“Dark revolts of being”: Abjection, ritual, and the secular sacred in William Shakespeare’s plays

Ashley Hards

Department of Arts

McGill University, Montreal

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Contents

Abstract

Cannibalism, dismemberment, murder, corpses, and gore: Shakespeare's theatre is filled with images of extreme suffering. Many scholars have connected this suffering to religious sentiments, yet Shakespeare's work resists religious categorization. Instead of aligning with conventional religious readings of the plays, I muck up the scholarship on *Titus Andronicus, Richard III,* and *King Lear* by reconstituting their "emptied rituals" as moments of abject horror that reach towards a form of secular transcendence.

By expanding the focus from religion to ritual, I address the larger debate about theatre's anthropological significance, particularly, the discourse on determining how the emerging popular theatre navigated the Reformation's shift in the value of rituals. I argue that the purpose of ritual in Shakespeare's plays is to respond to the paradoxical feelings of separation from and closeness to the divine that was occurring during the Reformation. The secular sacred offers the possibility that theatre can veer away from religious doctrine without losing its transcendent potential.

My methodology consists of a reading of suffering in Shakespeare in conversation with key anthropological and psychological studies—such as the work of Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and René Girard —to understand the psychological basis and impact of the "secular sacred." I conclude that none of these three plays offers conventional closure. They rip open the boundaries between the sacred and the defiled, the pure and impure, right and wrong, and religious and atheistic beliefs, all of which forces us to gaze at a form of meaninglessness. By revealing the fragility of systems of meaning, the horrific, abject acts in these plays create a sense of the sacred that transcends conventional sources of authority, making the theatre a tool for understanding and interrogating society.

Cannibalisme, démembrement, meurtres et cadavres ensanglantés : le théâtre de Shakespeare est rempli d'images de souffrance extrême. Plusieurs critiques ont lié cette souffrance à des motifs religieux : or, l'œuvre de Shakespeare résiste à catégorisation religieuse. Au lieu de m'aligner aux interprétations religieuses conventionnelles de ses pièces, je défie celles-ci en réinterprétant les « rituels vidés » de *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III* et *Le roi Lear* comme des instances d'horreur abjecte qui tendent vers une sorte de transcendance laïque.

En pensant au rituel plutôt que seulement à la religion, je participe au débat plus large au sujet de la signification anthropologique du théâtre, en particulier la question de savoir comment le théâtre populaire émergent a reflété le changement dans la valeur accordée aux rituels pendant la Réforme protestante. Je soutiens que la fonction du rituel dans les pièces de Shakespeare est de servir de réponse aux sentiments paradoxaux de séparation et de proximité avec le divin pendant la Réforme. Le sacré laïque offre la possibilité que le théâtre puisse s'éloigner de la doctrine religieuse sans toutefois perdre son potentiel transcendant.

Ma méthodologie consiste en une interprétation de la souffrance chez Shakespeare en dialogue avec plusieurs études-clés en anthropologie et en psychologie—telles que les travaux de Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner et René Girard—pour comprendre la base psychologique du « sacré laïque » ainsi que son impact. Je conclus que nulle de ces trois pièces n'offre de finalité conventionnelle. Elles ouvrent plutôt les frontières entre le sacré et le profane, le pur et l'impur, le bien et le mal, et les croyances religieuses et laïques, nous forçant ainsi à contempler une sorte d'absence de sens. En révélant la fragilité des systèmes porteurs de sens, les actes abjects et horribles commis dans ces pièces créent un sens du sacré qui transcende les sources traditionnelles d'autorité, transformant ainsi le théâtre en un outil servant à comprendre et à interroger la société.

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1. Introduction

In the middle of the Goth army's march towards a Rome plagued by bloody sacrifice and dismemberment, one solider strays from the army to find the villainous Aaron hiding in an impossible ruin:

> Renowned Lucius, from our troops I strayed
> To gaze upon a ruinous monastery,
> And as I earnestly did fix mine eye
> Upon the wasted building, suddenly
> I heard a child cry underneath a wall. (*Titus Andronicus* 5.1.20-24)

What is a monastery doing in pagan Rome? Johnathan Bate argues that this anachronistic monastery scene evokes the *Translatio imperii ad Teutonicos*, which analogized the Goth's defeat of Rome with humanist reformers' demand for religious freedom (19). Lukas Erne disputes Bate's interpretation of the Goth's return to Rome as an endorsement of the Reformation's triumphant rejuvenation of religion, arguing instead that the Goth soldier's apparent sorrow about the destruction of monasteries is evidence for Shakespeare's latent Catholic sympathies (145). While the Goth's description of gazing "earnestly" implies his fascination with the ruins, the Goth's speech does not definitively show regret or triumph. "Ruinous" both means a dilapidated building and something that brings about one's ruin ("ruinous, adj"); the monastery could be ruinous because it spread false notions of religion. "Wasted building" could decry the monastery's decay or recognize the building itself as having been defiled by false religion ("wasted, adj."). Such ambiguous language parallels the debate over the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536, which was viewed as a devastating, sacrilegious attack on "true" religion or as a purifying step towards

freedom from religious tyranny.[1] The passage's deliberate ambiguity has generated a new interest in how Shakespeare comments on the Reformation without aligning with either Protestantism or Catholicism.[2]

Importantly, the Goth turns from the anachronistic, religious relic to the devilish Aaron and his blackamoor child. Instead of elaborating upon the impact of the ruin, Shakespeare shifts the focus to Aaron and his child. Philip Schwyzer suggests that Aaron's hiding spot in the monastery is appropriate as "the ruin offers itself as an emblem for the play's most memorable character, and perhaps for the play as a whole, which consistently provides in place of the expected moral truths images of irreducible ambiguity" (101). Aaron is not just ambiguous, he is a liminal figure: reviled by the Goth's racism, Aaron reconciles his marginalization through his violent, villainous identity; his relentless violation of law, religion and morality makes him a transgressive, dangerous figure. Aaron's presence in the monastery—where monks and nuns used to live—suggests the pollution of Catholic religious ideas by a diabolical figure. Yet, his paternal

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[1] Peter Marshall describes the dissolution of the monasteries as "a spectacular, public, evangelical campaign, announcing the purification of the English Church, and denigrating the values and ideals the monasteries had stood for" (261). Evangelicals celebrated the sweeping away of "superstitious follies" (264). The mass reappropriation of sacred tools—including roods, bells, chalices, and altar cloths— for non-sacred uses suggest some level of popular support for these measures: "a long-standing disrespect toward monastic religion . . . was finally given vent" (Sommerville 21-22). Eamon Duffy, however, suggests that the fear of being accused of treason muted much conservative protest (385). The most dramatic form of opposition to the dissolution of the monasteries was the Pilgrimage of Grace, the religious dimension of which amassed enough popular support to pose a serious threat to the Tudor government (Sommerville 26-27; Duffy 399). Regardless of its popular support (or lack thereof), the dissolution of the monasteries marked a change in the meaning of religion (Marshall 266). Sommerville argues that this change was a secularization: the monastery ruins, therefore, represented a break with past traditions, a temporal shift characteristic to secularity (26). The destruction of the monasteries, however, can also be understood "as a transformed sacredness, not the end of the sacred place (MacCulloch 634).

[2] Philip Schwyzer argues that the monastery shows Shakespeare's ability to "recognize and exploit the ruined monastery as a culturally intelligible emblem of ambiguity" (99). Stephanie Bahr agrees that *Titus*'s anachronisms "resist any consistently partisan reading," suggesting instead that Shakespeare uses to chaos of the Reformation to "characterize the savage strife of the play's pagan past" (249). Nicholas R. Moschovakis also observes the Reformation context's influence on the play's violence; for Moschovakis, the anachronisms in *Titus* "question the legitimacy of violence as a means of establishing and preserving Christianity" (460). Helga L. Duncan notes a similar resistance to the conflict of the Reformation in the play: "The playwright, by staging the tragic profanation of ancient holy sites and the grotesque counter-reformations it produces, offers a bleak portrait of spatial and spiritual displacement in a culture on the cusp of profound religious change" (426).

affection for his child highlights another social destabilization: along with the dissolution of the monasteries, the Reformation challenged the religious practice of sanctuary (Sommerville 31).[3] Lucius's demand to hang the infant before its father, therefore, becomes associated with a loss of religious protection. This paradoxical sense of decay, defilement, violence, and purification reflects a reckoning with the destabilization of the Reformation.

This destabilization was not just marked by decaying ruins, but by public executions and decaying bodies. Violence and suffering were a more common part of early modern life (Mullaney 41). Nevertheless, the pace and scale of violence during the Reformation was staggering; for example, Mary Tudor's execution of around three hundred followers of Luther in her reign was unprecedented (Duffy 560). The popularity of John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* reinforces the impact of the Reformation's violence: apart from the Bible, the *Book of Martyrs* was the most omnipresent book in early modern England (Bahr n244). Part of this impact derives from how Foxe's focus on the victim's humanity "demystified death" (Anderson 115). Early modern culture was already anxious about Death's universalizing, shameful and destructive power: for some, the Protestant abolition of Purgatory exacerbated these fears (Neill 39). For others, Protestantism expunged ostentatious traditions, allowing one to be closer to God. For instance, in his final sermon, *Death's Duel,* Donne overcomes fears of death's universalizing potential by having faith in his eventual resurrection: "a gate into heaven I shall have, for from the Lord is the cause of my life, and with God the Lord are the issues of death" (Donne 21). Loss or gain, secu-

[3] Sanctuary gave the Church an exceptional authority over the state in certain circumstances: "it had been a notable triumph of the Church to be allowed to shelter offenders until they could be delivered to the proper authorities or abjure the realm, or even to house them permanently in a kind of monastic imprisonment" (Sommerville 30). The right to sanctuary was widely respected, and the occasional violation by monarchs (such as Henry VII) was accompanied by public apologies (Sommerville 30). Henry VIII limited sanctuary's powers, and, by 1624, King James I completely eliminated the sanctuary privilege (Pope 696). Sommerville connects the loss of sanctuary to as another step in the secularization of religious space during the Reformation (31). The loss of sanctuary, however, can also be seen as another contentious change in values, laws, and morality. It could be either a violation and a loss of security, or another purgation of outdated laws that enforced religious tyranny.

larizing or transcendental, the Reformation's reckoning with the divine erupted in "extreme mental and physical violence," which could generate an experience of alienation:

> Brecht talked of 'alienation', Verfremdung, a process of making the familiar unfamiliar in order to shock his theatre audiences into taking control of their perceptions of what was going on in the drama. The reformers, suddenly finding the Pope to be the devil's agent and the miracle of the Mass the most evil moment in their earthly experience, would have known exactly what Brecht was trying to say. (MacCullogh 19)

The shift in religious understanding during the Reformation, therefore, is best understood not in terms of loss, but in terms of a shift in the understanding of the divine.[4] This shift has psychological consequences: if religious meaning is subject to change, how does one properly understand the divine? Is there even a divine at all? What rituals need to be followed—what objects are still sacred? What differentiates a suffering criminal from a martyr?

Shakespeare's theatre unites the question of suffering and transcendence to wrangle this reckoning about the divine. This claim is not original: many scholars have connected the extreme level of suffering in Shakespeare's tragedies to religious sentiments. Yet, as the debate over the "ruinous monastery" shows, Shakespeare's works also resists any singular meaning. As a response to this resistance, I argue that the suffering in Shakespeare generates a feeling of transcendence that is not associated with any particular religious point of view. To understand how this transcendence is possible, I will step back from Christian theology towards a more universal anthropological focus on ritual. Ritual is a useful tool for circumventing the religious debate as rituals are used to represent and designate sacred structures in all religious creeds, and even in

[4] Bahr notes that the threat of extreme suffering over the interpretation of how to properly worship the divine created a psychological, "interpretative violence" (245). For example, one side's "martyr" was another's "heretic" (243). This pattern of debating over the meaning of a single symbol reoccurs in many of Shakespeare's tragedies, for example, the debate over whether Alarbus is a proper sacrificial victim in *Titus Andronicus* (see section 2.3.1).

some aspects of secular life. The Reformation's shift in religious values, therefore, also caused a shift in rituals.[5]

Theatre and ritual are also strongly connected: the first tragedies were ritual performances, part of the religious discourse during the festival of Dionysus (Sourvinou-Inwood 1).[6] Many scholars are involved in determining how emerging popular theatre navigated the Reformation's shift in the value of rituals.[7] These impacts are often evaluated through a political lens: one effect of ritual is to reinforce political and social values through collective social witnessing (Moore and Myerhoff 16).[8] For example, Naomi Conn Liebler argues that, although Shakespeare's plays depict the rupture of social structures, these works ultimately celebrate the protagonist's heroic effort "to keep Nature's molds from cracking" and valorize the foundational elements that allow for the community's continued survival (25). Rather than focusing on the possible political outcomes of the theatre, my thesis will use Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as articulated in *Powers of Horror* to focus on theatre's subversive *psychological* effects. By focusing

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[5] See Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700*. In particular, Hutton notes that by 1570 the elaborate ritual year that structured much of medieval religious life was essentially gone (110).

[6] The performances themselves occurred after an elaborate procession, sacrifices to the gods and the purification of the theatre with pig's blood (Rabinowitz 61).

[7] Given its liminal and subversive position in London's Liberties, Elizabethan theatre also possessed a unique license to criticize the conditions of its own marginality (Mullaney 56). Steven Mullaney argues that the theatre's position as an emerging cultural formation allowed it to see the dominant order "*through* its various cultural Others" resulting in "not so much a subversive drama as one rich in oblique commentary on its own times" (131). Anthony Dawson argues that while the theatre remained rooted in religious culture, its appropriation of religious language and ways of thinking and feeling had a secularizing function for Elizabethan society (244). Naomi Conn Liebler is careful to distinguish ritual from ritualistic elements in theatre: "By Shakespeare's time and in his plays, ritual actions or their abrogations are embedded in secular representations" (25). Liebler sees these ritualistic elements in tragedy as tools that highlight matters of the greatest social importance which are investigated—and ultimately reinforced—by the drama (34). Similarly, rather than attempting to identify Shakespeare's theatre as a ritual, this thesis will investigate how his theatre interacts with ideas of ritual and their effects; thus, it will distinguish between rituals that occur in the texts and possible elements of the performance that have a "ritualistic" impact on the audience.

[8] To elaborate, effective collective ceremony has a double-sided effect: "Being the most obviously contrived form of social contact, [rituals] epitomize the made-up quality of culture and almost invite notice as such. Yet their very form and purpose is to discourage untrammeled inquiry into such questions" (Moore and Myerhoff 18). Making such social values visible reinforces their presence, yet at the cost of revealing that these values are constructed, that they are a flimsy structure against surrounding chaos.

on the theatre as a space ripe with the potential for psychological and ritual meaning, this thesis aims for a middle ground between those who see the theatre as a purely secular institution and those who seek to identify its specifically religious affiliation. While I view the theatre as a secular space, I recognize that this secular space implements elements of ritual to navigate the changing definitions of the divine, allowing it to evoke a sense of the sacred that was not associated with any religious order—a sense that I dub the "secular sacred."

The idea of the secular sacred is dependent on the possibility that theatre-based rituals can be both non-religious and sacred. Moore and Myerhoff explore this secular ritual, noting that many everyday activities (from graduation ceremonies to birthday parties) contain the structures and shared understanding of communal values that define an effective ritual (4).[9] Both religious and non-religious (secular) rituals are involved in revealing "unseen" values: religious rituals show the supernatural; for anthropologists, secular rituals make visible the invisible social relationships, ideas, and values that structure society (Moore and Myerhoff 14). Just as the supernatural (Gods, angels, devils) are often thought of as sacred, the unseen values that secular ritual highlights (and, in some cases, serves to protect) are sacred: "if sacred is understood in the sense of 'unquestionable' and traditionalizing, then something may be sacred, yet not religious" (Moore and Myerhoff 20). Thus, the feeling of suffering and vulnerability that is evoked by the suffering in Shakespeare's work can be both secular and sacred, so long as it reveals the invisible.

[9] Moore and Myerhoff identify six key characteristics of a ritual: 1) repetition, 2) a self-consciously acted performance, 3) "special' stylization that calls attention to symbols, 4) ordered proceedings, 5) evocative staging that produces an attentive state of mind and 6) a collective dimension that gives the ritual social meaning (7-8). This list of traits allows for the possibility of both religious and secular ritual: an elaborate Catholic baptism and a high-school graduation both fall into the broader category of "ritual."

The recognition of invisible social truths has profound psychological effects. According to Moore and Myerhoff, ritual "can be construed as an attempt to structure the way people *think* about social life" (4). Hence effective ritual has a unique ability to generate an extreme concentration that Victor Turner explains as causing "a loss of consciousness and a feeling of 'flow'" (Moore and Myerhoff 8). Formless and ego-less, the experience of flow may seem to be peaceful, yet Turner complicates this peace by suggesting that certain "levelling, frame-breaking, hierarchy-toppling" symbols are best able to evoke group flow, including the "serious form of reference in terms of the shared experience of the group to what equalizes us all, the biological facts of "birth, copulation, and death,' and "the troubles of our proud and angry dust" which teach us that we *are* dust" ("Variations on a Theme of Liminality" 52). Such evocations of death and decay suggest the possibility that this loss of self is simultaneously freeing and disturbing, that it connects to a sense of human vulnerability.

Similarly, theatre engages with themes of death and vulnerability: Aristotle defines tragedy through its ability to create the catharsis—the purgation aroused by the conjuring of pity and fear in audience members, emotions that are generated by viewing spectacles of suffering (56). "Purgation" hints at the theatre's religious function: such catharsis was designed to cleanse the population of negative feelings. Antonin Artaud, on the other hand, views theatre's psychological power less as an instrument for cleansing than for infection: true theatre "discharges feeling onto the audience like an epidemic" (26). This rhetoric of infection, while positive for Artaud, is also recognized by antitheatricalists who denigrate the theatre's psychological power: early modern opposition against the theatre was partially based on a fear that it would corrupt the public's "minds and manners, by drawing them on to all licentious dissolution and excess of vice, to

the very utter subversion of their states" (Prynne 294).[10] The range of reactions to theatre's psychological impact suggest a reverence and a fear—a recognition that drama has the potential to reveal something about humanity that we are not yet able to identify.

Theatre, ritual, and suffering are all linked by their ability to push us to the edge of our understanding and induce new psychological states. Part of this ability comes from a feeling of chaos—of danger—that ritual is designed to cordon off: "underlying all rituals is an ultimate danger . . . the possibility that we encounter ourselves making up our conceptions of the world, society, our very selves" (Moore and Myerhoff 18). This state of danger can be better understood by thinking about what Kristeva calls "abjection":

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. . . Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)

Abjection is both a "revolt of being"—locating it inside the embodied person—and a force that causes the person experiencing it to be "literally beside himself." "Beside himself" implies that the abject figure is beside himself with emotion, and that he is removed from his body, standing beside it—a ghost. This contradictory nature is paramount to abjection: abjection is a feeling relegated to the borderlands of the human subconscious. Its existence is dependent on opposition:

> I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me.' Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. (Kristeva 10)

[10] Specifically, Jonas Barish notes that part of this attack was against acting itself, which was seen as a deceitful displacement of the divine Self (that God intended for us) with the Other (333).

The abject is not simply a thing that causes dislocation. Abjection is not some possessing ghost. Abjection is also not the space, the dreaded void, caused by this replacement, but a safeguard against inevitable meaninglessness: "A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards." (Kristeva 2) In the face of total blankness, abjection is the psychological response that fends off the void.

Theatre—particularly tragedy's—investment in images of suffering— "an action of destructive or painful description, such as the deaths that take place in the open . . . agonies of pain, wounds, and so on" (Aristotle 56)—makes it a space ripe for abjection. In simplest terms, abjection is the feeling of profound horror and vulnerability that occurs when one is reminded of one's own embodiment within flesh. By forcing one further into the workings of the body—the mechanics of the heart, the factory-line of digestion, the excretion that is birth—abjection causes a revolt that removes the self from the body. It is the cry of the mind saying, "No, I am not a physical being—I am not an object, a body, a thing— for I am a *mind* and I am *immortal*." Therefore, abjection can be felt when one encounters vomit, feces, pus, and corpses (Kristeva 3). All these excrements remind us of the physical and mental limits of our bodies. Kristeva also links abjection to the postmodernist concept of the transcendental signified. When it is revealed that there are no concrete meanings that knits systems (languages, religion, etc.) together, then one is faced with utter collapse. Abjection presents itself before this collapse. Like a stray cat balancing along the fence in an alleyway, abjection is present whenever there is a border: inside/outside, body/mind, meaning/meaninglessness, pure/impure, and holy/unholy. By recognizing the

arbitrariness of all borders, abjection holds me “at the border of my condition as a living being” (Kristeva 3). This borderland is a land of significance.

As abjection can be found at the borders, and as rituals seek to solidify borders, abjection and ritual are intertwined. To fully understand this ritual connection, Kristeva refers to both Sigmund Freud’s conception of taboo as the sacred and the unclean and Mary Douglas’s work on pollution rituals. Douglas argues that these rituals serve to separate the unclean from the sacred in society, and, by doing so, they solidify the rules that govern society (4). However, this idea is complicated by the blurred distinction between the sacred and the unclean in what she dubs “primitive societies”: by claiming that certain substances have the power to pollute, that they must be separated from the divine, these substances take on their own role in defining divine objects (8). Douglas, however, concludes that the sacred and the unclean are not interchangeable: rather, the unclean is sacralised by accompanying religious rituals (160). Kristeva pushes back against Douglas’s conclusion, claiming that items that are designated as unclean are also sacred: “Because it is excluded as a possible object, . . . abominated as ab-ject, as abjection, filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the "self and clean" the order that is thus only (and therefore, always already) sacred” (65). The abject is the defiled. It is also the sacred. Hence abjection is both perversion and sublimation (Kristeva 89). This conflation of previously separate values infuses the abject with a sacred recognition: revealing the sacred and the defiled to be one and the same is a universal truth; an experience that could be seen as transcendent. Therefore, the sacred and the defiled will be used interchangeably throughout the work, with “non-sacred” being used to designate mundane objects that are not associated with religious order. Importantly, the identification of the sacred/defiled shifts throughout religions, thus Kristeva claims “abjection accompanies all religious structurings . . . Several structurations

of abjection should be distinguished, each one determining a specific form of the sacred" (Kristeva 17). For example, Kristeva notes that Christianity interiorizes the abject by sublimating impurity (the defiled) into sin (127). Like in pagan ritual, abjection is linked to the spiritual, but, in Christianity, it explicitly offers a space for transcendence: confessing sin brings one closer to the border between the angelic and the demonic; it brings one closer to the law of God (Kristeva 127). Thus, abjection is simultaneously a degradation and a source of transcendence.

The purpose of ritual in Shakespeare's plays is not necessarily to conserve, but instead to respond to the paradoxical feelings of separation from and closeness to the divine that was occurring during the Reformation. Just as ritual aims to hide disorder, abjection highlights disorder, showing the arbitrariness of all relationships and pushing us towards a trance-like state that makes the audience more receptive to the play's claims. The profound horror that we experience at the sight of blinding, dismemberments and arbitrary death pushes us below the world of the Christian god, past the territory of atheistic nihilism, and into a border realm approaching the divine—the dwelling place of the secular sacred.

In order to enter this dwelling place, we must enter ritual from the darkness and chaos—through abjection. I aim to muck up the scholarship on *Titus Andronicus, Richard III,* and *King Lear* by reconstituting their "emptied rituals" as moments of abject horror that reach towards a form of secular transcendence.[11] Each of these plays has generated critical debate about their disturbing and sometimes irreligious content. Furthermore, all three involve distinctly abject modes of suffering: dismemberment, incest, and corpses. In order to understand the plays' anthropological impact, this thesis will frequently take a two-pronged approach, both investigating the depictions of ritual in the plays themselves, and also considering the performance as a ritual in it-

[11] This project continues the work I began in my honour's thesis for McGill University, where I focused on themes of horror and abjection in *King Lear*.

self. Anthropological sources like the work of Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and René Girard will be consulted to situate this analysis within the established discussion of ritual. Since there are no records of the Elizabethan performances, this analysis will be mostly textual, and references to modern performances will be limited. Nevertheless, the consistent critical reactions to the plays—regardless of the performance—suggests that this approach will be fruitful: for example, whether performed in the 18th century or in modern times, audiences and critics alike are shocked by Cordelia's death. This commonality suggests that the plays' impact is not limited to staging or performance (not that these cannot enhance the plays' horror), but that there is something inherent in the plot and text of the plays that evokes the feeling of the secular sacred.

In the first chapter, I look beyond *Titus Andronicus*'s overt debate on the "Roman-ness" of sacrifice and reinfuse the play with horror. *Titus Andronicus* is widely recognized to be filled with botched sacrifices: after all, the "irreligious" sacrifice of Alarbus starts the play's cycle of revenge (*Titus* 1.1.133). The mechanism of this failure is less addressed: is the un-Roman nature of these sacrifices really at stake, or is there something more fundamental that makes the gore intolerable? Given René Girard's theory of the sacrificial crisis, the improper sacrifice suggests that Roman society is not only grappling with the political consequences of the Goths, but also a collapse of all systems of meaning (49). By focusing on the play's multiple sacrifices, Titus's dismemberment and mad-humour, Lavinia's controversial death, and Aaron's final punishment, I argue that the discomfort produced by this gory play is abject: it pushes us to the limits of our consciousness and reveals the fragility of the systems in place to hold back meaninglessness.

King Richard III—the subject of my second chapter—has also incurred critical censure for its conflation of humour and gore (Siemon 2). Much of this discomfort stems from the fact that—despite his claim to be "lamely and unfashionable"— the titular murderer is magnetic

(*Richard III* 1.1.22). Already isolated from society by his deformity, Richard's identification as "rudely stamped" evokes defilement and contagion (*RIII* 1.1.16). By reconfiguring himself as the "Queen's abjects"—something that should be purged from England—Richard also translates himself into a sacred figure (*RIII* 1.1.106). His delight in murder, gore, and incest amplifies his defilement. Like the state of abjection, Richard III is both repugnant and charming, terrifying, and pitiful, and sacred and defiled. His actions and his character are rife with potential for the secular sacred. In addition, the play's fixation on curses raises questions about its religious character: are these curses part of religious doctrine, or are they emptied rituals that emphasize how, for England, the only true source of the divine is rooted in horror?

In my third chapter, I prove how Shakespeare's engagement with the secular sacred culminates in *King Lear*. Like *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear* is filled with dismemberment (Gloucester's blinding), an incestuous father-daughter relationship, and plenty of corpses. Critics, however, have more respect for *King Lear*, by and large reading the injustice of Cordelia's death as tragic and Christ-like (Cavell 73). Lear's descent into madness, Edgar's parody of abjection, Gloucester's horrific blinding, Lear's incestuous attachment to Cordelia, and the final tableau of corpses all create an apocalyptic conclusion that beckons "the promised end" (*King Lear* 5.3.261). *King Lear* demands to be recognized as a call for the divine in a world increasingly faced with meaningless horror.

2. Bloody Deeds and Vomiting Woes: Sacrifice, Gore and Abjection in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

The extreme level of gore in *Titus Andronicus* has elicited an array of critical responses, ranging from Samuel Johnson's assertion that the horror "can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience" (166), to T.S. Eliot's dismissal of the play as "one of the stupidest and most uninspired players ever written" (qtd. in Bate 33), to D.J. Palmer's redemption of the gore as "stretch[ing] the capacities of art to give them adequate embodiment and expression" (320). An incredibly popular play in its time, Shakespeare's earliest tragedy was sidelined after the Restoration, only being somewhat restored in the late 20th century (Bate 1). Something about the play's capacity for human cruelty and suffering resonates with contemporary cynicism. Nevertheless, in scholarship, there is an impulse to explain horror, guts, gore, and dismemberment through symbolism.[12] While these readings were necessary to redeem the play when it was widely reviled, sanitizing the play through various theoretical mechanisms represses the innate psychological response generated by *Titus*'s gore. Gore in *Titus* is a mechanism of ritual performance. Blood not only serves as a medium of horror, but also as the conveyor of impurity that jeopardizes Roman society's many sacrifices. If the gore in the play makes the audience—makes you—uncomfortable, then it is functioning exactly as intended. Why else does Titus insist on the

[12] Even in Claire Kimball's paper on dismemberment in *Titus Andronicus*, she turns away from the Elizabethan fear of bodily dismemberment to performance strategies that increase the metonymic power of, for examples, hands in the play. Despite this focus on dismemberment, Kimball asserts that "viewers do not attend Shakespearean productions with overt social preoccupations over integrated or violated bodies" (117). Kimball justifies her stance by asserting that we no longer share early modern religious fears of alterations in physical appearances affecting our soul (117). In her analysis of ritual in *Titus Andronicus*, Naomi Conn Liebler notes that this fear may not have been as potent for Elizabethan audiences on account of their regular exposure to horrors like public executions (132). Other theorists have chosen to focus on the political: many theatre adaptations have recentered the play's narrative around Aaron, the Moor; Noémie Ndiaye has investigated Aaron's impact from a postcolonial lens; others, such as Coppélia Kahn, have made useful feminist readings of the play. As mentioned in the introduction, there is also a lively debate over the play's religious character: Nicholas R. Moschovakis and Stephanie Bahr view the play's violence as an attempt to grapple with the suffering in the Reformation.

psychological impact of seeing the mutilated Lavinia? *Titus Andronicus'* engagement with themes of violence and ritual offers a possibility for meaning outside of the conventional religious or secular dichotomy: it reaches towards a theatre of abjection, which can bring forward a strong sense of the sacred without conventional religious transcendence.

The secular sacred provides an alternative role for ritual in *Titus*. Naomi Conn Liebler recognizes multiple rituals that occur in the play—including the ancient rituals of *sparagmos* (dismemberment) and *omophagia* (ingestion)—but claims that Shakespeare "aborts" their ritual intention (renewal) in favour of a creating political chaos (139). She claims that the lack of agreement about the play's various rituals results in a loss of cultural definitions—an annihilation—which reflected Elizabethan anxieties over its cultural superiority (Liebler 146). The destruction of meaning and defilement of ritual also has intense psychological effects. D.J. Palmer's fixation on the characters' own inadequacy to grasp the enormity of the horror that they witness verges on an understanding of abjection:

> Ritual and game, the solemn and the farcical, are also grotesquely mingled in Titus' enactment of his suffering, as though it is only in these forms of play that he can realise extremities of horror and cruelty that defy normal comprehension. The horrific of its very nature is that from which the mind shrinks, that which repels the senses, feelings and understanding, but for Titus there is no such evasion. Titus' passion is a continued struggle, not merely to endure the unendurable, but to express the inexpressible; he performs his woes out of the need to grasp what is all too real but virtually inconceivable in its enormity. (330).

