Violence Against the Sacred:
Tragedy and Religion in Early Modern England

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated

to the memory of my father, John Anderson (1944-2004),

to my mother, Valerie Anderson,

and most of all, to my wife, Ardith.

Job 14: 13-5
John 11: 41-44

Abstract

This dissertation argues that the tragedy of the English Renaissance reflects the religious culture of the era in its depiction of sacrificial violence. It contests New Historicist assumptions about both the relationship between religion and politics, and the relationship between religion and literature, by arguing that the tragedians were reflecting the Girardian sacrificial crisis that characterized martyr executions in the sixteenth century and which was fuelled by uncertainty within the church over the issue of violence.

Chapter One develops the historical framework. It begins by surveying the history of Protestant and Catholic martyrdom in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It then traces the doctrine of the persecuted church—the recovered New Testament sense that the true church is necessarily a persecuted minority that suffers for Christ's sake—in various religious writers of the period. The most important of these writers is the martyrologist John Foxe, who fostered an anti-sacrificial strain of Christianity from within the national church. Finally, I discuss how this victim-centred theology disrupted consensus at religious executions, offering an emotional template that the tragedians exploited.

Each of the three subsequent chapters is devoted to a different tragedian. Chapter Two discusses William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a play which is radical in its sympathy for the sacrificial victim. *King Lear* shows no particular faith in Christian redemption, but in this very lack of transcendence it demystifies and condemns sacrificial violence. Chapter Three is devoted to John Webster's two tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Here, the argument is focused

on Webster's use of the theological concept of participation to draw the audience's attention to its own involvement in the tragic violence. Finally, Chapter Four discusses John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. This play has been hotly debated by critics who argue that Milton either supported or condemned Samson's destruction of the Philistines. The argument of the chapter, though, is that the play reflects a nuanced understanding of Samson's violence that mingles approval and disapproval.

Résumé

Notre thèse soutient l'idée que la tragédie de la renaissance anglaise reflète la culture religieuse de l'époque dans son évocation de la violence sacrificielle. Elle conteste les présupposés du néo-historicisme à l'égard de la relation entre la religion et la politique et entre la religion et la littérature, en proposant que les dramaturges exprimaient à travers leurs tragédies une crise sacrificielle girardienne qui caractérisait les exécutions des martyres au seizième siècle et qui était alimentée par une crise de conscience par rapport à la violence qui s'exprimait au sein même de l'église.

Le premier chapitre fait état du contexte historique. Nous nous intéressons d'abord à l'histoire des martyres protestants et catholiques au seizième et au début du dix-septième siècles. Nous détaillons ensuite la doctrine de l'église persécutée, c'est à dire la conviction issue du nouveau testament que la véritable église est nécessairement une minorité persécutée au nom du Christ, au travers des écrits de nombreux écrivains de l'époque. Figure illustre parmi ces écrivains, le martyrologue John Foxe cultivait une tendance anti-sacrificielle au sein de l'église nationale. Nous examinons enfin comment cette théologie centrée sur la victime bouleversa le consensus face aux exécutions religieuses, en présentant un champ émotionnel exploité par les dramaturges tragiques.

Chacun des trois chapitres suivants se consacre à un différent dramaturge. Le deuxième chapitre aborde *King Lear* de Shakespeare qui se distingue précisément par la compassion qui y est manifestée pour la victime sacrificielle. *King Lear* ne fait preuve d'aucune foi en la rédemption chrétienne, or l'absence notoire de

transcendance démystifie et finalement condamne la violence sacrificielle. Le troisième chapitre se concentre sur les deux tragédies de John Webster, *The White Devil* et *The Duchess of Malfi et* s'attache notamment à l'emploi du concept théologique de la participation afin d'attirer l'attention du public sur sa propre contribution à la violence tragique. Le quatrième chapitre se penche sur *Samson Agonistes* de John Milton, pièce qui fut intensément débattue par les critiques qui insistaient que Milton ne soutenait ni ne condamnait la destruction de Samson des Philistins. La thèse du chapitre prétend cependant que la pièce reflète une attitude nuancée de l'auteur face à la violence commise par Samson, une attitude qui mêle à la fois approbation et désapprobation.

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David K. Anderson

Introduction

> By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in's hand.
> O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart,
> And makes me call what I intend to do
> A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.
> I saw the handkerchief.
>
> William Shakespeare, *Othello* (5.2.67-71)

This dissertation will argue that English Renaissance tragedy shows its investment in the Reformation religious culture specifically in its depiction of and response to violence. This means going to the heart of the genre. Early modern tragedy is steeped in violence. Violence is its central preoccupation; it is the material from which it is made. Its history is a history of successive depictions of bloodletting, some of them shocking, some of them cruel, some of them almost routine. However, there is great difference in the way in which acts of violence are presented across the genre. In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which is framed by a conversation between the ghost of Don Andrea (dishonourably slain) and the personification of Revenge, violence seems to be a solution, asserted with triumphal élan. It is Spanish repayment for Portuguese crimes. "Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul" (4.5.12), Andrea tells his companion, after the last bodies have been carried away to the sound of trumpets. A generation later, in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, we have the subject of violence treated with more humour and less reverence—almost as the subject of parody—but with the same sense that it can eventually repair the very damage it creates: Vindice tells Antonio, half as a brag, half as an excuse, that "The rape of your good lady has been quited / With death on death" (5.3.108). Antonio, as the newly acclaimed

duke, cannot afford to owe such a man a favour, so he sentences Vindice to death with the rationale that, "You that would murder him would murder me" (125). This death he hopes will be the final, cleansing act of violence necessary to tie off the cycle that included the murder of Vindice's beloved and the rape of his own wife.

Juxtapose these tragedies with the most famous example of the revenge tradition, *Hamlet*, where violence, and the ethics of its use, are the essential *problem*—not insofar as the play explicitly condemns violence, but insofar as it struggles with it, and never stops struggling. Simple revenge is not a pure enough motive for the prince; he searches for something more immediate. As an illustration of this difference, contrast *Hamlet*'s play-within-a-play to Kyd's. The former represents Hamlet's desperate attempt to draw from Claudius a reaction that will justify the violence he has sworn to enact; the latter is simply the savagely ironic method Don Hieronimo chooses to enact his violence with. It gives him the opportunity to stab his fellow players and one of his audience members—death by metatheatre. So if Hieronimo's spectators are killed, and Hamlet's are indicted, what about us, who watch at a further remove? What part in the spectacle does the audience play?

All this is by way of saying that in English Renaissance tragedy there is great ambivalence surrounding questions of violence, and its role in the society and, indeed, in the theatre. Certainly, Shakespeare is not the only representative of this unease toward bloodshed. It can be seen even in Christopher Marlowe: at times Marlowe seems to approach violence with utter exuberance, but then, in the space

of a scene, that exuberance itself seems to stand as a sobering critique. Few plays indulge in pure carnivorous glee to the degree of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, but even there the cruelty, perfect in its irony, is subtly undercut. What did an Elizabethan audience hear when Barabas—ostensibly condemned by his record of cruelty and betrayal, by his race, and even by his very name—cries out "Help! Help me, Christians, help!" (5.5.64) as he burns in the caldron he had prepared as a trap for others? Did the words provoke vindictive pleasure? Guilt? Pity? How much of each? One need not try to qualify Barabas' damnable record to feel the weight of the problem his cry presents. Some might assume that the Protestant audience members are meant to simply shake their heads with smug disgust over the treachery of these Catholic Maltese, no better than the Jews and Turks they have outfoxed, but that assumption rests on a dangerous oversimplification of both the composition of the Elizabethan theatre audience and the religious convictions of each audience member. This does not make Marlowe a covert evangelist for some irenic gospel of tolerance; it simply means that he is pressing, for dramatic effect, an exposed nerve.

Violence forces an interpretive dilemma on the witnesses, a dilemma voiced by Othello in the moments before he smothers Desdemona. She tries in vain to tell her husband that she has never loved Cassio, and that she never gave him the vexed handkerchief. The protestation infuriates Othello because it wrests the power to interpret the killing away from him:

> By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in's hand.
> O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart,
> And makes me call what I intend to do
> A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.

I saw the handkerchief. (5.2.67-71)

There are several things to note about the speech. First, the sense of revelation: Othello will shortly hide his wife's dead body behind her bedcurtains, which Emelia will rip aside as she enters. Though he claims that he is the aggrieved party, Othello wants to hide the truth of his violence—the concrete, gristly reality of Desdemona's dead body—from the world. He also wants to hide it from himself. Othello, invoking heaven in this speech, is doing what violence demands: he is disguising it, aestheticizing it and, most potently, sanctifying it. Thus, he is afraid of Desdemona's denial because it contradicts his claim of "sacrifice," and labels her death plain, unsanctified "murder." If the killing is a sacrifice then it is necessary violence, holy because of the greater purpose it serves—indeed, when the general enters his wife's bedchamber at the beginning of the scene he justifies himself with the most specious of motives: "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (6). Though this agenda is opaque to Othello himself, it is transparent to the audience—as flimsy as the hangings on Desdemona's bed, or the handkerchief which now stands for him as incontrovertible proof. The short outburst exposes the logic of sacrificial violence, the seductive fantasy that killing Desdemona is no crime, for though Othello claims he is ready to take responsibility for an act which will cost him dearly, he really believes the killing will not ultimately be his responsibility, because her death is necessary. We are allowed to recognize that Othello is trying to consecrate what is in truth a sacrilege. Eventually he will recognize it too.

Towards a Theory of Christian Tragedy:

The passage from *Othello* illustrates the very real sense of confusion which surrounds violence in the early modern period. It is of the first importance for Othello that his violence be understood as a sacrifice. Shakespeare, however, undercuts this label so that we as audience members remain unconvinced. In this passage, Shakespeare offers us an interpretive key not just to *Othello*, but to both English Renaissance tragedy, and English religious culture as a whole. In *Sweet Violence*, his recent book on tragedy, Terry Eagleton shows the danger, if not the impossibility, of applying a blanket definition to this 2500 year-old genre. After surveying a great number of attempts, Eagleton claims, "The truth is that no definition of tragedy more elaborate than 'very sad' has ever worked" (3). Eagleton may be right, but I am not endeavouring to write about the whole genre from Prometheus up to and beyond Tess Durbeyfield and Lieutenant Fredrick Henry. My focus is narrowed to the English Renaissance—and its tragedy, I want to suggest, is about Othello's problem. It can be understood—both in generic and historic terms—as reflection of the society's relationship to sacrificial violence.[1]

Any serious study of tragedy must consider the question of why people willingly, not to say eagerly, devote money and time to witnessing a spectacle of pain and suffering. Very likely the answer will have some relation to Aristotle's famous formulation that tragedy achieves, "through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" (46). But

[1] There may be a small number of tragic heroes who do not suffer because of violence as such—perhaps the best example is Philoctetes, from Sophocles' play of the same name, who has to endure the pain of his snake-bitten leg. It is worth noting, though, that violence is what ends his pain: after Philoctetes takes part in the Trojan war, his foot is healed.

beyond the general understanding that *catharsis* is a medical term denoting purgation, no one can be entirely sure what Aristotle meant. I think it is safe to claim, though, that Aristotle is suggesting that tragedy offers the viewer some kind of release, an unburdening, perhaps of negative emotion. This in itself might mean very different things for psychoanalytic, Marxist, or formalist critics. For me it has to do with the question of sacrificial violence.

My understanding of sacrifice is influenced by the work of the French critic and cultural theorist René Girard. For Girard sacrifice represents the institutionalisation of supposedly "good" violence—when a community's aggression is safely channelled against an arbitrary victim whose death unites, and so preserves, the majority. Girard writes that the victim,

> is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice. (*Violence* 8; Girard's italics)

At the same time this death establishes a precedent for the safe expiation of future violence, through its institutionalization in myth and ritual (*Violence* 37). This is a paradoxical understanding of violence: good violence protecting the community from bad violence. This paradox requires a common enemy, whose death entails no guilt for the group which kills him.[2] The scapegoat, in Girard's anthropology,

[2] Girard is quick to point out that in fifth-century Athens, the birthplace of tragedy, the state "prudently kept on hand a number of unfortunate souls, whom it maintained at public expense, for appointed times as well as in certain emergencies. Whenever some calamity threatened—plague, famine, foreign invasion, or internal dissention—there was always a pharmakos at the disposal of the community" (*Violence* 94). He continues, "It is not surprising that the word *pharmakon* in classical Greek means both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short,

absorbs the violence of the community as a whole; his death reinforces the bonds between the members. In his discussion of Greek myth and tragedy in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard explains that the scapegoat shares the same characteristics as a tragic hero:

> On closer inspection, Aristotle's text is something of a manual of sacrificial practices, for the qualities that make a "good" tragic hero are precisely those required of the sacrificial victim. If the latter is to polarize and purge the emotions of the community, he must at once resemble the members of the community and differ from them; he must be at once insider and outsider…. He must be neither wholly good nor wholly bad. A certain degree of goodness is required in the tragic hero in order to establish sympathy between him and the audience; yet a certain degree of weakness, a "tragic flaw" is needed, to neutralize the goodness and permit the audience to tolerate the hero's downfall and death. (291)[3]

For Girard, tragedy is another ritualized form of sacrificial violence, offering the crowd a victim. What Aristotle sanitizes with the medical term "catharsis," Girard sees as sacrifice—the satisfaction and pacification of the crowd by the death of the hero-victim.

In Girard's interpretation, though, tragedy does not simply or cleanly depict a sacrifice, but rather what he calls the sacrificial crisis.[4] This is a crucial moment, when the rites of surrogate violence no longer unite, but divide, removing, as it were, the dam of controlled and controlling violence which protects the

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any substance capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage" (95).

[3] In *Oedipus Unbound* Girard contends, "The art of tragedy replaces the animal with the hero and the ritual gesture with the word; it is thus a 'humanizing' interpretation of the ritual function. It is this art that reveals to us, as in a sense it reveals to the Greeks, the significance of animal sacrifice. It tends to repeat the latter at a heightened level of understanding and, therefore, of dissimulation insofar as the Other, the scapegoat, the hero himself, is declared solely responsible for the suddenly revealed conflict." (52-3).

[4] Girard: "Although they approached the subject…obliquely, the Greek tragedians were concerned…with the destruction of a cultural order. The violent reciprocity that engulfs their characters is a manifestation of this destructive process" (*Violence* 55).

community from the widespread, undifferentiated violence (49). This bad violence can only be ended by a further act of good violence, a new surrogate victim that can focus the hostility of the group on himself. Here is our catharsis: the sacrificial satisfaction predicated upon the death of the victim which ends the sacrificial crisis. This could be Oedipus who must be driven from Thebes because he unknowingly brought the plague down upon it through parricide and incest, or Pentheus, torn apart for trying to deny the worship of Dionysus.

In this study I will not be making a straightforward application of Girard's model, but I do believe that the concept of the sacrificial crisis can help us understand what was going on in the two most common and prominent exhibitions of sacrificial violence in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England: religious executions and tragic theatre. In Chapter One, I will describe how the Christian culture of Reformation England helped produce a distinctive form of the sacrificial crisis which disrupted sacrificial consensus at the burning or hanging of religious criminals, and in turn was exploited by tragedians to produce a distinctly Christian tragedy. Of course, tragic audience members require, even demand violence; it is, after all, what they pay for, and the context gives an act such as the stabbing of Caesar legitimacy, not merely because it is a recognized fiction, but because it is of a piece with the action which surrounds it. It is legitimate violence in two senses. First, in the same sense that a public execution was meant to be legitimate: because the violence serves a necessary sacrificial end (catharsis), and benefits the wider community of the audience, not only those directly involved in the action. It is also viewed as legitimate because it is conceptually necessary,

following logically from a sequence of events which it gives shape to. The tragedians I am studying work within this set of expectations; they do not withhold violence, nor do they condemn it outright with pious moralizing. They let it stand, and in some cases it is even celebrated by the survivors. At the same time, they are experimenting with the genre, and complicating its effect on the audience. They do not leave the spectators with a glow of satisfaction; they confront them. On this point I differ from Girard. In his study of Shakespeare, *A Theatre of Envy*, Girard suggests that Shakespeare offers two messages to his audience, that plays like *The Merchant of Venice* or *Julius Caesar* can sate the "groundlings" with the sacrificial catharsis they expect, even while they offer an enlightened deconstruction of the same for those with greater sophistication in the "galleries" (6). I want to avoid the suggestion that the tragedians are editorializing, and also to avoid speculating about categories within the always-fluid London audience. It is more useful simply to take the audience as a whole—albeit one made of diverse parts—and say that these Christian tragedies offer violence, but complicate it. The sacrificial crisis as I understand it does not mean a condemnation of violence (or this violent art form) but, as in *Othello*, a denial or disruption of catharsis.[5] In this study I examine four tragedies which reflect this sacrificial crisis: William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, and John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. I call them Christian tragedies not because they make a deliberate profession of Christianity—though one could say that *Samson*

[5] It could be suggested that Shakespeare does offer sacrificial victims in *Othello*, to redress the false sacrifice of Desdemona: Othello and Iago. But while Othello is killed, it is by his own hand and, in a famously uncomfortable resolution, Iago is not killed but merely wounded, and promised future torment. This is certainly a hollow affirmation of the ability of blood to cleanse blood.

does so—but because their attitude toward sacrificial violence is at least partly influenced by the ambivalence which characterized the religious culture around them.

Religious History—A Critical Approach:

This dissertation will attempt, in its own modest way, to offer a new approach to understanding the relationship between literature and religion in Tudor-Stuart England. So far in this introduction I have not discussed my historical framework, but rather positioned my argument by talking mostly about tragedies themselves. This has been a deliberate choice, of a piece with my approach to historical criticism. There have been several important attempts in recent years to understand the religious context of the Renaissance drama in England, which in the space of a hundred years had gone from the Passion play, a ritualised re-enactment of the Crucifixion, to the secular theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. There is the influential materialist reading of Jonathan Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy*. Dollimore makes occasional appearances in my second and third chapters as the eloquent spokesman of a certain kind of Marxist suspicion that sees Christianity as an ideological control mechanism. For instance, in reference to Webster's *The White Devil* he states, "Thus at the same time as it consolidates faith, religious ritual is shown to consolidate the power of those who rule, the second being secured in and through the first" (232). Dollimore then offers a familiar materialist interpretation of religion as the continuation of politics by other means.

