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Layers of Violence: Shakespeare's Othello and Julius Caesar

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Shakespeare lived in a violent world. It was a world in which violence, at its heart, was an accepted and everyday companion. Claus Jan Visscher's *Long View of London* (1616) (Figure 1.1) details the bridge gate to London Bridge.[1] On pikes, clearly sticking out from the top of the entrance, are 18 heads of traitors. A few passersby walking along the street below seem to be glancing up at the eerie decorations. Tiffany Stern, in the book *Making Shakespeare From Stage to Page,* speaks specifically about these treasonous heads: "They were black in appearance, having been parboiled and, often, coated in tar to prevent erosion". [2] She adds that the characters on the theatrical stage were made black when the actor "masked his face with a black vizard or 'pitched' it by artificially colouring it with a burnt cork" (Stern 9). In this way, as Stern points out, blackened actors resembled "the condemned traitors the audience would probably have seen on its way to the theatre" (Stern 9). As Shakespeare famously declared in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage". [3] There is truth to this statement, especially when analyzing the world through a violent lens. Much of the violence in the world of Shakespeare acted as

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[1] Claes Visscher, *The Visscher Panorama* , (Wikipedia) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visscher_panorama>

[2] Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 9

[3] William Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare The Complete Works*, ed. by Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 257.

theatrical entertainment, and this violence was then transferred to the stage. There are layers of violence, from onstage, to off stage, to the world itself.

The treasonous heads were not the only evidence of violence in Shakespeare's London. Bear-baiting and public executions were two clear examples of commercially acceptable violence in Shakespeare's time. Stern writes about the intriguing intersections between bear-baiting and theatre in the Elizabethan era. Bear-baiting actually "took place in building similar to the theatres" (Stern 18). The Hope theatre actually "doubled as a bear-baiting pit" (Stern 18). Equally, "both charged the same entrance fee, both put on shows that lasted for about two hours, both started at the same time and held roughly equivalent audiences" (Stern 18). Bear-baiting was a horrifyingly violent and torturous sport. Stern writes, "Bears in the bear-baiting pits were chained to a stake before being attacked by dogs" (Stern 19). Just imagine the violent, carnal appetite of a spectator willing to watch this spectacle. But, as Stern states, the audiences were quite similar for both bear-baiting and theatre, and the entertainment was similar as well. William Lambarde even mentions both forms of entertainment in the same sentence: "such as goe to Parisgardein, the Bell Savage, or Theatre, to beholde Beare baiting, Enterludes, or Fence play" (Stern 19). In this particular account, bear-baiting is mentioned as a form of *theatre*. Violence for entertainment spectacle existed in another part of London as well, in a devilish place called Tyburn. It was "the city's site for public executions from 1176-1783". [4] In that time period it is estimated that "between 40,000 and 60,000 people

[4] Hannah Crawforth, Sarah Dustagheer and Jennifer Young, Shakespeare in London (London : Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2015), p 21.

died at Tyburn" (Crawforth 21). It is a truly startling number. As detailed in *Shakespeare in London*, there was "seating set up by enterprising local residents" where refreshments were sold (Crawford 22). It could even be said that "early modern Londoners saw executions at Tyburn as quasi-theatrical events" (Crawford 22). The Tyburn Tree was a "three sided gibbet that had been constructed in 1571 from which up to nine people were hung at once" (Crawford 21). The spectacle of violence is quite horrifying. From a bear being attacked by dogs to drinking refreshments while watching nine people hung in unison, Shakespeare's London had plenty of theatrics outside the theatre itself. The violence seems to seep into plays such as *Othello* and *Julius Caesar*. The audience viewing these acts of violence could have seen an execution that afternoon, a bear-baiting match the day before, and could have just walked under the traitors' blackened heads while walking to the Globe Theatre via London Bridge. Violence was a part of the theatrical world that the audience inhabited; in an equal manner that violence was a part of the theatrical stage.

In Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, the titular character is under the impression that his love, Desdemona, has been cheating on him with a man named Cassio. This fact is clear because his handkerchief (by way of Iago) had made its way to Cassio's lodgings. Even though adultery did not occur, Othello is certain of it and brutally smothers his wife as a result. This shocking act of violence, taking place on an elevated bed in full view of an audience of hundreds, eerily resembles a hanging at Tyburn. Though there is no rope involved, it is a form of a public execution for a crime that one party believes was

committed. To fully unpack this point, one must first look at penalties for adultery in Elizabethan England. Richard L. Greaves in his book *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England* maps out the specific punishments for adultery at this time. The usual punishment by the church courts “required an offender to appear before the congregation in a white sheet on two or three occasions”. [5] An actual account at Grevely, Cambs in 1570 details that a male offender had to “stand iij severall Sundays or holye dayes in the church porch…from the second peal to morning prayre until the reading of the second lesson, be clothed in a white shete down to the ground, a white wand in his hand and ij papers with great letters of abhomynable Adultryem thone upon his backe and thither upon his brest” (Greaves 234). This punishment is a form of public humiliation. Though it is not a violent act, it shows the normal penalty by the Church only 34 years before *Othello* was performed. Another punishment could have been excommunication, which happened to an adulteress in Durham in 1579 “who broke her oath not to cease meeting her lover and refused to appear before the church authorities” (Greaves 234). A woman in this instance was punished by banishment. A truly sickening case from 1586 included an adulterer who was engaged for five years to his maid “who bore him several children, each of whom she murdered” (Greaves 235). As a result, she was executed, but the man was acquitted. Greaves writes that, “The preacher then commended the harsher treatment of adulteres in other states, noting such punishments as requiring a man to be stripped naked in public and given a thousand lashes, cutting off an adultress’ nose, allowing a victimized husband to strip his wife in public and whip her through the streets, and

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[5] Richard L. Greaves, *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p 234.

stoning the guilty to death" (Greaves 235). These forms of punishments in other states show the wide range of penalties for adultery at the time. Greaves finishes by saying that, "His views reflect Puritan concerns" (Greaves 235). These penalties follow the views of Burrow Greenwood who "called for execution of adulterers, both male and female" (Greaves 234). The Puritan viewpoint of punishment versus the Church of England's form of public humiliation show a sharp divide in the handling of an act of adultery.

Othello makes a violent and unforgivable decision by killing Desdemona. His rational "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men", eerily parallels the rational to draw and quarter strangers as mentioned in Florio his "Florio his firste fruites" (V. ii. 6): [6]

I have heard that there is a gret number of malafactors, as theeues, robberts, & pirates

There is many, & yet dayly ther is a great number hanged.

Haue they no other death?

No fir, but onely the traytours, the which are quartered.

You tel me a great thing: are there many traytors?

No fir, becaufe the queene doth punifh them fo wel, that they dare do nothing"

I pray God that there be none.

So do I alfo [7]

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[6] William Shakespeare , *Othello* , ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Wresting (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1993), p 235

[7] John Florio , "Florio his firste Fruites: which yeelde familiar speech, merie Prouerbes, wittie sentences, and golden sayings" (London , 1578) <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/crime-and-punishment-in-elizabethan-england> [accessed 6 January 2017]

The specific rational of “becaufe the queen doth punifh them fo wel, that they dare do nothing,” hinges on the fact that if one does the worst and most gruesome act, good will come of it in the end. Othello makes this same decision by telling himself that if he does not kill Desdemona, then she will indeed commit more adultery. By killing her, Othello assures that she won’t continue her crime, just like the traitors described by Florio.

Greaves quotes from the Geneva Bible, which he contends represents the “general tone of the Puritan attack on adultery” (Greaves 230):

30 Men do not despise a thief, when he stealeth to satisfy his soul, because he is hungry.
31 But if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold, or he shall give all the substance of his house.
32 But he that commiteth adultery with a woman, he is destitute of understanding: he that doeth it, destroyeth his own soul. [8]

The 1599 Geneva Bible is believed to be the bible that William Shakespeare would have used. [9] In these Proverbs, it is written that adultery destroys the adulterer’s soul. Also Babington “warned that committing adultery even in ignorance was a grave sin” (Greaves 230). In the tense scene between Othello and Desdemona, which ends with her being smothered, there is frequent reference to both sin and the soul. Othello asks, “Have you

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[8] “Bible Gateway passage: Proverbs 6:30-32 - 1599 Geneva Bible,” Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs 6%3A30-32&version=GNV> [accessed 6 January 2017]