The paradox of expressing the inexpressible evokes the linguistic crisis that a borderline patient experiences when faced with abjection: "[abjection's] symptom is the rejection and reconstruc-

tion of languages" (Kristeva 45). Just as abjection helps us understand the crisis of language that Titus experiences, it also explains how the disturbing violence in *Titus* has value that can redeem the play that otherwise has been considered Shakespeare's worst tragedy.

In order to understand how Shakespeare works towards the secular sacred, I will begin with an anthropological analysis of the how the sacrifice of Alarbus creates a precedent of ritual violation that verges on the abject. This ritual violation leads to an outburst of abject violence: violence designed to transgress, debase, and (to an extent) revel in pain. The reactions to Lavinia's mutilation emphasize that violence has the potential to generate a psychological state that, while not directly associated with the Roman gods, still verges on transcendence. Although the Andronicii search for the gods in the fourth act, their silence makes the final bloody tableau even more impactful. Instead of recognizing how the initial sacrifice caused this crisis, the Romans scapegoat the villainous Aaron as the instigator of the play's suffering. The concluding burials (or, in the case of Aaron and Lavinia, improper burials) continues the pattern of ritual violation set off in the first act. Although the play moves towards the reconstitution of the state and the family, such consistent ritual violation creates a countercurrent to the idea of a restored Roman state. Without this final secular tool to ward off violence, the audience is left with a stage filled with dismemberments, gore, and defilement—a display that generates the secular sacred.

2.1 "Religiously they ask a sacrifice": The Sacrificial Crisis and the Murder of Alarbus

While there are multiple attempts at creating some cohesive burial ritual in *Titus*, the inconsistency in funeral rites muddles their significance for the Romans and their Goth victims. The varied forms of burials suggests that the boundary between the sacred and the defiled in Roman society is ambiguous and shifting, which makes the sacrifice of Alarbus more shocking. The extent to which human sacrifice might have been practiced in Roman society is uncertain: alt-

hough he asserts that the sacrifice would be disturbing for a Christian, Elizabethan audience, Richard Marienstras claims that this sacrifice "corresponds to what Shakespeare and his audience considered to be Roman custom" (40). Jonathan Bate, however, asserts that Rome's association with civilized culture means that it would use animal rather than human sacrifice (5). Alarbus's dismemberment, therefore, would mark the entry of barbarism into civilization (Bate 5). Regardless of its historical inaccuracy, Alarbus's sacrifice fails to achieve the peace it is designed to create, which reveals the arbitrariness behind the killing. To reveal the precise mechanism of this injustice, I will investigate the sacrifice using Victor Turner's technique for classifying symbols within ritual and René Girard's ideas on the sacrificial crisis. Observing the flimsy structure that justifies the sacrifice removes any religious palliative behind the suffering, bringing horror to the surface. Alarbus's death, therefore, is both a moment of sacred veneration and a grave injustice.

A combination of religious beliefs and unspoken psychological fears rationalizes the sacrifice. Titus openly evokes the religious realm of the Styx as grounds for the burial: "Why suffer'st thou thy sons unburied yet / To hover on the dreadful shore of Styx?" (*Titus* 1.1.91). The burial, therefore, is meant to spread peace and end his sons suffering. Lucius's abrupt turn to sacrifice heightens the stakes by suggesting that the spirits must be appeased with a sacrifice:

> Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,
> That we may hew his limbs and on a pile
> *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh
> Before this earthly prison of their bones,
> That so the shadows be not unappeased
> Nor we disturbed by prodigies on earth. (1.1.99-104)

Unlike Titus, Lucius does not evoke a specific religious precedent, making the sacrifice already seem somewhat impromptu. Although human sacrifice may or may not have been practiced in Roman society, the fear of vengeful spirits is found in multiple cultures. Freud suggests that this fear is due to the "taboo" upon the dead: 'primitive' societies create narratives of vengeful spirits as an attempt to displace their hostility towards the dead (and our fear of contaminated corpses) (*Totem and Taboo* 67).[13] Kristeva pushes beyond Freud's idea of the taboo, claiming that corpses force us to identify with our own mortality and conceive the ending of our consciousness—our world— which is a psychologically staggering experience (3). Most likely, these corpses are hidden in coffins. Coffins, nevertheless, have their own grisly implications: a body in coffin is too decomposed to be shown; a body in a coffin does not contain any differentiating factors to distinguish them from you. While the Romans openly announce that their sacrifice is required to appease the shades, it is also motivated by a desire to remove the corpses from view, both by their burial and (symbolically) by their destruction. As much as it would be appealing to destroy these corpses—to destroy the vision of death that they bring to society—to do so would be a violation: the corpses are still important because they used to be Titus's sons. Obliterating honourable corpses would extinguish class boundaries and replicate the undifferentiating power of death.[14] Instead, the Romans displace their desire to demolish the corpses onto the Goth's body: Alarbus's corpse will be both dismembered and burned—utterly annihilated. Alarbus, therefore, is not just a substitute for the Titus's lost sons; he is also a substitute for their impure corpses.

[13] For more on the connection between the taboo on the dead and corpses on stage, see section 4.2.2.
[14] Anxieties about the undifferentiating power of death were potent during the early modern era (Neill 14).

While the explanation of appeasing spirits and destroying corpses offer two potential symbolic values, another meaning behind the sacrifice is implied by the motif of blood. René Girard claims that all sacrifice is conducted to prevent an outbreak of violence in communities:

> How can one cleanse the infected members of all trace of pollution? Does there exist some miraculous substance potent enough not only to resist infection, but also to purify, if need be, the contaminated blood? Only blood itself, blood whose purity has been guaranteed by the performance of appropriate rites—the blood, in short, of sacrificial victims—can accomplish this feat. (36)

Titus is "returned / Bleeding to Rome" (I.1.35): himself and his soldiers are contaminated by blood spilt through violence. Accordingly, blood is associated with abject, feminine impurity: Kristeva describes how "menstrual blood . . . stands for danger from within identity" for it contains "a cataclysmic power . . . not only of ritual impurity, but also of the power—of pollution" (71, 77). If the soldiers entered Rome without being cleansed, there is danger that this impurity would contaminate the city. Alarbus is "marked" as impure because, like the soldiers, he has shed blood in battle (1.1.128). Tamora later argues that the similarity between Titus's sons and her son make the sacrifice unjust. However, Alarbus's participation in battle, combined with his status as a Goth (an outsider), make him a good sacrificial victim Roman eyes: he is similar enough that the community can identify with him, but different enough that, theoretically, Romans will not be enraged by his death.[15] Therefore, Alarbus becomes a symbol for all returning Roman soldiers. His death should rid them of their blood-stained pollution.

Lucius associates the sacrifice with cleansing as he encourages the soldiers: "Let's hew his limbs till they be *clean* consumed" (1.1.130, emphasis added). Burning the body transforms it

[15] Girard explains this two-sided requirement by emphasizing the concept of the monstrous double: separation from society makes the victim monstrous (and sacred); similarity makes it a double (271-72).

into incense by sublimating the flesh: "Alarbus's limbs are lopped / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire, / who smoke like incense doth perfume the sky" (1.1.146-48). By lopping off Alarbus's limbs, the Romans are literally disarming the returning soldiers, preventing them from causing further violence. The juxtaposition between "entrails" and "perfume" is perverse—it foreshadows the grisly punning after Lavinia's mutilation. Entrails are a site of impurity: they contain the excrement that is associated with menstrual blood and abjection. Both fluids contain subversive potential: "the rites surrounding defilement, particularly those involving excremental and menstrual variants, shift the *border* . . . that separates the body's territory from the signifying chain; they illustrate the boundary between semiotic authority and symbolic law" (Kristeva 73). By transforming these polluting fluids into ritual "incense," Rome is attempting to purify defiled substances (preparing the bodies for the grave) and to cement the authority of Roman law.

These explanations show that the ritual is an attempt to separate the world into categories. The earth is a fleshly realm of violence, flesh, and impurity. The events on earth are supposedly dictated by the heavenly realm (e.g., the sacrifice is required to prevent the shadows from enacting their revenge on earth). The tomb is a site of mediation between these two realms. It is a "sacred receptacle" that does not allow for binary movement between heaven and earth: Titus notes "How many sons hast thou of mine in store /That thou wilt never render me more!" (1.1.97-98). The tomb is the opposite of the womb: a pit that absorbs life, that will not provide more sons. Stripped of polluting flesh and blood, the tomb is an "earthly prison of their bones" (1.1.102). Unlike earth and the heavens, the tomb is a world of rest: "Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells, / . . . No noise, but silence and eternal sleep / In peace and honour rest you here, my sons" (1.1.156-58). The anaphora "here" suggests that, for every quality of the tomb, the opposite exists on earth. Titus predicts the very treason and envy that will destroy the Andronicii

clan. We can trace the boundaries between these three realms that the Romans are trying to solidify:

Earth	Heavens	Tomb
Dead sons	Spirits	Corpses
Sacrifice	Revenge	Rest
Flesh (Impurity)	Spirit (Purity)	Bones (Purity/Impurity)

Alarbus should be a substitute for Titus's sons. His death would repeat their death, satisfying their desire for revenge and preventing any heavenly intervention on earth. Subconsciously, Alarbus's dismemberment allows Rome to displace its hostility towards corpses onto an appropriate victim. It also cleanses the city of polluting flesh, excrement, and violence.

These conditions are only satisfied if the sacrificial act is distinguished from arbitrary violence by being ordered, repeatable and consensually agreed upon. According to Girard, ritual sacrifices "are multiple, endlessly repeated" (102). Alarbus's sacrifice does not seem to be part of a repeated ritual, but entirely improvised: why are the "Roman rites" not named (1.1.146)? Where are the ritual chants and the veneration of the victim, which often accompany sacrifice? The funeral that we witness is never repeated in the text. Additionally, the ritual hinges on two substitutions: the substitution of one member of community (the sacrificial victim) for the entire community, and the substitution of this new victim for the original sacrificial victim (Girard 102). In Girard's thinking, this original victim is a theoretical victim of ancient violence—the violence that causes all future conflict and impurity (102). For the ritual to be effective, the community must be "truly unanimous" in their conviction on both substitutions (102). Both Romans

and Goths must agree that Alarbus is a symbol for Titus's recently slain sons; both must agree that Alarbus represents impurity and that, by killing him, the city will be cleansed. This consensus in lacking in *Titus*, which prevents the sacrifice from being effective.

The disagreement on the sacrifice's meaning is best expressed by Tamora's plea for her son's life. Beyond generating sympathy from the audience, Tamora's speech also distorts the Romans' symbolic binaries by emphasizing the similarities between the returning Romans and the proposed sacrificial victim:

> Stay, Roman brethren, gracious conqueror,
>
> Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> And if my sons were ever dear to thee,
>
> O, think my son to be as dear to me.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets
>
> For valiant doings in their country's cause?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods? (1.1.107-8, 110-11, 115-16, 120)

Titus previously uses "brethren" to describe the corpses that have already been interred ("Make way to lay them brethren" [1.1.92]). By using this term, Tamora evokes kinships between the Romans and the Goths; she could also be perceived as speaking to the very spirits that this sacrifice is supposed to appease (the brethren of the slain Andronicii). By paralleling the two civilization's "valiant doings," Tamora makes an ethical case for the son's life to be spared. As well, she blurs the distinction between the sacrificial victim (the impure "Other") and the re-

turning soldiers. Girard notes that prisoners of war were often used as a sacrificial victim as the victim must be "incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants" (12). Yet Tamora asserts that Alarbus can share these social bonds: her affection for her son humanizes the proposed pharmakos.[16] Titus attempts to reassert the distinctions between the soldiers by claiming "These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld / Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain" (1.1.124-25). The first "brethren" refers to his recently deceased sons; the second "brethren" to the deceased that died in previous battles. Despite his attempt to distinguish between this sense of familial honour between brethren from the "Goths," Titus's repetition of brethren shows the arbitrary cyclicality of Roman violence necessitated by Roman honour. If there have been generations of brothers dying for brothers, logically the Goths will want to avenge their slain son, who they also perceive as brethren. The very word "brethren" suggests that the victim has social connections, making him an illegitimate choice for sacrifice.

Next, Tamora argues against the efficacy of the ritual. Instead of cleansing the tomb of flesh and blood, purifying the city of pollution, "Andronicus, stain not thy tomb with blood" (1.1.119) suggests that the sacrifice will spread pollution into the site of the sacred. This language of staining is adopted by Demetrius after his brother's death: the sacrifice is a "bloody wrong" (1.1.143). By challenging the ritual's cleansing power, Tamora is contesting the religious order used to justify these killings. She also highlights how the ritual is potentially blasphemous as it places men in the position of deities: "Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods? / Draw

[16] In Ancient Greece, the pharmakos was a sacrificial victim who was paraded through the city to soak up its pollution before being exiled or killed in a public ceremony (Girard 94). This sacrifice was designed to cleanse the city of pollution, and a collection of victims were held at public expense in case of a major city crisis (Girard 94). Girard connects the pharmakon's position as an object of scorn and veneration as intertwined with their function: "the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance" (95). Nonetheless, the pharmakon was an object of pollution, a scapegoat, and a marginal social figure; Tamora's humanization of her son challenges his social liminality, making him an unsuitable person to be the pharmakos.

near them then in being merciful" (1.1.120-21). Thus, the binary between man and God (heaven and earth) is starting to collapse. By comparing Titus to nameless "gods," Tamora's speech shifts the focus from what distinguishes Romans and Goths to what universal human traits unite them. Titus's refusal of mercy— "Religiously, they ask a sacrifice"—feels hollow as no specific religion is evoked (1.1.127). Other than the Styx, there is no religious framework evoked in the scene. "They" is ambiguous: while it is meant to refer to the deceased sons, "they" could refer to Rome in general (and the bloodthirsty Lucius). If the sacrifice is done on behalf of human spirits, not gods, then it elevates the slain Andronicii to the level of gods—a clear violation. Thus, Tamora's cry, 'O, cruel, irreligious piety," rings true (1.1.133). The absence of a clear religious agreement over the meaning of the sacrifice makes Rome draw closer to barbarism.

By failing to establish unanimous meaning, the sacrifice sets off a pattern of defilement that acts on the symbols that were supposedly pure. Tamora's speech introduces new meanings to the binaries that the Romans are trying to establish. Before her plea, Alarbus was an outsider who was an ideal substitute for the slain Andronicii because he was similar to the slain sons and contaminated by violence. Tamora, however, humanizes her son. Thus, his sacrifice feels like an improvisational act of arbitrary violence. Each of the binaries between heaven and earth are disturbed. First, while the sacrifice is designed to encourage rest and prevent heaven's revenge, the Romans ignore the possibility of intervention by the Goths: Demetrius notes that "Alarbus goes to rest" but that the Goths will be armed "with opportunity of sharp revenge" (1.1.136-40). Next, Titus marks the spread of violence by killing his own son, Mutius (which ironically repeats the act that the funeral was meant to mourn). After initially refusing to bury Mutius, Titus eventually agrees, but the discrepancy between the funeral rituals reveals how the meaning behind the rites has begun to crumble: Mutius is placed in the tomb without a coffin, and his death requires no

sacrificial victim. His fleshy, blood-filled body contaminates the space that is supposed to contain pure bones. The collapse of ritual meaning has a greater impact for Rome as whole: "the violation of Roman burial rites by a Roman immediately establishes the pattern of ritual perversion and neglect that continues throughout the play to the end when the belated attempt is made to resurrect Rome from its own scattered seed" (Liebler 144). Importantly, the violation of ritual makes the sacrifice "bad" violence: as the violence has transgressed laws and morals, it generates the abject. The effect of this abjection is amplified by the on-stage gore.

This linguistic slippage between symbols and gradual collapse of ritual adds another layer to the violence that frequently makes critics condemn the play. For the Elizabethan audience, the distortion of funeral rites would have specific resonance: the loss of elaborate Catholic funeral rites after the Reformation exacerbated anxieties surrounding an increasingly secular death (Neill 38). On another level, because the sacrifice's value is not agreed upon by all parties, the Romans have unleashed violence and disorder: "the sacrificial distinction, the distinction between the pure and the impure, cannot be obliterated without obliterating all other differences as well" (Girard 49). In Girard's thinking, this obliteration represents a negative collapse—a void. Instead, the obliteration of differences can be seen as a sublimation: the defiled object (Alarbus) is also an object of sacred significance (a sacrificial victim, a son who is loved); thus, the sacred and the defiled are revealed to be one and the same. This process of revelation—of showing a universal truth—is tied to the definition of the sacred. It is also a psychologically turbulent experience—a moment of abjection. Revealing the arbitrariness of borders, therefore, generates the sacred. While there may be a void created for the Romans on stage, this idea of emptied meaning does not have to resonate with the audience's experience: we are aware that we are watching a performance of a failed ritual.

This additional performative element layers the play: what is poor ritual practice may still be good theatre. In the funeral procession, the images of violence—sacrifice, dismemberment, and corpses—infuse the performance with its own ritual value. The ritual collapse that we witness on stage exacerbates the experience of violent spectacle and approaches the borderlands of meaning accompanied by the abject. We witness on-stage suffering: even if Alarbus is killed off-stage, Mutius is murdered on-stage. As this violence is horrific and abject, the experience of viewing this suffering reminds us of our vulnerability and draws us toward "the place where meaning collapses" (2). However, by the end of the first scene, the symbols have not taken on their full meaning, and the actors have yet to experience the full extent of their suffering. Their reactions, in fact, seem less than human: for example, Titus's initial reaction to Bassianus's seizing Lavinia— "How sir? Are you in earnest then, my lord?" (1.1.281)—is anticlimactic, especially in comparison to his emotional outbursts about his daughter in later scenes.[17] As such, the experience of cruelty, abjection, and spectacle has not yet culminated.

2.2 "Such a sight will blind a father's eye": Dismemberment, Abjection, and the Reactions to Lavinia's Mutilation

The sacrificial crisis generated by Alarbus's sacrifice is certainly abject, and, by bringing us to the limits of meaning, it generates some sense of the secular sacred. Nevertheless, the ritual framework provides some explanation for the violence; the characters' reactions focus less on the physical violence than on the injustice of the sacrifice. In the play's latter acts, ritual is in-

[17] Part of this difference in characterization could be attributed to the question of the first act's authorship: although it was once a source of debate, the scholarly community now widely agrees that the first act of *Titus* was written George Peele (Bate 126). Peele's influence can also be seen in 4.1. and some parts of 2.2 (2.1 in the Arden version) (Bate 129). Bate suggests that this influence is most likely due to Shakespeare finishing the play or revising a finished version of the play (*Ur-Titus*) instead of an active collaboration (135). Either way, Shakespeare begins by closely following Peele's first act before going his own way (Bate 133). This divergence can explain how the spectacle of abjection culminates by turning away from a ritual framework and instead focusing on the character's very human reactions to increasingly violent crimes.

creasingly stripped away, redirecting the focus onto violence in itself. Revenge and revelling in crimes fill the void of ritual justice, making the gore even more horrific—more abject.[18] The move from sacrifice to revenge begins during the hunting scene. In this scene, the villainous Aaron's plot for "villainy and vengeance" (1.1.621) comes to fruition: Demetrius and Chiron murder Bassianus, Tamora ignores Lavinia's plea for mercy, Lavinia is raped near her husband's body (Chiron claims he will "make his trunk a dead pillow to our lust" [1.1.130]), and Quintus and Martius are framed for Bassianus's murder. All of these events are abject. They are also strikingly like the first sacrifice. Alarbus's corpse is desecrated in the first act; Bassinus's in the second; Mutius's burial is incomplete in the first; Bassinus's in the second; Tamora's plea for mercy is ignored in the first; Lavinia's in the second. The pit creates a ritualistic division of the stage—a vertical realm of semiology—that could provide another space to analyze ritual symbolism. For example, the improvised tomb is an "unhallowed and bloodstained hole" (2.2.210) filled with "ragged entrails" (2.2.230), both of which evoke the tools of sacrifice (and markers of defilement) in the first act. Given the play's penchant for gore, however, Bassianus's relatively simple murder is simply not as shocking as Lavinia's rape and mutilation, which occurs offstage. All crimes are abject; therefore, Bassianus's murder is abject. However, Lavinia's mutilation is more abject as it violates more boundaries: her body is violated; without the ability to speak, her identity is challenged; her new form makes her a liminal figure—a creature of death-in-life—who has the potential to spread pollution—and psychological torment.

Marcus and Titus's prolonged witnessing of Lavinia's mutilated body demonstrates Shakespeare's recognition of her subversive potential. The performance of this dismemberment has differed throughout the play's performance history. While Peter Brooks stylised the gore by

[18] As will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter, the more disturbing the crime—the more it violates ideas of "identity, system, [and] order"—the more abject it becomes (Kristeva 4).

covering Lavinia in ribbons and removing Marcus's verbal reaction (Bate 59), Lucy Bailey's 2006 production was so gory that multiple audience members fainted (Bate 155). Even though subsequent performances have reintroduced Marcus's speech (and, in some cases, the traditional gore), this impulse to hide the speech shows a very human reaction: part of the play's horror is generated by its mix of humour, gore, and poetry (Bate 58). Our impulse is to look away from the mutilated Lavinia who reminds us of our own bodily vulnerability. The play refuses this possibility. The speeches about Lavinia's body show that the reaction to gore verges on a religious experience; however, there is no comfort of a religious explanation for this violence. What remains is profound psychological disturbance, suffering, and a new understanding of the sacred.

Although the Andronicii's reaction the body are the most poetic, our first exposure to the ravished Lavinia is accompanied by Demetrius and Chiron's crude humour. Their lack of repentance makes the crime more malicious. The brothers not only mock Lavinia for her mutilated body, but also emphasize her helplessness to control her own death:

CHIRON: And 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.

DEMETRIUS: If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord. (2.3.9-10).

Bate suggests that this pattern of "feed line and punch line" was meant to create a "simultaneous heightening and release of tension in the audience" like the Porter scene in Macbeth, yet the "cultural gap between our time and Shakespeare's makes it difficult to share in the release" (10). The potential for comedic release—regardless of its effectiveness—still generates discomfort for all audiences. In colloquial terms, the brothers' jokes add insult to injury. The brothers' banter begins to call attention to the mutilated body by focusing on what it now lacks: without hands or a tongue, Lavinia's actions are limited, in some ways making her less human. As the brothers paint a picture of Lavinia as sub-human, one could see this joking as akin to the harassment that

faced the pharmakos when they were paraded through the city (Girard 95). Just as the pharmakos is the "butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and . . . outbursts of violence," (Girard 95) Lavinia has become a sponge for the brother's impurity. Their desecration is necessary to parallel the subsequent veneration evoked through the Andronicii's grief: the brothers add the defiled side to the two-sided victim. Their humour's proximity to violence thins the boundaries between vulgarity and worship, creating a sense of disturbance.

While Demetrius and Chiron's punning on Lavinia's mutilated body overtly debases her, Marcus's poetic response to his niece has been seen as equally offensive.[19] The juxtaposition of brutish jokes to ornate poetry is shocking to an audience that has just been exposed to a dismembered body. Marcus's reaction to Lavinia reveals her subversive potential: "If I do dream, would all my wealth wake me; / If I do wake, some planet strike me down / That I may slumber an eternal sleep" (2.3.13-15). Because of the extent of her mutilation, Lavinia confuses the boundary between waking and dreaming. Marcus' desire for "eternal sleep" —a euphemism for death— highlights his attachment to Lavinia by portraying her as a mutilation as a sight worse than death. Lavinia's mutilation is so devastating that it requires divine intervention, but it is not a god but "some planet" that Marcus calls upon for retribution. While "planets" may metonymically refer to Roman gods, the secular language makes this appeal to the heavens vague: planets could also be a star bringing about bad fortune (2.3n14). Marcus's reaction, therefore, suggests that some divine force is at work, but the religion that he might have used eludes his grasp.

Marcus's subsequent description of Lavinia's dismemberment forces us to experience this sight of overwhelming horror. Nevertheless, just as his speech forces us to look at the mutilated Lavinia, the use of metaphors shows that the sight challenges the capacities of language:

[19] Nancy Vickers claims that Petrarchan blazon like Marcus's dismember the woman's body even more, essentially enacting a second rape upon her (107).

Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,

Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,

Doth rise and fall between they rosed lips,

Coming and going with thy honey breath.

But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee

And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue. (2.3.13-25)

The blood issuing from Lavinia's wounds is not just blood, but "a bubbling fountain stirred with wind." This filtering of violence through simile is reminiscent of the substitutions used in the earlier ritual sacrifice. Marcus's speech, therefore, is not only poetic, but also ritualistic: Artaud argues that "the images of poetry in the theatre are a spiritual force that begins its trajectory in the senses and does without reality altogether" (25). Lavinia becomes a literary symbol: a Philomela "deflowered" by a Tereus.[20] This mythical precedent could be paralleled to the Girardian original victim: Marcus finds, if not justice, at least some pattern in the crime. This pattern, however, does not detract from the impact of the violence: just as the earlier scene saw blood as a symbol of impurity, the "three issuing spouts" (2.3.30) of blood mark Lavinia as defiled. Such defilement is compounded by Lavinia's new status as "deflowered" (3.1.26). Equating Lavinia's sexual status with defilement may seem antiquated to modern audiences, but this virginal status is highlighted because of its ritual connotations of impurity: as sexuality has polluted her body, Lavinia is no longer considered an appropriate bride; she becomes an outcast of the erotic stage.

As Lavinia has been defiled by the brothers, she also becomes an object of veneration. Her hands' abilities are amplified beyond myth as she "could have better sewed than Philomel"

[20] According to this myth, Tereus rapes his sister-in-law, Philomel, in the woods and cut out her tongue so she could not reveal his identity (Bate 90). Philomel, however, sewed a picture of the rape scene; herself and her sister took revenge on Tereus feeding him his son, Itys, in a pie (Bate 90).

(2.3.43) and her tongue made "heavenly harmony" (2.3.48). By suggesting that Lavinia's previous form was powerful enough to create a conversion (as the murdered "would not have touched them for his life" or "would have dropped his knife and fell asleep" [2.3.47-50]), Marcus exacerbates a sense of loss. That which was previously pure has been polluted. Lavinia's new status parallels her situation to that of the pharmakos: she is the ultimate Other who should be removed from society in order to cleanse Rome of pollution. Yet, unlike the pharmakos, Lavinia's defilement was not controlled by communal agreement; the spectacle of her defiled body does not have a clear ritual or religious explanation. Thus, the spectacle of rape and dismemberment has a primal impact on our psyche. Palmer describes Marcus's conceit as an attempt to understand Lavinia's transformed body, which is both "familiar and strange, fair and hideous, living body and object" (322). He might well have added another set of binaries to his list: sacred and defiled. The conflation of the sacred and the defiled—previously attempted to be separated through the rituals like the sacrifice—causes a crisis of meaning. Marcus's playing with language—like Demetrius and Chiron's punning—is an attempt to structure the world after being thrust into a state of abjection—to displace the horror through metaphor or myth. Yet, this displacement fails since, in creating the series of metaphors, Marcus also forces us to inspect every aspect of the violated woman, which engages us in a theatre of violence that pushes the boundaries of all religious understandings.

The play emphasizes the power of witnessing violence through the focus on the psychological impact of viewing Lavinia. When Lucius collapses to his knees at the sight of his sister, Titus insists that he, "look upon her" (3.1.66); he repeats this command as she sheds tears ("Look, Marcus, ah, son Lucius, look on her" [3.1.111]). Far from invoking a voyeuristic male gaze, the insistence on looking foreshadows Lear's reaction to Cordelia's corpse: "Look on her:

look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (*King Lear* 5.3.30). Katherine Goodland describes how this moment of looking in the later tragedy is "a demand to look at death—to experience it—freed of the platitudes that distract us from its unadorned truth" ("Inverting the Pietà in Shakespeare's King Lear" 219). *Titus* is an earlier attempt to grapple with the need to look at death: we must view this figure of suffering and be implicated in Titus's "consuming sorrow" (3.1.61). In the later tragedy, however, looking both acknowledges the presence of the corpse and provides a fleeting moment of hope. Looking in *Titus* is less tender: Marcus tells Lavinia, "let us go and make thy father blind / For such a sight will blind a father's eye" (2.3.52). The seeming redundancy of "blind," particularly when compared to Marcus's previously eloquence, suggests a linguistic struggle: metaphor has failed; there is no better way of describing Lavinia's form than by dubbing it as unviewable. Blinding, here, has a figurative meaning, for the sight of Lavinia blinds Titus to reason and binds him into a cycle of revenge. The image of a blinded father also evokes Oedipus's self-blinding after realizing that he has committed the double atrocity of incest and patricide. Kristeva sees Oedipus's blinding as an attempt to manage his atrocity by marking himself as defiled, therefore underscoring the split between the clean and the unclean self (84).[21] Although Titus does not physically blind himself, his dismemberment—caused by his blindness to Aaron's deceit—is a similar act of self-splitting. To save his sons and prevent more horror, Titus splits himself into two parts—the hand and the body. In doing so, he separates himself from the hand that carried out his conquests, reducing his honour. Furthermore, by alluding to blindness, Marcus recognizes the dangerous potential of Lavinia's dismemberment. It can provoke blindness, madness (Titus cries that "Had I but seen thy picture in this plight, / It would have madded me" [3.1.104-5]), or more dismemberments ("Give me a sword, I'll chop off my

[21] This concept will reoccur during Gloucester's blinding in *King Lear*.

hands too" [3.1.73]). Lavinia's transformation into an abject object—a creature on the border of life and death—makes her a source of defilement and contagion, which can pollute others by pushing them into abjection. To insist on viewing her—on looking at her—is to force somebody to acknowledge their own weakness, to threaten them with the collapse of boundaries that accompanies abjection, and, therefore, to force them to recognize that the sacred and the defiled are one and the same, which is, in itself, a spiritual experience.

Suffering and dislocation accompany this spiritual experience. Expressions of immeasurable agony permeate the family's reactions to Lavinia. The grief that Titus feels "disdaineth bounds" (3.1.71); her attacker "hath hurt me more than he killed me dead" (3.1.92); Titus' sorrows are "deep, having no bottom" (3.1.217). Such evocation of extremes suggests that Lavinia's mutilation pushes Titus to the borders of understanding. Titus's onstage mutilation proves the extremity of the suffering: for Titus, this mutilation is a sacrifice, an attempt to stem the violence of his son's wrongful execution; it also recalls his earlier urge to mimic Lavinia's abject state ("Give me a sword, I'll chop off my hands too" [3.1.74]). Yet, for the audience, this mutilation is another gory spectacle, a moment to grimace, especially as we know that the sacrifice will not work—Aaron warns us of his deceit shortly before assisting Titus. Aaron's deceitful intent enhances Titus's similarity to his daughter: after chopping off his hand, Titus becomes an abject figure, a victim of a crime, somebody who is mutilated, and unclean. His earlier evocation of the "Nilus" (3.1.72) and the "wilderness of the sea" (3.1.95) conjure the sublime—a tool for controlling abjection that is characterized by "a divergence, an impossible bounding . . . joy—fascination" (Kristeva 11-12). Titus's speech after chopping off his own hand moves beyond the sublime, revealing how he grapples with his shattered personhood.