However there have been other materialist treatments of the genre which have tried to show a more nuanced relationship between the stage and the Church. The most prominent explanation would be the New Historicist compensatory model, associated with scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose. The argument suggests that the theatre offers the Elizabethan and Jacobean populous a communal experience equivalent to the one they had lost for good with the Elizabethan Reformation, when the Eucharist was largely demystified and the highly ceremonial service of the Mass, understood as a quotidian miracle through Aquinas' theory of transubstantiation, became the humble Lord's Supper. In Chapter Two I discuss Greenblatt's idea that Catholic religious paraphernalia and rituals are "evacuated" of their spiritual content, becoming physical or conceptual props for the secular, sceptical playhouses. The New Historicist school claims to understand the theatre in its historical context, but also tends to work from the untenable historical assumption that Renaissance playwrights and even theatre-goers held the same sceptical views on religion that they do, and were looking steadily past their own culture, anticipating secular modernity. Catholicism is infantilized, and seen as a kind of debunked shamanism, while Protestantism is assumed to hold no genuine devotional or intellectual appeal to anyone but a few fanatics and ascetics.

More recently a number of critics have argued that early modern dramatists had a more complicated, and in many cases, positive relationship to the English Protestant church and the various reformed traditions. Jeffery Knapp in *Shakespeare's Tribe* claims that the London audience tended to see plays as "Godly

enterprises" and that "their views had a major impact on the theatre" (2). Huston Diehl, in *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* has a similar sense of the evangelising intentions of the Renaissance dramatists. Diehl is concerned with the question of iconoclasm, and Protestant suspicion of religious images, and like me she considers John Foxe's work a powerful influence on the drama. Diehl asks, "In what ways might the tragedies of the English Renaissance stage rehearse the drama—and the trauma—of reform? And in what ways might they be agents of reform, destabilizing their audiences' relation to images and nurturing new, Protestant ways of seeing?" (3). Diehl suggests that Foxe taught the dramatists to desacrilize and commodify images, making them safe and useful, rather than spiritually dangerous idols (37-8). Thus, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* shows the seductive power of spectacle, placing, "In opposition to Faustus, the Good Angel and the Old Man [who]—like the historical Calvinists—denounce magic and advocate faith in unseen things, urging Faustus to renounce the spectacles that delight him and the speculations that absorb him" (76). Or, in John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, Diehl scrutinizes,

> the disturbing images that Ferdinand uses to torture his sister after he has imprisoned her: a dead man's hand, wax figures fashioned to look like the corpses of her husband and children, and a perverse masque of distracted madmen. In displaying such images, Webster arouses in his spectators an anxiety about art and theater. His play is thus both intensely visual and profoundly iconoclastic. (183)

There is much to admire in the work of both Knapp and Diehl, and they have done valuable service in challenging what Knapp describes as, "the myth that piety and popular entertainments in Renaissance England were cultural opposites" (2). At the same time, I am sceptical about the idea that the early modern tragedians

were offering their customers encoded evangelism, using media different from those of the theologians while pursuing the same goals. While this might be true for a particular playwright at a particular moment, we cannot ignore equally important moments of scepticism, titillation or transgression in the plays any more than we can ignore moments of piety. There are plenty of both in this radical, unstable genre.[6]

One last text that merits discussion here, is *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat* by Peter Lake and (in Section 2) Michael Questier. Lake and Questier are religious historians, not literary critics, and I quote liberally from their discussion of religious executions in my first chapter. But that section is only a part of a long study of crime, confessionalization and commercialism in "the three incipient mass media of the day—the pamphlet press, the popular theatre and the pulpit" (xxvii). The book is innovative, entertaining and provocative, and Lake discovers striking

[6] In 2005 a collection of essays edited by Ewan Fernie was published that attempted to account for the mystical content of Shakespeare's drama while circumventing the doctrinal nit-picking. Fernie explains that *Spiritual Shakespeares* is a "presentist" consideration of Shakespeare which "treats Shakespearean spirituality as a distinctive, inalienable and challenging dimension of the plays, one that is illuminated by, but remains irreducible to, any established theory or theology" (2). The goal is to cut the metaphysical content of Shakespeare's drama free of the doctrinal nets that critics supposedly restrict it with. Instead of "religion," we are given the much more elastic "spirituality": "Spirituality is a mode of opposition to what is. Sometimes it is opposed to the body and the material world—and what could be more oppositional than that? But there are forms of spiritual materialism (for example, in "new-age religion") where physical life is seen as ultimately valuable and real by comparison with the conventions of social life" (8-9). Aside from the fact that most forms of Christianity, west and east, have indeed seen the physical life as "ultimately valuable and real"—one need look no further than the sacrament of Communion or the doctrine of the Resurrection—and that many devout people would prefer to characterize their faith by what they adhere to, rather than what they oppose, this definition seems to be invested in the materialist ("spiritual" or otherwise) reduction of religious concerns to questions of political resistance. There are useful essays in Fernie's volume, but beyond the fact that most of them end up circling back to what can be considered religious questions, as a historically grounded critic, I am sceptical of "presentism," especially when religious matters are at stake. Shakespeare may be no more interested in theology than he is in the occult or other forms of the numinous, but in early modern England these things still have a historical context. This does not mean that Shakespeare, Marlowe or Middleton cannot explore moments of "spirituality" outside established religious categories. But this volume carries with it the insidious suggestion that Shakespeare has no stake in the controversies swirling around him is a seductively simple solution that only pretends to open up interpretive possibilities; in reality, it simply denies critics the tools to properly exploit those possibilities.

parallels in the way these media present a trajectory from crime (or sin), through punishment, conversion and death. In the Introduction Lake explains that he kept discovering

> a vision of the world that could only be dispelled by the sacrifice of the scapegoated sinner or sin. In the narratives about felons it was the individual criminal who had to die; in the broader "city" narratives the sins of the community had to be expiated through collective professions and rites of repentance. The figures of whore, rake, patriarch run amok, usurer and papist around which these stories so often centred can thus be seen as classic scapegoats, through whose exclusion and sacrifice the peccant humours and evil impulses of the wider society could be purged and repressed. This process completed, all could return to "normal" and order could be restored. (xxvii)

What Lake perceives in these various narratives is, broadly speaking, a pattern of Girardian sacrifice, where the scapegoat absorbs the guilt of the community. When Lake examines the tragedy written in the period, he argues that the playwrights inherited this moralistic, sacrificial framework from the polemics, pamphlets and sermons, but that they complicated it. When he compares *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*'s treatment of predestination, sin and damnation to that of the murder pamphlets, Lake explains, "What got, if not lost, then certainly diminished in the transfer to the stage was the plonking obviousness of the moralising and providentialising framework provided in so many (although by no means all) of the pamphlets" (379).[7] Lake pays dramatists like Shakespeare and Jonson the high and not unreasonable compliment that they bring sophistication and complexity to a simple, titillating story. Lake claims that,

[7] Lake writes: "the point becomes not the fidelity with which the plot follows this outline but the byways it takes before returning to its predictable course and close. Having gestured heavily at the genre of the murder pamphlet and thus evoked a certain set of narrative expectations in the audience, the play then proceeds to play with and frustrate those very expectations" (389).

> On this view, the theatre…represented a sort of festive liminal space in which cultural materials and claims, deployed in earnest and often for the highest stakes on the scaffold and in the press and pulpit, could be played with and critiqued, combined and recombined in a number of narrative and thematic patterns, patterns that were certainly related to but by no means simply determined by the interplay of those same forces and arguments in the wider world of political and religious conflicts. (xxxi)

I think it is very important that a religious historian treats the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as important historical documents. However, I am nervous of some of the implications of the relationship Lake sees between the theatre and the religious culture. My historical argument relies, to a considerable extent, on the ambivalence and division Lake finds at the site of religious executions. But Lake spends too little time, I think, on considering the source of this division. The emotional complexity he finds was fuelled by religious writers, particularly John Foxe, who took up the question of sacrificial violence and its place in the Christian state. The tragedians, I will argue, reflected the emotional complexity the religious writers encouraged. It is not only in theologians like Hooker that religious culture attains complexity. Foxe's martyrology occupied a position roughly midway between popular culture and academic culture, but its understanding of human suffering, divine justice and Christian society is thoroughly nuanced. So while the drama might have brought sophistication to the murder pamphlets and itinerant preaching that relied on sacrificial moralism, that very sophistication was part of another facet of the religious culture.

So what sort of historical criticism do I intend to practice? My goal is to take the religious concerns and ideas of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England seriously and at the same time, critically. I wish to understand their faith as they

understood it, but also to account for the often gaping distance between faith and practice, the unforgiving desert where cavalier applications of theory languish and die. The scholar who wants to understand early modern England cannot make a wholesale application of modern or postmodern theory to the literature of the period, though particular ideas from any branch of theory may be enormously useful at a given point. But neither can he make a wholesale application of early modern theory (or as they called it, theology) to the period: Luther, Calvin, Bellarmine or Perkins may have informed a playwright or poet on any number of levels, but a play or a poem is more than a reiteration of their theology.[8] Diehl and Knapp are right to challenge the artificial separation of popular culture and religion in the Renaissance: all these writers are Christian. Certain things that may look strange to us from the outside must have seemed very familiar to those within, whether one is a sceptic like Marlowe or a believer like Milton. At the same time, materialism has alerted us to many moments in the plays that cannot be squared with orthodox piety, Protestant or Catholic. When I began work on this project in 2004 I tended to see Shakespeare as politically conservative—a supporter of social order and established hierarchy. I had some good (or at least plausible) reasons for thinking this, mostly based on the comedies, but they no longer hold up to the radicalism I see in *King Lear*. However this does not mean *King Lear*'s radicalism is Che Guevara's radicalism. As I hope to demonstrate in Chapter Two, Shakespeare's profound sympathy for the oppressed and marginalized does not spring from class politics, or at least not class politics as they are understood in the

[8] In Chapter Four I quote Joseph Wittreich, who makes this point about Protestant interpretations of the Samson story. See *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* 25.

twenty-first century, but from particular strands of Christian thinking. At the same time, this does not lead to an expression of Christian theology—it is ultimately a theological imperative concentrated at the political plane and not the spiritual.

There are some suggestive precedents for the kind of historical approach I am undertaking. Paul Stevens, in an article about how the Protestant understanding of grace shaped British imperialism from the days of Edmund Spenser to those of Winston Churchill, argues that religious meaning is not confined to the religious sphere:

> the power of the Word is always there with Protestant nationalists like Spenser, constantly shaping and directing understanding and action. This is not to say that the argument of grace functions like some vast monological machine, some mindless "dominant ideology," but that under certain circumstances and in particular textual communities it provides a repository of rhetorical triggers and strategies of great authority. (15)

Stevens' argument is nicely illustrated by Robert N. Watson. In "*Othello* as Protestant Propaganda" Watson offers an excellent discussion of the tension between faith and works in *Othello* while resisting the suggestion that Shakespeare was engaged in a deliberate programme of Protestant evangelism. Rather, Shakespeare seems to be exploiting the affective power of the doctrine of *sola fide* by submersing it at the level of allegory:

> This allegorical level is secondary, recessive, and protean; it quickly becomes absurd if attached to every turn of phrase or plot. However, though some critics would forbid discussing Desdemona as a Christ-figure unless Othello were to nail her palms to the headboard, a fairer test is whether the areas where the analogies and allegories do function properly are signalled, phrased, and clustered in ways that could affect at least the subconscious minds of an audience for whom these theological questions were matters of life and death, eternal as well as temporal. (236)

Shakespeare is not proselytising on behalf of Luther; he is putting Luther to work, in order to intensify his love story wherein Othello dies because he cannot accept Desdemona's love as a manifestation of pure grace and instead bases his identity as a husband on the false doctrine of merits taught to him by Iago.[9] Watson provides a striking amount of evidence culled from close reading of the play:

> Iago thus burdens Othello's marriage with something resembling Calvinist salvation anxiety—or perhaps burdens Calvinism with Othello's marital anxiety, the endless "damned minutes" endured by the spirit that "dotes, yet doubts" (3.3.169-72). No wonder Othello begins to refer to his marriage as "the business of my soul" (3.3.183), and to suspect that the love of this saviour is earned and therefore changeable, rather than predestined and therefore stable in perpetuity. "Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee" Othello exclaims in the midst of this temptation; "And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.90-2). And no wonder Iago enters instantly on this line, not only to personate the loveless chaos, but also (like Marlowe's Mephistopheles) to divert the protagonist from the path back toward grace. (241-2)

Both of these examples suggest how theological concepts can saturate a work of literature. Watson's example is especially potent because while *The Faerie Queene* has an avowed interest in Protestantism, *Othello* does not. In the first chapter I will

[9] Watson offers a compelling discussion about the significance of Iago's name to the grace allegory: "Thus far I have contrived not to mention the name of Iago, but now I want to confront that name directly, by linking it with Saint James the Apostle, known at his burial site in Spain as Santiago Matamoros: Saint James the Moor-slayer. This site was a favourite destination for Catholic pilgrims in the Renaissance, and Martin Luther repeatedly condemns the tendency to 'run to St. Iago' in hopes of salvation, instead of trusting in Christ's love. The doctrinal significance of St. James amplifies the historical one, because his Epistle (2:14-26) contains the clearest scriptural obstacle to solifidianism. Martin Luther therefore refused to 'regard it as the writing of an apostle ... it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works'" (237). Watson goes on to add, "Iago's initial self description sounds remarkably similar to condemnations of richly garbed Catholic priests, 'trimmed in forms and visages of duty,' greedily lining their own coats and worshipping themselves while deluding the world with 'but shows of service'" (1.1.49-55).

work from a similar premise in trying to explain how what I call the doctrine of the persecuted church offers dramatists a different set of potent "rhetorical triggers."[10]

We simply cannot underestimate the degree to which religion permeated all aspects of life in early modern England; I think that this was understood by tragedians, who wrote plays to turn a profit. For my argument this means that the anti-sacrificial interpretations of scripture that writers like Foxe made throughout the sixteenth century upset consensus over sacrificial violence, and the theatre made good use of this unease. To prove this I will begin by offering, in my first chapter, a discussion of religious executions and the martyrdom crisis in Tudor-Stuart religious culture. In the following chapters, I will endeavour to get very close to the texts of the tragedies. This dissertation is in part a manifesto about the importance of close reading to historical criticism. Too often close reading is seen as antithetical to the sober work of historical contextualization—a critical self-indulgence that distracts from the pressing concerns of locating a text's cultural reference points. But I want to contend that the context is seen most vividly in the details, at the level of subtle interaction, innocuous passing remarks, and within the nuances of image and metaphor. Historical critics must, like Watson, go beyond the broad strokes. When I discuss *Lear*, for example, I take up Greenblatt's suggestion that Edgar as Tom O'Bedlam represents a Jesuit on the run, hiding from an illegitimate, persecuting church. The suggestion in itself is interesting, but

[10] In *Aspects of Subjectivity* Anthony Low sums up the question succinctly: "What we know…is that whatever Shakespeare personally believed about religious matters, whether his deepest allegiances were national or universal, Protestant or Catholic, nostalgic or progressive, spiritual or agnostic (all positions for which critics have found at least some evidence) he knew his audience and knew how to play on their expectations" (103).

unfinished. If we look more closely at the climate surrounding persecuted Catholics in early Jacobean England, and at Edgar's characterization throughout the text, we begin to realize that Shakespeare is engaged in a thoroughgoing examination of what it means to suffer and be persecuted which goes far beyond the explicit borrowings from Harsnett. It goes to the root of Edgar's character, and his relationships with his father and his brother.

In *Making Trifles from Terrors* Harry Berger Jr. defines what he calls a "modified character-in-action approach" to Shakespeare's plays (25). Berger explains that his goal is to discover,

> What are the social resources available to self-deception? How do characters *use* the roles and relationships of love, courtship, and marriage, of family, court, and kingdom, or race, religion and gender, to validate their pursuits of power or pleasure or pain or self-interest or love? (26; Berger's italics)

Berger is not a historicist, but he is asking questions that historical critics should ask, questions about how social pressures influence and are influenced by individual psychology. In the chapters to come I will spend considerable time examining acts of sacrificial violence—Gloucester's blinding, the murder of the Duchess, Samson's destruction of the temple—but it is equally important to examine the context of violence, the way characters justify it or condemn it, the way they regard one another. The characters' psychology is important to the critic in the same way that it was important to John Foxe. As I hope to show, Foxe was not only interested in torture and death and heroic professions of faith; his martyrology is remarkable for its searching exploration of ethical crises, unsettled doubts and emotional complexity, whether in the interaction of a husband and wife

at the place of execution or the response of an onlooker. All of this is connected to Foxe's exploration of sacrificial violence, and the same dynamic is apparent in the tragedians I am looking at. All four of the tragedies I discuss not only examine victimization, but they also examine the impulse victimizers have for special pleading, for self-consciously placing themselves in the role of the victim. In the case of Shakespeare's Edgar, this is fair, though problematic. In the case of Webster's Bracciano or Ferdinand it is so transparent as to be contemptible. In the case of Samson it is, like everything else in that play, qualified—both affirmed and undercut at the same time.

If we are going to understand the relationship between the theatre and the culture, then critics must strive to historicize like Debora Shuger and read plays as closely as Harry Berger—or at least attempt it. The subtleties of these plays offer tremendous riches to the cultural historian but they need to be mined. A final example from Marlowe may help. In a recent paper to the Shakespeare Association of America entitled "The Reformation of Emotions" Steven Mullaney asks important questions about how the Reformation affected people on the emotional level, and their interactions with one another:

> let us say that those who were born Elizabethan did not know what to believe whether in terms of their own faith or the spiritual identities of those around them, and they also, perhaps even as a consequence, did not know what or how to feel. (4)

The long, slow process of reform meant that many people in Tudor England held beliefs and allegiances that their family members considered damnable. Mullaney wonders, "What did it feel like to be a sincere Calvinist and contemplate the everlasting fate of one's mother or father or brother or sister, who were not?"

