE CONFESSION
OF
Richard Brandon

The Hangman (upon his Death bed) concerning His betrayering His late Majesty, CHARLES the first, King of Great Britain, and his Protestant and Vow touching the same; the manner how he was terrify'd in Confession; the Apparitions and Visions which appeared unto him; the great judgment that befell him three days before he dy'd, and the manner how he was carried to White Chappell Church-yard on Thursday night last; the strange Actions that happened thereupon; With the merry conceits of the Crowne Court and his proving mum in the Cords for the Buttall.

Printed in the year Year of the Hangman downfall, 1649.

fig. 14
Title page from The Confession of Richard Brandon, 1649
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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