Titus rejects the organizing principle of reason, choosing to embrace a chaotic natural order that is boundless in its forms: If there were reason for these miseries, / Then into limits could I bind my woes (3.1.220-21). The limits that previously demarcated right from wrong, reasonable from unreasonable, life from death, have become objects, tools that Titus might have previously used to delineate his emotional reactions. Just as abjection reveals that the border between the self and wastes (e.g., dung, cadavers) is an object (Kristeva 4), for Titus, the things that used to produce order have lost their authority and become objects. According to Kristeva, the realization of the arbitrariness of borders generates the question "How can I be without a border?" (Kristeva 4). Titus's crisis of boundarilessness is demonstrated by his figurative relationship to the sea:

> I am the sea. Hark how her sighs doth blow.
> She is the weeping welkin, I the earth.
> Then must my sea be moved with her sighs,
> Then must my earth with her continual tears
> Become a deluge overflowed and drowned,
> For why my bowels cannot hide her woes
> But like a drunkard must I vomit them. (3.1.226-32)

Earlier, Titus is an observer "environed with a wilderness of sea" (3.195). Now, the Other (the sea) becomes the I (Titus): "I am the sea" (3.1.226). Not animal, not human, but a natural force, Titus momentarily abandons his corporeality to embrace boundlessness. Yet Titus slips between metaphors as Lavinia becomes both the sea and he becomes the earth. Such linguistic slippage reflects language's struggle to contain Titus and Lavinia's joint sorrow. The earth becomes deluged by a flood of tears; here, the boundary between sea and earth overlap as the sea regurgitates

onto the earth. Kristeva frames vomiting as a response to boundarylessness: "the body's inside . . . shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside" (53). The previous separation between himself and the sea's "brinish bowels" (3.1.98) collapses, leaving Titus in a state of spiritual transcendence. Although we have not mutilated ourselves, the earlier insistence on looking and our attendance in Titus's sorrows suggests that we must witness and participate in the entry into the borderland of abjection. Witnessing the extremes of sorrow highlights the fragility of systems used to explain violence; witnessing the body highlights our proximity to violence; the scene, therefore, generates a combination of repulsion and a capacity veneration that is akin to the sacred.

After Titus's sacrifice of his hand is rewarded by his sons' heads, the scene begins to shift from wrestling with boundless abjection to ritual violation to humour. Lavinia kisses these heads—reminiscent of the earlier role of her tears in consecrating her brothers' graves—which corrupts Roman rites further. Kissing this piece of a cadaver (even a recognizable piece) is gruesome; it violates ideas of separation that structure burial rites. Such violation recalls the earlier mutilated burial rites. In a moment of insight, Marcus describes this kiss as "comfortless" (3.1.242). If Lavinia's kiss is comfortless because she is not kissing her brothers, but something that is *other* from them (their dead heads), then are all burial rituals not similarly comfortless? Given that the play begins with a sacrifice justified by a burial ritual, one would hope that this insight would pre-empt the recognition that earthly acts committed on behalf of the dead do not benefit them. The arbitrariness of ritual, once again, generates a sense of disturbance. It is therefore ironic when Marcus does not recognize that acts of rage are equally as futile as acts of love; instead, he urges Titus into madness: "Rend off they silver hair, thy other hand / Gnawing with thy teeth . . . Now is a time to storm" (3.1.262-64). Titus's corresponding laughter is an initial

relief—a denial of madness. In the abject state at the edge of boundaries, one can see that the extremes of human emotion (grief and laughter) are not so different after all. Kristeva analyzes a similar instance of inappropriate laughter in Celine's work:

> . . . laughter bursts out, facing abjection . . . And yet, if there is gushing force, it is neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime . . . It is bare, anguished and as fascinated as it is frightening. A laughing apocalypse is an apocalypse without god. . . The resulting scription is perhaps the ultimate form of secular attitude without morality, without judgement, without hope. (205-6)

Laughter becomes an expression of emptiness. It is not abject, but a reaction *to* the abject, a form of secular emptying that creates an atheistic "transcendental collapse." Titus's laughter marks the collapse of all systems of reason, justice, and sacrifice: if the sacrifice of his hand does not save his sons, if kissing dead bodies is comfortless, then what meaning remains?

Somewhat disappointingly, Titus moves from an experience of spiritual transcendence to earthly revenge. Such a shift is justified by the idea of the sacrificial crisis: if the systems that differentiate good and bad violence collapse, then revenge may run rampant. Titus vows to "find Revenge's cave" as "these two heads do seem to speak to me / And threat me I shall never come to bliss / Till all these mischiefs be returned again" (3.1.271-74). Once again, the Andronicii undergo some sort of ceremony on the behalf of the dead; once again, no religious precedent is clearly stated. The vow's status as a perverted ritual is solidified by the gruesome tableau that completes it: Marcus and Titus each carry a head, and Lavinia holds the hand that once blessed her between her teeth like a dog. Shakespeare's turn to comedy—both in the ironic vow and the gruesome procession—could be a culmination of apocalyptic laughter. Yet the return to rituals is not quite apocalyptic. The Andronicii have faced the limits of all meaning, and yet they return to

human ideas justice as blood for blood and an eye for an eye. Revenge becomes a leash that ties us to the ground, which both exacerbates the wrongness of the violence that bursts forth in the play's final acts and creates a sense of uncanny repetition. Each murder becomes part of a pattern of contagion that begins with Alarbus's murder; the failure of society to contain this violence creates an experience of physical and psychological vulnerability.

2.3 The Theatre of Spiritual Meaning: The Bloody Banquet, Final Burials, and Abjection

Perhaps in reaction to abjection, in the final acts of the play, the characters turn towards old systems of the divine, evoking Ovidian myths, the gods, the heavens, and divine vengeance. Lavinia helps to decode her rape and mutilation by referring to Ovidian sources, specifically the rape of Philomela, which was eventually condemned by divine retribution as the gods transformed Philomela into a nightingale to escape Tereus's wrath (*Titus* 323). No such divine intervention occurs in *Titus*. Marcus suggests that the gods are responsible for the attack on Lavinia: "O, why should nature build so foul a den, / Unless the gods delight in tragedies? (4.1.59-60). In doing so, Marcus removes human responsibility for the attack: the humans are merely actors; the pit a stage; the events a tragedy of cosmic proportions. When Marcus asks Lavinia to reveal her attackers, he directly names these gods: "Apollo Pallas, Jove or Mercury / Inspire me that I may this treason find" (4.1.66-67). Lavinia's personal act of revenge (revealing her rapists' names despite their attempts to prevent her from doing so) is situated as an act authored by the heavens: "What God will have discovered for revenge. / Heaven guide thy pen to print thy sorrows plain, / That we may know the traitors and the truth" (4.1.74-76). Although Lavinia's ability to reveal the traitors' names could suggest that Marcus's prayer is answered, the sudden turn to religion feels hollow: Lavinia, not the gods, writes her name; if the gods had not been evoked, Lavinia would still have written her name and the treason would still be revealed.

The pairing of "God" and "revenge" foreshadows Marcus's attempt to connect earthly, human vengeance to a form of divine retribution: "Revenge the heavens for old Andronicus" (4.2.128). This utterance could suggest that the heavens should carry out Titus's revenge (since he refuses to do so) (4.2.n129); it also suggests that the Andronicii are taking vengeance against the heavens for orchestrating this tragedy. Yet, the absence of visible divine intervention contrasts the multiple speeches where characters swear their revenge; this attempt to war on the heavens or reconcile the divine with human motivations falls flat.[22] The paradoxical turn towards a religion emptied of meaning still has significance: the silence from the gods is almost predestined as the audience knows that this religion will not work.

The god's silence, however, does not create an atheistic emptiness, but a profound and transcendent pattern of violation, which began with Alarbus's murder. The play ends with an explosion of violence. Stripped of a solid religious explanation, this violence becomes bare, brutal, and almost arbitrary. In order to investigate the effect of this violence, I will first focus on the murder of Demetrius and Chiron. Then, I turn to the violence in the feast scene, moving from the violation of Tamora's unintentional cannibalism to her murder and the murder of Lavinia, Titus and Saturninus. Although Rome attempts to distance itself from this violence by creating a new state under Lucius, this distancing requires a scapegoat: Aaron the Moor. Thus, I turn towards this villainous and impactful figure—one who is seen as the cause of the play's revenge. After explaining Aaron's position as an orchestrator of abjection, I will finally turn to the play's final burials as one final source of the secular sacred.

[22] The war becomes most literal when Titus solicits the Gods with arrows to ask for their aid in his vengeance. Instead of receiving a response from the Gods, Titus encounters a clown who "could never say grace in all my life" (4.3.100). The clown's subsequent execution highlights the collapse of Roman justice: Saturninus literally kills the messenger.

2.3.1 "I'll play the cook": Chiron, Demetrius, and Titus's bloody feast

The preparation for the banquet continues the play's engagement with myth, divinity, and violence. Although Tamora (cloaked as the allegorical Revenge) raises the possibility of a banquet, Titus quickly steps into the role of a gracious host, and any good host knows the importance of planning meals ahead of time. Given their roles as Rape and Murder in Tamora's pageant, the murder of Demetrius and Chiron is retribution for Lavinia's rape and mutilation. Bate argues that the murder of the brothers generates comedic satisfaction: the gagging of the brothers and slitting of their throats "answers exactly to their gagging of Lavinia and cutting of her tongue" (12). Titus attempts to create a sense of ritual satisfaction as well by painting the brothers as carriers of contagion:

> O villains, Chiron and Demetrius,
>
> Here stands the spring whom you have stained with mud,
>
> This goodly summer with your winter mixed.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear
>
> Than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity,
>
> Inhuman traitors, you constrained and forced. (5.2.169-71, 175-77)

Their ability to "stain" "spotless chastity" highlights the villains' ability to defile others; the infection of summer with winter suggests that the horror of the act surpasses natural boundaries. Their sacrifice, therefore, should remove a source of violence and prevent more perversion. This reading is supported by how Titus's speech shifts towards a Christian vocabulary: "Villains, for shame you could not beg for grace. / Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you" (5.2.179-80). Bahr notes that "the possibility of divine mercy is raised and immediately negated, and the word

"martyr" is used synonymously with 'murder'" (267). Yet, just as the word martyr was used by both sides of the Reformation, martyrdom here highlights the incongruency between martyrdom and Titus's secular violence: if the brothers are being martyred, then what religious cause are they dying for? The murder, therefore, has the potential to become yet another failed martyrdom, another space for unyielding and unending violence.

The brothers' murder, however, is only one part of the violence: by completing the murder with an act of *omophagia* (cannibalism), Titus attempts to "repay outwardly directed crimes of mutilation and murder with an inwardly directed pollution" (Liebler 137). Titus's vivid description of cannibalism stands in for the off-stage preparation of the bodies, reenacting the desecration of the bodies for the audience (as the sacred sacrificial body is transformed into food):

> Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
> And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
> And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
> And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
> And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
> Like to the earth swallow her own increase. (5.2.186-91)

"Coffin" highlights that this culinary concoction is another failed ritual.[23] Titus inverts the binaries previously used to purify corpses: the bones that should belong in the tomb now become dust; blood (the impure) becomes a component for paste; thus, the two previously separate substances become perversely intertwined. By forcing Tamora to eat her own offspring—"Like

[23] Duncan highlights this connection, stating "their own pulverized carcasses will double as monstrous caskets" (446). Furthermore, Duncan suggests that this perversion of burial rituals counters Tamora's "blasphemous 'reformation' of burial space" that occurs during the hunting scene (446).

to the earth swallow her own increase" (5.2.191)— elides Tamora and the swallowing tomb from the earlier burial, creating a defiled inversion of birth. Furthermore, cannibalism is ripe with mythological and ritual meaning. The myth of Philomel climaxes when Progne feeds the rapist Tereus his own offspring (5.2.n192); therefore, Titus finds a mythical precedent for this form of revenge.[24] On the side of ritual, Freud explains cannibalism as an attempt to gain the qualities of a person through incorporating parts of their body by eating (*Totem* 95). Tamora, therefore, consumes the "qualities" of Rape and Murder that she has set off onto the population. Girard, and Jan Kott complicate this understanding of cannibalism. Girard argues that cannibalism is like all other sacrifices; eating the victim after they have been killed showed a desire to devour the violence of others, but only after this violence has been transformed into a "beneficent substance" (277). Kott views "maternal omophagia as a structural inversion of incest, and also giving birth and feeding" that completes a cycle of succession by annihilating fertility (so it can be renewed later) (Liebler 139). Both interpretations suggest a gruesome but positive possibility behind the cannibalism: cannibalism can be a source of renewal.

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[24] There are several other mythical precedents for cannibalism. Palmer connects this cannibalism to the myth of Saturn, a God who devours all his male children except Jupiter, Pluto, and Neptune (325). As Saturn is also known for castrating his father, Uranus, this mythical allusion connects the mutilation and cannibalism (Palmer 325). Palmer further connects the horror of cannibalism to the Christian concept of the Many and the One:

> A peculiarly horrid notion of renaissance neo-Platonism was that Saturn's twin deeds of dismemberment and cannibalism were an allegory of the primal mystery of the Many and the One: as the first represented disintegration and dispersal, the second, the eating of his own offspring, denoted the return of multiplicity into unity. (326)

Thus, the cannibalism could be seen as a metaphor for returning unity to Rome. Liebler adds some nuance to this idea by highlighting the allusion to Seneca's *Thyestes* (137). In Seneca's *Thyestes*, "Zeus's son Tantalus kills his son Pelops . . . and feeds him to the gods assembled at a formal banquet, with catastrophically inverted results for the entire community" (137). After Zeus restores Pelops, his two sons, Thyestes, and Atreus, compete for the throne; Atreus retaliates for Thyestes' seduction of his wife by feeding Thyeste's sons to their father (138). Whereas the banquet in Seneca causes "a cycle of revenge with no resurrective or regenerative possibilities," the *omophagia* in *Titus* ends the play's cycle of revenge, (139). The Atreus story is also important as it is a mythical violation of hospitality, one of the most basic laws that governed human behaviour and allowed for the development of civilized society. Regardless of mythical precedent, this violation of hospitality makes the crime feel far from regenerative: is the cycle of vengeance really cut off?

The context of the Reformation challenges this idea of renewal. Bahr highlights how Catholic belief in transubstantiation (that the Eucharist was literally consuming the body of Christ) was a frequent subject of Protestant scorn: Protestants associated Catholicism with cannibalism and overly literal readings of texts (255). For an early modern audience, therefore, the possibility of cannibalism would evoke the debate over the Eucharist and the broader violence of the Reformation.[25] Kristeva also notes the connection between eating and the Eucharist: "To eat and drink the flesh and blood of Christ means, on the one hand, to transgress symbolically the Levitical prohibitions, to be symbolically satiated . . . and to be reconciled with the substance dear to paganism" (119). In other words, devouring the flesh of Christ offers the possibility for redemption through interiorizing and spiritualizing the abject (118). Nevertheless, Demetrius and Chiron are not Christ-like figures. Their murder, therefore, is a perversion of the Eucharist—a transference of this spiritual ceremony onto an unhallowed, earthly act. Far from offering spiritual redemption, Tamora's consumption of her sons' bodies is as a ghastly degradation: as omophagia connects eating one's offspring and incest, Tamora's consumption of her sons is another reflection of her impure sexuality (the first being her association with Aaron). Furthermore, Titus does not see his ritual as cleansing the city of blood, but as spreading it so that the banquet "may prove / more stern and bloody than the Centaurs feast" (5.2.203). "Centaurs feast" alludes to the mythological battle between humans and horses during Lapinthae's wedding feast (5.2.n203). Yet, this allusion should not distract from the impurity of the crime: Titus has perverted the idea of the ritual as warding off violence, instead prefiguring his murder of the brothers as beginning a bloodbath.

[25] According to Bahr, Titus's demand that Lavinia "Receive the blood" is "a dark parody of the language of the holy Eucharist" (267).

2.3.2. "Witness my knife's sharp point": Murders and Mayhem in the Banquet Scene

In many ways, the bloodbath of the feast scene makes it the locus of the play's abjection: four major characters are killed at such a furious pace that there is little space for dialogue or extended psychological interpretations. The absence of these interpretations highlights the physical nature of the violence. For example, while Titus's urges for the guests to eat highlight the gruesomeness of their unintentional cannibalism,[26] his quick murder of Tamora prevents any possibility for her to recognize her own fate:

> Why, there they are, both baked in this pie,
>
> Whereof their mother daintily has hath fed,
>
> Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.
>
> 'Tis true, 'tis true, witness my knife's sharp point. (5.3.59-62)

"Witnessing" evokes the secular justice system and ideas of sacrifice: witnesses are required to prove one's guilt or innocence; witnesses agree upon the collective value of violence, making it a sacrifice. What we are asked to witness, however, is not a ritual act, but "my knife's sharp point." Violence stands in for ritual meaning; there is no specific ritual, mythical or religious precedent evoked behind Tamora's murder. Given Marcus and Titus's elaborate speeches over Lavinia's mutilation, Tamora's missing response to her new defiled state feels like a void: after all, Titus has sacrificed many children in battle (and two on-stage); Tamora has not killed any of her kin (although she ordered the death of the blackamoor child). Tamora's murder, therefore, is an attempt to control the meaning of the violence; an attempt to stem off the cycle of revenge. Yet, this cycle has been fully unleashed: Saturninus kills Titus; Lucius kills Saturninus. Lucius's

[26] Bahr cites Titus's urging "Please you, eat of it." (5.3.29) and "Will't please you to eat? Will't please your highness to feed?" (5.3.53) as "unappealing invitations" that "highlight the physicality and carnality of the act" (269) She connects these invitations to the reformers' "revoltingly physical depictions of the cannibalistic consumption of Christ" (Bahr 269).

evocation of systems of justice ("there's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed" [5.3.65]) can create a sense of relief—there are no more characters left to avenge Saturninus's death—but it also highlights the futility of the cycles of revenge that dictated the play. Unlike the myth of Philomel (where she is transformed into a nightingale to escape Tereus's fury), there is no direct divine intervention. We are left with the bare image of violence.

Perhaps because of the precedent of the Philomel myth, Lavinia's murder is particularly violent, unjust, and abrupt.[27] Unlike the other victims, Lavinia has not directly participated in the cycle of violence—she is a victim. Titus attempts to justify this murder by calling upon the mythical precedent of Livy: "Was it well done of rash Virginius / To slay his daughter with his own right hand, / Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?" (5.3.36-38). Titus compares Lavinia to Virginius's daughter, Virginia, who was killed to prevent her from being raped (or because she had been raped) by Appius Claudius (5.3.n36). Bahr notes the instability of this interpretation: by transforming Lavinia from Philomel into Virginia, Titus, like Demetrius and Chiron, uses myth as a weapon against her, evoking the violence of interpretation that accompanied the Reformation (262). The slippage behind symbols also evokes the linguistic contention generated by the sacrificial crisis: the horror of killing Lavinia escapes categorization by the way of any single mythical precedent. Although Titus frames Livy as "A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant / For me, most wretched, to perform the like" (5.3.43-44), even the antagonists question the justice of this murder. Saturninus describes it as "unnatural and unkind" (5.3.47) and Tamora asks "Why hast thou slain thine only daughter thus?" (5.3.54). Such questions challenge the validity of the sacrifice, suggesting that the "warrant" of myth does not correspond to the violence of the act.

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[27] Liebler notes that "critics have struggled to define Titus's killing of Lavinia in a range of meanings from cruelty to mercy" (146).

Titus's reframing of Lavinia's murder as an honour killing offers another possibility to explain the seemingly random violence. "Die, die, Lavinia, and they shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die" (5.3.45-46) and "Killed her for whom my tears have made me blind" (5.3.48) both suggest that the murder is self-serving as Titus is attempting to annihilate the source of his sorrow. Recalling Lavinia's subversive potential—her ability to blind with her sight—could reframe this murder as an act of purification.[28] Murdering Lavinia removes the stained and deflowered object—the defiled object—from our sight, in doing so, should transform the negative effects of its impurity into beneficial effects on the community. Yet, the living-in-dead body is replaced by a contaminating corpse, an object that must be purified. Just as with previous sacrifices, Lavinia's murder requires a consensus. Here, there is no clear exchange of values: does Lavinia represent contagion? Female sexuality? Her father's sorrow? What is more abject, her mutilated, living body or her corpse? Is she a willing sacrificial lamb, or another victim of a random murder? Such questions exacerbate the wrongness of her death by removing the possibility of a ritualistic or religious redemption. Instead, we are left with a broken, bleeding victim: a dismembered body that will never be reunited with its missing parts—a reminder of death and crime that is abject.

The Romans attempt to address this sense of dismemberment by reconstituting the state under Lucius: "O let me teach you how to knit again . . . These broken limbs again into one body" (5.3.69-70). Yet, this sense of unity is challenged by the void left by the banquet scene. Whereas Lucius recounts the atrocities of the play, the bloody banquet is not included in the list of crimes or as a sign of poetic justice. The Roman Lord offers one mythical precedent for the banquet: he recalls how Sinon tricked the King Priam of Troy into accepting the Trojan horse

[28] Liebler suggests that since Lavinia was previously an image of life-in-death, Titus's murder "completes Lavinia's definition as dead" (146).

and asks for the "Sinon" that has caused this destruction in Rome (5.3.n79-86). The audience knows that the banquet has been caused by a pattern of self-destructive revenge—a revenge that has, at times, been attributed to divine sources. Here, there is no room for the divine: the violence is attributed to a scapegoat, Aaron the Moor. Yet, naming Aaron as the source of the play's defilement does not detract from its sacred potential: Aaron's position as a liminal, abject figure elevates him to the divine without requiring a religious explanation.

2.3.3. "Spotted, Detested and Abominable": Aaron, Race and Abjection

"Now commonly regarded as the first great black role on English stage," Aaron is a paradox: modern audiences feel sympathy for a character faced with such overt racism, yet we also condemn him for his violent actions (Bate 122). Dismissed as a "unhallowed slave (5.3.14) or "irreligious Moor" (5.3.120) (a paradox in itself), Aaron is classified as a racial and cultural other to Rome more than the imprisoned and invading Goths. This racial otherness, however, is indicative of a larger pattern: Aaron's marginality (caused by his race) makes him a figure of abjection. As Rome fears Aaron's polluting potential—something that jeopardizes the state—Aaron's challenge to the dichotomy of black/white and impure/pure underscores his threat to the Roman state. Far from being an innocent bystander to his social exclusion, Aaron joys in his debasement and the debasement of others: his orchestration of the play's atrocities amplifies his role as agent and subject of abjection. Although his final punishment may be an attempt to purify the state, its effectiveness is challenged by Aaron's potential pollution. In order to examine the impact of Aaron's final punishment, I will first investigate the Romans' racist views of Aaron's contaminated body before turning to his self-abasement and villainy. In doing so, I will ask if Aaron's role as a distorter and violator of boundaries, combined with his final punishment, creates a sense of defilement that should be understood as sacred.

Aaron's religious and racial characterization as a Moor makes him an Other to the Roman society. Much of the language used towards Aaron reflects his racial otherness: he is "a coal-black Moor" (2.2.68-79); a "wall-eye slave" (5.1.44); a "swart Cimmerian" (2.2.72). The latter of these descriptions "associates [Aaron] with runaway black slaves in the Spanish Americas (Ndiaye 67). This contemporary reference reverberates with the scholarly consensus that, in the 1590s, the London's increasing Black population increased "English xenophobia and anti-African sentiment" (Ndiaye 65). As Noémie Ndiaye notes, the Romans (particularly Lucius) wield imperialism as a tool of social exclusion to reinforce a Roman social order (69).[29] Aaron's social exclusion makes him an exile within Roman society: if "the phobic has no other object than the abject," the Romans' xenophobia reflects their abjection—their reaction to this outsider existing in society (Kristeva 6). By coding Aaron as an Other, the Romans are attempting to reinscribe political order: "by means of a system of ritual exclusions, the partial- object consequently becomes *scription*—an inscription of limits" (Kristeva 73). As Mary Douglas suggests, social systems are established by separating the pure and the clean (the self) from the source of defilement (the Other)—these are particularly potent when involving sexuality (Kristeva 70). Thus, the Romans' fear of Aaron's sexuality spreading like a contagion and marking Tamora's honour "of his body's hue, / Spotted, detested and abominable" (2.2.73-74). To the Romans, Aaron's race makes him a polluted object; contact with this object causes spotting, like measles. His contact with the royal family—often elevated above society and,

[29] In particular, Ndiaye highlights that the Roman's xenophobia often takes on English terms (e.g., Lucius determines the blackamoor child's social status not by his mother's rank (as was accurate for Roman society) but by the father's, showing that he thinks "like an early seventeenth-century Englishman" (69).

therefore, viewed as sacred[30]—threatens the dichotomy of pure/Impure, unbalancing the empire and pushing it towards a threatening, abject state of liminality.

This fear of contagion culminates in the Romans' reactions to the blackamoor child. As he is the empress's child, the baby poses a threat to the established royal lineage. Yet, this threat is more potent than politics. The Nurse introduces the child as "A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue . . . as loathsome as a toad" (4.2.68-69). Despite its royal blood, the child's visible paternity is seen as proof of its impurity. The metaphorical comparison to a toad evokes the earlier notion of being "spotted": toads are commonly thought of as creating warts, or spots. Tamora's cruel request to "christen it with thy dagger's point" reflects a desire to conceal the proof of her own adultery—her own contact with the impure object—thus erasing "thy stamp, thy seal" (4.8.71-72). Yet this request shows that the attempt to contain the abject has already failed: christening through violence—through blood—is a perversion of ritual, an abject act in itself. The Roman's desire to extinguish Aaron's impurity ignores the permanence of his contagion: the child is no longer an Other, but part of the Roman society; killing the child—depriving it of its Roman rights—would not eliminate a source of abjection, but it would resemble the earlier sacrifice of Alarbus. Thus, the indignation as Lucius ignores Aaron's plea to "Touch not the boy, he is of royal blood" (5.1.49): Lucius selectively choses which aspects of law and morality that he will follow, perverting justice to align with his personal bias. His cruel order to "First hang the child, that he may see it sprawl: / A sight to vex the father's soul withal"

[30] The extent of the king's sacredness can differ across cultures: for example, one group situated between Egypt and Swaziland requires that their king commit an act of incest in order to make him the ultimate impurity, and, in doing so, infuse him with his power to "convert sterile, infectious violence into positive cultural values" (Girard 104-7). Although no such incest occurs in *Titus,* the royal family's separation from society reflects a similar idea of sacredness: the royal family is "above" others because of its society exclusivity; yet, by being exclusive, it is also a societal "Other." Furthermore, medieval belief in the connection between the king and God (the divine right to rule) cements the royal family's sacred status. Nonetheless, *Titus* is critical of power; even if this family is sacred, the play reveals that the royal family is both sacred *and* defiled; far from being a source of "positive cultural values," the royal family here pollutes the state with blood.

reflects his enjoyment of deliberate cruelty (5.1.51-52). This failure to contain the racial Other is one way that Aaron's presence generates anxiety: despite the efforts to create a scapegoat—a pharmakos—and exclude impurity from the social order, the Romans' purification ritual fails.

Aaron's abjection because of his social position is not only imposed, but also self-constructed, as Aaron threatens to reconstitute the Roman binary of Pure/Impure. Although being an exile can create a sense of abjection, in Kristeva's terms, the abject subject must have an agency in their debasement: "the one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings . . . he divides, excludes, and, without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections he is not unaware of them" (Kristeva 8). Aaron's role in his own abjection furthers his presence as a subversive figure. He internalizes the Romans' understanding of race—of blackness—as impurity: "Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (3.1.206). Blackness is an external, bodily marker, yet Aaron aims to absorb it into his soul, thereby violating the conventional division of the body as an impure site of sin and the soul as a pure, sacred substance. While this attack on the pure/impure binary may seem to reinforce Roman notions of blackness as evil, Aaron's rhetorical defense of his child challenges their conventions:

> Coal-black is better than another hue
>
> In that it scorns to bear another hue;
>
> For all the water in the ocean
>
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
>
> Although she can them hourly in the flood. (4.2.89-105)

Aaron plays on the fear of permanent blackness by reconstituting it into a sign of purity: whereas whiteness can easily be blemished and therefore must be washed to be pure, Aaron suggests that

blackness is a default—something that need not be changed. Therefore, blackness is purer than whiteness. This switch of the binary is not entirely innocent. Part of blackness's superiority comes from its ability to hide deception: "Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing / The close enacts and counsels of thy heart" (4.2.119-20). Blushing is caused by the rush of blood, and blood is associated with impurity. Thus, whiteness makes one more obviously impure. This transparency can be a benefit, or a curse: Aaron's idea of blackness as purity seems to be based on its usefulness for dissembling, which valorizes impure actions.

Aaron's impassioned plea for racial equality does not mean that he has abandoned enjoying evil for evil's sake. While the combination of his threatening presence and his rhetoric convinces the two brothers to let the child live, it is immediately juxtaposed by the abrupt murder of the nurse, who is doubly debased as Aaron compares her to an animal ("'Wheak, wheak!'—so cries a pig prepared to spit" [4.2.128]) and deprives her of a proper burial. While his order to "bestow your funeral" in the nearby field may suggest an attempt at burial, the addition of "gallant grooms" elides the funeral with a wedding (gallant has connotations of paying special attention to flirting, the groom is the man to be married, and the brother's previous "gallant" conduct involved Lavinia's rape, all of which creates a sexual undertone in Aaron's order) (4.2.165-66). The shock of this abject act underscores Aaron's continued status as an impure figure, potentially limiting our previous sympathy for his defensive paternity.[31]

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[31] Unlike Titus, who sends us sons to slaughter, Aaron's defense of his child makes him arguably the best father of the play (Liebler describes him as "the very model of paternal care" [122]). Such sympathy humanizes Aaron. Yet, Aaron's ability to feel such strong affection makes his actions all the wicked: he is aware of the emotional damage he causes yet chooses to inflict it. Furthermore, the source of his love for the child impacts the perceived selflessness of his actions:

> . . . this myself,
> The vigour and the picture of my youth.
> This before all the world do I prefer,
> This maugre all the world will I keep safe,
> Or some of you shall smoke it for Rome. (4.2.109-13)

Aaron's abjection does not just come from his social exile, but also from his pleasure in perversion. Even though the first act suggests that Tamora will be the play's main villain, Aaron is identified as "chief architect and plotter of these woes" (5.3.121). Aaron's alignment with vengeance—the main motivator for the play's violence—shows that he readily accepts his role in orchestrating violence: "Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (2.2.38-39). His dismemberment aligns each part of his body with a source of pollution: vengeance is the main threat to proper sacrifice (Girard 13); death—or the fear of it—generates the vulnerability required for abjection; blood (with its associations to menstruation and violence) is the main vehicle of impurity in the Roman's ceremonies. As "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject," Aaron's orchestration of most of the play's atrocities (Bassinius's murder, Lavinia's rape, Martius and Quintus's execution, and Titus's dismemberment) qualifies his actions as abject (Kristeva 4). Yet his gleeful recapitulation of events fully characterizes him as "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles," solidifying his abject presence (Kristeva 4).