(7-8). How did those without the absolute assurance of election view those who claimed it? How did those who claimed it view those who did not? As critics of Renaissance literature, this is a historical problem that we can only observe if we get very close to the text. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, which clearly wrestles with the question of predestination, is a good illustration of this. After sating himself on the delights provided by Mephistopheles, the fear of punishment eventually begins to weigh on Faustus. Before nodding off to sleep in Act Four Faustus tries to push aside the tormenting thoughts: "Tush! Christ did call the thief upon the cross; / Then rest thee, Faustus, quiet in conceit" (4.1.138-9). This remark is meant as a passing platitude, to buy Faustus a moment of precious forgetfulness. But if attended to closely, the line hints at the ocean of despair surrounding Faustus, isolated on the losing end of predestinarian grace. The verb "call" reminds us that in Calvin's system the very desire to repent is beyond the reach of unregenerate man, and can only be achieved if the Holy Spirit softens the heart of someone who is already, though he does not know it, elect. Furthermore, Christ was crucified between two thieves, and although one recognized him as Lord and was promised paradise, the other jeered at him and was not (Luke 23: 40-3). The spectre of the unredeemed thief haunts Faustus' speech, and the offhand scriptural allusion intensifies the poignancy of the situation. It also opposes the mercy of Christ to the severity of predestinarian theology, which seems to make the unredeemed thief a victim rather than an agent who is free to choose whether or not to repent. In doing this Marlowe is neither preaching Puritanism, nor condemning it outright; he

is manipulating a population of theatre-goers who are already wrestling with its doctrines in order to deepen the anguish of his protagonist.

An Uncertain Inheritance:

Religion was fundamental to all facets of early modern English culture: intellectual, artistic, emotional and even material. At the same time it was fundamentally unstable: not simply because the theological character of the national church depended on the life of a single individual—the monarch—but because "religion" meant a storm of competing voices and conflicting imperatives. Half-conscious, intuitive assumptions clashed with formal professions of faith or with elaborate exegeses. An individual was warned, from every corner, that his doctrinal allegiance would echo forever, and the shadow of eternity made theological questions all the more pressing. The very Church itself, the eternal Bride of Christ, had been shaken to its foundations and reconstituted four times since the reign of Henry VIII. No doubt many simply did what they were told. Some may have laughed as their neighbours agonized. But the situation was volatile and inescapable at once.[11] This claustrophobic pressure was epitomized by the martyrs or, as their enemies called them, the heretics or the traitors. In religious violence, carried out by the state upon the bodies of dissenters, the laws of obedience and conformity confronted the heroic meekness of Christ, who patiently accepted

[11] In the Introduction to *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England* Claire McEachern rightly asserts that, "to identify a theology is a far cry from specifying the mixtures of values, sentiments, emotions, convictions, and practices that constitute individual devotion. The authors most of interest to literary scholars in this regard are so not because their brand of religion is so apparent but because it is so complexly layered and multiply determined, evincing a slippage between official doctrine and personal belief that preoccupied the Tudor-Stuart authorities as well as modern scholars" (6-7).

betrayal, torture and death, and forgave his enemies. Theologians could try to reconcile this incongruity, but they could not make it vanish.

This is the inheritance of the tragedians. Shakespeare, Webster and Milton wrote about what they knew, which was uncertainty: uncertainty surrounding sacrificial violence, despite loud claims of certainty from church, state, victim, martyrologist and polemicist. In Chapter One, I will establish the historical framework of this project by discussing the sacrificial crisis that characterized religious executions. I will outline the history of martyrdom in the period, and then explain what I call the doctrine of the persecuted church—the New Testament understanding that the Church is necessarily a victimized minority. This doctrine was articulated by suffering Christians of every stripe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its most prominent spokesman in England, though, was John Foxe, and so much of the chapter will be spent discussing Foxe, and his martyrology. The Protestant Book of Martyrs was perhaps the most important text in unsettling the sacrificial consensus at Elizabethan and Jacobean executions of Catholic priests. The sacrificial crisis that the tragedians under study here depict comes out of a culture that was increasingly troubled by overt manifestations of religious violence, and by also by growing sympathy for the victims of such violence.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a play that shows very little confidence in Christian metaphysics, but in its understanding of suffering and violence it is closely engaged with the doctrine of the persecuted church. In Chapter Two I will argue that *Lear* reflects the sacrificial crisis in several ways: in its understanding of

suffering as an experience that is ultimately beneficial because it enables empathy and identification with others who suffer; in its exploration of genuine and insincere martyrdom; and finally in the death of Cordelia. Cordelia's death, I contend, stands for the revelation and condemnation of all sacrifice. The indictment of persecutory violence is so powerful that even the scapegoating of the villains is denied. Cordelia is not sanctified and beatified by her death; she is reduced by it. Her death, like the deaths of Foxe's martyrs, is important not because it is salved by transcendence, but because it is ordinary. The theme of common humanity, despite signifying unpalatable essentialism to so many critics, is nevertheless at the heart of this play.

In Chapter Three I turn to John Webster's two tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster does not have the stature of the two giants that flank him in this study, and I realize that his place could have very easily been given to Middleton, Heywood, or certainly Marlowe. By the end of the chapter I hope to prove that Webster has something important to say about sacrificial violence. Tonally, these two plays are very different: the first is a confusing series of murders and scandals, with no discernable centre of gravity; the second is dominated by the unforgettable presence of the titular heroine. Nevertheless, I think they are complementary in the way they speak to the same concerns. The word I circle back to continually in this chapter is "participation"—a term of great significance to the sacramental debates of Reformation England. As a dramatist, Webster is always aware of the audience, the paying spectators who consume the sacrifices he depicts. He repeatedly draws attention to the relationships that link all

of those involved in the rites of violence: the persecutors, the victims, the onlookers.

I am very much aware that some readers may think John Milton fits awkwardly with what is otherwise a discussion of Jacobean tragedy. But though *Samson Agonistes* was written as a closet drama in the style of the Attic tragedians, half a century after Shakespeare's death, it is invested in the same sacrificial crisis. Milton, the focus of Chapter Four, is indispensable to this project. He understood violence, and he had years to reflect on the failure of what had once seemed a glorious crusade on behalf of true religion. Today, his tragedy is the site of a bitter critical dispute over the status of the hero and his last act of destruction. But though many readers demand that either Samson or his Philistine enemies be sacrificed, the play itself refuses to submit to one side or the other. It is characterized by great ambivalence toward sacrificial violence. I do not think that indeterminacy is a prominent characteristic of Milton's prose or poetry, but by the time he wrote *Samson* he had come to know both sides of violence, and both sides, the compelling and the repelling, are reflected in the play. None of this is to say that Milton was writing against the Good Old Cause or his involvement in it, but it is to insist that he had come to realize its cost. This play, uniquely, is an *explicit* Christian tragedy, by a poet who believed he was called by God. It allows us to read backward through the other dramatists and religious writers, and realize their common concerns, and their shared questions.

Chapter One:
The Tragedy of Martyrdom

> I pray God…that some of us, as high as we seem to sit upon the mountains treading heretics under our feet like ants, live not in the day that we gladly would wish to be at league and composition with them to let them have their churches quietly to themselves, so that they would be content to let us have ours quietly to ourselves.
>
> Sir Thomas More, to William Roper (Roper 126)

> The false god changes suffering into violence; the true God changes violence into suffering.
>
> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (72)

When early modern tragedians depicted scenes of violence, they were engaging with one of the most controversial and unsettled facets of their culture. It was, as we all know, a blood-soaked culture, routinely punctuated with the gruesome execution of even petty criminals, and often adorned with the quartered body parts of traitors.[1] Yet within the culture a profound ambivalence toward violence was germinating. In the early modern period one can see the beginnings of a remarkable revaluation of the place of violence in society, which is no doubt still going on today. The revaluation began with specifically religious executions and eventually undermined, by the time of Elizabeth and James, the ability of the state to enact and the church to endorse deliberate physical cruelty over a matter of faith or conscience. Though issues like predestination or the sacraments transfixed the European imagination in those years, the question of coercion was equally large; few faced it directly but nonetheless it lurked behind the writing of theologians and

[1] Molly Smith writes: "During Elizabeth's reign, 6160 victims were hanged at Tyburn, and though this represents a somewhat smaller figure than those hanged during Henry VIII's reign, Elizabethans were certainly quite familiar with the spectacle of the hanged body and the disemboweled and quartered corpse" (217).

poets alike. It was perhaps the most significant crisis of conscience Western Christianity has ever faced. This chapter will endeavour to argue that the source of this shift was the Christian religion or, more accurately, a particular strain of it that was growing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under the influence of what I call the doctrine of the persecuted church.

In 1689, eighteen years after the publication of *Samson Agonistes*, the last tragedy of the English Renaissance, the parliament of England passed the Act of Toleration. Though the Act did not extend to Catholics, it granted freedom of worship to dissenting Protestant groups and thus broke the ancient rule that the subjects of a kingdom should be united in religion. The Act was a product of politics rather than altruism, but it represents a revolution (however incomplete) in the attitude towards religious conformity as it stood at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* C. S. Lewis explains the state of the question in the early days of the Reformation:

> We must, at all events, take care not to assume that a sixteenth-century man who lived through these changes had necessarily felt himself, at any stage, confronted with the clear issue which would face a modern in the same circumstances…. No man claimed for himself or allowed to another the right of believing as he chose. All parties inherited from the Middle Ages the assumption that Christian man could live only in a theocratic polity which had both the right and the duty of enforcing true religion by persecution. Those who resisted its authority did so not because they thought it had no right to impose doctrines but because they thought it was imposing the wrong ones. Those who were burned as heretics were often (and, on their premises, logically) eager to burn others on the same charge. (39)

A vivid example of this rigidness was Thomas More who, when his turn to die came, could write the *Dialogue of Comfort*, with seemingly little reflection on the

agonies he had forced many Protestants to suffer in his capacity as Henry VIII's chancellor. Indeed, More demonstrated startling prescience in his remarks to William Roper, his son-in-law and biographer, in articulating the concept of religious pluralism; to More though, pluralism is something to be shunned, or even dreaded. It means the end of the institution that had unified Western Europe since Constantine. John M. Headley writes, "More's terrible vision bespeaks the total subversion of the entire thousand-year-old traditional order in which compulsory religious uniformity is conceived as fundamental and absolutely essential to social and political stability" (34). St. Thomas prayed that Europe might be spared what he regarded as the removal of a first principle, the source of all social cohesion. In spite of his prayers, his fears eventually came true, though much too gradually to save him from the block. The attitude toward coercion and religious violence in the early modern era began to shift, and far earlier than most scholars, Lewis included, generally acknowledge. Even in the period of early reform (say, before the drafting of the Augsburg Confession in 1530) there were murmurs of dissent. It is fair to say that they were largely from individuals and groups who were themselves being persecuted (though this does not invalidate them), or that they were incidental remarks, and not the core tenets of a given writer. However, the currents strengthened, and so the foundations of the persecuting church were inexorably eroding by the end of the sixteenth century. The collapse was still far in the future, but a great sea change had quietly occurred.

The currents came first, and most importantly, from within the Church itself. No secular line of thought did nearly as much to damage the ability of the

Christian state to burn or decapitate their misguided co-religionists as those writers who based their arguments upon the Gospel and Christian history. At the head of this effort was John Foxe. Apart from the English Bible and Cranmer's Prayer Book, no other English text of the sixteenth century enjoyed the influence of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Special and Memorable Happening in the Church […]*. And Foxe, as I will argue, relentlessly equated suffering with the Church of Christ and persecution with the Church of Antichrist. His work encouraged the state of division and unsettled convictions which characterized religious executions in the later half of the sixteenth century and beyond—what I refer to as the sacrificial crisis.

Why make the response to religious execution the hinge of Christian tragedy? My answer has to do with the centrality of this issue for English Christians of all religious stripes, from Recusant Catholics, through Magisterial[2] and Radical Protestants—even for those beyond the umbrella of Nicene Christianity like Arians. While the martyrs were exceptional in terms of their gruesome fates, and often too in the fervour of their devotion, the difference was one of degree rather than kind. Brad S. Gregory, who has made the first truly cross-confessional study of the issue writes, "Through the multiple facets of martyrdom…the period's religious history is broadcast with the volume turned up" ("Martyrs" 455). Whether Elizabethan seminary priest or Marian Calvinist, the

[2] The term refers to those the followers of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Bullinger and others who (unlike the apolitical Anabaptists) attempted to align themselves with the secular authorities and offer a replacement to Rome on the national level. Diarmaid MacCullouch notes that theologically they are most easily identified by their support for infant baptism. See MacCullouch, *Reformation*, 143-4.

martyrs saw themselves as deliberately following the archetypal trajectory of suffering traced by Christ and the apostles; they were therefore profoundly relevant to all the members of their given confession. Gregory continues,

> Nor can the martyrs be marginalized through any neat social or gender categories, because in addition to transcending confessional divides, they included men and women, clergy and laity, young and old, the well-off, middling sorts, and the poor. If one is interested then, in the full range of ways in which religion was received and lived across the breadth of the population, one cannot ignore devout Christians in general or martyrs in particular. (457)[3]

All English Protestants of even moderate devotion knew that, if tested, God expected them to respond with the astonishing courage that the men and women in Foxe's book had shown. Likewise, the terrible pressure evidently felt by so many English Catholics to hide or succour a travelling priest or Jesuit bears witness to that group's inextricable relationship to those heroes of their faith. This was, for all concerned, an immensely important issue on the plane of lived reality: so many had died already, and more might die in the future. And it was just as important on the symbolic level, since a Christian was supposed to die spiritually with Christ, through humility and mortification of the self. [4]

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[3] Sarah Covington writes, 'Those martyrs who ended up going all the way in the process, and dying at the end, ranged from weavers and fishermen to bishops, an archbishop, court ladies, sixteen-year-old apprentices, Anabaptists, Protestant divines, widows, monks, and Jesuit priests" (3).

[4] Most of this discussion will be focused on English Protestants, since their writing, suffering, and eventual control of the English state make them the centrally important group for historical study of the period. Nevertheless, this is not a strictly confessional issue. I am not claiming that the gradual resistance to persecution is a specifically Protestant tenet or that Protestant doctrine is responsible for this negative attitude towards persecution. There is no causal relation between any Protestant position on faith, church government, or the sacraments and a condemnation of sacrificial violence. That condemnation is not a confessional position but a more generally Christian one that emerges in the period because of the confessional strife, and is developed by those who have experienced persecution. In many Protestant nations, England in particular, Catholic minorities would eventually face systematic persecution and develop their own rhetorics of suffering. But at this point the ground was already softening: they were confronting Protestants with variations on arguments that Protestants had already used.

Shared Suffering:

Christians began systematically burning each other in the Latin West in 1022, when 14 heretics were executed at Orleans (Gregory *Salvation* 75; Coffey 23). Burning was a special form of execution, reserved for those who had committed crimes of belief, rather than crimes of behaviour. In an article on martyrdom in sixteenth-century France David Nicholls explains why burning was the chosen method of punishment:

> The purpose of executing heretics was total obliteration: heresy had to be driven out of society like disease from the body and the social body completely cleansed of all impurities. Protestants were burned, an honour otherwise reserved for witches, homosexuals and those guilty of bestiality, underlining the connection with impurity and "unnatural acts." The records of their trials were burned along with them and the ashes scattered to the winds, thereby preventing their burial…. even their memory was meant to be destroyed along with all physical evidence of their existence on this earth and in this polity. This could go as far as pulling down houses…. Unlike other criminals, whose bodies could be exposed and left to rot, the heretic had to be utterly destroyed. (50)

The Church justified the act by pointing to Augustine, who had definitively reconciled moderate coercion as a legitimate tool of the Church after seeing its effectiveness in curbing the heretical Donatist sect. This reconciliation cast a long shadow, and a far blacker one than Augustine himself would have countenanced (Coffey 22-3).[5] In the following centuries, especially after the creation of the Inquisition, the Church delivered up hundreds to the flames in the name of right doctrine: Albigensians, Waldensians, Hussites and, in England, the Lollards. In

[5] For a discussion of Augustine's continuously shifting outlook on coercion see P. R. L. Brown, "Saint Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion." Brown contends that Augustine's attitude was characterized by great ambivalence, "marked by a painful and protracted attempt to embrace and resolve tensions" (107).

that kingdom, in 1401, responding to the widening influence of Wyclif's "Bible men," Henry IV's Parliament passed a bundle of heresy laws, including the statute known as *de Heretico Comburendo*. A persecution of the Lollards began which only died off in the 1520s when Luther's influence gave the authorities more pressing concerns (Coffey 78). Indeed, Wyclif's body, 40 years dead, was disinterred in the 1420s, dressed in clerical robes so that it might be formally disgraded, and then burned. The idea was to mirror in the physical realm what they believed was happening in the spiritual one, and also to mirror what would be done to the living bodies of anyone else who might echo Wyclif's defiance (Moynahan ix-xxv).[6]

During the Reformation the formal persecution of heretics reached its peak in the middle of the sixteenth century and then gradually died out.[7] It began with two Augustinian monks, followers of Luther, who were burned in the Low Countries in 1523 (Bagchi 211). William Monter has compiled the statistics on Reformation martyrs, and asserts that the two men were the first of 3000 men and women, largely in the Empire, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and England, who went to the stake rather than recant between 1523-65. Between 1567-74 another 1100 were burned, largely in the Low Countries, while the pan-European numbers fell to 280 after the turn of the century. Of this total, Monter points out that only a third were so-called Magisterial Protestants, and the rest were

[6] The practice of burning the remains of the dead continued in the sixteenth century. In 1557 Mary's persecution paused long enough to burn the dead bodies of the reformers Martin Bucer and Paul Fagius, who had been buried at Cambridge in Edward's reign. Foxe betrays real anger at the "extreme crueltie" and the "folly" of the authorities toward the "rotten carcasses" (12, 1963).