[9] Bible Gateway, Version Information <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/1599-Geneva-Bible-GNV/> [accessed 6 January 2017].

prayed tonight, Desdemona?" and then gives her the chance to solicit any crimes to heaven (V. ii. 28). He says the following:

Well, do it, and be brief. I will walk by.
I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.
No, (heaven) forfend! I would not kill thy soul. (V. ii. 35-37)

Keeping in mind Proverb 32 from the Geneva Bible, this mention of soul stands out dramatically. Instead of Desdemona's soul being destroyed by her supposed act of adultery, Othello is prepared to *save* it from death. This matches with his apparent need to not make her bleed, to not "scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster." (V. ii. 4-5). She is being painted as sacred, but is being sentenced to death for an act that Babington said was a "grave sin". The battle in Othello's head between her guiltiness and his necessity to save her soul from destruction shows a contradiction in his claim of adultery. Othello then furthers his claim to Desdemona's guiltiness by asking her to "Think on thy sins", furthering the parallel between Babington and Othello (V. ii. 48). Desdemona later tells him "No, by my life and soul," once again highlighting the distinction between sin and soul (V. ii. 61). Finally, Othello tells her "Sweet soul, take heed, take heed of perjury. / Thou are on thy deathbed" (V. ii. 63-64). It is a stunning declaration that is equally eloquent and measured. The repetition of "take heed" slows down the sentence when speaking it aloud, furthering its measured quality. The use of the word "perjury" formalizes the claim, and brings to mind a courtroom. It is as if Othello is acting as the judge of Desdemona and is sentencing her to death. The bed therefore becomes the court of law and Othello the judge. The stage directions speak far

more than words: "*(He) smothers her*". [10] A violent act, acted out on a marriage bed on the theatre stage. Her death is cruel, however, because she does not die immediately. Later in the scene, she cries out in pain, and finally dies claiming that "A guiltless death I die", furthering the tragedy of the moment (V. ii. 150). It is a death that is reminiscent of a slow death by fire on the stake. In one account of two people who died in 1572, they perished "in great horror with roaring and crying". [11] Indeed, Desdemona was not burning, but she was slowly suffocating as Othello and Emilia were speaking. Imagine the shock of the audience when she suddenly cried out, much to their alarm since it was supposed that she was dead. It is a cruel death, a horrifying death, and one that would historically align itself more with a Puritan form of punishment than that of the Church of England at the time of the first performance in 1604.

Sir Phillip Sidney writes in his *An Apology for Poetry or the Defence of Poesy* the following about tragedy:

And do they not know that a tragedy is tied to the laws of Poesy, and not of History; not bound to follow the story, but, having liberty, either to feign a quite new matter, or to frame the history to

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[10] William Shakespeare , *Othello* , ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Wresting (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1993), p 243.

[11] Liza Picard, *Crime and Punishment in Elizabethan England* <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/crime-and-punishment-in-elizabethan-england> [accessed 6 January 2017].

the most tragical conveniency? Again, many things may be told which cannot be showed, if they know the difference betwixt reporting and representing. [12]

As described by Sidney, the “difference betwixt reporting and representing,” Desdemona’s dramatic death was not reported to the audience, but rather represented live on stage. The death of Julius Caesar is represented and staged in full view of the audience of actors (playing citizens of Rome) and the audience of Londoners (viewing the performance). There is one particular death in *Julius Caesar* that is instead reported on stage not once but *twice,* and that is the death of Portia.

In the book *Shakespeare and Violence* by R.A. Foakes, he writes that “for long the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* was omitted, carried out off stage, or concealed from the audience, as, in Dr. Johnson’s words, ‘an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition’”. [13] Indeed, the blinding of Gloucester is a horrid moment. But, to be fair, is it any more horrid than seeing nine people hung in unison? Or, watching during a pillory “one or both of the offender’s ears…nailed to the pillory, sometimes they were cut off anyway” (Picard)? There is an odd disconnect between violence that takes place on stage and off. Thinking about spectacle in connection with *Julius Caesar* is fair given that both the deaths of Caesar and Portia (though off stage), are spectacles. Samuel Coleridge

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[12] Sir Phillip Sidney, *Shakespeare and Violence*, ed. by Geoffrey Shepherd and TW Maslen , 3rd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p 111.