Aaron's listing of atrocities is hyperbolically villainous—almost to the extent that it may feel contrived. The artificiality of Aaron's desire to "do ten thousand more" (5.1.144) does not make his speeches less abject. Paxton Hehmeyer reads Aaron's recapitulation of his plots as a performance of the devil incarnate, one whose similarity to other contemporary plays

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Aaron's love for his child is narcissistic since it is based on the child's resemblance to himself. The vagueness of "this" suggests that it is not just the child, by the "picture of my youth" that Aaron values above all else. Aaron's connection to narcissism further reinforces his connection to the abject: "Abjection . . . *is a precondition of narcissism*" (Kristeva 13). Narcissism is ego-centric, dependent on the repression of the other; abjection witnesses the ephemerality of this separation (Kristeva 14). Thus, Aaron's narcissism, in terms of his paternity, can be seen as an attempt to erase the child's Roman otherness, as a way of sublimating the child in his own image (his own cognition of purity/impurity), as a way of continuing his quest to cast away "these slavish weeds and servile thoughts!" (1.1.517). His one seemingly innocent act—the defense of his child—therefore still maintains some sinister undertones.

(Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*) generates audience discomfort as it implies that these atrocities have been committed on our behalf (172). But the sensation that is generated is more than discomfort: it is abjection. As Aaron retells each event, we are forced to relive them, this time from the perspective of an outsider—a voyeur—who perverts the events by filtering them through his perspective.[32] Aaron's repertoire of atrocities includes several abject acts: murder or planning murder; rape or plotting rape; false accusation; creating rivalry; animal cruelty; arson; and desecrating graves. Each event aims at destroying systems that hold society together (the law, property, bodily autonomy). Aaron's final claim "I have done a thousand dreadful things/ As willingly as one would kill a fly" devalues his own atrocities, suggesting that they are equivalent to killing a common pest. Although the audience does not witness the atrocities in this soliloquy, this metaphor evokes an act that we did witness, Marcus's murder of the fly in Act III Scene 2. Although Titus initially identifies with the fly and grieves its death, Marcus's brief assertion that "it was a black ill-favoured fly, / Like to the empress' Moor" is enough to incite Titus to "insult on him" and join in on the violence (3.2.67-72). As Aaron did not witness this event, this disturbing parallel seems to be deliberately constructed for the audience: it reminds us that the definition of an atrocity changes depending on one's perspective.[33] One moment, one may mourn the loss of a fly's family; the next, one might violently attack it for resembling a racial Other.

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[32] For example, Aaron reconstitutes atrocities into sport, repeating Demetrius and Chiron's punning, as he calls Lavinia's dismemberment a trimming: "she was washed and cut and trimmed, and /'twas trim sport for them which had the doing of it" (5.1.95-96). This figurative language is a misuse of Marcus's poetic attempts to recreate Lavinia's body: she is the subject of a joke, an object of sport.

[33] Another parallel occurs when Aaron describes his reaction to Titus's voluntary dismemberment: "I played the cheater for thy father's hand, / And when I had it, drew myself apart / And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter" (5.1.109-13). Both characters burst forth in apocalyptic laughter in face of the abject events. While Titus's laughter is a reaction to his own abjection, Aaron's retelling of his own laughter becomes an abject event in itself: it reflects a joy in perversion, a crossing between enthusiasm and suffering, that is an act of defilement.

The effect of this speech, therefore, is to begin a shift in boundaries: to reveal the margins of society and, by defiling them, risk the entirety of the symbolic order (Kristeva 69).

Aaron's atheism can be seen as another perversion of order. Viewing religion in merely pragmatic terms, Aaron simultaneously dismisses the Roman Gods as "popish tricks and ceremonies" (5.1.76) while recognizing that these ceremonies establish Roman society. "Popish tricks and ceremonies" evoke the anti-Catholicism of the Reformation.[34] Both the anti-Catholicism and atheism articulated by Aaron raise questions about the play's religious character. Yet, instead of aligning with any religious perspective, Aaron seems more focused on perverting any ideas of religious morals. He becomes a paradox, an "irreligious Moor," who is even more difficult to place within society. Just as he denies any religious affiliation, he also weaponizes ideas of religious repentance of his final speech:

> Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did
> Would I perform if I might have my will.
> If one good deed in all my life I did
> I do repent it from my very soul. (5.3.183-89)

Aaron's repentance for his accidental good deeds cements his "black soul." It continues his pattern of emptying symbols: just as Aaron reconstitutes blackness into a sign of purity, he transforms repentance into an evil act. Furthermore, one questions if repentance has any meaning if Aaron does not believe in gods. Aaron's dismissal of religion accompanies his role as Rome's polluter—he becomes isolated from the divine, embracing his sins rather than cleansing them.

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[34] Erne argues that the anti-Catholicism behind this insult is challenged by Aaron's villainy: the reunification of Rome under the "popish" Lucius, therefore, may show Shakespeare's latent Catholic tendencies (146, 150). Moschovakis is more nuanced in his analysis: "Far from betokening a reformist agenda on Shakespeare's part, the conflation of anti-popery with atheism in Aaron's discourse suggests a certain discomfort with the virulent animosity of reformers toward Catholic traditions" (482). According to this argument, Aaron is a mouthpiece for the danger of demoralized faith (Moschovakis 482).

Despite being a racial other, a source of pollution and a mechanism of abjection throughout the play, Aaron's final punishment is not to be exiled from the city, but to be planted within it. Naomi Liebler notes that this punishment threatens Rome's political unity:

> the 'headlessness' by which Rome is identified at the opening of the play is filled in by the image of Aaron's punishment at the end of the play. . . he appears to be a disembodied head; "planted," he epitomizes the paradox of an unregeneratable polity. . . his seed, half Moor and half Roman-Goth, will eventually destroy what is left of Rome. (146)

In a similar fashion, Aaron's improper burial threatens Rome's purity: ejecting the abject figure from the city should free it from defilement (Kristeva 84). Aaron's punishment, far from ejecting the abject, increases its potency by emphasizing Aaron's marginality. The refusal for a proper burial is used to differentiate the Romans from the non-Romans (Liebler 147); Aaron's improper burial therefore continues his marginalization. Simultaneously, Lucius's prohibition "If anyone relieves or pities him, / For the offence he dies" (5.3.180-81) reflects the possibility that others will treat Aaron as a human, that he will be included within society. Although Lucius may simply be punishing Aaron for feeding off his atrocities (after chopping off Titus's hand, Aaron claims "this villainy / doth fat me with the very thoughts of it" [3.1.203-4]), this prohibition ironically elevates Aaron to the position of a martyr: food could be considered a polluting substance, and, in Leviticus, the man/God distinction is established by eating certain foods (Kristeva 96). Thus, by denying Aaron food, Lucius is replicating a purification process akin to separating the (impure) blood from the (pure) bones in the burial in the first act. Martyr/Man/God, Other/Insider, Buried/Unburied, Dead/Alive, Aaron's punishment condemns him to a liminal state. Far from removing the threat of his subversive potential, this burial

counterbalances the reconstruction of the Roman Empire under Lucius: Lucius's cruelty suggests that Aaron succeeds in his mission to de-purify the state.

Although Hehmeyer claims that "moral judgment and feeling align in this last spectacle" (176), the play's attempts to create a moral framework for this burial fall short, leaving us instead as witnesses to an abject figure left lingering in the borderland of life and death. The Romans use the language of the secular law to justify Aaron's punishment: he is imprisoned and unfed to provide "testimony" against the empress (5.3.8); he is "witness" to the play's events (5.3.120); the audience is invoked as a jury to "judge what cause" the Andronicii have for their revenge (5.3.125); a Roman asks Lucius to "give sentence" on Aaron (5.3.176); and Lucius describes Aaron's punishment as his condemnation or "our doom" (5.3.181). These gestures towards the law could act as some comfort for the audience—some way to reinscribe boundaries after the play's violence has threatened almost all forms of social order.[35] Yet the law itself never appears: Aaron does not testify before the court; he is condemned without trial. Nor are there references to any religious precedents: ironically, the atheistic Aaron is the sole character that mentions souls or repentance during the trial. His punishment, therefore, feels like a continuation of the policy of vengeance—an eye for an eye—that created the play's violence in the first place. Lucius's proclamation— "This is our doom" (5.3.181)—takes on a more sinister meaning: far from reinforcing the boundaries of Roman society, Aaron's punishment implodes them. Despite the Roman's best efforts to defile Aaron with their punishment, their cruelty and his liminal position highlights the inextricability of the sacred and the defiled. The implosion of law, order and religion at the play's end does not cause a collapse into an abyss, but a glimpse into something else entirely: the secular sacred.

[35] This position would be enforced by a Girardian reading of the Law as a modern tool used to stave off violence and prevent the need for sacrifice (Girard 15).

2.3.4 "This is our doom": Burial Rites and the Future of the Roman State

Just as the play begins with a crisis over burial, it ends with several burials. Of these burials, only one can be understood as potentially purifying: Titus, like his slain sons, is consecrated with "obsequious tears" and kisses (from Lucius, Marcus, and his grandson). The touching turn from the violence to Titus's relationship with his grandson ("Many a time he danced thee on his knee ; Sung thee asleep, his loving breast thy pillow" [5.3.161-62]) creates a moment of pathos. Yet, the juxtaposition between this solemn burial and the burial from the first act still highlights discrepancies in the Romans' rites: why is a sacrifice not required for this funeral? Why is the divine not evoked? The grandson's mourning over his grandfather suggests that, far from ending the violence, Rome continues its self-sacrificing impulse: "O grandsire, grandsire, e'en with all my heart / Would I were dead, so you did live again" (5.3.171-72). The natural order of fathers dying before sons (or grandfathers dying before grandsons) continues to be challenged by Roman ideas of mourning and family. His apostrophe "O Lord, I cannot speak to him for weeping, / My tears will choke me if I ope my mouth" (5.4.173-74) could refer to Lucius, or to a God. His choking grief renders him silent, like the Lavinia who choked on her own blood. Grief, here, literally has the potential to kill, suggesting that Rome will continue to struggle as it mourns Titus. Although Saturninus, Lavinia and Titus are all properly interred, the changing rituals and the extremes of the public's grief challenges a strong sense of resolution.

This challenge is exacerbated by the improper burials of Aaron and Tamora. As mentioned in the previous section, Aaron's improper burial cements pollution in the Roman state, challenging the boundaries that formed law, religion, and morality for the Roman state. Tamora's improper burial has a similar effect:

> As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora,

> No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed,
> No mournful bell shall ring her burial,
> But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey:
> Her life was beastly and devoid of pity,
> And, being dead, let birds on her take pity. (5.3.194-99)

The lack of funeral rites here recalls the disturbance of the Reformation: specifically, excessive displays of mourning and funeral bells were less acceptable in Protestant England.[36] This injustice contradicts Erne's reading of the "popish" Lucius as reconstructing a Catholic state and aligns Lucius more closely with Bate's interpretation of the returning Goths as proto-Protestant. This religious affiliation is challenged by the lack of divine at the play's close: no gods are thanked or evoked. Although Lucius tries to justify this burial by both highlighting Tamora's animality (she is a "ravenous tiger" and "beastly") and suggesting that his lack of pity mirrors her own actions, the closing rhyme ironically suggests that the birds have more potential for pity than the new emperor, making him beastly. Implicitly, the misburial is an attempt to divide Romans and non-Romans (Liebler 147). Tamora has challenged the kingdom by manipulating (and feminizing) the emperor; her vengeance has caused an outburst of violence; casting her outside should cleanse the city of impurity. Yet, by refusing the burial rituals, the polluted, decomposing corpse remains brutally visible; the infectious sign of death continues to impact the Romans.

Furthermore, Tamora's misburial evokes the mistreatment of Polynices in *Antigone.* Antigone bemoans that the new King of Thebes, Creon, will only allow for the proper burial of

[36] Duffy notes that the ringing of funeral bells before funerals and All Souls Day was one of the most recalcitrant areas of continued Catholic practice (577). Goodland describes a shift in mourning practices: Embedded in the attacks and defenses of mourning ritual is a more general distrust of grief, and the public expression of grief in particular ("Inverting the Pietà" 208).

one of her brothers. For Polynices, Creon proclaims: "No Burial of any kind. No wailing, no public tears. / Give him to the vultures, unwept, unburied, / To be a sweet treasure for their sharp eyes and beaks" (*Antigone* 28-30). Just like Lucius, Creon limits displays of public mourning and leaves the body as food for the birds. This order is so unjust that Antigone defies Creon, burying her brother, and is executed in a living tomb as a result for her defiance. Antigone's death leads to the collapse of Creon's dynasty, as his son, Hameon, and his wife, Eurydice, both kill themselves. Such a classical precedent casts a grim note over Lucius's reign: although Tamora has no remaining sons to avenge her death, the improper burial means that her impure corpse continues to pollute Rome with the vision of death. Just as Lucius fears Romans intervening to feed Aaron, is there not a possibility that Romans (or some Goth soldier) might take pity on Tamora's corpse? The repetition of "pity" highlights Lucius's lack of pity, suggesting that the "Irreligious piety" (1.1.133) that sets off the play's violence continues to linger.

Ending and beginning on this precedent of ritual violation suggests that *Titus Andronicus* is deeply engaged in how ritual mediates and justifies violence. Religious explanations and secular justice fail to fully contain Aaron's villainous plotting, multiple dismemberments, cannibalism, and improper burials. The audience's exposure to this violence does not cheapen the play. Rather, the play's outburst of violence approaches the sacred: as the sacred and defiled overlap throughout the play, we are forced to face that the unclean and the clean are one and the same. Such an experience generates abjection: it forces us outside of ourselves to a world where binaries that previously defined systems are no longer useful. Revealing this universal truth is also a sacred act: Kristeva argues that abject literature "becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity" (26). The scale of violence in *Titus* pushes us down into this realm of the sacred. Nevertheless, Titus's overt preoccupation

with failed sacrifice, secular justice, and literary texts suggests a grappling with this concept—some systems are still being explored as an alternative way of understanding abject violence. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare strips away even more of these systems as his protagonist embarks on a project of perversion and "bloody deeds" (*R III* 5.3.171).

3. "Determined to prove a villain": Crime and Ritual Perversion in *King Richard III*

While the secular sacred in *Titus Andronicus* is generated by spurts of gore accompanied by bursts of abject poetry, it takes on an entirely different character in *King Richard III.* Although eleven major characters die over the course of the play,[37] there are only two on-stage deaths (and one severed head) (Siemon 17). Whether occurring on-stage or off-stage, however, each death that occurs repeats a pattern of ritual violation that summons the abject into the space of the play. How are we to understand the remarkably powerful combination of violence and violation? Part of the horror of *Richard III* is the slipperiness of the explanation for the play's violence: the nobles' deaths could be related to, even caused by, the history of violence that provides the play's framework; it could be attributed to the play's protagonist—the devious Richard who, try though the audience might—carries a sort of magnetism that makes us smile as he murders; or the violence could be a divine retribution—a fulfillment of the mourning women's curses. All three of these explanations seem to be endorsed: the plot drivers of secular revenge, devious ambition, and superstitious curses weave together and intertwine one with the other. As the power of each explanation challenges the supremacy of another, there are times when the play challenges the capacity of ritual to bring intelligible order to a world of violence and suffering. William C. Carroll recognizes Richard's failure to proceed through the normal rites of passage as an instance of a greater pattern of ritual violation—a pattern that reflects Elizabethan anxieties over Tudor succession (203). Carroll suggests that Richard reveals the potential for rituals to be "emptied out and made arbitrary" (Carroll 215). In analyzing the play's curses, Björn Quiring suggests that Shakespeare appropriates empty, obsolete rituals from the

[37] In chronological order, they are as follows: Clarence, Edward IV, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Prince Edward, the young Duke of York, Hastings, Lady Anne, Buckingham, and Richard III himself. The murder of Prince Edward, son to Henry VI, and Henry VI, although they occur in the previous history play, are also frequently cited by multiple characters.

pre-Reformation past to represent the theatre on stage: in doing so, only representation itself remains sovereign and sacred (125). While Richard's mockery of the institution of the family, his perversion of burial rituals and marriage, his misappropriation of secular law, and his play-acting of Christian piety certainly create a hollowing out of previous ritual meanings, Shakespeare does not leave ritual entirely hollow and empty. Rather, by revealing the interplay between those forms that we consider to be sacred and those that we consider to be worldly and sinful, *Richard III* generates a sense of abject transcendence.

To unpack the various forms of the secular sacred in this play, I will first focus on how Richard III's acceptance of his societal exclusion and his desire to pervert law, religion and morality make him an abject villain: somebody whose actions "[disturb] identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4). To understand how Richard's actions are disturbing, I turn to his perversion of burials, marriage, execution, and sacrifice: the wooing of Anne, the murder of Clarence, the sacrifice of the young Princes, and the procession of traitors on their way to the execution block. Richard's violence takes on sacred significance: it reflects the failure of societal structures to contain violence. Given this failure, one may argue that the play's violence steps too far away from the divine to be considered sacred. The abject Queen Margaret's curses, however, push against this reading by framing violence in terms of an uncanny supernatural agency. The combined power of Richard's villainy and Margaret's cursing challenges Richmond's attempt to reinstate ritual at the play's end: the secular sacred, not Christian theology, best encapsulates the horror of bloody deeds.

3.1 "The Queen's abjects": Deformity and Richard's abject villainy

In a show of mock-deference to Brakenbury as he brings Clarence to the Tower, Richard declares the brothers to be "the Queen's abjects" (*RIII* 1.1.105). James Siemon notes how this

line puns on the "Queen's subjects" while also evoking the rejection and degradation of abjection (1.1.n106). While easy to overlook, Richard's identification as "the Queen's abjects" underscores Richard's self-awareness of his societal exclusion, particularly among women. "Not shaped for sportive tricks," Richard's physical difference excludes him from the erotic economy that has emerged with the victory of the house of York (1.1.14). Just as Aaron's racial difference marks him as Other in Roman society, Richard's physical deformity becomes a sign of his defilement—a sign that others use to mark him as devilish, sub-human, a contagious and poisonous outcast. Yet, Aaron's abjection is more clear-cut: beyond his absorption of racist rhetoric and hyperbolic declarations of villainy, we are not provided with as much insight into his subjectivity as we are into Richard's. Unlike Aaron, Richard is born into a high station; his link to the crown—to "royal blood"—should make him revered. At the very least, a Duke would be a great catch for any noblewomen. Richard's physical difference, however, marks him as a carrier of unnatural forces at work throughout England. Richard, like Aaron, turns towards a form of deliberate self-abasement, embracing the discrimination that he faces and transforming it into a rhetoric of ambition and violence. Richard's overt declaration of his evil ambitions cements his adoption of his abject state: he will not merely be abject but will spread defilement and contagion by performing a host of fiendish actions.

Whether bemoaning Richard's violent behaviour or insulting the Duke's deformity, the characters in the play incessantly return to Richard's birth. Birth is rife with the potential for abjection: childbirth is filled with fluids, with excrement and blood and feminine tissues (Kristeva 155). Contact with these defiling maternal substances means that the child requires purification: Leviticus states that female children will be unclean for two weeks after birth, and circumcision for male children is required to "separate one from maternal feminine impurity and

defilement … a sign of the alliance with God" (Kristeva 99). Birth is a transition state, a space between life and death, the female body and the male body, and a movement from unity to separation (Kristeva 155). Thus, birth has the potential for rupturing systems of meaning—it is, after all, only after birth that we are introduced to systems of meaning and language, to the oppositional relationship of the subject and object, and, thus, to the idea of signification (Kristeva 33). Birth creates the first experience of being outside of the "zero-state" of the subject—it can be our first exposure to fear (Kristeva 33). Horrific—from Kristeva's point of view—for both the child, the mother, and the onlookers, it is unsurprising that Richard's monstrous birth denotes his defilement.

While birth should be mediated with rituals of purification, Richard's birth never seems to be have been completed: Richard is "sent before my time / Into this breathing world, scarce half made up" (1.1.20-21). Many of the ableist insults directed against Richard focus on his premature status: Henry VI calls him an "undigested and deformed lump" (the process of digestion associates Richard with excrement, another marker of the defiled) (*3HVI* 5.6.51); Margaret dubs him an "abortive, rooting hog" (1.3.227). While it might be typical to wish that a villain was never born, many of the insults and curses against Richard focus not on him, but on his birth and his mother's womb: the Duchess bemoans Richard's birth, claiming "O, my accursed womb, the bed of death / A cockatrice hast thou hatched to the world" (4.1.53-54); Queen Margaret warns the Duchess, "From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept / A hell-hound that hunt us all to death . . . That foul defacer of God's handiwork / thy womb let loose to chase us to our graves" (4.4.47-54). Blaming the mother for Richard's actions, beyond being misogynist, also recognizes a lack of division between Richard's body and the Duchess's womb. His deformity constantly reminds viewers that he has not been cleansed from defilement from his

mother's womb. Thus, part of Richard's contaminating potential comes from his association to the maternal body.

Not only is Richard's birth premature and incomplete, but it is also simultaneously unnatural and supernatural. Henry VI associates Richard's birth with cosmic disorder:

> The owl shrieked at thy birth, an evil sign;
> The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time;
> Dogs howled; and hideous tempests shook down trees;
> The raven rooked her on the chimney's top;
> And chattering pies in dismal discords sung. (*3HVI* 5.6.44-48)

Nature's protest against Richard's birth suggests that Nature possesses a supernatural agency. Richard himself claims to be antagonized by Nature, as he is "Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature . . . so lamely and unfashionable / That dogs bark at me as I halt by them" (1.1.23). Both Henry and Richard add otherworldly agency to animal actions: Henry's rereading of the owl's and night-crow's cries evokes prophecy and witchcraft; Richard implies that the dogs barking is a continuation of Nature's greater pattern of exclusion. Richard is simultaneously subjected to Nature and able to control it: Richard frames himself as helplessly cheated by Nature, yet his ability to spread such upheaval and contagion suggests his power over Nature—his contagious potential. Hence Richard's tyranny is framed as a defilement of Nature's laws: Richmond describes Richard as "The wretched, bloody and usurping boar, / That spoiled your summer fields and fruitful vines" (5.2.7-8). Richard's simultaneous degradation as unnatural (rejected by nature) and supernatural (able to cosmically impact nature) mimics the two-sidedness of the sacred: while Richard's degradation may be (from an ableist perspective) designed to disenfranchise him, it, at times, elevates him to an almost divine power.

Just as his birth and deformity are intertwined, the frequent links between Richard's disability and his animality are one final feature that mark him as Other and abject. The rumour that Richard is born with teeth (creating paradoxical tension of Richard being under- and over-developed) begins the trope of his association with dogs: Richard claims his teeth "plainly signified / That I should snarl, and bite and play the dog" (5.6.77). Greta Olson notes that a birth with teeth associate Richard with cannibalism as well as a rabid dog (312). The animal references to Richard extend beyond the canine, and the scope of these references interrogates the boundary between the human and the animal: "as a boar, spider, toad, dog and hog, Richard elsewhere displays behaviour less than human and is 'othered' from humans as a vicious animal" (319). Early modern human exceptionalism juxtaposed humanity with "the entirety of nature," suggesting that what was animal was "a deficit" (Shannon 129). Accordingly, Richard's animality could be seen as a degradation, as another reflection of his othering from society. As abjection "confronts us with the territory where man strays on the animal" (Kristeva 12), Richard's animality is paradoxically both a degradation and an elevation—it contributes to the exceptional liminality that gives Richard his power. The threat that Richard's deformity poses to society, therefore, is a crisis of categorization: to the ableist nobility, Richard is part man, part womb; unnatural, yet supernatural; part animal, part human.

Like Aaron, Richard is aware of his abjection, and he weaponizes it—and joys in it—as a tool for political power. Richard transforms the feminine associations of his premature birth into masculine battle prowess (thus Janet Adelman locates the origin of Richard's "aggressive masculine ambition" in "the problematic maternal body" [2]). While his lack of sexual success could be perceived as a lack of virile masculinity, Richard transforms the form that limits his love life into a punishment for battling against female tyranny:

> Why, Love foreswore me in my mother's womb,
> And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
> She did corrupt frail Nature with some bribe
> To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
> To make an envious mountain on my back,
> Where sits deformity to mock my body;
> To shape my legs of an unequal size;
> To disproportion me in every part,
> Like to a chaos or an unlicked bear whelp,
> That carries no impression like the dam.
> Am I then a man to be beloved? (*Henry VI Part* 3 3.2.153-63)

Just as God punishes Satan for speaking out against his divine decree, Nature punishes Richard's refusal to accept her authority ("soft laws") by reducing his masculine body (the "withered shrub" of an arm is phallic). As infants are often symbols of innocence, Richard's corruption by nature makes him a liminal figure before he is even born: he is a defiled child.[38] Richard's own blazon—or dismemberment—of his body places him at the intersection of plants, myth, and animals: part-shrub, carrying an "envious mountain" on his back like the mythical Atlas, and resembling an "unlicked bear whelp," Richard's self-fashioning is arguably more monstrous than his own appearance.[39] Just as the nobles view Richard's deformity as reflective of his nature, Richard makes his deformity a punishment for his diabolic stand against tyranny.

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[38] Bethany Packard expands upon this idea of the defiled child, asserting that Richard's "political strategy of child-like presentation" is part of his reclamation and reinterpretation of the stories of his birth (108, 113).

[39] The monstrosity of Richard's appearance on stage varies depending on the production. Anthony Sher's Richard was marked by "spectacular physical deformities": "With draping tunic, Sher resembled a six-legged spider from the front and a vulture from the side; his snake-like tongue flicked in and out relentlessly" (Siemon 111-12). Sher paired

Recognizing that his deformity renders him an outcast from sexual pleasure, Richard appropriates the rules of physiognomy in order to fashion himself as an abject perpetuator of abjection. While early physiognomy asserts that there is a correspondence between the appearance of the body and the nature of the soul, this principle became more ambivalent in the early modern era (Torrey 138). Hence the tension between Richard's ugly appearance—which could signify malice—and his ability to deceive others into following his will (Torrey 138). Richard appropriates the connection between deformity and vice: "Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so, / Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it" (*3HVI* 5.6.76-77). Apprehending his helplessness over his form (and somewhat contradicting his previous assertion that his shape was a punishment visited on him by Nature), Richard retains his agency by deliberately turning towards "hell"—the diabolic. Richard's interiorization of his defilement mirrors a shift in the relationship between Christian theology and abjection. The New Testament interiorizes abomination as sin (Kristeva 118). This interiorization does not neutralize the threat of evil: "for evil, thus displaced *into* the subject, will not cease tormenting him from within, no longer as a polluting or defiling substance, but as the ineradicable repulsion of his henceforth divided and contradictory being" (Kristeva 116), a being governed by the division between the demonic and the divine (Kristeva 117). This step from the exterior to the interior suggests a transcendent potential for spirituality: the abject is no longer something "to be ejected, or separated, but as the most propitious place for communication—as the point where the scales tip

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Richard's physical deformity with an enormous capacity for abrupt, agile movement, making him an object of fascination and repulsion for the courtiers and the audience (Siemon 112). On the other hand, in Ian McKellen's Richard, "any spinal curve was hardly apparent; his arm was unobtrusive" (Siemon 114). While McKellen's more understated presentation could be seen as making Richard less different and less abject, the disjuncture between Richard's resemblance to humanity and his own understanding of his deformity could be arguably more disturbing. If Richard's body is less physically twisted, the contortion of his mind that conceives himself as deformed is greater; his ability to blend into society to commit his wrongs even more effective; the line between the average human and Richard's atrocity thinner.

forward towards spirituality" (Kristeva 127). Thus, Richard's suggests a full sublimation of the abject identity—a spiritual recognition that reaches towards the divine.

As Richard's deformity stains him with abjection, Richard's moral crookedness reflects his internalization of his own pollution. Kristeva predicts the abject subject's masochistic substitution: "Often, moreover, [the abject subject] includes himself among [his abjections], thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations" (8). Richard's exceptional capacity for violence marks his separateness: Hence, his declaration "Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile" (*3HVI* 3.2.182*)* is an uncanny anticipation of Kristeva's enumeration of the causes of abjection: "a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it . . . a friend who stabs you" (4). Richard dissembles by painting himself as an adoring lover, a faithful brother, and a reluctant, religious heir to the throne. His union with Anne and his incestuous desire to marry his niece reflect Richard's impulse to use "the body for barter:" Richard alludes to his "secret close intent' (1.1.158) in marrying Anne and views his marriage to his niece as a way to reinforce his reign (4.2.60). Similarly, when asking for his niece's hand, Richard makes procreation a bargaining chip: "If I have killed the issue of your womb / To quicken your increase I will beget / Mine issue upon your daughter" (4.4.296-98). Finally, Richard's proclamations of brotherhood before his betrayal of Clarence makes him "a friend who stabs you." Although Richard may associate himself with Christian theology of demons and hell, these parallels suggest that Richard's deeds need not be understood within a theological system. Richard's "bloody deeds" (5.3.172) reveal boundaries by violating them.

The combination of Richard's liminality and his malice locates the power of the play's horrors with borders and extremes, ushering in an area of ritual significance. Rituals affirm the

bonds that unite and create a community (Liebler 8). Abjection recognizes these borders and perverts them: "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (Kristeva 15). Prohibitions are set up to fence us off from dangers: violating them therefore recalls the chaos to "the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be—. . . that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out" (Kristeva 10). Psychologically, the embrace of this chaos becomes a process of self-abandonment, a replacement of the "Self" by the "Other": abjection "is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter* ego, drops so that 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence" (9). As the audience is lured into Richard's ambitious plots, we engage in a similar abandonment. Richard is the "Other," our unique insight into his psychology can create an identification between the Self (us) and the Other (Richard). Even if one does not identify with Richard, witnessing his violent acts can cause a similar crisis of conscience—a similar discomfort. Richard's "bloody deeds," therefore, evoke the secular sacred because the scale of their violence generates a psychological state of "sublime alienation" that is conventionally qualified with religious explanations, yet these explanations are stripped away, creating a paradox of transcendence without divinity.