[7] This does not, of course, include the many acts of popular violence, such as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in France, when more Protestants were killed by their fellow citizens in a few days than were burned in the whole of the sixteenth century. Nor does it account for the deaths of those individuals who died in prison (a great number). All such victims were accounted martyrs by their supporters.

Anabaptists, the radical, largely apolitical Protestants who were persecuted by both Catholics and other reformers (Monter 49). It is worth mentioning John Coffey's explanation that sixteenth-century magistrates tended only to burn those to their "left" on the theological spectrum. For the Catholics, anyone professing Christianity outside the institution of the Roman confession could be prosecuted as a heretic. Coffey continues,

> In contrast to Catholics, Lutherans only employed the death penalty against "sacramentarians" (Zwinglians and Calvinists)[8] and Anabaptists, whilst Calvinists only felt justified in executing Anabaptists or anti-Trinitarians. (99)[9]

Coffey's book includes a table of English heresy executions, from the beginning of the *de Heretico* statute, through the reign of James I. Between Henry IV and Henry VIII's break from Rome, approximately fifty martyrs, mostly Lollards, were executed. In the last thirteen years of Henry's life, there were another fifty, a mixed bag of magisterial and radical Protestants. Two radicals were burned under Edward VI, six under Elizabeth, and two under James I. Of course the largest number by far—approximately three hundred—occurred under Mary, a statistic made all the more sobering when one considers that the deaths were concentrated into a three year space: from Parliament's restoration of the old heresy laws (shelved during Edward's reign) in the winter of 1555 to the Queen's death in 1558 (Coffey 99). Little wonder these three years haunted the English collective memory in the centuries to come.

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[8] A comparatively rare event.

[9] Coffey includes the interesting fact that only one Roman Catholic was burned for heresy in the sixteenth century: "predictably, this anomaly occurred under Henry VIII, in 1538, when Friar John Forrest was burned as a heretic for affirming papal supremacy" (99).

Mary's succession to the throne in 1553 was complicated by the general distrust of reformers and the claim of Lady Jane Grey, the Protestant candidate preferred by her late brother and much of his government. Aware that she needed to placate her Protestant subjects (the majority of whom, she was sure, would soon shake off their heretical allegiance and return chastened to the Roman fold), Mary issued what MacCullouch calls a "soothing declaration" to the Londoners that suggested a future policy of religious tolerance. The declaration stated:

> albeit her Grace's conscience is stayed in matters of religion, yet she graciously meant not to compel or constrain other men's conscience otherwise than God shall (as she trusted) put in their parts a persuasion of the truth that she is in, through the opening of his Word unto them by godly, virtuous and learned preachers. (Foxe 10, 1409)[10]

For the opening months of her reign, this seemed to hold true. However, by the winter of 1555, the legal and administrative framework was in place for a persecution of those leading lay and clerical Protestants who refused to conform. The idea, David Loades argues, was to strike hard and create a swelling tide of reconversion. On 22 January 1555 the Lord Chancellor, Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, offered a formal pardon to a group of leading "heretics" in exchange for their recantations—only one accepted (149). A fortnight later, on 4 February, the popular preacher John Rogers was burned at Smithfield. Foxe says of Rogers with moving simplicity that, "He was the first Protomartyr of all that blessed company that suffered in Queen Mary's time, that gave the first adventure upon the fire" (11, 1493). Many who followed him were lay people, forced to

[10] I have modernized the spelling and punctuation in all quotations from Foxe. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the 1583 edition of the *Acts and Monuments*.

recant or die because of their own uncompromising Protestant zeal, uncompromising Catholic zeal on the part of their local authorities, or simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Of these, a high number were from the lower and mercantile classes.[11] However, Mary's government did its best to target many important clergymen, including Thomas Cranmer, the man her father had made archbishop of Canterbury.

Mary died late in 1558; her sister Elizabeth's reign marked the permanent establishment of a Protestant national church, and a shift in the pattern of religious persecution. While radicals and Anabaptists were still targeted, Catholics would become the principal victims. Unlike the former two groups, Catholics were not executed for crimes of conscience but political crimes, generally treason and sedition. Thus, they were not burned but beheaded or, more commonly, hanged (with all the extended torture of drawing, quartering and disembowelling which that process involved in the early modern period). The number of executed Catholics is less than that of Protestants, but still considerable. After he split with Rome about fifty dissenting Catholics, mostly priests, were killed in Henry's reign, equal to the number of Protestants Henry martyred in the same period. As an example of Henry's savage quest for uniformity—his "murderous ecumenicism"—Diarmaid MacCullouch points to 30 July 1540, when three Protestants were burned and three papists were beheaded ("Archbishop" 204). After Henry's death English

[11] The social rank of the Protestant martyrs was a frequent target of their polemical enemies. Cardinal William Allen defended Mary's persecution and attacked Foxe by arguing that at least Mary's government had the good taste to burn nobodies of low standing, while Elizabeth's regime executed many priests of learning and quality. See Elton, "Persecution," 180-1. Allen was echoed by the Jesuit, Robert Persons, who calls Foxe's subjects, "contemptible and pitiful . . . rabblement," "rags and rotten clouts cast out to the dunghill, as they well deserve" (quoted in Helgerson 265).

Catholics had a reprieve, of sorts, that lasted until the 1570s. From then, until Elizabeth's death, Coffey records 189 Catholic martyrs, most of them in the 1580s, with another 25 under James.[12]

Unlike Mary's active attempt to root out heresy, Elizabeth's persecution of Catholics was defensive, though at times the defence was ruthless and pro-active. The 1559 Act of Uniformity required the Queen's subjects to attend Church, and determined the specifically Protestant character of the service, but Elizabeth, as Francis Bacon famously noted, had no desire to force a theological litmus test on her subjects.[13] But the political climate darkened from the end of the '60s, and so did the lot of English Catholics. Brad Gregory describes the pressure put on the government and its Catholic subjects by progressively accumulating national and international anxieties (275). Those anxieties piled up steadily, beginning with the revolt of the Northern Lords in 1569 and Pius V's disastrous 1570 bull, *Regnens in Excelsis*, which excommunicated the Queen and anyone who obeyed her—effectively making true the Protestant allegation that loyalty to St. Peter's was impossible to reconcile with loyalty to Westminster. 1581 saw the first Jesuit mission to England under Thomas Campion and Robert Persons, and 1584 saw the shocking assassination of William the Silent and the rise of the Catholic League in France. The culmination of all this was the attempted Spanish invasion in 1588. In 1585 the government passed an "Act against Jesuits, Seminary Priests and such

[12] To round out the statistics, Coffey also lists 24 Catholics killed during the Civil War, 2 in the early days of the Commonwealth, and 24 during the panic caused by the Popish Plot" 1678-80 (90).

[13] I am referring to Bacon's oft-quoted assessment that, "her Majesty not liking to make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts, except the abundance of them did overflow into overt and express acts or affirmations tempered her law so as it restraineth only manifest disobedience" (1, 98).

other like Disobedient Persons" which made traitors of Jesuits or priests and felons of those who helped them (Coffey 86-7). England was the only state in Europe where being a priest necessarily implied a treason trial. Though certain figures like Persons and William Allen were guilty of treason or a least sedition (those two carried on endless discussions with the Vatican and the Hapsburg powers for a Catholic reconquista (Gregory 275)), the general effect of the legislation was to severely cripple even the most apolitical Catholic life in England. This policy, as people like Burghley argued, was directed toward security rather than theological conformity,[14] but the atmosphere it created was nevertheless persecutorial. Peter Lake records that of the 471 seminary priests recorded to have lived in Elizabeth's England, 285 were imprisoned at some point, while 116 were executed (*ALH* 199). While these priests would have been undoubtedly happy to see a Catholic regime headed by Mary, Queen of Scots, replace Elizabeth's, the vast majority were prosecuted simply because of their vocation, not because of proven treason or sedition. The imprisonment and death of over half of their priests could only have ingrained Catholic feelings of persecution.[15] By charging the priests with treason the government hoped to alienate the executed priests from the crowds which might otherwise sympathize with their sufferings. Yet while the label of "traitor" could perhaps have some impact on the more neutral elements in the watching

[14] G. R. Elton considers Burghley's position on the issue alongside that of Foxe and More in "Persecution and Toleration in the English Reformation." See pages 180-2.

[15] Lake discusses how prisons, due to the concentration of priests and recusants, became the effective nerve centre of Catholic life in England (*ALH* 205). Though allowed some freedom of movement and communication, prison was seen by the Jesuits and priests as "a cold, damp way for heretics to deny them glory of martyrdom" which could last for years. Such must have been the authorities' intent, much of the time. As a result, Catholics often reconceived prison positively as a type of "living martyrdom" (191).

crowd, who were much less eager to see a man or woman die for belief than for crimes against the nation, there was no ambiguity for the victims' coreligionists who immediately proclaimed them martyrs.

The 1606 Oath of Allegiance is a good example of how a measure conceived as a political response had a marked religious effect. Instituted by James' shaken government in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, the Oath demanded that Catholics swear,

> That I do from my heart abhor, detest, and abjure, as impious and heretical, this damnable doctrine and position, that princes which be excommunicated or deprived by the Pope may be deposed or murdered by their subjects whatsoever. (quoted in Tanner 90-1)

This would hardly be seen as an extraordinary sentiment today, but it forced seventeenth-century Catholics into a crisis of conscience. It was one thing to live quietly, trying to submit both to one's secular and one's spiritual authorities, ignoring so far as was possible their mutual hostility. It was another to be forced openly to choose between them and concede that one's church was "impious and heretical." Though some English Catholics could reconcile themselves to the Oath, many could not. In a 1997 paper Michael Questier argues vehemently against those historians who see the Oath as an intended force of moderation. For him it was a calculated attempt to create a war within the Catholic community, via "the most destructive anti-Romish act of state since the Elizabethan restoration" (318). Though the generous share of blame for the Allegiance crisis could be fairly attributed to the 1570 bull (and, of course, the Gunpowder plotters), the response of James' government tended to make it harder for the majority of Catholics to reconcile themselves politically to the Protestant state, which heightened the air of

crisis and reinforced a culture of Catholic martyrdom: anyone who would die defying such a government was a hero of the faith, upheld by the Holy Spirit.

Dying Bravely:

One of the most remarkable facts about religious executions in Reformation Europe is the degree of courage or, so often, joy with which victims of the various confessions faced their horrible deaths. John Knott notes that in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* there is nothing like the "analgesic state" ("Joy" 723) that Thomas Heffernan finds in medieval martyrologies, where pain is miraculously transmuted into a rapturous, and often eroticised union between God and the victim. Foxe's martyrs generally feel pain,[16] and often express that feeling, but they do not give into it. Their suffering is a severe trial of faith, but their resolve, and often joy, in the face of it is for Foxe evidence of God's support. Consider the piteous example of John Hooper, the one-time bishop of Worcester, who begs sympathizers to load more wood onto his pyre: "'For God's love good people let me have more fire.' And all this while his nether parts did burn: for the faggots were so few, that the flame did not burn strongly at his upper parts." But this very understandable plea does not detract from his composure. Hooper, we are told, was "three quarters of an hour or more in the fire" but,

> Even as a Lamb, patiently he abode the extremity thereof, neither moving forwards, backwards, or to any side: but having his nether

[16] There are occasional exceptions to this rule. For instance, Thomas Freeman in "The Importance of Dying Earnestly," discusses the account of the Henrican martyr John Bainham's death. When the flames are lit Bainham cries out, "O ye Papistes, beholde, ye looke for miracles, and here now ye may see a miracle, for in this fire I feele no more payne then if I were in a bed of roses" (quoted Freeman 267-8; Foxe 8, 1030). Freeman contends that Foxe was misinformed about this detail (added to Bainaham's story in a later edition). Certainly, such "analgesic" moments are very rare in the *Acts*.

> parts burned, and his bowels fallen out, he died as quietly as a child in his bed. (11, 1511)

Knott and Janel M. Mueller both argue that the *Acts and Monuments* contradicts Elaine Scarry's influential description of how suffering "unmakes" the victim until his consciousness is totally appropriated by the torturers. Mueller writes that this theory "seems to have bid successfully for transhistorical validity" (161) but argues that Foxe's writing provides a major challenge:

> In place of unmade selves, voices, or worlds, Foxe's narratives record triumphant makings on the part of the condemned heretics, and, on the part of their prosecutors (or persecutors), correspondent unmakings that render specious any triumph that the latter may claim. (162)[17]

The pain they suffer does not signal the martyrs' humiliation and destruction, but their ultimate triumph: following the model of Christ, they choose to endure pain and death for the truth.[18]

Another remarkable aspect of Reformation martyrdom is the degree to which both sides generally concur in describing the constancy and courage of the victim in a given execution. It this age of bitter religious polemic it seems very natural to look for a violent disagreement over this key issue. Gregory admits this but writes that,

> in fact hostile writers repeatedly described the deaths of false martyrs in terms recognizably like those of sympathetic martyrologists. The few cases in which martyrs' behavior is

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[17] This view of Foxian suffering stands as a direct contradiction to the psychoanalytic approach of Cynthia Marshall in *The Shattering of the Self*. See especially 85-90.

[18] Debora Shuger remarks on an important difference between the way Calvinist and Catholic Passion narratives depict Christ's sufferings: "In the latter, the dominant colours are red and white—'the crimson of blood or the royal purple, accompanied by the pure whiteness of innocence and the delicate texture of Christ's skin.' The Calvinist Christ, however, is black and blue. Instead of the Counter-Reformation's sentimental 'ecstasies of sweet pain,' the Calvinist narratives depict the grotesque physicality of the tortured body" (95).

> described contradictorily, such as that of Thomas Bilney, executed in Norwich on August 16, 1531, are the exception. No sustained literature casts doubt on their comportment in general. Even if our evidence of martyrs' behavior relied exclusively on hostile sources, we would have to conclude that they usually died with a joyful resolve that often impressed onlookers…. [S]ympathetic writers faced the same intersubjective constraints. Without inviting opprobrium and thus damaging their wider cause, they could no more allege joyful deaths where there were none than hostile writers could claim abjurations where martyrs had died steadfastly…. [I]t was not only difficult, but ultimately self-defeating, to perpetrate pious frauds about carefully staged events seen by hundreds of thousands of people. (18-9)

He sums up by saying, "Unless there is cause to question a particular account, we have good reason to trust reports of such behavior, extraordinary as it is. The underlying problem is less early modern invention and credulity than modern or postmodern skepticism and cynicism" (21). Polemicists would frequently smear the life and character of a victim at great length, but the credibility one could lose by putting false words in his mouth at a time when so many were watching him so closely was prohibitive. Naturally, the explanations for this constancy varied tremendously—polemical firefights would periodically erupt between a given martyr's supporters and those whom Gregory calls "controversialists": anti-martyrologists engaged in polemic and derision. Luther, according to David Bagchi, believed that Anabaptist martyrs were upheld by Satan, something More believed of Luther's followers (Bagchi 214; Gregory 316). Hugh Latimer, who would one day give the most famous of exhortations of constancy to a fellow martyr—showing a keen understanding of the value his behaviour would have in promoting his cause—also attacked those who sympathized with the "good deaths" of the Anabaptists (Loades, *OM* 160). The persecutors could cite anything

from diabolical inspiration to stubborn pride to explain the steadiness or joy they could not otherwise account for.

When early modern magistrates or theologians grappled with this problem, they had a ready-made solution, handed to them by Augustine: *non poena sed causa facit martyrem* ("not the penalty, but the cause, makes the martyr").[19] Facing horrible pain was useless if one did so for the wrong reasons. Gregory is no doubt right to insist on the importance of the principle for understanding early modern martyrdom: leaders from the various groups were not only quick to dismiss the victims of other confessions as "pseudo-martyrs,"[20] but were also careful to modulate the zeal of their younger followers, many of whom were eager for the martyr's crown.[21] One must always be ready to suffer for Christ, but a cavalier, vainglorious attitude was spiritually dangerous. Thomas Freeman's examination of John Bainham's martyrdom includes a useful anecdote about the condemned man being visited in Newgate by Hugh Latimer:

> Bainham then explained that he was condemned for declaring that Thomas Becket was a traitor but Latimer admonished him that this was not a sufficient cause to die for. Bainham then stated that he was also condemned for denying the existence of purgatory and this met with Latimer's approval. (283)

The line might seem arbitrary today, but for a sixteenth-century theologian it was crucial to understand what tenets were to be defended with death. Protestants who felt Becket died to advance the political power of the papacy and not the glory of

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[19] Augustine uses this phrase in his epistle to Festus, on the Donatist sect (*Letters*, epistle 89, 35).
[20] This term originated with English Catholic polemicists, and would later be turned against them during the Allegiance controversy by John Donne, whose *Pseudo-Martyr* will be discussed in Chapter Two.
[21] Gregory: "In May 1582 William Allen told Alfonso Agazzari, the Jesuit rector of Rome's English College, that the recent spate of executions had increased the ardor to be sent to England" (279).

Christ questioned his martyrdom. But Latimer did not want the same thing to be said of Bainham: that he died for essentially playing the same game from the opposite side. The existence of purgatory had a fundamental relationship to *sola fide*. No one, Latimer believed, would be saved or damned for their feelings about Thomas Becket.