[13] R.A. Flakes*, Shakespeare and Violence* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), p 13.

believed little in the need of spectacle in theater, saying that the stage "had not artificial, extraneous inducements – few scenes, little music" and that Shakespeare had "to rely on his own imagination…to speak not to the sense, as was now done, but to the mind". [14] Andrew Gurr furthers this argument by saying that "'Audience' harks back to its judicial sense of giving a case a hearing. 'Spectators' belong at football matches where the eye takes in more information than the ear" (Sager 25). The disconnect between an audience and a spectator is intriguing, given that one can change to the other in a heartbeat. When Brutus is ruminating about whether to follow Cassius in his assassination plot, would not the crowd be an audience in this sense? Shakespeare is appealing towards the mind in a way Coleridge would be pleased with. However, when Caesar is murdered and the murderers cover their hands in his blood, are not the audience members turned into spectators watching a form of violent entertainment? Have they not become similar to those who watch bear-baiting or a hanging at Tyburn? There is no true answer to these questions, but there is truth in Francis Barker's claim that "Violence at once repels and attracts us" [15]. There is a longing to be that spectator rather than the audience member.

How odd then, that Portia's death is not viewed on stage. In Plutarch's *Lives* translated by Thomas North, Porcia's death is mentioned at the end of the section he

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[14] Jenny Sager, *The Aesthetics of Spectacle in Early Modern Drama and Modern Cinema: Robert Greene's Theatre of Attractions* (New York: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2013), p 25.

[15] Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Tragedy and History* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993), p 17.

devotes to Brutus. This version of *Lives* is proven to have been used by Shakespeare when writing *Julius Caesar*. Plutarch writes:

And for Porcia, Brutus wife: Nicolaus the Philosopher, and Valerius Maximus doe wryte, that she determining to kill her selfe (her parents and frendes carefullie looking to her to kepe ker from it) tooke hotte burning coles, and cast them into her mouth, and kept her mouth so close, that she choked her selfe [16]

The description is stark and specific about how Portia dies, and also adds to the horror by specifying that she "kept her mouth so close, that she chocked her selfe". Shakespeare however, makes the death far less specific, by having Brutus tell Cassius:

Impatient of my absence

And grief that young Octavius with Mark Antony

Have made themselves so strong – for with her death

That tidings came – with this she fell distract

And, her attendants absent, swallowed fire. (IV. iii. 151-155) [17]

Analyzing both these accounts, it is clear that Shakespeare took much of the spectacle out of Portia's death. Instead of specifying that she ate hot burning coals, and kept her mouth closed, Shakespeare simply uses the poetic phrase "swallowed fire", which probably

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[16] Plutarch, Donato Acciaiuoli, Simon Goulart , *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, Volume 6*, ed. by George Wyndham , trans. by Sir Thomas North ([n.p.]: D. Nutt , 1896), p 236

[17] William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* , ed. by David Bevington (New York : Bantam , 1988), p 79.

would have made Coleridge happy in its thought-provoking and spectacle-free delivery. There is another point here, however, because as Phillip Sydney specified, there is a difference between reporting and representing. With Brutus reporting Portia's death instead of having her commit suicide on stage, there is almost more drama in the moment. It is sudden and surprising. In this way, there are levels of violence represented in *Julius Caesar*. While Caesar is murdered on stage, and Brutus orders his fellow murderers to "bathe [their] hands in Caesar's blood", Portia dies off stage in a horrifying way but the death is only reported by her husband (III. i. 107). Equally, as has already been discussed in this essay, public executions at Tyburn, bear-baiting and traitor's heads on stakes waited just outside the doors of the Globe. Violence was present *everywhere*: onstage, offstage, and in the world around the stage.

The violent world that Shakespeare inhabited is equally present in his text and physically represented on the stage (both onstage and off). The quote: '[I]n tragedies, some points are so terrible that the poets are constrained to turn them from the people's eyes' is quite relevant in this sense. In an ironic way, Portia's grisly death is hidden from the audience's eyes while the gruesome deaths of Caesar and Desdemona are in plain view. There is no definite answer as to why this is the case, however, it is proven that violence in Shakespeare's time existed in layers, and Portia's death existed in a layer that was purposefully hidden from the audience's sight. Perhaps Shakespeare wished the audience to imagine the horrifying death in their own heads, instead of showing it plainly in the way Plutarch did. We will never know. Violence and cruelty are as present on the

Elizabethan stage as off, making it impossible for an Elizabethan citizen to truly escape death.