3.2 "Was ever woman in this humour wooed?": Anne's seduction and the violation of funeral rites

Described as "gross," "revolting" and "repulsive," the wooing of Anne on the way to King Henry's internment is one of Richard's most perverted acts. While burials are meant as rites of purification (Kristeva 109), Richard interrupts this process of purification, contaminating it with

sexuality, and ultimately leaving the funeral rites incomplete. His disturbance of ritual here can be seen as part of a pattern of perversion, which connects to the impulse of abjection: "the abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (15). The process of perversion does not empty a ritual of meaning, it infuses it with new meaning. Richard's ability to turn his conversation with Anne towards the erotic is disturbing not only because of its inappropriateness, but also because of how the defilement of King Henry's corpse somehow makes this eroticism disturbingly appropriate for the occasion. Thus, the scene takes on its own sacred resonance. In order to fully explore the pattern of perversion in the wooing scene, I will first focus on Anne's lamentations and the precedent of burial ritual. Then, I turn to the witnessing of the body and the importance of blood. Finally, I concentrate on the erotic exchange between Anne and Richard.

Throughout *Richard III*, we encounter murders with no bodies: the victims are dragged offstage, their bodies thrown onto heaps or buried in unmarked graves. Here, we are presented with a body without a murder (Henry VI is murdered in the previous play). The appearance of an old victim—an old crime—suggests the impact of previous injustices on the events of the current play. Its appearance also has a two-fold effect: it highlights the absence of other bodies and the failure of funeral ritual while also calling direct attention to the palpable presence of King Henry's corpse. This failure of funeral ritual is reflective of a larger anxiety during the Reformation: Katharine Goodland argues that the abolition of purgatory led to a de-centering of the physical body and community in funeral ritual, which, for some, was a "gain in godliness," but, for others, was a disturbing loss ("Obsequious Laments" 34-35). The elaborate ritual

procession, Anne's laments, curses, and focus on bodily fluids, therefore, highlights a recent shift in the structuring of the sacred.

As the corpse is the ultimate symbol of bodily vulnerability and death, it is a major source for abjection. Thus, it may generate a desire to look away, to hide the body, to cover it in a shroud. Just as the corpse is initially shrouded, Anne's lamentation initially distances her from the corpse by using metaphor and conjuring the king's ghost:

> Poor key-cold figure of a holy king
>
> Pale ashes of the house of Lancaster,
>
> Thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood
>
> Be it lawful that I invocate thy ghost
>
> To hear the lamentations of poor Anne. (1.2.5-9)

Goodland notes that Anne's mourning "includes all of the characteristic features of the genre of ritual lamentation for the dead: the direct address to the corpse, the establishment of kinship, the narrative of death, and the call for vengeance" ("Obsequious Laments" 47). Ritual structures are ordered by the abject: here, the ritual is an attempt to prevent a disintegration of the law, a desire for justice and revenge. Yet, Anne does not address the corpse as directly as possible: it is not a body, but a "key-cold figure," "pale ashes," a "bloodless remnant of that royal blood." The paradox of a "bloodless remnant" of "royal blood" begins to expose some fragility in the symbolic structures that are used to purify the corpse: this is not just any corpse, but the body of a king. The king is rendered sacred through royal blood, which legitimized the king's relationship with God and his divine right to rule.[40] Nevertheless, blood is a source of

[40] Quiring brings this connection one step further and deliberately invokes the Eucharist: 'blood' refers to the real liquid flowing from the violently murdered body, to the mystery of lordly descent that constitutes a nobleman's nobility, and to the sacramental blood of the Redeemer. The various ensuing dialogues play with the ambiguities

defilement—it should be separated from the sacramental subject in order to purify it and prepare it for burial. The king's body, therefore, must be symbolized and valued because of his blood, but also be purified and bloodless for the rites to be complete. While there is a desire to separate the king's body and his spirit, this separation is challenged by the body's physical role in determining the spirit's occupation.[41] Thus, the slippage of meaning already suggests a blending of the divide between the spiritual and the physical, the heavenly and the earthly, beckoning towards the arbitrariness revealed by abjection.

Furthermore, while designed to cut off the corpses' polluting potential, burial rituals are highly dependent on the physical body as a conduit to the spiritual realm (Kristeva 109). Thus, Anne attempts to consecrate the body with her tears: "Lo, in these windows that let forth thy life / I pour the helpless balm of my poor eyes" (1.2.12-13). Goodland notes that "the iconography of the scene evokes both the mourning Magdalene and the Pietà" ("Obsequious Laments" 47). Quiring, on the other hand, compares the mourning to "'Easter sepulchre,' a visual Eucharist on the occasion of which the faithful, especially women, would congregate around a representation of the bleeding Christ in imitation of the Three Marys" (32). Both interpretations reveal the transcendent potential of Anne's lamentations: Anne's language infuses the body with symbolism, highlighting how it is holy and sacramental. At the same time, however, the sacred cannot exist without the defiled: the purification ritual of consecrated tears, when stripped of its symbolism, is a mixing of bodily fluids reminiscent of the mixing of fluids during an erotic encounter. Given that Anne is Henry's daughter-in-law, this borderline erotic encounter verges

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inherent in the relationships between these three significations: the three foundational qualities that legitimate the rule of lords, that is, divine judgment, noble descent, and life-or-death combat, are designated by the same word and are approximated to each other through the evidential figure of the Eucharist. (32)

[41] According to Ernst Kantorowicz, the king's earthly body was paired with an "immortal body" transferred from the faithful collective (312-13).

on the incestuous. Thus, the sanctimony of the burial ritual that Richard interrupts is already shaky: while ritual structures attempt to purify the body through symbolism, the transcendent power of the scene comes from Richard's ability to circumvent these structures, creating gaps in meaning.

Richard's interruption of the burial ritual explodes the theological structures that Anne uses to defend against the abject potential of death. This explosion occurs most palpably when Anne calls upon Richard (and the audience) to witness Henry's bleeding corpse:

> If thou delight to view thy heinous deeds,
> Behold this pattern of thy butcheries.
> —O, gentlemen, see, see dead Henry's wounds
> Open their congealed mouths, and bleed afresh.
> —Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity,
> For tis thy presence that exhales this blood
> From cold and empty veins where no blood dwells. (1.2.53-59)

This supernatural act has been seen as referring to cruentation: the belief that a victim's body would bleed in the presence of the murderer (1.2.n56). Thus this "deluge most unnatural" can be understood as a "miracle" of "divine judgment" (Quiring 35). The mechanism of this divine judgment, however, comes about through the desecration of the corpse: the body, previously purified and bloodless, is now infused with polluting blood. Royal or unroyal, the blood is directly associated with menstruation: "congealed bleeding mouths" are a stand-in for female genitalia, which adds to the play's association between the womb and death. Furthermore, the pollution that occurs is not specifically in reaction to Richard's guilt, but to his physical presence as a "lump of foul deformity," emphasizing how Richard's abject body has the potential to

spread defilement and contagion. Despite the attempts to view the king's body and Richard as separate adversaries, Anne demands a similar spontaneous bleeding in Richard: blushing is caused by the rush of blood to the face. While Anne demands that Richard blush to show shame for his sins, blushing also occurs when a lover encounters his love. Thus, the erotic begins to violate this supposedly hallowed moment of divine judgment. Anne's demand that we witness the sacrificial body and interpret the bleeding as a sign of Richard's guilt fails to account for all ritual meaning: the physical corpse urges us towards abjection; the spread of defilement may not be attributed to a supernatural power, but to Richard's earthly abject state.

Richard's appropriation of the funeral for a seduction of the chief mourner is so effective because he highlights the link between the sacred, the defiled, death and sex which are already present in the ritual itself. Richard resists Anne's curses by evading her attempts to categorize him: when Anne accuses Richard of being bestial, Richard counteracts by claiming that he is not a beast at all; when Anne suggests instead that Richard is a supernatural devil, Richard moves from the realm of religious sanctity (angels and devils) to the secular law, asking "to acquit" myself (1.2.77), not to confess. His easy leaps between these different rhetorical structures, beyond earning the audience's admiration, also work to create a slip in symbolism: rather than seeing his murder of King Henry as an act worthy of damnation (a sign of being Hell's agent), Richard aligns himself with the heavenly by claiming that Henry is "fitter for that place than earth" (1.2.110). He transposes guilt for Henry's murder from Edward, to himself, to Anne's beauty, transforming himself from a fiend to a lover. Richard's desire to "lie" with Anne, in particular, unites the triple meanings of the word: lying as deception, lying as sexual consummation, and lying in eternal rest (1.2.116). Richard's blending of these different sanctities

(of marriage, religion, law, and death) does not hollow them out; rather, it reinfuses each within the other.

The full perversion of the burial ritual occurs by way of Richard's displacement of the cause for his sin onto Anne's beauty. Kristeva describes how the Christian conception of sin "turns into a living beauty": "Such a conversion into jouissance and beauty goes far beyond the retributive, legalistic tonality of sin as debt or iniquity. Thus it is that, by means of the beautiful, the demoniacal possession of the world can be tamed" (123). To win Anne, Richard highlights how he is not motivated by sinful ambition, but by Anne's beauty:

> Your beauty was the cause of that effect:
>
> Your beauty, that did haunt me in my sleep
>
> To undertake the death of all the world,
>
> So I might live one hour in your sweet bosom. (1.2.124-27)

Richard's vice (lust) becomes personified as Anne's beauty: a beauty that, like the devil on his shoulder, urges him towards evil acts. Anne's beauty also inspires Richard's mock conversion—another perversion of ritual that causes a slip in signification from the burial scene. Previously unable to "shed a remorseful tear" (suggesting a lack of repentance and overflow of sin), Richard claims that Anne's beauty provokes a conversion, making him "blind with weeping" (1.2.169). Just as Anne's tears are supposedly a purifying balm for Henry's corpse, Richard's tears are meant to signify his consecration. Offering his body as sacrifice cements the doubling between Richard and Henry's corpse: he makes himself a surrogate for the king's body and paints himself as a second sacrifice to Anne's love. This conversion is not religious, but erotic.

The eroticism of the conversion makes the burial even more abject. Many scholars note that Richard's offer of sacrifice as kinky or "sadomasochistic" (Bloom qtd. in Olson 307). As

Greta Olson relates, bodily fluids are exchanged, the sword is an offer of penetration, Richard's supplication to Anne reverses typical gender roles (307). Olson reads Anne's submission to Richard's request as reflective of a repressed bestial desire, "to return . . . to an animalistic, orally-centered form of sexual activity" (308). My analysis can push this claim even further: Richard's false conversion paints him as a substitute for King Henry's corpse. Thus, the union transgresses the boundaries of animal and human, and the living and the dead. As if this defiled pairing was not already abject enough, the union is incestuous, both in Richard's role as a substitute for the father-in-law, and also in his own configuration of the match: "The easiest way to make the wench amends / Is to become her husband and her father" (1.1.155-56). Incest is the ultimate prohibition: as will be explored more thoroughly in the following chapter on *King Lear*, incest "transgresses the boundaries between what is clean and proper" (Kristeva 85). Richard's wooing of Anne, therefore, has a spiritual resonance: by so thoroughly transgressing boundaries, by revealing the instability of almost all systems of meaning, the wooing scene reveals their fragility. These systems, however, are not emptied of meaning, for they are infused with others. The very witnessing of this act approaches the edge of ritual structures, beckoning towards the divine.

Richard's redirection of the funeral from Chertsey to Whitefriars, and his failure to "wet his grave with my repentant tears" (1.2.218) completes the collapse of ritual. The degradation from proper lamentation to Richard's narcissistic joying in his own physicality creates a pattern of abasement: Anne's lust for Richard as she will "abase her eyes on [him]" (1.2.249) suggests a weakening of the natural forces that enforced Richard's social exclusion. This weakening is part of the coming plague: once able to join in society, Richard's abjection threatens all structures.

The shift of agency from the supernatural Nature to the secular man signals a turn to corporeality: something other than God enables the spread of Richard's "bloody deeds."

3.3 "Bloody deeds" and butchery: Richard's Desacralization of Execution

Even though Richard never personally murders any character in the play, Richard's reign is marked by blood—by "bloody deeds" (5.3.171) carried out by a "bloody tyrant" (5.3.246). The repeating motif of blood highlights the literal violence in the executions that Richard authorizes. However, unlike in the earlier play *Titus Andronicus*, much of the gore is hidden from the stage: Clarence's murder is the only "bloody deed" that occurs on stage (1.4.270). The "bloodiness" of Richard's orders, therefore, comes from their repeated defiance and defilement of the principles that structure royal society. Just as blood marks the boundary between the body's inner and outer workings (Kristeva 69), Richard's murders transgress secular law, religious rituals, family ties and the boundary between man and animal. In doing so, they emphasize Richard's presence as an abject figure, advancing his own project of self-abasement: regardless of who carries out the murder, the female blood that marked Richard as different from his birth continues to stain his reign. As well, each act of defilement reveals the fragility behind the systems that they transgress, for example, Christian ideas of redemption and death. The parodying of these systems, however, does not empty them of meaning, but instead redirects the focus onto the injustice and transgressive power of death in itself.

Because of its presence onstage, Clarence's murder exemplifies the stripping of the conventional frameworks around violence and their replacement with the physical presence of death. As both Quiring and Carroll note, Clarence's murder is a perversion of the sacrament of baptism and the Eucharist: Richard informs his brother that King intends him to be "new christen'd in the Tower" (1.1.1.50); Clarence's drowning in the malmsey butt jokes on the

christening; and Clarence is "made a sop of," alluding to "the bite that Jesus passes to Judas" (Quiring 29; Carroll 206). Quiring suggests that this parody is part of Richard's greater project of questioning the signification of the sacrament: "he takes up conventional sacraments . . . instrumentalizes and parodies them by demonstrating their emptiness. But they retain their eminent power nonetheless and are reduced to a game only for those who have the power to wield them" (28-9). Quiring's recognition that this emptying is not entirely complete is apt: I argue that the parodying of these sacraments, far from reducing them to a game, highlights the horror of the violence that we witness. Importantly, both religious values and secular laws are parodied, but secular laws: the exchange between the two murderers and Clarence interrogates chivalry, class divisions and secular law.

The murderers themselves are the first step in the pattern of injustice behind Clarence's murder. Although Richard describes them as "executioners," the murderers do not follow the early modern protocols for executing a traitor. Treason was considered to be a "twice-monstrous act," and it involved a confession, public procession through the city, second confession on the scaffold and a public execution, where the traitor was "hanged and drawn and quartered and for further display in death" (Mullaney 117). Through the confession and execution, the traitor was returned to society: "When the body fled, treason has been effaced; execution is treason's epilogue, spoken by the law" (Mullaney 118). Although the audience knows that the accusations about Clarence's treasonous intent are falsified by Richard, the failure to follow the ritual pattern for execution underscores the injustice of this act—this is no execution; it is a murder. Even though the murderers are surrogates for Richard, his use of hired men contributes to a sense of dissembling and deception; instead of taking the murder into his own hands, making his role in his brother's demise clear, Richard intends for Clarence to die without knowing his true

executioner (he orders for Clarence to be killed in his sleep and warns the murderers to watch out for Clarence's eloquence—his ability to dissuade them from the murder). Furthermore, Richard's choice to use servants to carry out his orders spreads the contagion of violence into other bodies. Just as Richard uses his inability to shed tears as a tool to manipulate Anne, his comment "Your eyes drop millstones while others drop tears" applauds the murderer's masculinity by way of their likeness to his own hardheartedness. The unnaturalness of hard tears—tears that have previously been used to consecrate Henry's body—highlights the murderer's impurity.

Far from creating a solemn scene of religious debate, the murderers' attempt to understand the consequences of their own actions is farcical:

2 MURDERER: What, shall we stab him as he sleeps?

1 MURDERER: No. He'll say 'twas done cowardly, when he wakes.

2 MURDERER: Why, he shall never wake until the great Judgment Day.

1 MURDERER: Why, then he'll say we stabbed him sleeping. (1.4.100-5)

Stabbing somebody in their sleep is undignified and insidious as it prevents the possibility of a final confession, potentially damning the victim. The first murderer's hesitation to murder Clarence in his sleep evokes the principles of the masculine code of chivalry. To be a backstabber is to be cowardly, or womanly—it is "wrong." Yet, it is also equally cowardly to kill an unarmed man; it is equally wrong to be a murderer for hire. Thus, this principle of chivalry will not bear weight during the murder: the first murderer stabs Clarence in the back, an equally cowardly move. Furthermore, the first murderer's fear of Clarence speaking "when he wakes" is humorously short-sighted. While the second murderer introduces the judgment day as a comfortable hyperbole—suggesting that the murderers' cowardice will not be discovered in their lifetime—the first murderer's direct repetition of his previous fear reinfuses the religious

meaning behind the word "Judgement," hence the second murder's sudden turn to theological fears:

> 2 MURDERER: The urging of that word 'Judgement' hath bred a kind of remorse in me.
>
> 1 MURDERER: What? Art thou afraid?
>
> 2 MURDERER: Not to kill him, having a warrant, but to be damned for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me. (1.4.106-10)

The first murderer's prod "What? Art thou afraid?" reinforces his alignment with ideas of masculinity: to be a coward is to be womanly; to be womanly is to be defiled; no matter what occurs, the murderers will be defiled. The second murderer, however, seems to have a moment of genuine reckoning, as he sees the fragility of the law that has authorized the murder. While this moment of religious clarity could reinforce the power of religious values, the murderer's assertion that his mind might change "while one tells twenty" (1.4.119) and his relocating of conscience from his own soul to the inside of "the Duke of Gloucester's purse" (1.4.127) undoes the idea of the repentant sinner. Religious zeal is replaced by mercenary desire; repentance infused with the sin of greed. Yet, this sinister turn towards murder and greed is inappropriately funny, making the murder that follows even more perverse.

Both Richard and the murderers admit to being motivated by the diabolical: the second murderer urges the first to "Take the devil in thy mind" (1.4.145). Accepting Christ and confessing one's sins are designed to "drive out evil spirits and devils;" thus saving the sinner "from the abject" (Kristeva 122). The murderer's deliberate choice to "take" the devil, therefore, reflects an absorption—an acceptance of abjection. The murderers become motivated by ghoulish zeal, deciding to desecrate the corpse in a parody of a baptism:

1 MURDERER: Take him on the costard with the hilts of thy sword, and them throw him in the malmsey butt in the next room.

2 MURDER: O excellent device! And make a sop of him. (1.4.152-55)

The enthusiasm for the violence (as the second murderer deems it an "excellent device") starkly contrasts the earlier hesitation to stab the Duke in his sleep. This combination of zeal and planning makes the crime more abject as it "heightens the display" of the fragility of the law (Kristeva 4). The precise nature of this new crime involves a defilement of sacred objects: Clarence's corpse will stand in for the newly baptized child. Accordingly, the murderers intend to transgress multiple boundaries, making the murder (already horrific) even more impactful. The turn from this murderous excitement to the Second murderer's desire to "reason" with Clarence may seem sudden. However, the murderer's desire to transform the murder into a parody suggests their continued discomfort with the bloody act: they do not refer to the body as a corpse, but as "him;" it is somehow easier to understand the body as a "sop" than as a corpse. The implicit recognition of the horror of the act that they are about to undertake reinforces its power and challenges the value of symbolic substitution, creating a precedent for the rhetorical exchange with Clarence, where both parties grapple with the fragility of the systems that they are about to transgress.

The debate between Clarence and his murderers emphasizes the "bloodiness" of the murder by revealing how it violates several orders of society. This violation opens the wound for a sacrificial crisis: because the violence is not contained within a ritual system with clear meanings, it risks becoming a contagion. Clarence's murder could possibly be justified by either being an execution (of a traitor) or a sacrifice. Yet, the principles behind both sanctioned forms of violence are violated. To highlight this violation, Clarence calls upon his social status, the

secular law, religion, and familial orders—each a major structure of society that could be considered sacred. Yet, for each of Clarence's arguments, the criminals highlight the Duke's hypocrisy. Therefore, when Clarence attempts to assert his social superiority by claiming he is "royal," the murderer's highlight how his claim for social superiority is undermined by his position as a traitor:

CLARENCE: In God's name, what art thou?

1 MURDERER: A man, as you are.

CLARENCE: But not as I am, royal.

1 MURDERER: Nor you as we are, loyal. (1.4.162-64).

Clarence defends himself from this claim of treason by turning towards the power of secular law, enumerating the multiple principles that must be followed for the execution to be just:

Are you drawn forth among a world of men
To slay the innocent? What is my offence?
Where is the evidence that doth accuse me?
What lawful quest have given their verdict up
Unto the frowning judge? Or who pronounced
The bitter sentence of poor Clarence's death?
Before I be convict by course of law,
To threaten me with death is most unlawful. (1.4.180-86)

The list of rhetorical questions not only highlights the absence of the judicial procedure, but also of the elaborate protocols required for a public execution. Violating the judicial procedure is more than "unlawful": if, as Rene Girard claims, the judicial system "serves to deflect the menace of vengeance" by replacing private vengeance with public vengeance, then ignoring the

principles of the law threatens to create a tide of violence—of blood—that could overwhelm the kingdom (15). Highlighting the discrepancy between "the innocent" and "a convict," Clarence begins to paint the picture of himself as a martyr, a pure soul who is an inappropriate victim for sacrifice since to kill him would not eliminate pollution but cause it to spread.

In his attempt to reinforce the importance of secular law, however, Clarence slips into the religious:

> I charge you, as you hope to have redemption,
>
> By Christ's dear blood, shed for our grievous sins,
>
> That you depart and lay no hands on me.
>
> The deed you undertake is damnable. (1.4.188-91)

This turn suggests an instability in values: the law and Christ are thoroughly intertwined; thus, it becomes unclear if it is the "frowning judge" or Christ himself who should declare Clarence's innocence. If Clarence was secure in the power of secular law, surely, he would emphasize the possible legal consequences of the murder. Instead, in a self-conscious recognition of the law's weakness, Clarence turns towards the divine, distinguishing between the King's orders and "the great King of kings" (1.4.194), which directly threatens the divine precedent of royal blood that Clarence initially uses to assert his difference. Such hypocrisy does not go unnoticed by the murderers, who highlight Clarence's treason in the previous plays, emphasizing his defilement ("And like a traitor to the name of God / Didst break that vow, and with thy treacherous blade / Unrip'st the bowels of thy sovereign's son." [1.4.204-6]). Clarence's defense requires for him to be seen as innocent, both under the law and under God; his threat is only valid if he is not a source of pollution. Yet, the murderers reconstruct Clarence's argument, suggesting that, regardless of the status of the current accusations against the Duke, his previous violation of the

sacrament makes him a traitor—one who routinely violates secular law and God's law, and, therefore, a liminal figure who does not deserve protection. No longer an innocent man, but a "bloody minister," the murderers recognize Clarence's defilement and use it to justify the murder as a sacrifice.

Finally, Clarence uses the precedent of family bonds as a reason for why he is an improper sacrificial victim. A proper sacrificial victim comes from outside of the community so that the whole community can unite in rage against it (Girard 102). Clarence's familial ties mitigate his status as a traitor (his actions against the Lancasters were done on the behalf of his family and the current kingdom), therefore reintegrating him into society. Furthermore, Clarence's assertion of his brother's love suggests that this murder, far from stemming from the cycle of violence, could be met with violent reprisal, if not by King Edward, then by Richard. Yet, Clarence's confidence that Richard "loves me and holds me dear" (1.4.232) is misplaced: Richard disowns his family after murdering Henry VI, claiming "I have no brother; I am like no brother" (*3HVI* 5.6.80). This dramatic betrayal emphasizes the damage behind Richard's dissembling nature: as Richard is absent from the murder, Clarence must tortuously piece apart the mechanism of his demise. While religion or law are subject to change (as they did during the Reformation), family is meant to be a universalizing principle—a source of infinite love. Clarence's insistence that Richard's betrayal "cannot be" emphasizes the wrongness of kin-killing kin. Such wrongness has a biblical precedent: if the murder of Abel by Cain is widely recognized as one of the first acts of violence; then, here, Cain murders Abel without laying a finger on him. Richard's infidelity is the final nail in Clarence's coffin: his final threats of damnation and implication that the murderers become less human by murdering him ("Not to relent is beastly, savage, devilish" [1.4.262]) are using systems that have already been shown to be inapplicable. Royalty, justice,

religion, and family are structures designed to prevent the outbreak of sheer violence. Clarence's murder shows the instability of these structures.

Witnessing the murder is the climax of this transcendent power. As Clarence's elaborate plea has built suspense, the first murderer's attack is abrupt. Although the first murderer's initial hesitation to kill Clarence in his sleep may have suggested some honour, he murders the Duke by stabbing him in the back, literalizing Richard's betrayal of Clarence. The second murderer's warning ("Look behind you, my lord" [1.4.267]) and his regret for his role in the violence could suggest that the possibility for some redemption: "A bloody deed, and desperately dispatched. / How fain, like Pilate, would I wash my hands / Of this most grievous murder" (1.4.282). The murderer recognizes the defilement of the murder, for it is a "bloody deed" and he needs to "wash" his hands, to purify himself from the murder. Yet, this turn to religion is equally as hypocritical as Pilates' attempt to "cleanse himself symbolically of guilt at the sentencing of Jesus" (1.4.n271). As Christianity interiorizes impurity as sin, there is no way to separate the defilement from the murderer's actions from his self. The blood does not just rest on his hands, it has sunk into his soul. The murderer's repentance ("I repent me that the Duke is slain" [1.4.277]) offers the possibility for his sublimation—perhaps one person may be saved from the incoming tide of abjection. Nevertheless, this repentance is immediately followed by the first murderer's mistreatment of the Duke's corpse: "I'll go hide the body in some hole / Till the Duke give order for burial" (1.4.279-80). Regardless of the second murderer's change of heart, we return to the physical body—the source of pollution that has been created by their abject act. The mis-burial suggests the possibility for future contamination from the murder.

Simultaneously, just as Clarence's murder is revealed to violate social values, there is an uncanny sense of justice behind his death, which creates even more discomfort. The murderers

are correct in recognizing that Clarence is a traitor: beyond his violation of his oath to the Lancaster, Clarence reveals his disloyalty as he suggests that the brothers violate the king's orders and seek out help with Richard. Furthermore, despite frequently enacting God's wrath as a tool against the murderers, Clarence refuses to repent for his sins, making him less Christ-like than he may aim to appear. Such discrepancies suggest that, like his brother, Clarence is skilled at dissembling; his dishonesty makes him less innocent, his murder—while still horrific—could be justified. Clarence's prophetic dream adds another nuance to the attack. While the attack is mainly framed as being devilish, Clarence's prayer after his dream of the murdered Warwick and the dead prince offers the possibility that this attack is an instant of divine vengeance:

> O God! If my prayers cannot appease Thee,
> But Thou wilt be avenged on my misdeeds,
> Yet execute Thy wrath in me alone;
> O spare my guiltless wife and my poor children. (1.4.69-72)

While Richard is commonly seen as the devil's messenger, his order for the murder of Clarence, here, may be seen as being ordained by a divine presence: he is the actor that carries out God's revenge. Richard himself frames his murders behind the mask of being a divine actor: his promise to Clarence ("I will deliver you" [1.1.115]) positions him as a godly figure (God delivers us from evil); he asserts "I will shortly send thy soul to heaven, / If heaven will take it present at our hands" (1.1.119-20). While Richard's maniacal plotting makes his divine intentions another joke and a feature of his dissembling nature, Clarence's prayer suggests that there is some resonance behind the two comparisons. The binary of God and the devil, of the sacred and the defiled, thus are conflated. If Clarence's murder highlights the fragility of these laws and divisions, it does not suggest that they are empty, but that they are one and the same:

overlapping. The invisible being revealed is that there is no true division between the sacred and the defiled, the godly and the diabolic: they are two sides of the same coin. The murder does not follow the principles of any law—it defies and defiles them—yet, in being so defiled, the murder is also sacred. This paradox is the source of the secular sacred: Clarence's murder challenges Christian religious feeling, yet the combination of violence and desecration makes it retain a sense of transcendent power.

3.4 "I wish the bastards dead": Child sacrifice and Richard's crisis of paternity

Although it does not occur on stage, the murder of the two young princes is equally—if not more—bloody than the murder of Clarence. Even the hard-hearted Tyrell recognizes the injustice of the act, describing it in terms of blood, butchery, and atrocity: 'The tyrannous and bloody act . . . The most arch deed of piteous massacre / That ever this land was guilty of. . . this piece of ruthful butchery" (4.3.1-5). Part of what makes these murders more shocking is their gratuitousness. The threat that the children posed to Richard's succession had been eliminated by Richard's falsified rumours of their bastardy. Richard's callous demand, "I wish the bastards dead, / And I would have it suddenly performed" (4.2.18-19) highlights this discrepancy: there is no need to kill the children if the public believes that they are bastards. Richard's desire to murder his nephews is wrong on several levels: killing innocent children is wrong; spilling royal blood is wrong; murdering one's nephews is wrong. By attacking the hallmark of naturalness and innocence, Richard's attack on the children could be seen as an ultimate act of defilement: he takes symbols of purity and transforms them into polluted corpses.[42] Yet, this reading somewhat oversimplifies the early modern understanding of children: "sixteen- and seventeenth-century children could be understood as both innately innocent and sinful, as lacking reason yet skillfully

[42] Carroll suggests that Richard's murders the children in retaliation for the betrayal of his birth and as revenge for their natural wholeness (207).

imitating it, and as embodying connections to the past and future" (Packard 110). This description suggests that children are a threat because of their liminal position; in fact, their ability to imitate reason suggests a potential for dissembling akin to Richard's own. Packard argues that the children "serve to expose, and ultimately undermine, [Richard's] political strategy of child-like self-presentation" (108). Just as Packard notes that the boys have an intellectual capacity similar to Richard's, I argue that Richard's attack on the children is especially abject because of his relationship to them: after their father's death, Richard is their father-figure. The accusations of bastardy and sacrifice of the children both reflect an anxiety around Richard's patriarchal power: it is, after all, Richard's patrilineal blood that secures his claim to the throne. The failure for the bodies to appear—and their memorialization in Tyrell's speech—creates a gap where the sacrificial body should be witnessed as proof of paternity and power. The disruption of this ritual—the failure to properly witness death—is a violation that is abject.

Much like their uncle, the Prince and the young Duke possess a unique ability to observe and challenge narratives. The young York shows a keen knowledge of the stories around Richard's birth: he contradicts the Duchess's assertion that Richard was "So long-a growing and so leisurely" (2.4.19) by asserting that "my uncle grew so fast / That he could gnaw a crust at two hours old" (2.4.27-28). The young York cites Richard's nurse as his source, yet the Duchess claims that the nurse "was dead ere thou wast born" (2.4.33). As Packard notes, the young York's response that he "cannot" state his real source could suggest child-like ignorance or a "refusal to disclose his source for the flout, demonstrating his ability to keep his mouth shut and indicating his control and awareness of the implications of his words" (118). York's ability to control narratives suggests his similarity to his uncle, which poses a threat (as if he could see through his uncle's dissembling façade) but also exposes their kinship, potentially undermining

Richard's later claim of his bastardy. The young Prince has a similar power: his discussion of Julius Caesar and the impact of valour on one's posthumous reputation, combined with his own imperial ambitions, poses a threat to Richard (Packard 119). The children's intelligence makes their death more tragic: they are not just symbols of purity but fledgling human beings.