The Persecuted Church:

When martyrs began dying in Reformation Europe, they did so with the confidence that they had correctly interpreted the scriptures and God's will, but also with the confidence that their suffering was uniquely precious to God and that he would reward it. This idea was fully supported by the early reformers, who had recovered the New Testament sense that affliction was inescapable for a Christian, and even a mark of God's favour. In 1523, having lived for several years under the expectation of imminent violent death, Luther published his treatise, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*. The work posited a division between citizens of God's kingdom, and the citizens of secular kingdoms, who lived according to secular laws. Though this dichotomy may sound generally like the one maintained throughout medieval Europe, Luther radicalized it. The godly citizenry were not members of a clerical caste, but people of no particular station who had truly received the Word of God, living in the World but not of it. To a Christian it was an absurdity to think of enforcing true religion by earthly means, as the bishops did when they handed heretics to the secular arm for punishment:

> Heresy can never be prevented by force. That must be taken hold of in a different way and, and must be opposed and dealt with otherwise than with the sword. Here God's Word must strive; if

> that does not accomplish the end it will remain unaccomplished through secular power, though it fill the world with blood. Heresy is a spiritual matter, which no iron can strike, no fire burn, no water drown. (389)

True Christians, Luther argues, are necessarily a minority in whatever culture they inhabit. They attract persecution from the ungodly, but God allows it for their refinement. (379)

Some months after *Secular Authority* was published, Luther's nascent Theology of the Cross found two dramatic exemplars in the first martyrs of the Reformation. David Bagchi writes,

> When, in July 1523, two Augustinian friars, Johann van Esschen and Heinrich Voes, were burned in the market square in Brussels, Luther saw it as a guarantee that theirs was the true Church which, in a sort of bloody apostolic succession, had always been persecuted and which would be persecuted to the end of the world. (211)

Of course, Luther would carefully step back from many of what we might consider his gentler positions in the coming years. He was genuinely shocked by the violent anarchy of the Peasant's Revolt in 1525; furthermore, the increasing appeal of his theology to a widening circle of Imperial magnates forced him to play the politician, establishing his own doctrinal boundaries which needed to be policed by secular authorities. Bagchi, as I have already mentioned, goes on to describe the problem that persecuted Anabaptists, who died with as much constancy as any evangelical martyr, posed for Luther. Like a Catholic official he resorted to Augustine's *non poena, sed causa facit martyrem*, but the good deaths the Anabaptists so often died was a problem he couldn't satisfactorily solve, even by suggesting that their steadiness was due to Satan's intercession (see Bagchi 213-5). *Secular Authority* was not Luther's last word on political theology, and I am not suggesting that it

had a pronounced, discernable impact on the course of religious toleration. It is simply one example among many of a text whose moral implications germinated throughout the century and became pervasive. Luther would not be the only man who was troubled by deaths he officially supported.[22]

Of even more relevance to England is *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, written in 1528 by William Tyndale, a man who experienced religious persecution throughout his whole adult life. Arguing for the primacy of the vernacular scripture and a Protestant interpretation of the sacraments, the work is prefaced by a powerful discussion of persecution as a great dividing line between God's kingdom and Satan's. Tyndale echoes the early Luther in telling England's young Protestant community that their suffering is a mark of God's favour. Like Luther, Tyndale sees the true Church as only vaguely associated with earthly societies, and thus a minority in hostile territory:

> For the world loveth that which is his, and hateth that which is chosen out of the world to serve God in the spirit. As Christ saith to his disciples (John 15) if ye were of the world, the world would love his own. But I have chosen you out of the world and therefore the world hateth you. (3-4)

Tyndale mines the scriptures for arguments and typological parallels to justify the contemporary suffering of the true Church. A painful life is for him a necessary interlude that God uses to define and purify the faithful:

> we must needs be baptized in tribulations and through the Red Sea and a great and a fearful wilderness and a land of cruel giants into our natural country: yea and inasmuch as it is a plain earnest [sic],

[22] Bagchi describes how Luther was permanently haunted by the fact that he was not martyred himself, and therefore went on to develop the idea, played with by so many in the period, that a life of submission to God's will "can be a greater and truer martyrdom than any death, no matter how spectacular" (216).

> that there is no other way into the kingdom of life, than through persecution and suffering of pain and of very death, after the example of Christ. (11-2)

And again:

> God since the beginning of the world…ever sent his true prophets and preachers of his word, to warn the people, and gave them space to repent. But they for the greatest part of them hardened their hearts and persecuted the word that was sent to save them. (13)

As Tyndale sees it, persecution and victimization are hard-wired into the world order, a reflexive response to the gospel. In his preface Tyndale speaks powerfully about the pervasiveness of this persecutory, or sacrificial, imperative. Even the disciples themselves, he writes, felt the urge to do unchristian things in the name of Christ, as Peter did when he cut off the servant's ear in Gethsemane. Little wonder that sixteenth-century Europeans do much worse. The urge seems to have been instilled in the collective subconscious from the very beginning of life:

> [T]he very disciples and apostles of Christ after so long hearing of Christ's doctrine were yet ready to fight for Christ clean against Christ's teaching. As Peter (Matthew 26) drew his sword: but was rebuked. And (Luke 9) James and John would have had fire come from heaven to consume the Samaritans and to avenge the injury of Christ: but were likewise rebuked. If Christ's disciples were so long carnal what wonder is it, if we be not all perfect the first day? Yea inasmuch as we be taught even of very babes, to kill a Turk, to slay a Jew, to burn an heretic, to fight for the liberties and right of the church as they call it: yea and inasmuch as we are brought in belief if we shed the blood of our even Christian [sic], or if the son shed the blood of his father that begat him, for the defence, not of the Pope's godhead only, but also for whatsoever cause it be…that we deserve as much as Christ deserved for us when he died on the cross; or if we be slain in the quarrel, that our souls go, nay fly to heaven, and be there ere our blood be cold. Inasmuch (I say) as we have sucked in such bloody imaginations into the bottom of our hearts even with our mothers' milk, and have been so long hardened therein, what wonder were it if while we be yet young in Christ, we

> thought that it were lawful to fight for the true word of God?…. (29)

Instead of inhibiting violence, in the Christian spirit of loving meekness, the Church intensifies it, justifying its violence in the name of Christ. The papacy channels violence outward, targeting, as Tyndale puts it, Turks, Jews and Heretics, and programming its people from infancy with the sacrificial imperative.

> This seest thou, that it is the bloody doctrine of the Pope which causeth disobedience, rebellion and insurrection. For he teacheth to fight and to defend his traditions and whatsoever he dreameth with fire, water and sword…yea and to invade whatsoever land or nation that will not receive and admit his godhead. Where the peaceable doctrine of Christ teacheth to obey and to suffer for the word of God and to remit the vengeance and the defence of the word to God which is mighty and able to defend it. (29-30)

For the godly, imitating Christ, sacrificial violence is centripetal; they obey Christ's dictates to "obey and suffer" and surrender any claims of vengeance to God. Like Christ, Christians are persecuted for the truth, they do not persecute for it. Yet there is no tone of despair in the *Obedience*. Tyndale never lets his readers forget that though they are horribly vulnerable to the fires and swords of antichrist, they will ultimately triumph. "What holp it Pharaoh to drown the men children?" he asks, referring once again to the Egyptian captivity. "So little, I fear not, shall it at the last help the Pope and his bishops to burn our men children which manfully confess that Jesus is the Lord and that there is no other name given unto men to be saved by" (5). It is important not to mistake this valorization of suffering for hopeless fatalism; rather, it is a scripturally-grounded argument that expects, with full confidence, that present pains will be more than repaid by God.

One of the best-known advocates for toleration in the Reformation was the French theologian Sebastian Castellio. Castellio was spurred to write against heresy executions because of the death of Michael Servetus, who in the autumn of 1553 was burned in Calvin's Geneva for denying the doctrine of the Trinity. This was a deeply controversial execution as Calvin, like Luther, had been considered a proponent of freedom of conscience in his early career. Castellio, whose once amiable relationship with Calvin had soured, condemned Calvin in a tract entitled, *Concerning Heretics, whether they are to be persecuted […]*. It is a seminal text in the history of religious toleration. Castellio does not defend Servetus' Arianism; instead he condemns the attitude which the Protestants seemed to be rapidly learning from their Roman enemies: that bad doctrine was sufficient grounds for burning a human being. The work is largely a compilation of statements in support of tolerance and clemency by various theologians (including Calvin (202-3)), but it begins with two long dedicatory letters, to Duke Christoph of Wurttemberg and William of Hesse. In the former, Castellio implies that a kind of heresy-mania has gripped his fellow Reformers so that the word "heretic,"

> has become today so infamous, detestable, and horrible that there is no quicker way to dispose of an enemy than to accuse him of heresy. The mere word stimulates such horror that when it is pronounced men shut their ears to the victim's defence, and furiously persecute not merely the man himself, but also those who dare to open their mouth on his behalf; by which rage it has come to pass that many have been destroyed before their cause was really understood. (126)

Like Tyndale, Castellio suggests that violence has become self-justifying. And like Tyndale his rhetorical strategy ultimately relies on confronting his fellow Christians with the anti-sacrificial character of their own religion. Otherwise, he asks,

> Who would wish to be a Christian, when he sees that those who confessed the name of Christ were destroyed by Christians themselves with fire, water, and the sword without mercy and were more cruelly treated than brigands and murderers? Who would not think Christ a Moloch, or some such god, if he wished that men should be immolated and burned alive? (133)

He continues by asking his reader to imagine that Christ himself is present at the burning of a heretic: "Imagine Him pronouncing the sentence and applying the torch. Who would not hold Christ for Satan? What more could Satan do than burn those who call upon the name of Christ?" (134). Castellio then imagines himself trying to reconcile this new, violent Christ, with the one depicted in the Gospels:

> Dost Thou now command that those who do not understand Thy precepts as the mighty demand, be drowned in water, cut with lashes to the entrails, sprinkled with salt, dismembered by sword, burned at a slow fire, and otherwise tortured in every manner and as long as possible? Dost Thou, O Christ, command and approve these things? Are they Thy vicars who make these sacrifices? Art Thou present when they summon Thee and dost Thou eat human flesh? (134)

Castellio understands that these acts of violence are sacrifices. Behind these anguished questions is the Protestant contention that Christ's death was the only acceptable sacrifice; indeed, He does not devour the flesh of his victims like Moloch, but only commands that Christians take and eat the bread which represents His body.

Luther, Tyndale and Castellio all provide important articulations of the doctrine of the persecuted church. The most important exponent for this study, though, is the martyrologist John Foxe. Though he did not suffer for the gospel to the extent of Tyndale, Foxe did know persecution. He began his career as an

ecclesiastical historian at Magdalen College until the increasing anti-Protestantism of the late 1530s forced him to work as a private tutor through the 1540s and early '50s. Like so many others, he fled to the continent during Mary's reign, where he began writing a Latin history of the Henrican martyrs, having personally witnessed one of them, William Cowbridge, burn at Oxford (Gregory 167). But as the shocking news of Mary's persecution began to reach the English exile communities, he decided to expand his work and make her victims the new focus. He also decided, in order to reach as many people as possible, to write in English. The result, *The Acts and Monuments* was by far the longest text printed in English and one of the most widely disseminated. The Archbishop of Canterbury declared it an official book in 1571, and ordered it to be set up in cathedrals beside the Bible, and many smaller parish churches did likewise (Gregory 193)—an impressive fact, as a book of its length and material sophistication made it prohibitively expensive. Whatever the price of Foxe's book, it attained a stature that is hard to grasp today. Patrick Collinson writes, "For a certain class of seventeenth-century reader, Foxe was much more than a popular and, indeed, standard author. He was read formally, systematically and, in the language of the time, "throughly," as men read Scripture" (31).

In 1983 G. R. Elton delivered a seminal paper to Britain's Ecclesiastical History Society.[23] In it, Elton convincingly challenged the prevalent, longstanding view of the development of religious tolerance, as proposed by early and mid twentieth-century historians like W. K. Jordan and Joseph Lecler. Elton begins by

[23] Later reprinted as "Persecution and Toleration in the English Reformation," in volume 21 of *Studies in Church History*.

describing the "received story" in which, "the openminded willingness which characterized the humanism of Erasmus and More as well as the Rome of Leo X," was succeeded by,

> the bigotry typical of Carafa, Calvin, Knox and the English puritans; only the gradual evaporation of such passions, produced by each side's inability to triumph totally, produced a weariness with religious strife which made the return of mutual sufferance possible. (163)

So, a mood of comfortable tolerance was broken by men who became progressively more fanatical, until a numbing battle fatigue settled over Europe following the English Civil War and the Peace of Westphalia. Elton, however, upset this theory by examining the attitude of two major figures toward religious tolerance: Thomas More, admired by so many since the nineteenth century as something very near a modern liberal, and John Foxe, a prominent representative of the supposed era of hardening intolerance.

Largely because of the Utopians' willingness to admit the right of their neighbours to worship freely, More had been frequently praised for his progressive, humane broad-mindedness. Elton avers that though he had a medieval willingness to tolerate, to an extent, people already outside the church (Jews and Muslims), More's attitude toward the possibility of doctrinal heterogeneity within Christendom was unwavering:

> he never once expressed any doubt about the practice of burning men alive. His profession that the clergy burned no one but merely handed the convicted and excommunicated heretic over to the secular arm must be read in the light of his admission that the law left that arm no option but to burn the man. The mixture of lip-smacking and evasiveness in all these diatribes against individuals becomes truly nasty. (169-70).

In Foxe, though, Elton sees a career of extraordinary opposition to religious violence. Though a convinced enemy of the Papacy, and holding little hope for the souls of Anabaptists, much less Arians, Foxe's attitude to those groups was one of constant mercy and constant hope for their eventual conversion. Elton states that Foxe did not have the "brutally simple certainty" common to so many in the period, "and the lack made him tolerant. For the chronicler of man's inhumanity to dissenters this is no doubt a comprehensible, as it is certainly a satisfactory, state of mind" (173).

The best evidence Elton provides of this comes from Foxe's actions after the Elizabethan restoration. Unlike Luther in 1523, Tyndale in 1528, or Castellio in 1553, Foxe was in no danger of persecution by 1575. He was now an important, even revered, spokesman for a national Protestant church, whose writing was known throughout the kingdom. But despite his own liberation from the threat that hung over him in the days of Henry and Mary, Foxe was willing to intercede for a group of Flemish Anabaptists discovered some time earlier by the London authorities. Charged with heresy, several recanted, several were banished, but five were sentenced to burn.[24] Elton quotes from a pair of well-known Latin letters Foxe wrote to the Queen and the Council respectively, begging them to spare the prisoners. If imprisonment or exile (his preferences) could not be allowed, even death by hanging was better than burning—and if the sentence was to be death, he begged to be given several months to try to convert the men from their heresy. J. F. Mozley includes a translation of the full letter to Elizabeth in his seminal 1940

[24] Foxe pointed out to the Council that this sentence was technically illegal, as *de Heretico Comburendo* and related laws had been annulled at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign (Mozley 87-8).

biography of Foxe, and it is worth quoting from it at some length. Foxe begins by explaining that he has no intention of defending the Anabaptists' flawed doctrine:

> I defend them not: these errors should be repressed, and I rejoice that no Englishman is infected therewith. It is the manner of their punishment which shocks me. To burn up with fiery flame, blazing with pitch and sulphur, the living bodies of wretched men who err through blindness of judgement rather than deliberate will, is a hard thing and belongs more to the example of Rome than to the spirit of the gospel…. Not that I am pleased with the misdeeds or favour the errors of anyone—this I wish to say. It is the life of men that I favour, since I myself am a man: and I favour their life, not that they may err but that they may repent…. For such is my disposition (I will say this of myself, foolishly perhaps, but yet truly) that I can scarce pass the shambles where beasts are slaughtered, but that my mind secretly recoils with a feeling of pain. And indeed with all my heart I admire and venerate the clemency of God himself in ordaining that those brute and lowly creatures which were formerly made ready for the sacrifice, should not be committed to the flames before their blood was poured out at the foot of the altar…. And so I dare for Christ's sake beseech your majesty to spare, if it may be, the lives of these wretched men, at least so far that this horror may be stopped, and changed into another kind of punishment. There are banishments, close confinements, there are chains, there are perpetual exiles, there are brandings and floggings or even gibbets. This one thing I earnestly beg, that you suffer not the pyres and flames of Smithfield, so long laid to sleep under your blessed auspices, to rekindle now. (86-7)

Sadly, Foxe was to be disappointed. Though one of the five died in prison, and two more were eventually released after long delays, on 22 July 1575 the fires of Smithfield, which had consumed John Rogers and so many other Lollards and Protestants, were lit again, and two of the Anabaptists were burned (Mozley 89).

It is not sufficient to seize on Foxe's mention of the slaughterhouse and equate his leniency with simple squeamishness. He may well have been naturally inclined against violence of any sort, but this is a principled argument backed up with references to his own faction's recent experience of persecution, and an

interpretation of the scriptures: God is more clement than men. Indeed, his reference to this clemency, as seen in the reminder that the Jews "*formerly*" killed sacrificial animals cleanly and burned them only when dead, implicitly and necessarily raises the New Testament's eventual opposition to even animal sacrifice. And if God has forbidden us to burn the dead bodies of sheep how do we dare to burn the living bodies of men and women?

Because of their false doctrine, Foxe may not have considered the Anabaptists proper martyrs, but to burn them was to do the work of antichrist. This is no modern ecumenical laxity—he believes their theology is damnable and damning, a disease the nation needs to be protected from. But as he later wrote to justice Monson, one of the commissioners in charge of the Anabaptists' case, "The nearer any man approaches to the mild spirit of the gospel, the farther he stands from this harsh way of burning and torturing" (quoted in Mozley 88). This compassionate attitude did not end with Anabaptists, but was also extended to condemned Catholics, for whom he likewise interceded. The impassioned Mozley, who wrote to defend Foxe in 1940 after the Oxford movement had largely succeeded in discrediting him, is again useful:

> When the queen, threatened on every hand by the plottings of Rome, began at length to leave her clemency and to treat papism as treason, so that from 1581 onwards Campion and a long line of his fellow-believers went to the gibbet, Foxe's voice of protest was again heard. This hammer of papistry, who had seen hundreds of his comrades go to the fire, nay, whose own name, along with those of his friends Nowell and Crowely, stood at this very time upon the list of prominent English protestants marked down in Rome for slaughter, this was the man who pleaded for the lives of his enemies. (90)

Elton, writing at a time when Foxe's reputation had largely recovered sums up the issue more calmly: "from papists he expected only persecution but for them he favoured as much mercy as might be feasible" (174). Remember that these men were not burned as heretics, but hung or beheaded as traitors, a difference that many apologists of Elizabeth's regime (such as Burghley) were happy to hide behind. But Foxe saw through the rationalization to understand that men like Campion were dying for their convictions. That he had no respect for the substance of those convictions was not at issue. To employ a distinction C. S. Lewis makes when discussing Erasmus, Foxe was not basing his argument on a political principle—religious liberty—but on a spiritual one—mercy (40). He wanted the sinful errors snuffed out, but he also wanted his own side to avoid committing sinful errors of a different sort. But over time this spiritual position was to permeate deeply into the political sphere.