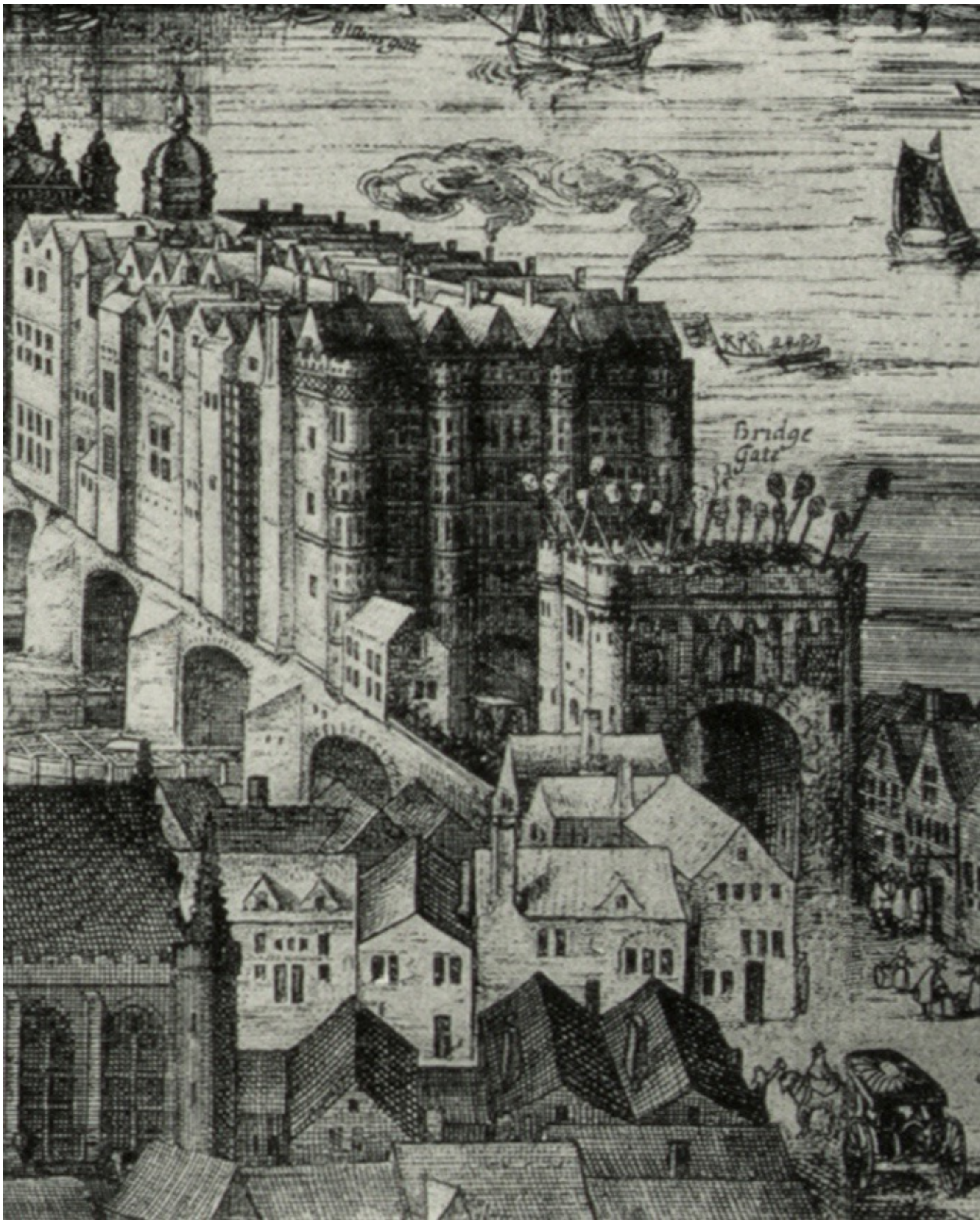

Figure 1.1

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