Furthermore, their similarity to Richard challenges his ability to marginalize them as bastards and assert his claim to the throne. Richard attempts to dismiss their wit as a mark of their maternity: "He is all the mother's, from the top to toe" (3.1.156). Such association with the mother, however, resembles Richard's own defiled connection to his mother because of his birth, reinforcing another possible similarity between the uncle and his nephew. His demand for Buckingham to "Infer the bastardy of Edward's children" (3.5.75) and suggest that Edward IV was illegitimate continues this association with the mother by extrapolating the insecurity behind the paternity that structures succession in England. Patriarchal states are simultaneously based on the importance of paternity as determining royal (sacred) blood, but also cannot deny the underlying possibility that paternity is invisible, unproven, and assumed (D. L. Miller 3). Thus, Richard's dismissal of the children as bastards exploits the law of succession that is designed to protect the sacred structure of royalty. In doing so, Richard threatens his own legitimacy: if Edward's claim to royalty is to be dismissed for "Being nothing like the noble duke, my father" (3.5.92), then Richard, who also does not resemble the Duke, could be vulnerable to accusations of bastardy. Despite his dissembling, Richard does seem to follow the principles of succession (murdering his way to the top): the recognition of the fragility of his own paternity creates a possible crisis. David Lee Miller claims that "Patrilineal patriarchies recruit sacrificial victims as visible stand-ins for the father body . . . 'Witnessing' proves crucial to all these transactions because although the spectacle can be observed, the connection to the patriline cannot" (7).

Richard asserts his claim to the throne and his paternity by sacrificing his nephews. Shakespeare, however, reacts against the sacrifice by denying the witnessing required for the sacrificial victim; this denial of witnessing creates an absence, a disturbance, that makes the murder a crime, and causes a fracturing of paternal power, which is replaced by cursing and mourning women.

Without being presented with corpses—the vision of pollution—there is a possibility that we will see the victims as a symbol of purity. Instead of witnessing the sacrifice, the audience is given a glimpse of the deaths through Tyrell's speech. This speech is doubly removed: we do not witness the deaths ourselves; nor do we hear the murderer Dighton and Forrest directly; instead, we hear from the middleman, Tyrell. Just as the murderers have difficulty telling the tale (as Dighton must continue Forrest's speech, and at the end "they could not speak" [4.3.21]), this removal suggests that the murder is unstageable. Gemma Miller argues that the off-stage nature of the murder prevents the fetishism of the children's deaths: the unrepresentable death contrasts the children's witty, fully embodied on-stage presence (229). Yet, the blazon describing the innocent children sexualizes, feminizes, and dismembers them:

> 'O thus,' quoth Dighton, 'lay the gentle babes'.
>
> 'Thus, thus,' quoth Forrest, 'girdling one another
>
> Within their alabaster innocent arms
>
> Their lips were four red roses on a stalk,
>
> And in their summer beauty kissed each other.
>
> A book of prayers on their pillow lay,
>
> Which once,' quoth Forrest, 'almost changed my mind.
>
> But, O, the Devil—' There the villain stopped. (4.3.9-16)

"Girdling" and "kissed" evokes the erotic; the descriptions of "alabaster arms" and metaphor of lips as roses follow the conventions of the medieval blazon. Such eroticism makes the murder even more disturbing: our perspective on the death is voyeuristic. Furthermore, the presence of the prayer book, while meant to assert the children's religious piety and innocence, recalls Richard's own use of prayer books to ascend to the throne. Religion, here, is a prop used to achieve a sense of pathos. Combined with the hyperbolic descriptions of the children's innocence, the death itself seems like a staged performance. This over-generalizing representation of innocence contradicts the fully embodied princes that we encounter in the first half of the play (G. Miller 213). Unlike Marcus's speech over Lavinia's bleeding body, this blazon idealizes the victims' difference from Richard: while Richard's deformity is seen as proof of his rejection by Nature, the children are "The most replenished sweet work of nature" (4.3.18). Such a focus on the children's difference suggests that Richard's attempt to make his paternity (and claim to the throne) visible has failed: the community has not agreed upon the children's illegitimacy; therefore, even the murderers who witness the sacrifice do not agree with the King's orders.

Furthermore, the blazon's elaborate negotiation of presenting and cloaking the bodies through metaphor highlights the impropriety of the sacrifice: collective witnessing of the bodies is required to determine the efficacy of the sacrifice (105). For example, Christianity repeats the founding sacrifice (the sacrifice of God's son, Christ) and the consumption of his body through the Eucharist; an unclear association between the father and the son would threaten the foundation of divinity (D. L. Miller 104). Therefore, this unwitnessed, unfinished ritual has implications of cosmic proportions. Although Tyrell's speech paints the boys as two martyrs, symbolism does not compensate for the physical embodiment of the young princes, leaving the

audience with a sense of loss. Just as the earlier interruption of King Henry's burial evokes changing funeral rites during the Reformation, the sacrifice without a body suggests a reckoning with ritual's ability to contain death. "Ritual must be orderly because it frequently interrupts or manages or accompanies various forms of disorder" (Moore and Myerhoff 17): the interruption of funeral and sacrificial ritual here creates an opportunity for indeterminacy to overwhelm the audience. As disturbing as it may be, the corpse signifies death; it is the object that determines the murder's significance. Without seeing the body, there is no clear subject-object relationship. The unseen spectacle of death threatens to overwhelm the play. This discomforting tension between seeing and not-seeing evokes the "perpetual danger" of abjection (Kristeva 10). The violation of family, nature and ritual aggravates this sense of indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is unquestionable and sacred. Therefore, it is not by imitating the murder of Christ, or presenting us with martyred bodies, but by generating discomfort through the bodies' absence that the children's murder generates a sense of the secular sacred.

Not a sacrifice, not an execution, but a murder, the spilling of innocent blood is powerful enough to challenge the system of signification that creates the kingdom. Richard's failure to legitimate his masculinity through sacrifice creates the possibility for a vengeful maternity. Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess's position as liminal, mourning figures makes them potentially abject. The Duchess's mourning for her grandchildren highlights her paradoxical position: "Dead life, blind sight, poor mortal living ghost" (4.4.31). Both women are oxymoronic: mothers without children; queens without titles.[43] Their position aligns them with Queen Margaret—

[43] Margaret highlights this emptiness by comparing Queen Elizabeth's current situation with her current one:

> For happy wife, a most distressed widow;
> For joyful mother, one that wails the name;
> For one being sued to, one that humbly sues;
> For queen, a caitiff crowned with care. (4.4.98-101)

The Queen's new situation, therefore, becomes defines through loss.

another maternal figure who threatens England's order. These curses become a mechanism of the supernatural—an alternative source of defilement—that creates an alternative space for the divine.

3.5 "Foul wrinkled witch": Queen Margaret's Abjection and the Power of the Curse

"Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads" (3.3.14): Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, and Buckingham all utter these fateful words on the way to their executions. Although Richard is directly responsible for these executions, this eerie utterance positions Margaret's supernatural curse as another driving force behind these bloody events. Margaret and Richard both become associated with "the spilling of "guiltless blood" (3.3.13). Just as Richard is dismissed as "foul,"[44] Margaret's illegitimate presence in the court and her propensity for cursing make her a "foul wrinkled witch"—a specter of abjection (1.3.164). The ghostly queen is a liminal figure who, like Richard, has committed a "bloody deed" (1.3.180). Her curses suggest the contaminating potential of her defilement and offers a new potential space for the spiritual: given that Margaret frames some of her curses as prayers to God, their effectiveness could indicate their divine sanction. Siemon, however, suggests that Margaret speaks "neither for God nor Tudor history" as an early modern audience would attribute the source of Margaret's success to the generalizations and orthodoxy of her curses, and they would not overlook her "glaring errors" (21). Similarly, Quiring suggests that Margaret's curses introduce old rites (including those of excommunication) in new, deficient context: their endless repetition and seeming

[44] Anne insults Richard as being "foul" multiple times: "foul devil" (1.2.50), "lump of foul deformity" (1.2.57), "fouler than heart can think thee" (1.2.83), and "Never hung poison on a fouler toad" (1.2.150). Hastings reacts to the possibility of Richard's coronation by threatening "I'll have this crown of mine cut from my shoulders / Before I see the crown so foul misplaced" (3.2.42-43). Margaret describes Richard as "That foul defacer of God's handiwork" (4.4.53), and implies Richard is foul during her instructions on cursing: "Think that . . . he that slew them fouler than he is" (4.4.120-21). Queen Elizabeth calls Richard "that foul bunch-backed toad!" (4.4.81) and calls his self "full of thy foul wrongs" (4.4.394). Buckingham describes the judicial process controlled by Richard as "foul injustice" (5.1.6). Richmond dubs Richard as foul twice: "This foul swine" (5.2.10); "A base foul stone" (5.3.250).

redundancy juxtapose Richard's theatrical appropriation of rituals for his own gain (58). The apparent redundancy behind Margaret's curses, however, is not meant to undermine their meaning: the language and repetition of the curses creates a larger ritual framework within the performance of the play; their paradoxical presence as prayers and curses highlights the potential of abjection to act as a substitute for and generator of transcendence.

Margaret's position as an exiled figure makes her an object of fear and reverence. Margaret's presence as a masculine, foreign queen made her a threat to York ascendency in the *Henry VI* plays.[45] Although Margaret's new status—a queen without a kingdom; a mother without a son; a wife without a husband—could make her less powerful, her ghost-like presence haunts and contaminates the kingdom. Queen Margaret stands out as a character out-of-time and out-of-place: she was exiled to France in 1476 and died in 1482, one year before the events that occur during the scene of her first appearance (1.3.n108). Although the anachronism of her appearance may not be immediately apparent, the nobility questions her continued presence in England: Richard asks, "Wert thou not banished on pain of death?" (1.3.166). Margaret's presence violates law and ritual: exiles—like the pharmakos— are both the cause and the cure for pollution; their exile purifies the city (Mullaney 42-43). Specifically, Margaret's desire for revenge threatened York's ascendancy. Margaret's return from her banishment suggests that the law is no longer

[45] Margaret's past misdeeds as a warrior queen, including the murder of Richard III's father, the late Duke of York, and Richard's brother Rutland, are referenced during each of her appearances. The most vivid of which is Richard's recapitulation of Margaret's mock coronation of his father:

> The curse my noble father laid on thee
> When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper,
> And with thy scorns drew'st rivers from his eyes,
> And then to dry them, gav'st the Duke a clout
> Steeped in the fautless blood of pretty Rutland (1.3.173-77).

By suggesting that Margaret's diminished state is divine retribution for her actions, the reference to "curses" augments the cyclical violence in the play. The Duchess intensifies this resonance, reminding Margaret "I had a Richard too, and thou didst kill him; / I had a Rutland too; thou holp'st to kill him" (4.4.44-45).

effective at insulating the community from pollution.[46] While the York clan may see Henry VI and Prince Edward's death as righteous, Margaret reintroduces them as bloody, thereby challenging the signification of the sacrifice. This challenge ties to the greater threat behind her abject status: Quiring notes that "She has turned into a revenant who cannot be located in the symbolic system and who is defined by an already inapplicable signifier ('Queen Margaret')" (50). Not only is Margaret rejected from legal systems and the nobility, but she also becomes rejected by language itself. As a symbolic remanent, she highlights the fragility of language. If, as Kristeva suggests, language is set up as an assurance against "fear—a terrifying abject referent" (38), then Margaret's challenge to the signification of royalty, motherhood and revenge all threaten to collapse the barrier against fear, ushering in the horror of abjection.

Margaret's curses aim to spread her abjection, continuing to exacerbate the corruption of language and natural order causing others to fall into a similar position of liminality. Her eye-for-an-eye curses indicate an awareness of the fragility of language. The hollow titles that each noble currently holds can be exchanged for suffering:

> Though not by war, by surfeit die your king,
> As ours by murder, to make him a king.
> —Edward, thy son, that now is Prince of Wales,
> For Edward, our son, that was Prince of Wales,
> Die in his youth, by untimely violence,
> Thyself a queen, for me that was a queen,
> Outlive thy glory, like my wretched self. (1.3.196-202)

[46] The ineffectiveness of the law may explain why the characters endure Margaret's cursing, even though she was "banished on pain of death" (1.3.166).

Margaret's wordplay reflects "the subject of abjection. . . Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages" (Kristeva 45). The parallel structure and repetition of key signifiers (e.g., "Edward," "king") demonstrate a deliberate ambiguity: "him" in "to make him a king" could refer to Henry VI or Edward III. Margaret's curse suggests her desire to spread her exile to others through bloody revenge. This pattern of violation recalls abjection. Furthermore, her curses are aimed at disturbing natural order, including the normal length of human lifetimes: "God, I pray Him, / That none of you may live his natural age, / But by some unlooked accident cut off" (1.3.211-13). Her curse against Richard moves the violation beyond the idea of a prayer to God into heightened language that recalls witchcraft:

> No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
>
> Unless it be while some tormenting dream
>
> Affrights three with a hell of ugly devils
>
> Thou elvish, abortive, rooting hog. (1.3.216-27)

Margaret's vocabulary— "plagues," "ugly devils," insomnia, and "abortive"—combined with her status as a marginal, female figure makes her witch-like. Witches are also abject: their association with the devil generates fear. At the same time, "witch" was a common term of scorn (suggesting their social isolation) (Siemon 27), and some theorists believe that witches were persecuted for symbolizing the traditional symbolic order (Quiring 55). Hastings character's dismissal of Margaret as a "false-boding woman," (1.3.1.3.246), combined with Buckingham's assertion that "curses never pass / The lips of those that breathe them in the air" (1.3.284-85), suggest that Margaret's curses are seen as empty gestures from a dying order—utterances to be ignored. Yet, Buckingham's later claim "My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses" (1.3.303) foreshadows the effectiveness of Margaret's contaminating curses.

Although Margaret's prophecies are not always entirely accurate, the small inaccuracies do not detract from the curses' greater effectiveness. The fulfillment of Margaret's curses creates a ritual framework in the play: each victim is led onto the stage before their death; each recalls their past sins (Rivers, Grey and Vaughan recollect the murder of Richard the Second and their role in the murder of young Prince Edward [3.3.11,16]; Hastings regrets his naivety and impious celebration over Rivers, Vaughan and Grey's death [3.4.90]; Buckingham evokes his betrayal of King Edward's family [5.1.13-15]); each reframes their execution as the swinge of Margaret's curse before requesting that they be lead to the block. The combination of stylized language, staged, ordered executions, and the anticipation of violence makes this procession highly ritualized. This ritual does not give form to the benevolent power of a Christian God, but to the vengeful blood-for-blood mechanism of Margaret's curses. Rivers reconstitutes Margaret's curses into a prayer and attempts to make his execution into a sacrifice or martyrdom:

> Then cursed she Richard; then cursed she Buckingham;
> Then cursed she Hastings. O, remember God,
> To hear her prayer for them, as now for us.
> And for my sister and her princely sons,
> Be satisfied, dear God, with our true blood,
> Which, as thou knowst, unjustly must be spilt. (3.3.17-22)

Although Margaret does frame her curse as a prayer to God, the rhetorical question "Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?" (1.3.194) hints at her insecurity that God may not be listening. Rivers aligns his execution with divine providence by suggesting that God heard Margaret's prayer: death is horrific, but, perhaps, it is less horrific if it is divinely ordained. Yet Rivers' closing passage turns towards the power of blood that is "unjustly" spilt. In doing so, he

evokes the language that Margaret used when asking: "Witness my son, now in the shade of death, / . . . O God, that seest it, do not suffer it; / As it is won with blood, lost be it so" (1.3.266-71). Regardless of the presence of a Christian divinity, the ritual pattern that we witness is the sacrificial crisis caused by the failure of collective agreement behind the value of blood: just as Margaret's son's death requests that we witness her sons' death to understand the violence as unjust, we now witness another spilling of unjust blood, which affirms Margaret's polluting power. This spread of blood and defilement is hardly redundant: it suggests that the supernatural is working through horror, elevating the violence of the play to the level of the sacred.

By providing another possible mechanism for the operation of the sacred in the play, Margaret creates a sense of discomfort and chaos. Although Margaret claims that she will return to France,[47] her exit is not a relief: she has replicated her condition amongst two other women, creating a new source for defilement. Learning to curse does not involve an embrace of God, an allegiance to the devil, nor any supernatural power. It requires the mourning women to dwell on the extremes of their conditions, making themselves even more separate:

> Forbear to sleep the night, and fast the day;
> Compare dead happiness with living woe;
> Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,
> And he that slew them fouler than he is.
> Better thy loss makes the bad causer worse.
> Revolving this will teach thee how to curse. (4.4.118-23)

The exaggeration of binaries makes cursing a technique of extremes: learning to curse requires that one lives in the past ("dead happiness" versus "living woe"); that one divides subjects into

[47] Before teaching the mourning women how to curse, Margaret states that she "will to France, / hoping the consequence / will prove as bitter, black and tragical." [4.4.6-8])

the binaries of sweetness (purity) and foulness (defilement); that make oneself even more abject so that the revenge against the causer can be more extreme. Increasing the defilement of the murder—exacerbating the discrepancy between the violence's intended meaning and its reality—makes the murder more horrifying, more abject, and, by inference, more sacred. Thus, Margaret's curses are instructions to become more abject (as to become abject is to become closer to the sacred), which recalls the abject exile's willing self-abasement: ". . . he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations" (Kristeva 8). Far from what some critics may suggest, this alignment with abjection makes the final fulfillment of Margaret's curses not redundant, but disturbing: if one can reach towards the divine by rooting down into the muck of blood and suffering, then what reason is there to follow religion, law, or morality? The mourning women's embrace of their abject state, and the on-stage power of the Duchess's final curse, continues Margaret's interrogation of ritual.

Siemon notes that it is not Margaret's intended "tormenting dream . . . with a hell of ugly devil" (1.3.226), but the Duchess's procession of ghosts that brings about Richard's doom. The appearance of the ghosts, however, hardly detracts from the power of Margaret's curse. First, she is the one who instructed the Duchess: the power of the Duchess's curse can be understood as a direct product of the abject that Margaret causes. Second, the ghosts are another source of abjection, another unsettling apparition that, like Margaret, challenge the doctrines of Elizabethan England. Each ghost, like Margaret, an abject apparition returning from exile to enact vengeance for past misdeeds. Whether understood as dreams or actual ghosts, the apparitions draw attention towards the reality of death and the fragility of the systems used to

hold off the horrors of death. Their appearance on All Souls Day alludes to the late medieval tradition of the Dance of Death, which highlighted the triumph of death over the living (Quiring 97). The universality of death was a subject of great fear (Neill 21). The idea of the dead in Purgatory caring for the living on earth (and vice versa) was one way of turning aside from the horror of death: "that the deceased became an object of fear and loathing, hastily banished underground out of the sight and the society of his or her living kin, and all too likely thereby consigned to oblivion" (Duffy 349-50). The return of the vengeful spirits evokes the fear of angry and neglected dead (Duffy 350). The ghosts, therefore, are horrific as they highlight the change in religious beliefs around death: they cannot be easily categorized as the agents of a Christian God; like the corpse, they are proof of the stark reality of death. As many of the corpses are unseen or improperly buried, the ghosts call attention to the taboo on the dead, which is rooted in the fear of the dead returning as angry ghosts (*Totem and Taboo* 67). As burials served to avoid this taboo by purifying the corpse, the ghosts highlight the consequences of these unfinished rituals. Witnessing this eruption of ritual—this symbol of death—in a ritualized form[48] (each Ghost orders Richard to "Despair and die") pushes the audience towards abjection: it requires them to look at themselves, recognize their bodies as frail, their death as possible, and the rituals used to ward it off as ineffective.

Richard's reaction to the procession of Ghosts highlights the crisis of self, caused by abjection (not fear of divine providence) as the source of newfound weakness. Kristeva views abjection as a "kind of narcissistic crisis": "The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to

[48] Quiring highlights the ritualized and ceremonious entrance of the dead (99). The formulaic combination of "Despair and die!" and "Think on…" "seems to suggest liturgical performatives; the scene of the ghosts is a kind of sacrificial mass with references to . . . ecclesiastical excommunication ceremonies" (Quiring 99).

be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death. Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)" (Kristeva 14-15). Through defiling each victim with his bloody violence, Richard has delegated them as "Other": the victims are dead, not living; the dead do not return to speak. Their reappearance in Richard's dream—his subconscious—suggests that Richard is no longer able to separate himself from the Other—the objects that he has defiled. Thus, the Ghosts cause a "lapse in the Other" bringing about a crisis of the ego (Kristeva 15). First, Richard is unable to locate the object of fear: "What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by" (5.3.182). Unable to locate this object, Richard attempts to assert his own narcissistic self-love as a barrier against fear: "Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I" (5.3.183). Yet, the previous signifier "I am I" starts to war with itself in a linguistic crisis:

> Is there a murderer here? No. Yet, I am.
>
> Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason why?
>
> Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
>
> Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
>
> That I myself have done unto myself?
>
> O, no. Alas, I rather hate myself,
>
> For hateful deeds committed by myself.
>
> I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not. (5.3.184-91)

Kristeva uses the case of a borderline patient to suggest a progression from the collapse of narcissism to the state of abjection, where one must differentiate oneself from threatening limits, to the assignment of these limits (these ab-jects) as religious ideas of defilement, taboo, and sin (Kristeva 48). Richard follows this trajectory: unsure of his identity, he identifies himself as a murderer and a villain; but, by marking himself as a defiled villain, he marks the Self as the

Other. Witnessing his sins—his abjection—causes a crisis of self: his previous self-abasement functioned as a way of reconciling his exclusion from the erotic community as a mission of deliberately violating boundaries, Richard now witnesses the pointlessness of his actions: "There is no creature loves me, / And if I die, no soul will pity me" (5.3.200-1). Although Richard rallies himself for the upcoming battle, the terror that he encounters emphasizes the power of the abject.

Locating the power source of Margaret's curses in abjection offers a new alternative for understanding the play's impact. Margaret's curses are not redundant because they represent the return of mythic ideas from the past, nor does their generalization of ideas of revenge limit their substance. Her curses create a second mechanism for the plot: if one operator is Richard's perverse, abject defilement of rituals, the other is Margaret's abject revenge, which takes on an almost divine power. Both mechanisms suggest that the framework of Christianity, religion and morality fail to capture or render intelligible the sheer power of human experience, specifically, the violence apparently endemic to the human world. Thus, Richmond's return to these precepts after Richard's death does not fully gird off the horror we witnessed. Richmond's victory over Richard can be seen as fulfilling Margaret's curse: Richmond announces, "The day is ours; the bloody dog is dead" (5.5.2), directly invoking Margaret's prayer, "Cancel his bond of life, dear God I pray, / That I may live and say, 'The dog is dead'" (4.4.77-78). Richard's death may be seen as an ending of the pandemic of abjection: he is no longer able to spread defilement with his beast-like presence; Margaret's final curse has been fulfilled. Richmond begins to undo Richard's violation of ritual, repelling pollution by reinstating funeral rites ("Inter their bodies as become their births" [5.5.15]), codes of justice ("Proclaim a pardon to the soldiers fled / That in submission will return to us"[5.5.16-17]), and the religious sacrament of marriage ("And then, as

we have ta'en the sacrament, / We will unite the white rose and the red" [5.5.18-19]). Yet, Richmond's warning against treachery hints at the fragility of these old rituals:

> Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
> That would reduce these bloody days again
> And make poor England weep in streams of blood.
> Let them not live to taste this land's increase
> That would with treason wound this fair land's peace.
> Now civil wounds are stopped; peace lives again.
> That she may long live here, God say amen. (5.5.35-42)

His warning against traitors is eerily similar to Margaret's curses: he also evokes "blood" twice, and the sterility evoked by the prohibition to "taste this land's increase" is similar to the mourning women's lingering punishments. The effect of this resonance makes the final evocation of God ("God say amen") less ceremonial and certain: Margaret also invoked God in her curses. Therefore, this possible return to divine providence is tainted by the impact of Margaret's abject cursing. One cannot forget the impact of Margaret's curses—nor the lingering spectres of Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess, who have been endowed with her abilities.

The frailty of Richmond's return to ritual, however, does not mean that the play's rituals are vacuous, ineffective, or laughable. Instead, we are left with the resonance of blood and curses, which have taken on their own power throughout the play. These objects offer a new source of meaning: no longer contained within a religious system of theology, defiling villains, incestuous burials, desacralizing murders, gratuitous infanticide, and vengeful curses become a source of horror that, by violating boundaries, reveals the surging power of the chaos right below our feet. Witnessing these acts is profound; it demands inward reflection, discomfort,

vulnerability, that generates a religious experience without the supernatural or the concoctions of theology. That lingering sense of something else—something darker—on the sidelines becomes apocalyptic in *King Lear*, where the gods' silence in the face of the onslaught of violence, incest and corpses generates the question: "Is this the promised end?" (*Lear* 5.3.288).

4. "Image of that Horror": Suffering, Blinding, and Corpses in *King Lear*

"Is man no more than this?" (*Lear* 3.4.101). This existential question aggravates King Lear's fit of madness, where he undertakes to tear off his clothing in order to reach a state closer to nature. In his reading of *King Lear* and the Book of Job, Hannibal Hamlin sees this moment as Lear's recognition of his kinship with the poor (314). Lear's moment of recognition is preceded by a meeting with the exiled Edgar, who is disguised as Poor Tom. Hamlin and other critics do not acknowledge that Poor Tom is not just a vagrant (Liebler 208), nor only a man attempting to mimic martyrdom (Anderson 100), nor only someone feigning demonic possession (Neely 59). Poor Tom (Edgar) is an exile who takes on filth—covers himself with it—in order to approach his own animal state:

> I will preserve myself, and am bethought
> To take the basest and most poorest shape
> that ever in penury contempt of man
> Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
> Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots
> And with presented nakedness outface
> The winds and persecutions of the sky. (2.2.177-83)

Both Lear and Poor Tom recognize the artificiality of the boundary between the human and the animal. By simply changing his attire, Edgar is "brought near to beast." For Lear, the boundary between humans and animals is manufactured out of parts of other animals (the worm's silk, the beast's hide, the sheep's wool, the civet cat's oil for perfume [3.4.102-3]). Hence man without these distinguishing garments is "unaccommodated:" "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, / bare, forked animal as thou art" (3.4.105-6). Lear and Edgar's inching towards the

animal is a subversive rewriting of the medieval Chain of Being. Humans are not above animals and closer to God; they are one with animals.

Despite the apparent degradation of their own animality, the nakedness of Poor Tom and Lear has resonances of transcendence. Their proximity to the animal state allows them to better understand the human condition. Such understanding of the human condition comes at the price (or is caused by) profound mental turmoil. Laurie Shannon sees this turmoil as a realization of humanity's negative exceptionalism: contrary to popular early modern belief, humans are not a superior, perfect creation, but have multiple shortfalls that deprive them of animal happiness (132). In this light, comparisons to animals and beasts are positive, for animals—unlike men—are accommodated to their environments. Lear's realization is not one of these positive moments. Poor Tom and Lear are confronted with the fact that the objects conventionally used to mark one's identity (clothing) only have manufactured meaning. This small realization ties into a greater epiphany about the universe: all "objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being" (Kristeva 5). In this case, the proximity to the animal state is a descent— "an inaugural loss"— that does not focus on a positive kinship of animals, but a categorical deflation of humanity's pretensions. Lear and Tom's descent is transcendent because it brings them to the borders of their being—to the edges of their existence. To reach this transcendence through suffering—through filth and madness—is to enter the realm of the abject.

To be abject is to be "of low repute; despicable, wretch; self-abasing, servile, obsequious" ("abject, n and adj"). Poor Tom certainly fits this description. He sticks himself with "Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary" (2.2.187). Like Aaron and Richard, Edgar/Poor Tom is an exile scorned by society: "Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes and mills, / Sometime with lunatic bands, sometime with prayers, / Enforce their charity" (2.2.189-91). He purports to erase

his identity through self-abasement and filth. Kristeva does not deny this conventional reading of abjection: her abject figure is an "*deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (8). Kristeva, however, pushes beyond such easy classifications of the abject as an exile. If Poor Tom is merely a dirty beggar, why would he trigger such a profound reaction from Lear? Why does Edgar not, like Kent, disguise himself as a lesser nobleman, but instead chooses to erase his own personhood ("Edgar I nothing am" [2.2.192])? Abjection's connection to the sacred and the defiled makes it more than a state of exile. Poor Tom's filth becomes sacred because it makes him a creature of the margins: "filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (Kristeva 69). Living at the margins, at the boundary, at the brink of a properly human life, brings one to a state ripe with the potential for transcendence. Hence Lear's extraordinary reaction to Poor Tom. Lear is not just coming face to face with a figure that spells out the solid limits of his own power as a monarch—with a leveling image of humanity—but also with a man in his most fragile state "where man strays on the territory of *animal*" (Kristeva 12). Lear attempts to reach a purer state, a state closer to the "natural," because he is faced with the abject, with suffering, with the unknown. His reaction is madness. His reaction is also horror.

Horror and tragedy are intimately linked. Recall Aristotle's assertion that suffering's ability to generate catharsis make it essential for a good tragedy (56). Over the years, this suffering has somehow been sanitized by the way of various critical apparatuses: it has become a moral, a lesson, a religious allusion, a "theme" of tragedy, and not an act in itself. Suffering in tragedy can feel like too much. In Aristotle's ideal tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus's self-mutilation through blinding occurs offstage; the only image that we have of his suffering is his

re-entry, which causes "Amazing horror" (*Oedipus Tyrannus* 1297). Despite the importance of "agonies of pain," even Aristotle's ideal tragedy recognizes that some content is simply too gruesome to be seen. If we are presented with too much suffering, it challenges the possibility of transcendence offered by most tragedies. This challenge is why *King Lear* exists in such a controversial position in the Shakespeare canon. Suffering in *King Lear* is horrific. Eyes are gouged from skulls, men driven insane by tempests, and an innocent woman is hanged. The final scene of the play does not provide an image of salvation or resurrection; it is a scene where three corpses are brought out onto the stage at once. In a world where cries to gods are ignored, a world devoid of magic, a world where the innocent are mutilated and murdered, is there a possibility of God?