How so? John Foxe did not spend so many years writing a formal essay condemning persecution, nor did he write letters to all members of the Church of England like those he wrote to Elizabeth. His project, his formal means for transmitting his ideals, was a martyrology, which used a mixture of narrative, commentary, reprinted historical documents and woodcut images to tell the stories of those who died for the Reformed cause. It was through the *Acts and Monuments* that he reached the English nation. The work went through four editions in Foxe's lifetime, 1563, 1570, 1576 and 1583. But while literary and cultural critics of Renaissance English have a thorough understanding of Foxe's popularity, and his impact on England's religious life, too little consideration, I believe, has been given

to his wider ideological impact. I want to argue that Foxe's writing, and the attitude of specifically Christian tolerance and mercy it advanced, transformed the English political and, at the same time, literary landscapes. The Book of Martyrs, as it came to be known, was simultaneously the most important expression and agent of the gradual, widespread sea-change that would slowly erode the ability of State or Church to kill for the sake of religion. One might respond to the early Reformers the way More did to Tyndale: that their opposition to persecution was simply the result of their own victimization. But Foxe took that opposition and made it his great theme:

> In the meantime let them work their wiles, let them envy, let them malign, let them blaspheme let them curse, ban, betray, whip, scourge, hang and burn: for by these means God will try his elect as gold in the furnace and by these fruits, shall they also bring themselves to be known what they be, for all their sheep's skins. For as he that in suffering patiently for the Gospel of God, is thereby known to be of Christ: even so in likewise is the persecutor of him known to be a member of Antichrist. (11, 1700)

The relationship to sacrificial violence here is paradoxical. It is itself evil, therefore signalling the evil of the Roman church which uses it. But it is not wholly delegitimized because it proves the sanctity of those who suffer it; it exposes their spiritual state as well as their enemies'. In orthodox theology the persecution Christ suffered is understood as a sinful indictment of humanity but also the key to humanity's redemption; in the same way Foxe condemns sacrificial violence, but the suffering of his martyrs is precious to him. It is a testimony to their sanctity and the truth of their faith; it makes them like Christ. This nuanced understanding of violence makes Foxe uniquely valuable for better understanding early modern tragedy, all the more because *The Acts and Monuments* not only asserts this anti-

sacrificial doctrine of the persecuted church, it describes it, helping us understand how sacrificial violence looked in the early modern period, dramatizing the behaviour of the participants and the reactions of the spectators. When the tragedians of the period depict sacrificial violence, acts of cruelty, or moments of compassion towards a suffering victim, they are using—though not necessarily with reverence—formulae which martyrology had developed and which had become part of the common culture of Reformation-era England.

In *The Renaissance Bible* Debora Shuger remarks that, "In the sixteenth century, cruelty, the forgotten deadly sin, became the essence of evil, and its symbol was the torturer" (91). Though she does not mention him, Foxe's accounts of godly men and women tormented and burned for the sake of conscience must have been a major influence in provoking this change. Patrick Collinson goes so far as to say:

> In a sense, Foxe's subject, and that of all martyrology, was not so much the martyr as the persecuting force which victimised him, and the overweening fault of the catholic Church was not, as it may have been for [Bishop John] Jewel, confusion and division, but malevolent cruelty. This was the sheet anchor of Foxe's ecclesiology, for a cruel church could never be a true church. (39)

In Foxe's hands the opposition to sacrificial violence became the key to Christian history.[25] On the first page of the *Acts* Foxe divides the fifteen hundred years separating his own age from the death of Christ into five periods:

> First, I will entreat of the suffering time of the Church, which continued from the Apostles age about 300 years.

[25] It is true that Foxe can indulge himself by discussing the unpleasant deaths various persecutors suffer, as a way of underscoring God's justice. Helgerson rightly points out, though, that vengeance is left entirely up to God, and no human agents are involved (255-6).

> Secondly, of the flourishing time of the Church, which lasted [an]other 300 years.
> Thirdly of the declining or backsliding time of the Church, which comprehendeth another 300 years until the loosing out of Satan, which was about the thousandth year after the ceasing of persecution. During which space of time, the Church, although in ambition and pride, it was much altered from the simple sincerity of the Primitive time, yet in outward profession of doctrine and religion, it was something tolerable and had some face of a Church….
> Fourthly, followeth the time of Antichrist, and loosing of Satan…[un]til the time of John Wyclif and John Hus, during 400 years.
> Fifthly and lastly, after this time of Antichrist, reigning in the Church of God by violence and tyranny, followeth the reformation and purging of the church of God, wherein Antichrist beginneth to be revealed, and to appear in his colours, and his Antichristian doctrine to be detected, the number of his Church decreasing, and the number of the true Church increasing. (1, 1)

The mention of Wyclif and Hus is crucial—it was in Christians like them and their persecuted followers that the true church existed during the reign of antichrist. Foxe's martyred friends were not anomalies in the history of the Church; instead they were part of a great continuum that stretched back to Abel and found perfect expression in Christ. After describing the death of John Hooper in 1555 Foxe pauses to write,

> When I see and behold the great patience of these blessed martyrs in our days, in their sufferings so quietly and constantly abiding the torments that are ministered unto them of princes for God's cause: methinks I may well and worthily compare them unto the old martyrs of the primitive church. (11, 1512)

And so he does, comparing Hooper to Polycarpus, "the ancient Bishop of Smyrna" (1512). This continuum, though, takes in not only early Christians persecuted in the first three centuries AD and sixteenth-century magisterial Protestants, but most of the pre-Reformation heretics burned by the Church. In

Foxe's apocalyptic interpretation of history, the devil was unloosed at the turn of the millennium to begin a new persecution of the true faith as it gradually revived.

According to Euan Cameron, the papacy failed when it attempted to link the early Protestants with medieval heretics, because the Protestants themselves were eager to embrace them. Beginning with Luther, the Reformers looked back at the persecuted groups of the Middle Ages and saw themselves—they were not heretics, but martyrs for their courageous defence of many of the same principles that sixteenth century reformers cherished (Cameron 188-90). This was vitally important to Protestant identity: it was a scriptural *fait accompli* that the True Church must have existed continuously since the time of the Apostles—when asked by Catholics to identify the historical Church, Protestants could now reply that it had existed in the persecuted groups that clung to true faith, otherwise abandoned by Rome after the turn of the millennium (197). Cameron demonstrates that this generally meant the Lollards, their Bohemian cousins the Hussites, and the Waldenses of southern France (and certainly the remnants of these movements that existed in the early 1500s were incorporated into the developing Protestant confessions). But other groups like the Cathars could pose problems, as they would have been considered heretics to almost any Protestant, so writers like Foxe often tidied up these doctrinal problems, to create an impression of unbroken homogeneity. Points of conflict between a given victim and reformed doctrine were brushed aside as a piece of "inquisitorial misrepresentation" (206).

Cameron is careful to point out that such revision was not a piece of calculated dishonesty; it was done in the conviction that doctrinal purity was a less

important mark of Christ's presence than Roman persecution: however flawed the Cathars' theology may have been, they were better Christians than their cruel, anti-Christian persecutors (194). Patrick Collinson supports Cameron here, making a similar argument in a paper defending Foxe's historical reliability. Collinson finds Foxe to be, by sixteenth-century standards, an exemplary model of historical veracity,[26] and explains that his tendency to assimilate the beliefs of heretics into the Protestant mainstream was due to the recognition of a higher principle:

> if some of the victims of popish malice were deluded or intellectually confused simpletons, something which Foxe from time to time conceded, the church which responded by burning such people alive still put itself out of court. Of one such "half foolish" victim Foxe observes: "But what he was we know not; but this we are sure, he died a good man, and in a good cause, whatsoever they judge of him. *And the more simplicity and feebleness of wit appeared in him, the more beastly and wretched doth it declare their cruel and tyrannical act therein*" ….[James] Gairdner made a polemical but almost valid point when he observed that it was sufficient to have been condemned by the bishop of Rome to win Foxe's respect. Opposition to Rome was in itself virtual proof of sanctity. (40; my italics)[27]

In Foxe's hands the men who burn martyrs are filled with malice; they can be cruel and vindictive, showing themselves to be the disciples of antichrist, like the men who executed the Marian martyr Rowland Taylor:

> These four were appointed to set up the faggots and to make the fire, which they did: and this Warwick cruelly cast a faggot at him, which lit upon his head, and broke his face, that the blood ran down his visage.[28]

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[26] Collinson: "The martyrologist worked only a little more carelessly and a few shades more partially than would be tolerable in a modern doctoral thesis, but with essentially the same methods" (35).

[27] The passage Collinson quotes is from *The Acts and Monuments* 12, 2034.

[28] This is not the only instance Foxe records of a martyr's face being struck and bloodied by a stick thrown by a servant. Julins Palmer underwent a similar experience at his burning, though in his case Foxe tells us that the sheriff took exception, calling the servant a "cruel tormentor, and with his walking staff broke his head, that the blood likewise ran about his ears" (11, 1940).

Taylor asks with dignity, "Oh friend, I have harm enough, what needed that?" (11, 1703). There is great pathos here for the victim, as Warwick needlessly torments him before he is burned to death.

This continual emphasis on victim sympathy reminds the reader that at the centre of the Gospel narrative is a man who suffers collective violence rather than initiates it, and calls for his disciples to follow his example. We see this with Anne Askew, who was martyred during the reign of Henry VIII, and wrote an account of her trial and confinement which Foxe reprinted. It includes a telling exchange when her examiner asks her about views on transubstantiation:

> First Christopher Dare examined me at Sadler's Hall, being one of the Quest[ioners], and asked if I did not believe that the sacrament, hanging over the altar, was the very body of Christ really. Then I demanded this question of him: wherefore St. Stephen was stoned to death, and he said, he could not tell. Then I answered, that no more would I assail his vain question. (8, 1234)

Foxe cares about doctrine, and the question about the sacraments is important, but it is less important than Anne's question about the first Christian martyr, which her inquisitor is unable to answer. Stephen, of course, was stoned to death—the ultimate example of collective violence—for his acknowledgement of Christ before the religious establishment. Many of Foxe's martyrs burn with his dying words, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7: 59), on their lips. Like them, Anne is reminding her persecutors of the role they play in the exchange, and the distance between their violence and the Church that martyrs like Stephen founded. This theme comes up repeatedly in Anne's prosecution. Later, another inquisitor asks

about the Mass and she replies with the same question about Stephen (1236). At the end of the trial Bishop Bonner asks her to recant and she refuses.

> Then the B[ishop] said I should be burnt. I answered that I had searched all the scriptures, yet could I never find, that either Christ or his Apostles, put any creature to death. Well, well, said I, God will laugh your threatnings to scorn. Then was I commanded to stand aside. (1238)

This is bravery that testifies to Anne's faith and ultimately to the impotence of the Roman persecution. And once again, it condemns their violence as unchristian.

Certainly it is impossible to suggest that the doctrine of the persecuted church had become a recognizable political dogma by the time of Shakespeare. Nor can one claim that Foxe's writing was unambiguous in promoting the doctrine, or that its only effects were benevolent. The innumerable, gruesome stories of godly men and women burned and broken for their faith could certainly promote intolerance in the reader toward their tormenters. *The Acts* was used to fuel jingoism and virulent anti-Catholicism well into the nineteenth century. It includes long sections of invective against the Pope and his doctrines, and indulges in cartoonish depictions of the deaths of the martyrs' antagonists. But in this its reception was symbolic of the strange wrestling match that English religious culture as a whole was engaged in with itself in the period, the effect of which was to provoke a sacrificial crisis at the foot of the gallows, with the scapegoat mechanism no longer provoking unanimity among the participants, but widening discord instead.

The Charisma of Martyrdom:

William Monter writes, "If there is one constant motif running through heresy executions it is complete failure of old-fashioned institutions to frighten dissenters" (50). Why, at this moment in European history, when religious unity in the West was at the breaking point, did the mechanisms of coercion fail, and fail so completely? In retrospect, it is hardly surprising—one need only consider Tertullian's adage that "in the blood of the martyrs is seed" (*Apology* 227) to remember the powerful effect martyrdom had in compelling converts, and I have suggested, with the doctrine of the persecuted church, that Western Europe was increasingly sympathetic to the victim of religious persecution, and increasingly hostile to the persecutor. Religious execution was the site where Augustine's dictum collided with, and eventually retreated before the doctrine of the persecuted church. Foxe wrote *The Acts and Monuments* in the full knowledge that the scenes of cruelty undermined rather than confirmed the Roman Church. Even at the outset of the Marian persecution the authorities could feel the dangerous resentment created by the burnings. Foxe tells us that as Taylor was being led to the stake the officers in charge

> caused to be made for Dr. Taylor a close hood, with two holes for his eyes to look out at and a slit for his mouth…that no man should know him, nor he speak to any man. Which practice they used also with others. Their own consciences told them that they led innocent lambs to the slaughter. Wherefore they feared, lest if the people should have heard them speak, or to have seen them, they might have been much more strengthened by their godly exhortations, to stand steadfast in God's word, and to fly the superstitions and idolatries of the Papacy. (1525)

A potent combination of tender conscience and brutal professionalism forced the authorities to try to dampen sympathy for Taylor (and resentment toward their own cruelty), but Foxe plainly implies that the only effect was to tarnish their cause still further. Few people actively wanted to be associated with the persecution: Loades reports that, in the middle of 1555 (around the time Taylor was burned) the Queen recognized that a greater show of authority was required and ordered members of the gentry to attend burnings. The result, Loades writes, was less than overwhelming, and soon compulsion was required (*OM* 166).

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the crowd gathered around a London gallows was anything but unified by the death of the victim. Gregory is adamant about the importance of the *non poena* principle in the period, but however much the people dying might have agreed with it, or the polemicists supporting or condemning them in print, even he admits that the crowds were volatile and often likely to sympathize with the victims (339). Susannah Brietz Monta, in *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* writes about how the suffering of the martyrs tended to outweigh doctrinal matters:

> Thus, although martyrologists frequently assert that the cause should determine whether a person died a martyr, in practice martyrologists also used martyrs' lives, words, and dramatic self-sacrifices to argue that their martyrs died for truth…. Though he often repeats the mantra that the cause, not the death, makes the martyr, John Foxe also argues explicitly that the manner of one's death reveals the rightness of one's beliefs. (10)

Earlier I discussed Collinson's assertion that in Foxe cruelty even more than false doctrine showed the Roman allegiance to antichrist, and how the questionable theology of certain martyrs was less important that their willingness to die for

Christ. This subtle distinction was reflected in the crowds at religious executions. Many of the people at a burning or hanging were friends and fellow believers of the victim's, and some were genuinely hostile, but there were many others who could be swayed by what they saw. Peter Lake has examined this issue in detail in *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat* and writes that for Protestant and Catholic alike, the steadiness of a convicted man was considered an "acid test of the personal religious profession of the condemned and of the truth of the religious system within which that profession was framed" (241). This "acid test" was less a theological tenet than a logical inference rising from the doctrine of the persecuted Church, and reached by many individuals witnessing an execution. The Church of England had changed direction four times in the sixteenth century, and might change again—anyone of sincere religious convictions who watched a man or woman die must have wondered if they too would be able to bear the pain of flames or disembowelling. A brave death, especially if preceded by a declaration of faith, could be a sign of the Holy Spirit's intercession.

The 1853 edition of the *Acts and Monuments* includes a large, foldout woodcut illustration of Latimer and Ridley's deaths that gives a clear indication of the theatrical nature of an execution.[29] Foxe is always concerned with emotive effect of his stories, and the woodcut conveys a sense of the levels, or removes, at which Foxe sees the martyrdom working. In the clearing, Ridley and Latimer are chained to their stake, and each commends himself to God. Around them, three executioners ready the pyre at which flames already lick. Above them is Doctor

[29] See http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/johnfoxe/images/woodcuts/1805ins5.jpg.

Smith, the attendant priest, condemning them from the pulpit. Despite Smith's attempt from the dominant position at the top of the circle to convince the crowd that these men are dying for the wrong reasons, their actions speak louder than his words. Donald Kelley has called Reformation martyrdom "imitatio Christi with a vengeance" (1328), for what more complete emulation of Christ can their be than dying for his gospel? And there are always those who are encouraged to imitate the imitators. Latimer understood this very well; with the eyes of so many people on them, he famously tells his friend, "be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man: we shall this day light a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out" (11, 1770). In Foxe's view certainly, Latimer was right: their deaths helped to move England into God's fold. Indeed, we know for certain that Cranmer was not the only spectator moved by what he saw. Later in the Book of Martyrs Foxe tells the story of Julins Palmer, whom he describes as having been, "a Papist within the University of Oxford, and so obstinate, as that he did utterly abhor all godly prayer" (11, 1934). Palmer's Catholicism was not initially shaken by his reading of Protestant theology, though Foxe does discuss his subsequent study (1934), but by witnessing Ridley and Latimer's deaths:

> he himself also did see more experience afterward, at the examination and death of those holy confessors and martyrs which were burned at Oxford before his eyes, in so much that the first hope, which the godly conceived of him, was at the return from the burning of Bishop Ridley, and Bishop Latimer. At what time in the hearing of divers of his friends, he burst out into these words, and such like: O raging cruelty, O tyranny tragical, and more than barbarous. (1934)

Palmer was so moved by the cruelty he witnessed, that he eventually suffered it himself, being burned at the stake in Berkshire in July of 1556 (1940). There are

many other examples of the martyrs' courage and the authorities' cruelty making converts among the spectators; Monta cites the example of the "very papist" cook George Tankerfield, who was converted to Protestantism: "perceiving the great cruelty used of the Pope's side, [he] was brought into a misdoubt of their doings, and began (as he said) in his heart to abhor them" (11, 1689).