This possibility is what has engaged scholars for hundreds of years. Some argue that *King Lear* is a Christian redemption narrative. Others, such as Hannibal Hamlin, argue that the narrative of "Christian redemption" oversimplifies the play, which should instead be understood as a "more skeptical" reading of the Book of Job (334). David Anderson argues that the suffering in *King Lear* is one of martyrdom. On the other side of the debate, some critics argue that *Lear* is an "atheistic" play: "King Lear is haunted by a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been *emptied out*" (Greenblatt 176). Although no critics deny that the play is somehow related to religion (or the lack thereof), the debate over the extent to which this reaching towards the divine is Christian has caused academics to reach a critical impasse.[49] The

[49] Many of these critics are grappling with the same fundamental ideas and events that will be explored in this paper. In William Elton's *King Lear and the Gods*, he sets out to answer the question of *King Lear*'s Christian character. He concludes that, because the play ends without a final "salvation, regeneration of redemption, and the purported benevolent, just or special providence cannot be shown to be operative," the play is a pagan tragedy, not a Christian one (336). According to his reading, the fifth act of the play "shatters the foundation of faith itself" and "made more vivid the image of that horror, the all-dissolving chaos for those who could not turn aside and stop their beating minds" (338). This image of shattering, surely, leaves room for the abject. Stephen Greenblatt continues Elton's argument by reading the play in tandem with Harsnett's book, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures.* He

hope of the religious critics is that all of the flesh, filth and suffering in *King Lear* reaches up towards a higher order—the divine. They are looking in the wrong direction: *King Lear* does not reach *up* towards the divine; it pushes us down into filth and the sacred. *King Lear* ends with misery, death, corpses, and without a promise of redemption. The scale of suffering in the play pushes the border of human reality and suggests that there is something greater than the world that we know. While the play is barren of the supernatural, something about the horror in the play gives us insight into an almost transcendent place in the human psyche: the border realm of the abject.

Abjection allows Shakespeare's play to achieve this powerful representation of the sacred in a world bereft of God. Gloucester's blinding and Cordelia's hanging are both moments of abject horror. They are also moments that critics point to in arguments about the play's atheistic quality: all goodness is extinguished from the world of Lear; there is no promise of redemption; we are left with a world devoid of spirituality. The extent of the suffering in these two key

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argues that *King Lear* adopts the theatricality of Harsnett's book, but that *King Lear* is haunted by a sense of rituals "emptied out" of their religious significance. The result of this is a "deeper uncertainty, a loss of moorings, in the face of evil" (Greenblatt 178). This loss of moorings is reminiscent of the "inaugural loss" integral to abjection (Kristeva 5). Greenblatt's article generated many responses. In "Shakespeare and the Skeptics," Richard Strier picks up on Greenblatt's argument that "*Lear* seems to represent a world that is truly and utterly 'disenchanted'" (Strier 181). Strier reconciles the structure of the "Reformation doctrine of grace" with a secular understanding of *King Lear*: "What Shakespeare does in Lear and elsewhere, in other words, is to create a thoroughly secular world in which terms like grace and sin, which, in Reformation theology, require a transcendental guarantee, are seen to exist and function without such" (184). Carol Thomas Neely's "Reading the Language of Distraction" uses Greenblatt's focus on exorcism to head in a different direction. Thomas argues that the performance of Poor Tom is an exorcism deprived of supernatural connections, but that the sacred meaning behind is ritual is resituated: "grief, guilt, anger, and punishment are understood within human psychological parameters, and supernatural rituals are adapted for therapeutic purposes" (61). Alison Shell attempts to take a step back from the debate over *King Lear*'s Christian character. She claims the play resists a single totalizing explanation and does not conform to a single optimistic (presumably Christian) or pessimistic (atheist) reading. To her, the interpretation of the play's suffering has been altered by a misreading of seventeenth-century Christianity: "To an early modern viewer the play is more likely to have played to fears about one's own imperfection: how, even when the hand of God was manifested, one might not react appropriately to it" (196). Seventeenth century viewers, therefore, could understand *King Lear* as a Christian play even if there is no happy ending. Liebler's anthropological reading offers another alternative: she argues that the play "not only interrogates a moribund feudal aristocratic system; it also exposes the structures of civilization per se as the system" (201). By violating the structures of society, the play reminds us "that cultural structure is always held in a delicate balance" (Liebler 223).

moments, however, is so profound that it evokes feelings that are almost holy. Abjection allows us to understand how Gloucester's blinding and Cordelia's death are simultaneously moments devoid of religious redemption, and moments deeply engaged with the dialogue of the sacred. Shakespeare turns to the Theban plays, which are deeply connected to the history of tragedy and fundamental ideas of psychology and anthropology, as one method of eliciting the secular sacred. Gloucester's blinding is the first potent moment of horror: like Oedipus, Gloucester's blinding defiles his body and causes a division of the self. Unlike Oedipus, Gloucester's split self is never reconciled by a final moment of deification. Cordelia is also denied such deification: her father's incestuous desire for his daughter makes Cordelia's corpse an object of taboo desire *and* abject horror. The profound horror that we experience at the sight of blinding and death pushes us below the world of the Christian god, past the territory of atheistic nihilism, and into a realm edged with the divine—the dwelling place of the secular sacred.

4.1 "Vile jelly:" Gloucester's Blinding

Gloucester's blinding is so horrific that much of the play's performance history is engaged with its concealment for the sake of the audience's comfort.[50] Nonetheless, most of the scholarship on Gloucester's blinding diminishes the body's palpable reaction to this atrocity. That is not to say that scholars ignore the significance of the scale of this horror: the blinding is described as a "sudden horror" (Elton 113), "cruel" (Hamlin 331), "one of the most gruesome acts of persecution in Shakespeare's corpus" (Anderson 89), and even, (shockingly) "gratuitous melodrama" (qtd. in Cavell 44). All of these phrases are sprinkled onto arguments that sanitize

[50] Although there are no records of Shakespeare's performance, it would be surprising if Nahum Tate's "happy ending" reworking of the play showed the blinding on stage, which suggests a reaction to the horror of Shakespeare's onstage blinding. This pushback continued into the nineteenth century: "the blinding was done offstage or was concealed from the audience . . . Only since Peter Brook's production in 1962 . . . have some producers attempted to register the horror of the deed in full view of the audience" (Shakespeare 3.7.n67-69).

Gloucester's blinding behind the Aristotelian terms of catharsis. It is easy to agree with Edgar and see Gloucester's blinding as a punishment for his adultery. Eyes are instruments of lechery and desire. Gloucester refuses to acknowledge the product of his adultery, Edmund, as his own son; thus, the opportunity for recognition is literally removed (and his recognition of Edgar as his loyal son is melodramatically too late) (see Cavell and Elton). David Anderson moves beyond an Aristotelian reading of recognition and argues that the intervention of Cornwall's servant on Gloucester's behalf makes the blinding scene one of martyrdom (89). Using a psychoanalytic lens, Janet Adelman reads Gloucester's blinding as a symbolic castration (107); and Julia Reinhard Lupton expands upon this castration imagery, arguing that the blinding is not just symbolic, but that it represents a collapse of the symbolic self into the organ of the "vile jelly" (171). These interpretations could be enhanced by recognizing the abject horror that is aroused by Gloucester's blinding. The horrific nature of Gloucester's blinding should be understood in a context beyond the Lacanian *thing* (as argued by Lupton), and instead understood as a moment of the splitting of the self (as articulated by Kristeva). Unlike Oedipus, who finds wholeness in his recognition of defilement and, ultimately, escapes the condition of the abject wanderer by achieving transcendence, Gloucester's division is not resolved, and he is unable to achieve true transcendence. This lingering abjection—and the human nature of Gloucester's suffering—adds to a sense of horror that moves beyond Christian transcendence and interrogates the very basis of how we, as a society, categorize the sacred and the defiled.

Oedipus's blinding is significant for tragedy, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. Girard notes that the idea of the surrogate victim and sacrificial crisis are both apparent in the Oedipus myth, and claims that the true horror being suppressed in the myth is the "menace to total destruction" (84). Thus, the similarity between Gloucester and Oedipus's blinding suggests that

Gloucester's mutilation has powerful subversive potential. Oedipus describes his blinding as a darkening storm: "Oh, darkness! / Hideous clouds engulf me, swept in / by ill wind!" (*Tyrannus* 1313-15); Gloucester similarly finds his blindness to be "All dark and comfortless" (3.7.84)—surely the "hideous clouds" that Oedipus sees are also comfortless. Such similarities on the level of language create a strong basis for a comparison of the two blindings. The key difference in the blindings, however, is illuminating: whereas Oedipus's blinding is an act of self-mutilation caused by the recognition of his incestuous relations, Gloucester's blinding is forced upon him. Gloucester's blinding occurs through a ritualistic de-sacralization of rituals. Ritualistic designations and laws are set up to hold back the abject, and the deliberate violation of them—the deliberate defilement of them—allows for the entry of the abject (Kristeva 17, 85). Regan, Goneril and Cornwall's gleeful torture of the Earl, therefore, should be understood as a defilement that occurs through multiple steps. First, Regan and Goneril push for punishment without trial:

> REGAN. Hang him instantly!
>
> GONERIL. Pluck out his eyes! (3.7.4-5)

Such punishment violates rules of justice. Next, Gloucester is treated badly against all the protocols of social rank (violating what at the time would be sacred hierarchy) as Cornwall orders for the Earl to be "Pinion[ed] like a thief" (3.7.23). The trio then breaks the rules of respect for elders (Cornwall describes the Earl's arms as "corky" [3.7.28] and Regan plucks his beard). Finally, Gloucester warns his torturers against violating the sacred duties of the host/hostess: "I am your host; / With robber's hands my hospitable favours / You should not ruffle thus" (3.7.39-40). This final violation is particularly powerful: the rules of hospitality have a long history in tragedy (in *The Odyssey*, Penelope's suitors have violated the rules between

guest and host). Liebler argues that this particular violation of hosting challenged the principle of comitatus: "a system in which the most prominent relationship was a lord's protection of his followers, and the most prominent locus for that relationship was the mead hall" (206). This system was crucial in defining aristocratic relationships; by violating this system, Regan, Goneril and Cornwall risk destabilizing all social relationships. The torture scene is a ritual of defilement. The final step that pushes audience discomfort over the ledge into the fully abject is the non-sacred sacrifice of Gloucester's eyes.

Unlike Oedipus's blinding, which can be read as a sacred moment of recognition, Gloucester's blinding is fundamentally an act of defilement. Our response to this blinding can be described through Kristeva's explanation of the locus of abjection: "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (12). The idea of our own eyes being plucked out sends shivers down our spine: it reminds us that our eyes are just organs. Furthermore, Cornwall's decision to "[set] my foot" on the eye emphasizes that our lens onto the world—the organ of sight—can be extinguished with a stomach-turning "plop." In this sense, Cornwall's servant acts as an audience surrogate: as he is named Servant 1, his anonymity makes him universal. The servant enacts what the audience wants to do at this time—to stop the defilement of the Earl and return to some level of normalcy (perhaps if one eye remains, then we have not fully entered the abject).[51] Cornwall's cruelty, however, impedes him from heeding the servant's warning. The Duke mocks the Earl— "Out, vile jelly, / Where is thy

[51] Cohen reads the servant's articulation of the justice behind his death, which occurs because he heroically tries to prevent evil, as a moral counterpoint to the Captain that hangs Cordelia later in the play (373). In doing so, he suggests that the Servant's death is a valiant moment where humanity takes a stand against atrocity. He downplays the treatment of the servant's body by reading it as a moral judgment on Cornwall's character (his attempt to reorder humanity). At the same time, the servant man sacrifices himself to save Gloucester, and, although he does succeed in eventually killing Cornwall, Gloucester is still blinded. Even if his death is valiant, the treatment of his body is an abrupt descent from this heroism, which emphasizes our horror at the blinding.

lustre now?" (3.8.81-82)—and orders the servant's body to be "thrown on the dunghill"—another defilement that emphasizes the audience's feeling of abjection.[52]

Nevertheless, to provide an account of abjection in terms of a list-like violation of boundaries, or merely to point to a sense of disgust and bodily disconnect in the audience would be to severely diminish its power. The audience's discomfort upon seeing the destruction of the man—and recognizing the organ as "vile jelly"— is palpable. Breaking the body into its organs violates its sacred unity. This violation pushes us deep down into a dark abyss of corporeality. We are pushed this low for a reason: such suffering demands a self-interrogation; we are to "recognize ourselves in it without gouging out our eyes" (Kristeva 88). Recognition here is not to identify ourselves as adulterers like Gloucester, but as beings who are "altered by the symbolic"—by patterns of manufactured meaning. Abjection asks us to joy "in the truth of self-division" (Kristeva 89). It pushes us down so that we can reach the intersection between "sublimation and perversion" or the sacred and defiled, which is religion (Kristeva 89). Gloucester too is forced to reach into himself and find this intersection. His tragedy is that he never reaches the intersection, and, thus, is unable to have the sort of transcendence that Oedipus achieves.

While Oedipus's death is seen as a sacrifice to the gods, Gloucester's prayers to the "kind gods" (3.7.35) are ignored. He will not be saved by organized religion, but there rests the possibility for salvation through a recognition of the sacred in the abject. For Kristeva, blinding is a literalization of the self-division in our bodies:

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[52] This exact command reappears in Kristeva's interpretation of Artaud. She sees his writing as the "I" overcome by the corpse and cites an instance where the narrator describes how, "Once dead, however, my corpse was thrown out on the dunghill" (Kristeva 25). Although Artaud may have been influenced by Shakespeare, it is not strictly relevant. What is potent about this moment is the strong connection between a dual defilement: the corpse being thrown onto excrement is a particularly abject moment.

> Oedipus blinds himself, so as not to have to suffer the sight of the objects of his desire and murder (the faces of his wife, mother, and children) . . . Blinding is thus an image of splitting; it marks, on the very body, the alteration of the self and clean into the defiled—the scar taking the place of a revealed and yet invisible abjection. Of abjection considered as invisible. In return for which city- state and knowledge can endure. (84)

This reading is complicated by the horror that Gloucester endures. Oedipal self-splitting is an image of willing castration and defilement. As he administers the punishment himself, Oedipus's understanding of his defilement, and how this relates to his punishment is clear. Gloucester's blinding is a punishment for treason which, although perceived by Edgar to be appropriate for adulterers, leaves Gloucester's path to redemption unclear. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is a pharmakos: "a being of abjection . . . a scapegoat who, having been ejected, allows the city to be freed from defilement" (Kristeva 84). On his death bed, however, Oedipus finds the value in his abjection. His defiled body becomes a site for sacred ritual and, ultimately, for transcendence to gods who knowingly created his fate: "abjection is nothing more than a flaw in Oedipus' impossible sovereignty, a flaw in his knowledge" (Kristeva 88). Gloucester, too, wanders in the condition of a defiled abject, but he is not granted the clarity of prophecy, destiny, or the favour of the gods granted to Oedipus. He is unable to reconcile the splitting of the self, ultimately becoming a more disturbingly abject figure.

Part of this perpetual abjection is Gloucester's inability to wrench himself from despondency and see the transcendence offered to him by his blinding. Oedipus understands completely that his body—the instrument of the violation of the incest taboo—is a defiled object. Gloucester comes to a similar revelation when he recognizes his inability to "see" Edgar's loyalty ("I have no way, and therefore want no eyes: / I stumbled when I saw" [4.1.20-21]);

however, he cannot move past his initial misery. After blinding himself, Oedipus demands that the Chorus "Cast me into the sea, kill me, shun me from sight" (*Tyrannus* 1411), but this melodramatic suicidal language is replaced by a quiet understanding in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Gloucester also feels this suicidal impulse. He desires to be brought to Dover, where "there is a cliff whose high and bending head / Looks fearfully in the confined deep" (4.1.76-77). Such combination of height and depth recalls the "vista of open seas" that Kristeva includes in her conception of the sublime (12). While abjection causes a debilitating splitting, the sublime is a positive addition, a "something added . . . a divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination" (Kristeva 12). Gloucester is reaching for transcendence after his defilement, which will occur through his sacrifice to the sublime: "O you mighty gods, / This world I do renounce and in your sights / Shake patiently my great affliction off" (4.6.34-36). What Gloucester fails to recognize, however, is that his "affliction" is not something that he can shake off. He has been split by his entry into the dark world of the abject; he cannot give his body as sacrifice because it has been defiled (even Oedipus's body went through a ritual to become sacred again), and, therefore, his sacrifice is denied. Gloucester does not find transcendence in a miracle, but bemoans "Is wretchedness deprived that benefit / To end itself by death?" (4.6.61-62). Such misery occurs because Gloucester is unable to come to terms with his abjection.

The path that Gloucester takes after his blinding and defilement fails utterly to make up for the de-sacralization that he encounters. The closest that the Earl comes to redemption is in Edgar's theatre of divinity: a theatre set up to resuscitate the goodness of the gods. Edgar has been acting the abject through his self-abasing performance of "Poor Tom." Although Edgar must be disguised, one questions why he is so deliberate in performing the abject. Perhaps this is

some reflection of a distorted psychology: all that it took was one forged letter for Gloucester to completely lose trust in his rightful heir; Gloucester's rejection of Edgar implies, therefore, that the loyalty fundamental to Edgar's character is already a performance. Hence Edgar abandons his identity as a courtly performer and chooses to feign madness in the most extreme way possible. The emphasis that Stanley Cavell places on recognition in the play—and Edgar's avoidance of his father's recognition—provides another answer for this extreme performance: Edgar is ashamed that he has fallen for Edmund's plan, and he attempts to disguise himself more to hide from his shame (55). There is another explanation. If seeing Poor Tom precipitated an existential crisis about the character of the human in Lear, perhaps Edgar was seeking to send a similar message to his father. He creates a theatre of abjection as a way of forcing his father's (or society's) recognition of the broken border between the defiled and the sacred. It is a theatre of divinity altogether different from "feigned miracle" that Edgar aims to create on the Cliffs of Dover (Strier 184). The former theatre focuses on pushing Gloucester down into himself to recognize the boundary; Edgar's latter theatre aims to lift his father up into the divine. Edgar's initial theatre is entirely undermined by Gloucester's blinding. Gloucester can no longer see the abject state of his son—a state of suffering, which unlike the others in the play, is caused almost entirely by Edgar himself. In this moment, Edgar has the potential to abandon the abject charade and fulfill his father's wish that "Might I but live to see thee in my touch, I'd say I had eyes again" (4.1.26).

Edgar's refusal to reveal himself to his father might be seen as cruel, if not sadistic. Why would a son continue to deny his blind, exiled father the one thing that would comfort him and figuratively restore his sight? Reading the play through abjection, however, reveals another layer of subtlety in Edgar's refusal. First, Edgar has only been acting the abject, and, when he sees his

father's bleeding eyes— a real image of abjection—he turns aside because he is appalled. Cavell reads this disgust as a reflection of Edgar's need for his father: Edgar delays revealing himself to Gloucester because he cannot bear that his father is maimed (56). Edgar doesn't necessarily need a father—if anything, his later staging of the Cliffs is dangerous enough that it indicates Edgar's Oedipal rage towards his father[53]—but he is shocked out of his performance of abjection by his father's impotence. He chooses not to see his father and adopts the role of the dramaturge. Gloucester requests a final throw into the abject void by being brought to the cliffs of Dover. This connects to a second interpretation of Edgar's refusal: Edgar is creating a theatre of redemption. Conventional Christian readings see this redemption as the ending to a pilgrimage, or a "fall" that mirrors the fall of Adam and Eve—the initiating act that leads towards redemption. Contrastingly, Edgar's theatre of redemption is a final attempt to join a redemptive divinity and the abject. Edgar casts himself as a divine or demonic figure with eyes that "were two full moons. He had a thousand noses, / Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea" (4.6.70-71). Gloucester is a creature who has been deprived of his ensouled humanity after his defilement, and Edgar is trying to revive Gloucester's dying faith through this image of the gods.

His strategy fails. While *King Lear* uses the spectacle of Gloucester's blinding to summon the abject into the space of the playhouse, Edgar's theatre of redemption does not stage any parallel moment of abjection; indeed, Edgar's theatre is used to keep the abject at bay by misrepresenting Gloucester's defilement by projecting it onto a fake story about kind gods and divinity's care for human beings. Rooted in this path to attempted suicide is the belief that

[53] Freud's Oedipal theory claims that the son always unconsciously harbours a desire to kill his father to couple with his mother. As a nobleman, Edgar would have even more reason to kill his father: up until he is disowned, the murder of his father would grant him a title and inheritance. Given Gloucester's weak state (he was just blinded), even the fall onto even ground could kill him. First, Gloucester could simply die because of the impact on his wounds (he wouldn't have his hands bracing his fall if he believed that he was willing falling to his death). Second, Gloucester could die from the shock of the fall. Edgar's theatre of redemption for his father, therefore, is not entirely without risk or malice.

Gloucester will be "cured" after finding the gods. Despite Edgar's assertion that "the clearest gods . . . have preserved thee" (4.6.73-74), Gloucester does not see any redemption coming toward him from above. He still sees himself in a state of abject "affliction," a state nearing death (4.6.76). He is unable to escape the zone of abjection and must face his fate in a world that he views in the purgatorial terms of punishment, death, and redemption.

Luckily (or unluckily), Gloucester's purgatorial condition does not last long. Oedipus is saved by the literal divine intervention, which unites his split, blind body. The Earl never overcomes his division. His heart, Edgar reports, bursts "'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy, and grief" (5.3.197). Whereas Oedipus's death is a moment of sacred transcendence, Gloucester's is a literalization of the splitting caused by blinding and abjection. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the king's death is ceremonial. It begins with a ritual cleansing where he:

> . . . removed his tattered
> Old clothes and told his daughters to fetch
> Freshly drawn river water to cleanse
> Himself and pour libations. (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1597-98)

His body is already treated as a sacred object: it is bathed "as if they were cleansing a corpse" (*Colonus* 1602). Freud explains how touching dead bodies is taboo (sacred and unclean) in many "primitive" cultures (*Totem* 69). For Oedipus, the position of his body as sacred is solidified by his ascension to the gods: "Something else, not human, came down from above / And led him up high into heaven, or else the ground / Opened up and received him deep down in the earth" (*Colonus* 1662-64). Although Oedipus has been seen as unclean, the gods' intervention designates his burial site as a sacred place. If we decide that the place of an abject figure's burial is sacred, and if we agree that Oedipus is united by divine justice, which allows him to ascend or

descend (suggesting that he is no longer constrained by binaries), then we are left with the question: where is Gloucester's body?

Gloucester's death is recollected, but his body seems of no concern, even to his son. This absence is part of the play's horror: Gloucester's place of death does not become a sacred site; it is just the place where a blind, wandering man died. Edgar uses "pilgrimage" (5.3.195) to find the sacred in his father's death, but his recuperative religious language flounders in the face of Gloucester's ruptured soul. Gloucester dies as a divided individual who does not ascend to the gods or descend fully into the meaning of his abjection. He does not find the intersection of the divine and the defilement. Since we are aware of Edgar's talent as a dramaturge, we might even question if the tale of his father's death is another piece of theatre. By sanitizing his father's death, making it appear as though he died from joy and not from his wounds, Edgar attempts to keep the abject at bay. The defilement of Gloucester's body is couched in Edgar's moral judgment that his father's adultery "cost him his eyes" (5.3.170). Such moralizing interpretations of Gloucester's death remind Edmund, in his dying moments, that he is a product of sin and adultery. Edgar is attempting, understandably, to put a moralist framework around the boundless realm of abjection. In this sense, he tries to shelter the audience from the truth. Edgar undertakes to distance us from abjection through staged religious redemptions, moralizing explanations, and redemptive language. Alas, Edgar's project fails, and the Earl's body is abandoned and is not heard of or seen again.

Gloucester's corpse is a striking absence in the play. Although Albany is directly referring to Goneril and Regan when he says, "Produce the bodies, be they alive or dead" (5.3.229), we expect a gathering of the bodies. This line stands out because it is uncommon to bring bodies on stage; usually the challenge is removing them (5.3.n229). Shakespeare clearly

wanted a display of death, and, in a play where fathers and daughters (and sons) move progressively closer together, the lack of Gloucester's body creates a void. This void is exacerbated by the focus on the body in Gloucester's final moments. Gloucester's description of his surroundings as a grave— "a man may rot even here" (5.2.8)—parodies the beginnings of *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the blind king is seeking a place to rest. Edgar's brief moralizing phrase "Ripeness is all" (5.2.11) recalls the language of pilgrimage and insists that there is a time for death (presumably, not at that moment) (5.2.n11). Gloucester's final words— "And that's true too" (5.2.11)— do not indicate an acceptance of his situation, but a radical disengagement from it. This brief exchange between father and son draws attention to the lack of ritual and "ripeness" surrounding Gloucester's death. As highlighted in the previous chapters, burial during the Elizabethan era is a controversial topic.[54] Freud highlights the importance of burial rituals to mitigate the taboo of the dead (*Totem* 60), and Kristeva sees that "burial is a means of purification" in the Old Testament (109). The lack of treatment of Gloucester's body leaves a yawning abyss for defilement in the play. Disturbing though it may be, we want to see Gloucester's corpse on stage. As far as we know, Edgar leaves his father's body as unburied food for buzzards.

Gloucester's blinding lacks the same recognition of the sacred that closes Sophocles' play and allows Oedipus's death to extend beyond the abject. The lack of the gods' direct intervention in *King Lear* leaves room to make meaning out of Gloucester's blinding. It is not a moment of Christian martyrdom, nor is it a moment of traditional tragic suffering. The blinding is a random act of cruelty; and Gloucester never recovers from the torture that is inflicted upon him.

[54] Katherine Goodland describes how, during the Reformation, proper Protestant grief was "a way to measure the moral strength and inner virtue of the living" ("Inverting the Pietà" 205). As such, funerals and all forms of public mourning were suspected of being Catholic or "Popish" ("Inverting the Pietà" 205).

Conventional readings of Gloucester's blinding as Oedipal castration fail to understand the full significance of Gloucester's mutilation: he is defiled, exiled, and othered by Cornwall's violence. Not only does such a gruesome act cause the audience to experience the horror of the abject, but it also causes us to question how any figure can withstand such horror. Oedipus moves beyond the abject by reconfiguring his defiled body as a sacred site: his death is a moment of transcendence, where his split-self is finally united. Gloucester never achieves such unity. He never moves past his despondency and defilement. He continues to see his body as a "affliction," and, ultimately, fails to achieve transcendence despite of his son's redemptive theatrics. One could suppose that a failure to transcend defeats the impulse of the sacred secular in *King Lear*, but that is not the case. Here, we have a man trying to make sense of extraordinary horror by reaching towards death by way of the sublime forces at the Cliffs of Dover. Gloucester fails to recognize that, because he is so thoroughly defiled, he is brought closer to the sacred, for they are each one side of the same coin. Transcendence, although it does not occur for Gloucester, remains the central issue of a play concerned with the sacred, the defiled, and the human capacity for horror.

4.2 "The Image of the Horror:" Corpses, Incest and Abjection

A panting bastard writhes in pain on the ground; in his last minutes, his eyes light up, and trumpets sound. He cries out "Away to the castle, for my writ is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia" (Kozint͡sev). The men mobilize, sprinting up a decaying tower like ants in clanking iron exoskeletons trying desperately—melodramatically—to save an innocent life. But even this moment of intense action is too late, for their run is broken up by the agonizing screams of a prisoner. Instead of a shot of Lear holding his daughter, Cordelia, we are presented with something more morbid: her corpse, hanging in an archway (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Cordelia's hanged body in Kozint͡sev's 1971 adaptation of *King Lear*.

In Grigoriĭ Kozint͡sev's adaptation of the play, Lear does not deliver his howls in front of a body that he carefully cradles—no—he howls madly at the tinmen below him. Even after her body is cut down, the camera zooms in on the frayed rope as Lear cries out "Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.307). The presentation of a corpse on stage—or on screen—is never pleasant, but Kozint͡sev's bleak interpretation of the play removes any morsel of comfort—any hint of Christian iconography or resurrection. For his viewers, there is no final touch that heals the open wound between father and daughter that was opened in the play's first scene. Instead, there is a presentation of a body, and a reminder of Cordelia's gruesome death.

When such bleak interpretations of Shakespeare's play exist, how can one blithely label it as transcendent? Reactions to Cordelia's death are intense: Samuel Johnson claimed that "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor" (162). The playwright Nahum Tate's reaction to Cordelia's death was simply to erase it from the play: in his 1681 rewrite, Cordelia survives and is married to her love interest, Edgar (Foakes 47). Modern audiences are unlikely to tolerate this erasure, for they recognize that—horrific though it may

be—Cordelia's death is necessary for play's impact. Instead, we try to explain it through religious terms: Hannibal Hamlin compares Cordelia's sacrifice to Christ's and notes that Lear carrying Cordelia onto stage can be "likened to a gender inverted Pietà" (324); David Anderson compares Cordelia to a martyr although he allows that she is a "heroine whose death is utterly without sacrificial palliatives" (115); Cavell argues, by becoming fully human and accepting the unacceptability of her love for her father, Cordelia "resembles Christ at Crucifixion, not Resurrection" (73).[55] Katharine Goodland's article "Inverting the Pietà in Shakespeare's *King Lear*" is dedicated to decoding these comparisons between Cordelia and Christ, and, by studying seventeenth-century mourning practices, she too places Cordelia in the realm of Christian iconography. This is not to say that these interpretations are wrong or that Kozint͡sev is right. Film's flexibility means that Kozint͡sev did not have to stage Lear bringing Cordelia onstage, but could merely cut to her corpse. Most stagings allow for the presentation of the gender-inverted Pietà. At the same time, Hamlin notes that theological interpretations of the play "are inadequate to the tragic power of Shakespeare's play. No theological argument proves convincing in the face of innocent suffering" (334). What seems to remain is the utter destruction presented by Kozin-t͡sev's film: there is no Resurrection, only a hanged corpse—"an image of that horror" (5.3.267).

To call Cordelia's death an atrocity deprives it of its power. We must learn to see how *King Lear* reaches beyond the limits of a Catholic or Protestant or—as Kozint͡sev presents—an empty atheistic transcendence. Transcendence in *King Lear* is reached by a categorical violation of the religious and ritual laws. The loss evoked by this violation exposes the bedrock of all

[55] Even Stephen Greenblatt, who mainly posits a non-Christian reading of the play, describes Cordelia's death with the language of Christian redemption: "Lear's sorrows are not redeemed; nothing can turn them into joy, but the forlorn hope of an impossible redemption persists, drained of its institutional and doctrinal significance, empty and vain, cut off even from a theatrical realization but, like the dream of exorcism, ineradicable" (180).

religious belief: a division between the sacred and the defiled. When we see this bedrock, we are in a state without boundaries, a state of meaning and meaninglessness that can only be described as transcendent. Corpses are the major vehicle towards this boundaryless state. Kristeva describes the corpse as presenting "fundamental pollution" (109) for Christian ideology; she may as well have described it as "fundamental taboo." In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes taboo as "the oldest human unwritten code of laws" which includes only "(a) the sacred (or unclean) character of person or things, (b) the kind of prohibition which results from this character, and (c) the sanctity (or uncleanness) which results from a violation of the prohibition" (22). The reaction to these taboos is "objectified fear," which later splits into "veneration and horror" (*Totem* 29).[56] Opposites—the sacred and the unclean, veneration and horror— are necessary for the delineation of the "border" between the polluted and the unpolluted, or what is external and what is internal. This border forms the realm of the abject. Since this border is being composed of sacred and defiled objects, we can see this entry into the borderless as an experience of transcendence. This border explains how Cordelia's death can be at once devastating and transcendent: her death manages to violate several levels of taboo—both the taboo of the dead that is associated with corpses, and, because of her relationship with her father, the incest taboo. The palpable effects of her death should not be limited to a framework of Christian martyrdom, but understood in the realm of the sacred, the taboo, and distorted Oedipal desire.

4.2.1 "I loved her most": Incestuous Desire in the Realm of the Abject

Many scholars have recognized that Lear's love for Cordelia is more than paternal. Adelman claims that Lear collapses into both the father and the son, and that this collapse

[56] Mary Douglas criticizes Freud's assumption that 'primitive' people regarded taboo with utmost fear. To her, taboo is a changing concept that is not always rooted in magical horror or spiritual beings (35-36). Instead, ideas of taboo and pollution (or the roots of them) are unique to different societies and should be understood as such.

"enables [Shakespeare's] story of a father's relationship with his daughters to carry the immense fear and longing of a son's relationship with a mother" (103). Adelman's focus is not on this relationship, but on men's fear of their mothers—and their fear of female sexuality: she does not elaborate upon how the behaviour that she undertakes "to call Oedipal, and to gender male, insofar as it seems to have its roots in the son's frustrated desire for the mother's exclusive sexual attention" (125) is innately disturbing to audiences. Freud, too, does not explore the impact of this incestuous relationship: in *The Theme of Three Caskets*, he compares Lear's love contest to Portia's contest for a suitor (and fairy tales), and recognizes that this comparison positions Cordelia as the ideal suitor. Freud later concludes that the silence represented by the third casket places Cordelia in the position of "the Goddess of Death" (298). When Lear carries Cordelia onto the stage, "Cordelia is Death… she is the Death-goddess who . . . carries away the dead hero from the battlefield" (*Three Caskets* 201). Cordelia's place as a symbolic substitute for death explains the impact of her corpse, but what Freud fails to elaborate on is his earlier insistence that "the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love" (*Three Caskets* 299). Uncharacteristically, Freud does not explicitly state the obvious sexual implications for Lear: Cordelia is both his own Goddess of Death, and the mother—the object of desire—that he yearns for. Lear's incestuous desire is not an incidental theme, nor is it meant to show Lear's reversion to infantile sexuality (a sexuality suggested by Lear's image of his "unburdened crawl toward death" [1.1.40]). Exploring the Lear's relationship with his daughter reveals that the pollution of his incestuous desire; this incest taboo makes Cordelia's final death even more abject.

Lear's love contest places his desire for self-gratifying incestuous love on display. He will decide about the apportioning of the royal inheritance based on "which of you shall say we

love us most" (1.1.51). Although Goneril and Regan may be delivering "rehearsed speeches designed for the occasion" (1.1.n55), their speeches seem more like love sonnets than declarations of daughterly fidelity. Lear's decision to gift each daughter a section of the kingdom before hearing the next also undermines the legitimacy of his contest: clearly, he has already decided which sister shall get which parcel of land, and their public declarations of love serve no purpose other than flattering his ego. Also odd is Lear's obvious preference for Cordelia. Whereas the other sister's gifts were "no less in space, validity, and pleasure" (1.1.81), Cordelia is blatantly favoured as "our joy" and potentially able "to draw a third more opulent than your sisters" (1.1. 82-86). Embedded between such uncomfortable remarks of favouritism is a reminder of her budding sexuality: "to whose young love / The vines of France and milk of Burgundy / Strive to be interessed" (1.1.84-85). Although these lines may seem to be appropriate given the occasion—unlike her married sisters, Cordelia is being courted by multiple suitors—Lear's eagerness to hear about his daughter's affection, and his rage when he does not hear it, is reminiscent of a lover courting his beloved.

Furthermore, Lear is enraged by Cordelia's transactional language. Lear is reduced to the man who "begot me, bred me, loved me" (1.1.96). The order of these verbs raises eyebrows because breeding and loving are placed so close together. Cordelia recognizes the difference between familial and marital love:

> That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
> I shall never marry like my sisters
> To love my father all. (1.1.101-4)

Lear sees this statement as "untender" (1.1.107), and the repetition of "half" as calculated and harsh. In her speech, however, Cordelia draws the line between different types of desire, and her deliberateness in doing so accentuates the disturbing nature of the love contest: what father requires *all* of his daughter's love? Cordelia's love for her future husband should not deprive Lear, as it is a different type of love: sexual love. Yet, as the mad Lear often claims, he wants "all."[57] His incestuous desire is all embracing and totalizing. As Cordelia asserts her individuality and her identity as a mature, sexual woman, Lear is reminded that the marriage that he arranges will deprive him of something that—up until her engagement—Lear completely controls: his daughter's body. Lear's disownment of Cordelia "as a stranger to my heart and me" (1.1.116), and his denial of her dowry, is leavened with sexual jealousy. His rage is explainable as he "loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery" (1.1.124-25); therefore, with her abandonment, Lear has to negotiate his place with his other two daughters (arguably setting off the play's tragic events). Lear's choice of "nursery" also gives us a look into his subconscious: "nursing" is not exclusive to nursing the infirm back to health, it is also what a mother does to sustain her child. Lear has already envisioned Cordelia as his caregiver, and, thereby, has evoked the Oedipal connotations of the desire for the mother (a desire formed in infancy, when a child is nursing). Cordelia is dismissed by a King and a father disappointed by his (sexual) unsatisfaction: "better thou hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better" (1.1.235-36).

[57] Part of Lear's rage towards Goneril and Regan comes from his insistence that he is "Your old, kind father, whose frank heart gave you all" (3.4.19). "All" suggests that Lear gave his two daughters his entire inheritance, and Lear assumes Poor Tom has committed this error as well. Given the context of the love context, "gave you all" also suggests that Lear gave his children all of his love. It is only logical that he expects all of his children's love in return. Ironically, although Lear is enraged by Cordelia's transactional language, he too sees love as a transaction of giving and receiving.

Cordelia disappears as the play delves deeper into horror, only to reappear like the princess in a fairy-tale.[58] This new Cordelia, as Adelman notes, lacks the intriguing subjectivity and voice that initially engaged the audience (120). Instead, she becomes "a virtual icon of the *mater dolorosa*" (Adelman 120). While she does gain the redemptive powers of a saint-like figure, Cordelia also retains odd power as a pseudo-love interest for the king: Lear's sexual rival, the King of France, is conveniently drawn away to address "Something he left imperfect in the state . . . which imports to the kingdom so much fear and danger that his personal return was most required and necessary" (4.3.4-6) and is never seen again. This disappearance gives Cordelia the ability to be both the image of the Holy Mother who "shook the holy water from her heavenly eyes" (4.3.31), and a love interest who "heaved the name of father / Pantingly forth as if it pressed her heart" (4.3.26-27). Although her tears possess a curative power—Lear's realization that her tears are wet plays a part in his return to sanity—her kiss resuscitates him:

> . . . restoration hang
> Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
> Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
> Have in thy reverence made. (4.7.26-29)

Such words of affection, uttered in any other context, would connote a true love's kiss. Like the prince in a fairy-tale, Lear is awakened and his love for his daughter is renewed. Were *King Lear* not a tragedy, the play could have ended in this moment as the King's desire that emerges into view in the love contest is finally fulfilled.

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[58] The stage directions "with drum and colours" (4.4.) suggest a show of power that would make it appropriate for Cordelia to appear in armour (Werner 232). Sarah Werner argues that this armor indicates Cordelia's unruly character and her position as a potential threat to the patriarchal order (245). In this reading, Cordelia is a warrior princess. Armor and military leadership, however, do not disallow the possibility for a Cordelia that is newly submissive to her father. Werner in fact notes that Cordelia's return to England is a form of submission to her father's incestuous desire (a submission that entails Cordelia's own agency in her father's sin) (241).

King Lear, however, is not a fairy-tale, and the love that Lear has for Cordelia cannot prevail. That is not to say that Lear does not fight for it. After being taken prisoner, Lear seems delighted by the idea of being caged with his daughter:

> We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage.
> When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies . . .
> . . . . . .
> And take upon's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies. And we'll wear out
> In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones
> That ebb and flow by the moon. (5.3.8-13, 16-19)

Lear's language is filled with themes of worship: "blessing," "kneel," "forgiveness," "pray," "God's spies," "packs and sects" are among the most obvious. In many ways, Lear's fantasy of a prison life with his favourite daughter suggests a vain retreat into interiority that contrasts with his insanity. Whereas Lear on the heath was keenly attuned to the suffering of animals and beggars, this Lear wants to play out a fantasy of standing apart from court life ("gilded butterflies" alludes to vain courtiers [5.3.n13]). One questions, however, Lear's obvious joy at being confined in one place with his daughter: is the language of gilded butterflies, song, and prayer also not the language of a sonnet? This unnerving desire is enforced by Lear's expression "Have I caught thee?" and his subsequent embrace of his daughter (5.3.20). On the one hand, these lines are heartbreaking as they display Lear's vain hope that he can be with his favourite

child. The distance established between them in the court scene is ended by this kind embrace. On the other hand, Cordelia is "caught," trapped, and silenced. There is no poignant moment with her last words. She faces her death as a perfect daughter, and a silent love interest. In Lear's mind, this silence is appropriate: he says as he cradles her corpse, "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman" (5.3.270-71). But the Cordelia introduced to us in the love contest is not soft or gentle, these terms better fit the weakened symbol that the audience encounters in the later acts of the play. As Adelman says, "Shakespeare is complicit in Lear's fantasy, rewarding him for his suffering by remaking for him the Cordelia he wanted all along" (125).

Lear's relationship with his daughter is not necessarily entirely incestuous—many of the lines quoted above can be understood as expressions of profound paternal affection—but to overwrite the overarching feeling of incest that readers encounter in the play is to eradicate one of Lear's biggest taboos. If Cordelia is an object of incestuous desire, then the presentation of her corpse can be understood as dually defiled: she is not just the Goddess of Death metaphorically leading her father to his grave, she is also an object of love whose death literally breaks her father's heart. The incest prohibition allows for the symbolic order of repression; the abject "shatters the wall of repression and its judgments . . . It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (Kristeva 15). Because the fear of incest is so powerful in the structuring of the unconscious, it delineates the border between the self and other, and the subject and the object (Kristeva 63). The sacred is structured around this basic prohibition against incest:

> A whole facet of the sacred, true lining of the sacrificial, compulsive, and paranoid side of religions, assumes the task of warding off that danger. This is precisely where we

> encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject. (Kristeva 64)

To reduce Lear's desire for Cordelia to an allegorical reflection of his state as both father and son (as Adelman does) reduces the symbolic significance of this desire. Lear's collapse into father and son is a suffocation brought about by his violation of the incest taboo, which fundamentally reorders the borders of his subjectivity and allows for this collapse. Now, the impact of Cordelia's death can be understood as being within another layer of what is taboo: her corpse is taboo because it is a thing of death left behind in the realm of life; it is also taboo because of her father's desire for his daughter's body.

4.2.2 "Look on her": Cordelia's Corpse, the Crucifixion and Abjection

Snow White was poisoned, but her corpse was kept perfectly preserved in a glass coffin. This princess was revived by a kiss from her true love. Cordelia is hanged. Actresses performing her final entry on the stage must let their heads hang as if their necks were broken. Inverted Pietà or not, King Lear enters carrying a corpse. His hopeful sonnet-like poeticizing—his brief vision of utopic union with his daughter—ends with her death. Cordelia's death is universally recognized as the play's most profound horror. It is also a moment of hope: Samuel Johnson interprets the play as filling "the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity and hope" (159-160). Cavell also sees Cordelia's death as providing "hope, because it shows the gods more just—more than we had hoped or wished: Lear's prayer is answered again. . . Cordelia's death means that *every* falsehood, every refusal of acknowledgment, will be tracked down" (80). This interpretation glosses over the physical, palpable, corpse presented to the audience, but it raises the question: how is it that Cordelia's corpse is both "the promised end" (5.3.261) and a moment

of hope? The answer to this question lies in abjection's place between perversion and sublimation. Cordelia's corpse is the ultimate embodiment of abjection and taboo. As we know, the closer we approach abjection, the closer we come to the transcending force of the secular sacred.

In order to access this sacred, we must have access to the taboo. We have already discussed how Cordelia and Lear's relationship crosses the incest taboo. According to Freud, corpses—particularly the touching of corpses—is taboo. As mentioned in previous chapters, his explanation for this taboo around the dead is, to the modern reader, oddly superstitious and out of place: he believes that horror at the sight of the corpse stems from a fear of spirits of demons (created, in part, by the "primitive" man's inability to distinguish violent death from natural death) (67). The fear of ghosts and spirits is rooted in "the contrast between conscious pain and unconscious satisfaction over the death that has occurred" (*Totem* 71). Freud's explanation of the death taboo is hindered by his racist assumption that the Aboriginal cultures are less developed than Western cultures, and that their unconscious processes are comparable to a child's. His analysis of taboo ignores the profound impact of the dead: dead bodies remind us of our own mortality; the taboo on the dead is as a meaningful ritual and should not be reduced to superstition. Mary Douglas interprets dead bodies as sites of pollution and danger: "the anxiety about bodily margins [elicited by corpses] expresses danger to group survival (129)." Kristeva, however, critiques Douglas's anthropological rewriting of taboo as overly secular. By attempting to undo the damage created by Freud's racist anthropology, Douglas leaves out the sacred.

The anthropological debate on corpses underscores something that appears self-evident: corpses are bad. Yet, one corpse has a greater impact on us than others. Recall that Albany commands Kent to "Produce the bodies" (5.3.229). When Lear enters the stage with Cordelia, he

completes a tableau of corpses. Regan and Goneril are treated with some form of due deference because their faces are covered (5.3.240). Cordelia's body does not get this same treatment: Lear's howls draw our attention to the exposure of Cordelia's body. In the seventeenth century, open-casket funeral services were banned as they were seen as too Catholic; so too were overly dramatic displays of grief ("Inverting the Pietà" 203). The attention drawn to Cordelia's body would make it especially taboo. When Lear asks "Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (5.3.304), he provides a possibility for a melodramatic ending where Cordelia is saved "just in time." Does he notice her chest rise and fall? Does her breath cast a mist on a mirror? His death, then, would be caused by joy, not grief (5.3.n309-10). *King Lear*, however, is not a soap opera. Lear's dying breath forces us to look at Cordelia's broken and lifeless corpse. It is "a demand to look at death—to experience it—freed of the platitudes that distract us from its unadorned truth" ("Inverting the Pietà" 219). We must not avert our gaze from a body that—despite taking the position of Christ in the inverted Pietà—will not be resurrected. The failed promise of resurrection is precisely why Cordelia's corpse has more of an impact than those of her sisters: it is left in the open; it is openly mourned (Lear's wails are certainly not appropriate for good Protestant piety); and it is explicitly, gruesomely, dead.

Hence, Cavell describes Cordelia as "Christ . . . at the moment of Crucifixion, not resurrection . . . the moment of his death is the moment when Christ resembles us, finally takes the human condition fully into himself" (73). Cordelia's death reveals something that the human condition is one of suffering. Lear's language upon his daughter's death gestures towards the divine: "Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so / That heaven's vault should crack" (5.3.256-57). Goodland reads this plea as a demand for communal grieving ("Inverting the Pietà" 216). Tongues make thunder; eyes make tears; and "heaven's vault" recalls the storm that Lear

experiences. Lear's mourning is elevated from the grieving of a father to a force able to summon the divine. At the same time, Lear does not show faith in an afterlife: "she's gone forever" (5.3.257). These are not the words of a man secure in the pathway to the divine. Lear's doubt about the divine is what challenges an allegorical reading of Cordelia's death as a rewriting of Christ's death. Christ's death created a rebirth; Cordelia's death creates an apocalypse— "the promised end'—where "All's cheerless, dark and deadly" (5.3.288). David Anderson reads this apocalyptic ending as gesturing towards some sublime: "whereas Luther believes that this ideal society . . . will come about in God's good time, for Shakespeare it remains confined to the small moments of mutual sufferance shared between the fools and madmen who stand outside castle gates, lashed by wind and rain" (121). What Lear's words evoke is not the sublime, but the abject. His grief calls upon death as an equalizing force, "No, no, no, life! / Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.304). Recall Lear's speech on the heath:

> Is man no more than this?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor,
>
> bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off you lendings:
>
> come, unbutton, here. (3.4.101, 105-7)

Both the heath and Cordelia's corpse cause a revelation of the animal body beneath the clothing. On the heath, Lear strips off his royal clothing in order to become closer to the natural world. As he does so in response to Poor Tom, Lear is imitating the exile of the abject. Cordelia's death brings about a different understanding of the animal world. When Lear says, "Pray you undo this button" (5.3.308), he could be gesturing towards an item on his own costume (suggesting that he is undergoing cardiac arrest), or he could be pointing at a button on Cordelia's costume (showing

his vain hope that a simple undoing of a button could allow Cordelia to breath) (5.3.n308). His desire to undress is no longer linked to a desire to become a true man in the face of nature. It is, in both later cases, a connection between embodiment and mortality. Lear does not recognize his daughter as a fallen saviour for humanity. Her death is just as meaningless as the death of a rat. With these gestures towards potential resurrection, and the denial of them, we are brought closer to the abyss of grief where the abject resides.

Cordelia's value as a Christ-like figure, a figure that endures profound suffering, therefore, cannot be understood in the positive terms of love and redemption that Cavell perceives: "If Cordelia resembles Christ, it is by having become fully human, by knowing her separateness, by knowing the deafness of miracles, by accepting the unacceptability of her love, and by nevertheless maintaining her love and the whole knowledge it brings" (73). Cavell reads Cordelia is a character who refuses to play along in the court gesture of false love. To him, she is a figure of flexibility who maintains her love even when her father avoids it. But the picture that he paints at the end of this tale—of a figure who resolutely holds onto her love until it is recognized—sanitizes the horror that allows us to reach towards transcendence. First, one must understand Kristeva's conception of Christ. His body is "purifying, redeeming all sins, it punctually and temporarily gives back innocence by means of communion" (119). Communion causes:

> . . . all corporeality [to be] elevated, spiritualized, and sublimated. Thus, one might say that if the inside/outside boundary is maintained, osmosis nevertheless takes place between the spiritual and the substantial, the corporeal and the signifying—a heterogeneity that cannot be divided back into its components. (Kristeva 119-20)

Christian narratives interiorize the abject into the body. This sacred embodiment is given the penultimate form in the most sacred body of Christ (Kristeva 120). When this body is consumed in the Eucharist, the participants are sublimated (Kristeva 119). Cordelia's body does not achieve this mythic status: it is not a locus for osmosis between "spiritual and substantial." It is tragically lifeless and dead. Her body is better read secularly as an exterior projection of "the mother's interior associated with decay" (Kristeva 101). As we know, Lear has collapsed his daughter into his mother and his love interest; her corpse could be, literally, the decaying mother. But this reading is oversimplifying and overly specific. In the realm of the abject, the mother is not an actual figure, but a counterpoint to the law of the father. She is the "object that guarantees my being as subject" (Kristeva 32), and the potential sight of abject incestuous transgressions. If Cordelia is the mother's decaying interior, then she is the decay of the first signifiable object—the first thing that we, as human beings, can define; the thing that we build meaning around (Kristeva 32). Her death beckons an apocalypse because it suggests an ending to the systems that we use to produce meanings. In this respect, she is Christ-like: her death opens the potential for a re-orientation of signification and the spiritual.

Yet, Cordelia is not Christ, and her death does not promise Christian redemption. She is not resurrected; she is "gone forever." At the same time, her death is not devoid of the spiritual. Its effects on Lear and the audience gesture towards something beyond ourselves. Our reaction to the body—our reaction to Kozintsev's presentation of it—is explained by the abject. According to Kristeva, corpses are "the utmost abjection":

> No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live . . . The corpse, seen without God and outside of

> science, is the utmost abjection . . . Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (3)

Corpses are objects that present us with the border of one's "condition as a living being" (Kristeva 3), and the confrontation with the border causes us to collapse: the corpse is a space of life—a body—but it is also Death itself—a body without life. Our reaction to this effect when presented with Cordelia is even more palpable because her death seems so unjust: throughout the play she stands for true love, patience, and innocence—all qualities that one would associate with a fruitful life—but these qualities are brutally eliminated. Such atrocities go against "the natural order of things," intensifying the disruption associated with abjection. When we see Cordelia's corpse carried onto the stage, we are reminded that we too are mortal. We are pushed to the border of the living and the dead, and, when this occurs, we approach the chasm between meaning and meaninglessness. Cordelia's body is an object of incestuous desire. It is a body displayed in a time when bodies should not be displayed. It is an object of life devoid of life. It is the decaying symbol of the beginning of all meaning. By disturbing our ideas of what is good, of what is moral and sacred, Cordelia's corpse achieves abject transcendence. What do we feel when we are utterly horrified? When there is no alternative meaning provided to death? But when this death is so extensive, so pure, that there is meaning behind it? We feel the secular sacred: the transcendence provided by horror.

4.3 "The Promised End": The Apocalypse and the Secular Sacred

Shakespeare's final tableau of corpses promises an apocalypse. Britain is left without a clear heir, and the royal family's best advisor, Kent, is soon to dutifully follow his master to the grave. Although his use of the royal "we" in the final speech may suggest that Edgar takes on the royal title (5.3.n322), Edgar is not morally pure. He is a dramaturge deeply connected to the

performance of abjection. His gleeful self-abasement, his willingness to abandon order and go into exile, does not suggest that he will always provide stable leadership. Even at his best, Edgar attempts to fit the divine into a moralizing framework: he is a leader who consistently turns away from the abject, a leader who sanitizes horror. Perhaps this is exactly what Britain needs—a man who only performs the abject. A coronation in a circle of corpses, however, is full of foreboding. With such an image of utter destruction, it is remarkable that critics from Samuel Johnson to Stanley Cavell have found hope in *King Lear*. This hope is not found in the great, lofty, ideal leadership of Edgar (we shall reserve that for Tate's version of the play). Hope is found in the edging of the divine that accompanies absolute horror.

I have discussed how images of this horror have profound effects on the human psyche. Lear's encounter with Poor Tom destabilizes his foundational knowledge of what makes a man human. His connection with nature is a rejection of hierarchy and meaning. It is an embrace of undress and the unknown. Other images of horror are not so positive. Gloucester's blinding is a rewriting of the famous Oedipal blinding: Oedipus commits incest and murder, but even he is subsumed into the divine order. Gloucester, whose adultery pales in comparison to Oedipus's sins, is systematically defiled, before finally being divided into an abject creature and exiled from his own home. His abjection is so profound that it shakes Edgar's performance of Poor Tom, and beckons Edgar to create a theatre of redemption. Gloucester is not given access to the divine. While corpses have such a powerful effect on the viewers of the play, Gloucester's body is mysteriously missing. Somewhere in a forest, the divided Gloucester has found a place to rot. Cordelia's body is treated differently. As an object of incestuous desire, Cordelia's body violates multiple levels of taboo. Its final presentation can be Christ-like, but, if we see Christ, it is Kristeva's abject Christ: a figure whose body is the locus of the spiritual and the corporeal.

Cordelia's role as Lear's pseudo-mother suggests instead that her body plays a role in defining all meaning: to face this decaying figure is to lose our grasp on all systems of meaning. On a more secular level, Cordelia's corpse is a corpse. It is horrific because it is defiled. It is sacred because it is defiled. The secular sacred does separate these two concepts.

Should one conclude, therefore, that the "promised end" of *King Lear* is Kozint͡sev's utter destruction? This seems too pessimistic. Although Cordelia will not undergo a Christ-like Resurrection, our proximity to the divine is not devoid of redemption, for "Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (Kristeva 15). Abjection exposes the ephemeral quality of borders that we see as permanent. These borders include the structures of language and systems of meaning: there is no single definitive sign that offers a clear explanation of all being. What Kristeva provides is an alternative to structured religion: abjection does not allow us access to a single Catholic or Christian reading of the play. Instead, it offers an explosion of the sacred. Meaninglessness is also a world of reconstruction and revolt. A world where man can become animal; where horror can be defined through the divine; where language is a zone of infinite play. How can utter destruction exist in this void? There is hope for transcendence in this "promised end."

5. Conclusion

"This is our doom" (*Titus* 5.3.181); "Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord, that would reduce these bloody days again" (*RIII* 5.5.35-6); "Is this the promised end?" (*Lear* 5.3.288)—all three of these plays ends with a grim reconstruction of the state, yet none provides absolute certainty about the future. This lack of closure is part of what has generated the religious and anthropological debate over the plays' meanings. Nevertheless, there is still an important sense that something greater than humanity is at work in each of these plays. As I have explored, the open-endedness of the plays reflects Shakespeare's encounter with the Reformation's grappling with the divine. Providing a simple religious or secular solution to each play's horrific events would not reflect the anxieties and hopes of the Reformation. I have argued throughout this work that the violence in *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III* and *King Lear* generates abjection, which pushes us towards a psychological state of transcendence that is not associated with any religious creed. This state is induced by extreme displays of suffering that generate psychological dislocation; by ritual perversions that reveal that the sacred and the defiled are the same—that the language that we used to understand religious ideas of good and evil are not as clear cut as we once thought; and, most importantly, by corpses that force our turbulent reconciliation with death. Each play offers a slightly relationship between violence and the sacred.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare focuses on pagan rituals and the question of if there can ever be 'good' sacrificial violence. By analyzing the play's violence alongside anthropological studies on sacrifice and Kristeva's ideas on gore, I revealed that the suffering in *Titus is* a major source of its power. The botched sacrifice of Alarbus sets off an outbreak of revenge that culminates in increasingly abject acts: the murder of Mutius, the murder of Bassianus, the rape and dismemberment of Lavinia, and the final feast scene. Despite the occasional reference to

pagan gods, no heavenly source intercepts the violence and preserves Rome. Instead, the play is polluted by a diabolical agent of abjection—Aaron—who enjoys atrocities. The burial of the Andronicii's dismembered bodies and the violation of funeral rites for Tamora and Aaron suggests that the restoration of the Roman state and the family may not be enough to stop the cycle of horror. Nevertheless, the categorical violation of ritual does not empty it of meaning, rather, it reveals that meaning is arbitrary, that the sacred and the defiled are not as separate as pagan religion would like to believe. The recognition of this universal truth generates the secular sacred.

Richard III also challenges the societal structures meant to separate the pure and the impure. Just as *Titus* crowned Aaron as the contriver of its catastrophes, the titular protagonist—Richard—is a liminal figure responsible for the distorted marriage rites, funeral rites, and executions. Through Richard, Shakespeare explicitly engages with England's violent past and how aristocracy has historically wielded religion and violence as a tool for power. *Richard III* explores abjection's relationship to Christianity, suggesting that both pagan and Christian rituals make false assumptions about the separateness of the sacred and the defiled. Margaret's curses offer another source of the secular sacred. Like the prayers to the gods in *Titus*, Margaret's curses are never explicitly answered. Their eerie success suggests that Christian predestination is not enough to understand the play's violence. Furthermore, Margaret's instructions to other abject women, Richard's crisis of the self, and Richmond's final warning against traitors all challenge the play's closure. In *Richard III*, the ambiguity between different meanings of violence, combined with the different options for agency, prevents the play from ending with a narrative of Christian redemption. Because of their systematic violation of rituals, Richard's "bloody deeds" (*RIII* 5.3.171) generate a sense of indeterminacy—a sense that underlies all

religious and ritual structures. This indeterminacy threatens the kingdom (and the audience). Simultaneously, this indeterminacy reveals the flexibility behind all systems of meaning—witnessing and recognizing it is a profound experience of the divine, another source of the secular sacred.

Finally, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare returns to fundamental ideas of tragedy and psychology, including *Oedipus Tyrannus*, taboo corpses, and the Crucifixion. Part of what makes this tragedy so effective is the character's struggle to reconcile suffering with humanity. Edgar/Poor Tom and King Lear's madness on the heath suggest that being less than human—being closer to animals— may be a source of transcendence. Who would not want to disenfranchise themselves from humanity when the human characters in the play have such a capacity for cruelty? Gloucester's blinding, unlike some instances of violence in the earlier plays, is not explicitly framed as a sacrifice, nor as an execution. It is a horrific moment of violence, one that—like Titus viewing Lavinia's mutilation—is so potent that it pushes Edgar to the limit of his understanding. Edgar's dramaturgical attempt to reconcile Gloucester with the divine fails, and his body does not become a sacred site of worship—a sign of hope for the kingdom—but a gaping absence. Cordelia's death is another moment of cruelty, one that is so potent that it may be recognized as an image of Christian martyrdom. As I have argued, however, the impact of Cordelia's death comes from the juxtaposition between her purity in life and her impurity in death. Her body is marred by incestuous desire and the fundamental ideas of pollution that accompany cadavers. Her proximity to life and death—the closeness that causes Lear's demand to "Look on her"—makes her body a disturbing marginal figure. Nevertheless, *Lear*'s "promised end" is not filled with atheistic hopelessness: by bringing us to the border of all

significance, *Lear* suggests that meaninglessness can be filled with new meaning; that violent humanity may change.

The three plays' consistent desire to push the boundaries of proper morals, religions, and laws reflects the challenge that the Reformation posed to each of these institutions. By redirecting the focus from the religion to how each play has a capacity to evoke the secular sacred, I sidestepped a conventional debate over the plays' religious character in favour of an anthropological reading. Without access to the original performances, it may be impossible to definitively determine the exact ritual role of Shakespeare's theatre in early modern England. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's plays effectively use different elements of ritual to generate this feeling of the secular sacred. Further research could focus on modern audience's psychological reactions to these performances, potentially intertwining Kristeva's psychoanalytical ideas with modern notions of neuropsychology. Furthermore, this project offers a new possibility for understanding how artists reacted to the combination of gore and religious debate during the Reformation. Other research could expand my focus to other playwrights to investigate if and how they engaged with the theme of the secular sacred. As the importance of chaos, violence and ritual is recognized across multiple fields, there is much fertile ground to explore the secular sacred.

Although I have introduced these plays in reference to the Reformation, understanding their psychological and ritual impact helps us to understand why Shakespeare's plays continue to resonate in modern times. This work is especially timely given the context of the pandemic: photos of corpses in refrigerated trucks and the constant upward tick of death statistics arguably placed us in a state of everyday abjection like the experience of the Reformation. The temporary closure of theatres exacerbated this sense of loss. Understanding the intersection between theatre,

violence, and ritual helps to combat the confusion that comes during transitions. The secular sacred defends the continued importance of horror, violence, and theatre today. For, as much as we might want to turn away from horror, dismemberments, gore, and crime, the secular sacred reminds us that our vulnerability makes us human, and that all these seemingly permanent systems of meaning can be changed. We can find divine meaning in these "bloody days" (*RIII* 5.3.36).

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