We need to understand the power which the martyrs wielded, even in the hour of their death. Writing of the Huguenots martyred in the sixteenth century Nicholls states,

> The martyr as main actor could thus play along with the theatre while being in a sense above the whole business. By their very non-resistance martyrs showed the meaninglessness of the official interpretation of the spectacle, and audiences in some way sensed this, hence the reactions of either sympathy for the martyr or disruption of the play. (72)

They did not resist the violence, but they did appropriate the meaning of the violence brought against him. Crossing the confessional boundary line, Lake similarly refuses to see condemned Catholic priests in England as "simply as the objects of the hostile ideological and physical attentions of the state" (230). They too, like the Protestant and Anabaptist martyrs before them, were actors, fully aware that the audience was watching:

> the catholic victims of state power were also agents, the initiating subjects of a struggle for the control of some of the central ideological, rhetorical and material weapons mobilised by the state against them. The aura of spiritual power and personal charisma that attended the last dying speech and the gallows conversion…opened spaces for catholic agency and speech at the very centre of the persecutory state that was supposedly crushing catholic treachery into silence and oblivion. (230)

Alexandra Walsham concurs, writing that religious executions "could be appropriated and subverted by the very individuals they were designed to annihilate, to glorify themselves and the faith for which they died" (79). This was not only true of Protestants, for by the last third of the sixteenth century English Catholics had seen enough maltreatment to feel that theirs was the persecuted Church, and to develop their own discourse of martyrdom. On this battlefield victory for the Protestant state would have been a landslide of peaceful conversions and recantations, not a mountain of mutilated bodies. Officials in the governments of Elizabeth and James knew what was at stake on the popular level, and knew how thoroughly Mary had alienated potential supporters by the antichristian rigour of her persecution. There were advantages to the authorities, if people recognized the lengths the regime could and would go to, but the cost of using them was exorbitant. Lake writes:

> And yet for all the obvious propaganda value of the rites of state violence…the Elizabethan state was generally reticent about indulging in an orgy of carnivorous state-building. Protestant polemicists could not emphasise enough how easy it was for papist clerics to avoid the penalties from which, in a perfect Foucauldian world, there should have been no escape. Before time, it seems, the state was exchanging torture for discipline. And when it came to retelling for public consumption the events of a public execution, it was not protestant but catholic commentators, hot in pursuit of the charisma of martyrdom, who chose to dwell on the physical sufferings of the priests. Protestants were reticent, even squeamish about such matters. (237)

"The charisma of martyrdom" is a very suggestive phrase. Victim status had become something precious, not only in God's eyes, but as a weapon in the confessional struggle and recognizing this, the state feared being branded a persecutor. Here, Lake suggests, is the reason for the gradual reduction in brutality

in Jacobean executions, so that the condemned was generally allowed to slowly die of strangulation ("hanged at the neck until dead") before the process of dismemberment began—something a Foucauldian interpretation has trouble explaining. Even Catholic writers admitted that the government often "reined in its more sadistic tendencies" (238).

This ideological ground was contested so fiercely because victory would carry with it a large part of the popular sympathy. Much like Marlowe or Shakespeare's audience, the people watching the execution of a Jesuit could be moved to sympathy or anger, shouting blessings or insults. The religious identities of the spectators were only one factor in determining their reaction—the bearing and words of the condemned could trigger a range of responses. A simple gesture, like Cranmer shoving his right hand into the flames (because it had signed his recantation), the last words of Stephen, or simply the name of Jesus, could have the impact of a hundred-page polemic. There were numerous ways in which Catholic victims could magnify the sympathy accorded to them: singing hymns, kissing halters, the sign of the Cross, and loyal prayers of blessing for the Queen.[30]

Sarah Covington states that around the scaffold, "religious affiliation rested on unstable and contingent ground" (4). Lake's description of the death of Henry Garnet, the Jesuit known to have been friendly with the Gunpowder plotters, is a fascinating example of this volatility. Garnet's association with the shocking attempt to destroy the Protestant government certainly made him a likelier target than most for the crowd's resentment, but the government was worried,

[30] See Lake 244 and Walsham, 167-8.

recognizing that his well-known eloquence might generate sympathy and considered executing him in secret. Following the report of the Venetian ambassador, Lake states,

> But when Garnet then *was* executed, in public, the same ambassador wrote that "he died like a Christian, but in addressing the crowd, which was immense," he committed a *faux pas* (by using the word "pope") "whereupon rose such an uproar that it was feared lest the fury of the mob should forestall the course of justice." (271-2)

Yet the same crowd which minutes before had been howling with bloodlust then acted out of mercy to "forestall…several attempts to cut him down before he was dead" (272). Lake sums up by saying, "[E]ven the normally anti-popish London crowd could turn against what it took to be unfair or unfitting behaviour, even when that behaviour had been undertaken in defence of the protestant state" (272). There was still, no doubt, a wide gap in Jacobean society: many people could abhor the suffering of their own co-religionists even as they supported the suffering of others. But that gap had begun to narrow.

The Sacrificial Crisis:

In her chapter on the enforcement of orthodoxy in *Charitable Hatred* Alexandra Walsham traces a gradual weakening of the effect of persecutory violence from the later persecutions of the Lollards down through Elizabeth's campaign against the priests and Jesuits (66-92). The victim sympathy that so characterized burnings by the mid-sixteenth century did not always predominate, but if in the early part of the sixteenth century these spectacles could command a degree of unanimity, as the sixteenth century progressed they lost the power to coerce the masses. How can

we understand what was going on in the crowd at the foot of the gallows, when a man like Robert Southwell was hung, drawn, quartered and disembowelled, before a population largely made up of recent converts and recusants, haunted by the memory of the Marian burnings? The imperatives of doctrine and obedience were in conflict with the imperatives of mercy—often, we can assume, within the same breast.

Girard's concept of the sacrificial crisis helps us understand what was happening in the crowd at religious executions. The sacrificial crisis marks the point at which the death of a victim no longer has the power to unify, but instead causes division and dissent. In Greek tragedy the crisis is manifested in a widening, chaotic spiral of violence that threatens the social order. In Tudor-Stuart England a different sort of sacrificial crisis is apparent, manifested not in uncontrollable reciprocal violence, but in pity for the victim and doubts over the justice of the persecution. This is not to say that the population had turned definitively against violent coercion—there would have been no crisis, in that case—but that it was in a state of flux, caught between opposing pressures, and anything but unified around the dying scapegoat.

In Girard's reading of myth and primitive culture the sacrificial crisis entails a return to the Hobbesian war of "all against all." The Low Countries and France provide possible sixteenth-century examples of sacrificial crises that did result in a temporary return to generalized violence. Gregory describes the latter in highly Girardian terms: "Executions in Paris affirmed communal Catholic values in the 1520s and 1530s; by the late 1550s, they provoked religious riots" (339). But

this was not because of sympathy for the victim, but because the hatred of the crowd for Protestants had increased to the point where the state could no longer control it. The French case is worth pausing on, because accounts of religious executions in France are positively harrowing, and one searches in vain for the sort of ambivalence that characterizes burnings and hangings in England. As successive kings of the Valois dynasty tried desperately to hold the kingdom together, they followed a course similar to the one we have seen in England, moving from burnings for heresy to hangings for treason. Yet an ocean of blood was spilled by the authorities and the public before the tenuous peace of Henri IV in the Edict of Nantes. Both David Nicholls and Natalie Zemon Davis have argued that in mid to late sixteenth-century France crowds at religious executions tended to demand more violence and cruelty, rather than less, and tended to see themselves as acting on behalf of authorities who had handled dissidents with insufficient rigour.[31] Hence, we have the strange case Nicholls discusses (recounted by Foxe's Huguenot counterpart Jean Crespin) which is almost a complete inversion of the intercession of the English crowd at Henry Garnet's death:

> The martyrologist also records crowds at Reims and Paris in 1559 trying to prevent victims being strangled before burning, in the latter case successfully. This kind of behaviour became pathological during the first religious war in Paris. The bodies of Protestants who had been hanged or decapitated for sedition were grabbed from the place of execution, dragged in the mud, insulted, mutilated, and thrown into the Seine or burned, while living Protestants were subjected to mock trials and killed on the spot. (70)

[31] The state of French religious politics means that we are generally discussing Catholic crowds clamouring for Huguenot blood, but Zemon Davis offers important instances of Protestant violence toward Papists, often for much the same reasons. See especially 173.

Davis offers an equally telling example, from the dark days following the St. Bartholomew massacre during the reign of Charles IX:

> The most fascinating example of the assumption of the magistrate's role by a crowd, however, is the mock trial held by the boys of Provins in October 1572. A Huguenot had been hanged for thefts and killings committed during the religious troubles. Groups of boys put ropes around his neck and his feet, but a tug-of-war could not resolve which way the corpse was to be dragged. The boys then elected lawyers and judges from among their midst for a trial. Before the eyes of a hundred spectators, they argued the penalty, appealing from the decision of the real judge that the Huguenot be only hanged and not burned alive as befitted a heretic. After the boys' decision, the corpse was dragged through the streets by the feet and burned. (164)

Yet despite the differences, the French case helps us to understand what is at stake in the English sacrificial crisis. Offering examples of both Catholic and Protestant brutality, Davis explains the logic behind popular manifestations of religious violence, and the energies which the Valois government was ultimately unable to channel:

> These episodes disclose to us the underlying function of the rites of violence. As with the "games" of Christ's tormentors, which hide from them the full knowledge of what they do, so these charades and ceremonies hide from sixteenth-century rioters a full knowledge of what they are doing…. The crucial fact that the killers must forget is that their victims are human beings. These harmful people in the community—the evil priest or hateful heretic—have already been transformed for the crowd into "vermin" or "devils." The rites of religious violence complete the process of dehumanization. So in Meaux, where Protestants were being slaughtered with butchers' cleavers, a living victim was trundled to his death in a wheelbarrow while the crowd cried, "vinegar, mustard." And the vicar or the parish of Fouquebrune in the Angoumois was attached with the oxen to a plow and died from Protestant blows as he pulled. (181)

This is a picture of collective violence familiar to any reader of Girard, and Davis' explanation for it is crucial. Christ acknowledged on the cross that the people who

crucified him knew not what they did. Neither did the Frenchmen and women who spilled blood in the name of their religion admit to themselves the truth of what they were doing. Davis explains that the goal of religious violence "is that of ridding the community of dreaded pollution. The word 'pollution' is often on the lips of the violent, and the concept serves well to sum up the dangers that rioters saw in the dirty and diabolic enemy" (158). The materialist interpretation cannot explain such violence: there is no question here of the authorities overawing the masses with a demonstration of force; rather the crowd itself acts to exterminate the perceived threat, making the victim a contaminated and malevolent other, separate from the group, needing to be purged.

In English Reformation history there is no commensurate example of this widespread, spiralling popular violence—even in the worst days of Mary's reign, or the 1580s when Elizabeth's persecution of priests skyrocketed, there was no general bloodshed. In England the danger for the government lay in using too much violence rather than too little, and the state seems to have realised this and slowly mitigated the severity of its policies, eventually rejecting the sacrificial order, at least in the case of religious belief. This is not to proclaim a Whiggish view of England's special destiny as liberal bellwether—unlike France it was spared a series of devastating religious wars in the sixteenth century[32]—but nonetheless the crowds were influenced by a particular interpretation of their religion made by writers like Foxe to value victim status and so doubt the justice of coercion over a matter of religious conviction. This in itself was dangerous enough to the state, in

[32] It should also be remembered that sixteenth-century France produced men like Montaigne, a principal early founder of the liberal tradition.

that it sanctioned the alienation of the people from the forces of order. As we will see in the upcoming chapter on Milton, in the Civil War the opposing camps struggled on the level of rhetoric to put themselves in the victim position, knowing the power such status held in the political struggle—indeed, it ultimately justified outright revolt.

The concept of the sacrificial crisis is important because it emphasizes the collective, contested nature of violence, something generally resisted by scholarship influenced by Foucauldian views of state punishment. In fact, everyone had a stake in the violence, not simply the ruling regime. Sacrificial violence, for Girard, is not a tool of the powerful; it belongs to one and all. Walsham notes that at the burning of a Lollard in Ipswich in 1515 an indulgence of 40 days pardon from purgatory was offered to anyone who brought faggots to the pyre (77). This is the church actively wooing the masses to come and join in the sacrifice; it suggests the integral role of those who bear witness. In my discussion of John Webster I discuss this under the heading of "participation": whether one is chained to the stake like Latimer and Ridley, presiding like Dr. Smith, assisting like the executioners who tend the fires, or simply watching like the surrounding onlookers, one participated in the sacrificial rites as a communicant of violence. The growing influence of the doctrine of the persecuted church destabilized any unity in the gallows-crowd; it pulled the sympathy of many from the persecutors to the persecuted, and it viewed the afflicted victim as an object of compassion, as someone whose suffering was precious to Christ, and not as a contaminated other. When Foxe begged for the lives of the captured Anabaptists saying, "It is the *life* of

men that I favour, since I myself am a man," he reminded his rulers of the shared human bond the acknowledgement of which makes sacrificial violence impossible. Likewise, in her Second World War notebooks Simone Weil encapsulated the difference between Christianity as she was coming to understand it, and the false, sacrificial form it has so often taken: "the false god changes suffering into violence; the true god changes violence into suffering." Though a different kind of person in a very different age, John Foxe would have understood her; Weil's aphorism goes to the heart of his theology, and the heart of the sacrificial crisis of early modern England. The principal contention of this study is that this moral and emotional dilemma over the sanctity of violence is reflected in the drama of the period, producing a uniquely Christian tragedy.

Chapter Two:
Tragic Compassion: William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

> There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. The important thing is that neither bitterness, nor envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at matters great and small, sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice, and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune. This perspective from below must not become the partisan possession of those who are eternally dissatisfied; rather, we must do justice to life in all its dimensions from a higher satisfaction, whose foundation is beyond any talk of "from below" or "from above." This is the way in which we may affirm it.
>
> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The View From Below," from "After Ten Years: A Letter to the Family and Conspirators," *A Testament to Freedom*, (486).

> Whoever takes up the sword shall perish by the sword. And whoever does not take up the sword (or lets it go) shall perish on the cross.
>
> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (87).

I want to begin this study of the sacrificial crisis in Renaissance tragedy with what might seem an unusual play. Though William Shakespeare's *King Lear* exhibits an almost palpable sense of the numinous—the characters seem, at times to be living in a half-world of restless, mercurial spirits hovering just beyond their senses—there is little on the literal or symbolic planes to connect these manifestly pagan powers to Christianity. Indeed, Lear's story takes place in pagan Bronze Age Britain, centuries before Christ. But none of this disqualifies *King Lear* as a test

case for my thesis about Christian tragedy. Meeting the burden of proof in this study does not require finding overt expressions of Christian doctrine, but rather gauging the play's attitude toward persecution and violence. And on this plane Shakespeare's tragedy powerfully reflects the doctrine of the persecuted church and is powerfully involved in the anti-sacrificial discourse within English culture.

King Lear is famous for its unsettling ending. In his preface to the play Samuel Johnson said of it, "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" (704). He was not alone, as the enduring popularity of Nahum Tate's melodramatic white-wash showed. In the nineteenth century Tate's version was finally put by and *King Lear* was once again a tragedy, but a tragedy that, however it may suit modern and postmodern notions of dislocation and alienation, still denies traditional catharsis. The raw horror of Gloucester's blinding and Cordelia's shocking, undeserved death—a death which makes the very characters on stage feel that they have been denied the expected "promised end" (24.258)—are extreme moments that seem to compound pity and fear rather than expel them. Yet in this disquieting violence is *King Lear*'s sacrificial crisis, its Christian tragedy. The moments of violence in this play press continually on the theme of common humanity, and identification with the suffering other. Ultimately, *King Lear* is structured around a Christian inversion of value: the characters—and the audience—are asked to re-conceive of the way they regard the other. The centre of value is shifted to the victims, so that the privileged world of

the castle, the established order which maintains itself through sacrificial violence is exposed and indicted.[1]

The Tragedy of Good Friday:

The place of religion in *King Lear* has been a contentious question for the last several decades. For much of the nineteenth century many readers understood *King Lear* as a drama of Christian redemption, and this view persisted largely unchallenged until the 1960s (Ryan 376). In 1966, in a book that argued that the play was actually an indictment of the Christian God posing as an indictment of the characters' pagan deities, William R. Elton summed up the "currently widespread view that *Lear* is an optimistically Christian drama." Elton wrote,

> This belief holds, first, that the protagonist among other characters is, consequent to his sufferings, "regenerated," "redeemed," or "saved"…. Second, corresponding to the meaningful suffering of the protagonist, supposedly there is in addition an intrinsic teleology, a cosmically derived play, which somehow gives providential significance to the events of the tragedy. (3)

Though this summary is certainly oversimplified, in the main it is an accurate broad-strokes representation of the traditional "Christian" argument: Cordelia's death has some regenerative power; Lear, in some variously described way is redeemed, his suffering is proven meaningful and healthy; Good is victorious. Elton is one in a long line of critics who have contested this interpretation, seeing

[1] There is no small irony in the anxious attempts of Gloucester to bring Lear out of the storm, into the castle. As the First Gentlemen tells Kent, this is a night where, "the cub-drawn bear would couch, / The lion and the belly-pinched wolf / Keep their fur dry" (8.11-3). The animals, as Gloucester will soon discover, are all behind the walls, and Lear is safer without, away from the trappings of his former power, conversing with the fools and madmen.

little in the play that suggests the redemption of either the king, or his society. And if Lear is not redeemed, what good was his suffering?

Like Elton, I too see little evidence of redemption in the ending of *King Lear*. The attempts of Albany to apportion punishments and favours in the final scene become patently hollow when Lear's heart cracks. One of Elton's contemporaries, Roy W. Battenhouse, offers a generally admirable Christian reading of the tragedy, but on this point, he simply overreaches:

> Lear's feelings (like those of an onlooker at Calvary) are caught up within a frame of grief-stricken tragedy. As was true on Good Friday, no Easter vision has yet become available to the sufferers of this moment's desolation. Nevertheless, amid the deep despair there can be (if pictured by an artist of psychology like Shakespeare) occasional flickerings of a transcendent hope to punctuate the moment of darkness. For are not the darkest hours just before dawn, and is not the Dark Night of the Soul the traditional preface to mystic vision? (288)

Where are these moments of "transcendent hope" Battenhouse points to? Lear himself had said in his last, desperate moment of patently *false* hope, that if only Cordelia's pulse will flutter back to life, it will "redeem all sorrows" (24.261). But Cordelia remains dead and so by this standard, at least, the play's sorrows are unredeemed. If the New Testament ended at Calvary no one would consider it redemptive, and none of Christ's distraught followers, before the rumour of his resurrection, suggested that all would be well. The three survivors left onstage after Lear's death are given no reason to believe that their hoped-for "promised end" is still pending, and nor are we. To rework Battenhouse's metaphors, the play gives us night without morning, Good Friday without Easter.

So if *King Lear* expresses no confidence in Christian spirituality, how does it reflect the religion of its historical moment? The most influential and provocative answer to this question would have to be Stephen Greenblatt's essay on *Lear*, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists" from *Shakespearean Negotiations.* Greenblatt examines the tragedy alongside one of its sources, Nicholas Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*. Greenblatt contends that Shakespeare was playing a double game, elevating the theatre at the expense of the church, which had sold the old Roman props and regalia to companies of players. This seemed, to the Protestant establishment, like a convenient arrangement: "The official church dismantles and cedes to the players the powerful mechanisms of an unwanted and dangerous charisma; in return the players confirm the charge that those mechanisms are theatrical and hence illusory" (120). Borrowing a concept from Richard Hooker,[2] Greenblatt explains that these accoutrements of worship, along with rituals such as exorcism, have undergone an "evacuation" (126) of their spiritual charisma, their significance becoming purely imaginative. So in *King Lear* Greenblatt sees a tragedy pervaded by,

> a sense of rituals and beliefs that are no longer efficacious, that have been *emptied out*. The characters appeal again and again to the pagan gods, but the gods remain utterly silent. Nothing answers to human questions but human desires; nothing inspires awe or terror but human suffering and human depravity. For all the invocation of the

[2] Hooker uses the concept of evacuation in Book 4 of the *Laws* to explain the relationship between the Church and the old Law which has been superseded or fulfilled, but not abolished by Christ. Hooker writes: "For though God do now hate sacrifice, whether it be heathenish or Jewish, so that we cannot have the same things which they had but with impiety; yet unless there be some greater let than the only evacuation of the Law of Moses, the names themselves may (I hope) be retained without sin, in respect of that proportion which things established by out Saviour have unto them which by him are abrogated" (1, 316). Greenblatt calls this passage, "powerfully suggestive for understanding the negotiation between the domain of literature and the domain of religion" (191, n50).

> gods in *King Lear*, it is clear that there are no devils. (Greenblatt's italics)

He continues,

> Edgar is no more possessed than the sanest of us, and we can see for ourselves that there was no demon standing by Gloucester's side. Likewise Lear's madness has no supernatural origin; it is linked, as in Harsnett, to *hysterica passio*, exposure to the elements, and extreme anguish, and its cure comes at the hands not of an exorcist but of a doctor. (119)

According to Greenblatt Shakespeare gladly receives the props, rituals and language of the old church in order to play with them, and he makes sure the new church comes out the loser. In mocking the supposed transcendence of the Roman rite, he achieves the transcendence of the theatre over the former source of charisma, whether Protestant or Catholic. And for Greenblatt, the idea that the national Protestant church (not to mention the radical sects outside of it) found charisma in their own interpretations of Christianity, is not even worth pausing on.[3] As Greenblatt sees it, Christianity for Shakespeare is something wholly demystified; ineffective on its own terms, it is simply a powerful lever he can pull to produce certain effects when manipulating his audience.

Greenblatt's analysis of the place of religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean society is deliberately narrow and deeply sceptical. The essay minimizes the centrality of religion to early modern life with great complacency and refuses to concede that Reformers (or Counter-Reformers) had their own coherent intellectual frameworks. But other critics have struck a more successful balance

[3] In *Resistant Structures* Richard Strier rightly asserts that the typical New Historicist understanding of religion-as-ritual wilfully ignores the Protestant claims of transcendence through interior, private experiences like scripture reading and prayer (73).

between the play's apparent lack of faith in Christian transcendence and its genuine affinity to structural, linguistic and ethical aspects of its religious culture. In "Shakespeare and the Skeptics" Richard Strier writes that in *King Lear* Shakespeare advances a kind of secular, de-mythologized Christianity. Strier finds "human equivalents" to Christian doctrine, though no faith in Christian metaphysics—for instance, Strier notes that Cordelia is surrounded by positive, unironic religious language so that though she is not a typological Christ figure, she is Christ-like. (187-8). Also of interest is C. L. Barber's "The Family in Shakespeare's Development," which combines a similar attitude toward the plays religious content with a psychoanalytic approach. Barber states,

> As regularly happens in Shakespeare's mature work, religious language comes into play to express the investment in the family bond... What the play presents, however, is not a Christian resolution, but the tragic consequences of this investment. In the scene of Lear's reunion with Cordelia…Lear's summary image on coming back into sanity is shaped by Christian conceptions: "Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire." And in Cordelia's "No cause, no cause," we get a full expression of Christian love without a Christian supernatural. (198)

Finally, the most interesting example, especially for the questions that absorb me, is Debora K. Shuger's "Subversive Fathers and Suffering Subjects: Shakespeare and Christianity." Shuger charts an intertextual relationship between Shakespeare and the early Church fathers, offering some astonishing parallels between patristic attacks on "superflux" and the expressions of the suffering Lear's newfound compassion, such as her comparison of Lear's speech on "unaccommodated man" (11.86-92) and his castigation of the "rascal beadle"

(20.150-6) to the following quotation from St. Jerome, written twelve hundred years earlier:

> He whom we look down upon, whom we cannot bear to see, the very sight of whom causes us to vomit, is the same as we are, formed with us from the self-same clay, compacted of the same elements. Whatever he suffers, we also can suffer. Let us consider his suffering as our own…. In silken robes, or rags, the same lust holds sway. Desire neither fears the Emperor's purple nor keeps away from the beggar's filth. (quoted from "Subversive," 50)

Shuger writes that, contrary to materialist arguments, "Lear's prayer does not voice subversive heterodoxies—whether popular or humanist—but the social teachings of the medieval church. In his painful epiphany, the pagan king for a moment grasps the nature of Christian caritas" (53).

Strier, Barber and Shuger are major critics, and they make important, compelling claims about the place of Christianity in *King Lear*. They share a common approach, though, wherein they stand back from the text, and look for overt moments in the language of the play which broadly echo statements from the New Testament (or in the case of Shuger, the Greek and Latin fathers). But the play reflects England's religious culture on other levels as well. I am speaking of wordplay, of figurative language, of seemingly offhand statements, and of subtle interactions. This is not the province merely of critical aesthetes, but of cultural historians, and it is where Shakespeare's response to the religious turmoil of his world is most powerfully reflected. Greenblatt claims that the theatre evacuated the formal rites and props of the religious culture, but I would claim that the religious culture rather infected the theatre, leaving plays like *King Lear* shot

through with its concepts, assumptions and often conflicting demands—even at the most innocuous levels.

Thus, the piece of criticism which, for me, makes the most compelling discussion of *King Lear*'s engagement with Christianity may seem to be an odd choice at first. Published years before the advent of cultural poetics, Stanley Cavell's classic essay, "The Avoidance of Love," is not a work of historical criticism, but rather a philosophical investigation of Shakespearean scepticism. Furthermore, like most of the other critics I have cited, Cavell holds that the last scene of the tragedy offers little promise of redemption. For him this makes the play's status as Christian, "very equivocal." But here he offers a major insight, suggesting that, "If Cordelia exemplifies Christ, it is at the moment of crucifixion, not resurrection" (73). I want to press this insight—that the same thing that denies *Lear* status as a straightforward dramatic avowal of Christianity is what makes it Christian, albeit in a qualified, *tragic* mode—a little farther than Cavell might have intended. I want to show, with recourse to the religious writers, that this picture of unredeemed and undeserved suffering which runs throughout *King Lear* until it finds its full expression in Cordelia is where Shakespeare grapples with the Reformation martyrdom crisis.

The moments of sacrificial violence in the play, and Cordelia's death in particular, mark *King Lear* out as a Christian tragedy not because of some symbolic promise of redemption, but because they expose sacrifice as something sordid and unjust. Compassion for the victims who suffer unjustly without the balm of sacrificial transcendence is the trigger of this tragedy's sacrificial crisis. Cavell

understands how *King Lear*'s depiction of persecution is Christian because of what it says about all victims. He writes:

> one glimpses the possibility of a common human nature which each, in his or her own way, fails to achieve; or perhaps glimpses the idea that its gradual achievement is the admission of reflection in oneself of every human theme. As Christ receives reflection in every form of human scapegoat, every way in which one man bears the brunt of another's distortion and rejection. (80)

Its understanding of violence, rather than Battenhouse's symbolic *ignes fatui*, is what marks out *King Lear* as a Christian tragedy: violence as such, and not the redemptive sugar-coating which would justify it. This violence is ugly and impossible to reconcile with notions of either earthly or eternal justice—the violence of Good Friday, before Easter, the violence suffered by Foxe's martyrs, who die without the "analgesic" rapture of medieval martyrs. This violence does not expel the victim from the community of witnesses, but rather reminds the community of the bonds the victim shares with them. And this is true not only of Cordelia, though hers is the most poignant example of it, but of all the victims. Cavell states that when Lear meets Edgar and Gloucester at the bottom of their imaginary cliff, the king himself—along with the disinherited beggar and blinded lord—reflects this portrait of common suffering: "If he is an outcast, every man is, whose society is in rags about him; if he is a scapegoat, every man is, under the general shiftings of blame and in the inaccuracy of justice" (77).

<u>"Wilt Break My Heart?"</u>:

I want to discuss the materialist treatment of religion in *King Lear* a little further, in order to position my own critical claims. Essentially, I am arguing that materialist

criticism does capture something about the play's relationship to its historical moment, but not everything. In *Radical Tragedy*, published in the mid-1980s, Jonathan Dollimore explained that *King Lear* supports neither the Christian claims of external redemption, nor humanist claims of personal redemption through the tragic hero's greatness of spirit.[4] Dollimore concedes that the latter school, though superficially more plausible, relies on the same pernicious habit of mystification, the same recourse to transcendence. Whether Lear is redeemed by a higher power, or because of some self-redemption, achieved through the ineffable sense of personal grandeur, in either case he is redeemed (191). Both readings reconcile the characters' suffering, while the play, properly understood, exposes it as the result of an unjust political system and the ideologies which support it. Dollimore contends that the humanist readings place the individual suffering subject in the centre of the play's cosmos; as he reads the play, however, "man is decentred…in order to make visible social process and its forms of ideological misrecognition" (191).

Dollimore is correct to challenge the assumptions so often made about the individualizing tendencies of traditional approaches. This chapter follows the

[4] The classic articulation of the humanist reading is A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Modelling his tragic theory after Hegel's, Bradley recognized that the Christian promise of redemption was incompatible with the tragic understanding of conflict and suffering. For Bradley, *King Lear* mocks any attempt to rationalize the agony it depicts; he claims that such complacent moralizing is characteristic of Tate's *Lear*—"Truth and virtue shall at last succeed" (205)—not Shakespeare's. Instead of affirming a cosmic moral order and transmuting dust and ashes into the oil of gladness, tragedy offers only the qualified salve of humanist individualism, which proclaims that, "the heroic being, though in one sense and outwardly he has failed, is yet in another sense superior to the world in which he appears; is in some way which we do not seek to define, untouched by the doom that overtakes him; and is rather set free from life than deprived of it" (270). Though the hero is destroyed he is ultimately superior to what destroys him; that he suffers but achieves through his suffering uncommon grandeur: Lear's individual nobility becomes something radiant in the face of the power which overcomes him, and this makes his suffering aesthetically satisfying. Indeed, suffering becomes something precious for its own sake: "here adversity, to the blessed in spirit, is blessed. It wins fragrance from the crushed flower" (273).

materialist line insofar as it denies the idea that the meaning of the tragedy comes from the hero's salvation by either an external power, which transmutes and redeems his suffering, or by his own greatness of character. *King Lear* does not bring the individual into relief by way of the nobility of his anguish, with the other members of the society fading into the background. Instead, it works the other way, tearing down the solipsistic preconceptions of the characters, emphasizing their relationships to their fellows, making suffering something common and demystified. In this play Shakespeare emphasizes the network of relationships that connect one individual to another, and the bonds that he draws attention to are not the vertical bonds and obligations of the traditional hierarchy, but rather the horizontal ones that unite all members of a society, regardless of rank or role.

However, my argument diverges from Dollimore's at an important juncture. One aim of his radical political reading of *King Lear* is to demystify the Christian and Humanist values that overtly question but, Dollimore feels, implicitly confirm the ideological status quo, the most important being pity. A traditional reading of the play would look at the injustices suffered by the characters and find solace in the growing sense of compassion they achieve for one another. When the blind Gloucester asks Edgar to identify himself, his son simply describes himself as,

> A most poor man, made lame by fortune's blows,
> Who by the art of known and feeling sorrows
> Am pregnant to good pity. (20.210-2)

But for Dollimore this formula—that from suffering we learn compassion for others who suffer—is a dangerous palliative that distracts the oppressed from their

disenfranchisement. Pity is a deception, a false dawn that dupes one into tolerating the political conditions of the play rather than opposing them. And more than that: pity, in Dollimore's reading of the play, is useless. He declares that, "Cordelia…more than anyone else in the play has been seen to embody and symbolise pity. But is it a pity which significantly alters anything?" He continues,

> Pity, like kindness, seems in *Lear* to be precious yet ineffectual…. Moreover the failure of those values is in part due to the fact that they are (or were) an ideological ratification of the very power structure which eventually destroys them. (193)

Pity and kindness are not eternal goods, then, but symptoms—evidence of the oppression which necessitates them. They are by-products of a social order that the play wants to cast down. In a provocative, historically sensitive reading of *King Lear* that tries to negotiate the gauntlet of Christian, humanist, and materialist readings that have hemmed it in during the past century, Kiernan Ryan makes much the same contention, stating that the play,

> as a whole pushes beyond egalitarian compassion to anticipate the extinction of the world that creates the need for compassion in the first place…. For what it actually seeks to do is to disengage us from a whole way of life whose death it already foresees. (389)

It is this idea of "disengagement" that is so troublesome. In truth, it is such critics who want to disengage *King Lear* from its historical moorings—whether Dollimore, with his assumptions about post-industrial class conflict, or Ryan with his theory of the tragedy's futurist prescience[5]—not the play that wants to disengage its readers. *King Lear* affirms compassion loudly throughout, and

[5] Ryan ends his essay by asking, "How can the historicist criticism that currently holds sway in literary studies begin to comprehend a work which, like all the greatest literature, is not back there behind us, awaiting our explanation and diagnosis, but way out ahead of us, waiting for us to catch up?" (39).

Shakespeare constructs a tragedy around an important principle of early modern Christianity, which was essential to the doctrine of the persecuted church: that suffering is precious for what it teaches, not simply on the personal but the social plane. When Edgar offers Gloucester his formula of "good pity," he is expressing the same early modern view of regenerative suffering as someone like Tyndale in *The Obedience*:

> Mark this also, if God send thee to the sea and promise to go with thee and to bring thee safe to land, he will raise up a tempest against thee, to prove whether thou wilt abide by his word, and that thou mayest feel thy faith and perceive his goodness, for if it were always fair weather and thou never brought into such jeopardy whence his mercy only delivered thee, thy faith should be but a presumption and thou shouldest be ever unthankful to God *and merciless unto thy neighbour*. (6; my italics)

The metaphor of the tempest has to resonate for any student of *King Lear*. The most important part of the passage, though, is in the last five words. As Tyndale sees it, God allows his chosen to suffer not only for the sake of their own personal spiritual well-being—so they may realize that God's intervening grace, rather than their own endeavours, is what saves them—but also for the collective good. Suffering does not simply pose a cosmic test of endurance on the believer, it alters his attitude toward the other. This is not the weak-kneed, ineffectual commiseration Dollimore describes. Pity is not some dried flower pressed between the pages of *King Lear*, a beautiful, fossilized token of the old order. It is the touchstone of Shakespeare's radicalism, of his condemnation of the status quo—a radical pity[6] akin to Bonhoeffer's. It results, not in partisan class strife, but

[6] The phrase "radical pity" was coined by Eric Byville in a paper called "The Rhetoric of Identification in *King Lear*" that was given at the 2006 annual general meeting of the Shakespeare

in a new perception of human society and the individuals within it. In this play pity is something fierce and untameable, something that pushes far beyond the familiar comfortable borders. Not only does it cause children to forgive the betrayals of their parents, or a servant to assault his prince to prevent an act of great cruelty but, like Bonhoeffer's pity, it demands of the audience a total inversion of our system of valuation.[7]

Consider how pity challenges one of the most gruesome instances of persecution in Shakespeare's corpus: the blinding of Gloucester. In the scene Cornwall and Regan commit an act of shocking, deliberate sacrifice: cornered by his political superiors the earl is tied up by younger, more numerous opponents, mocked, tortured and finally blinded for his part in Lear's escape and the French invasion. Gloucester himself recognizes his position as Cornwall's scapegoat with the deeply sacrificial imagery. When he says, "I am tied to th' stake, and I must stand the course" (14.51)," he conjures up images of martyr burnings, and also of bearbaiting. Gloucester, like martyr or the bear, is a victim of collective ritual violence. However, unlike a baited bear who was able to fight back against the

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Association of America, Philadelphia, 13 April. Byville's paper discusses the opposition of pity to authority in *King Lear*, and claims that this opposition is manifested at the level of Shakespeare's language. Byville charts a tension between inclusive language that moves toward a vision of common humanity, and the exclusive language of authority, which creates distinctions and hierarchies (9).

[7] Bonhoeffer wrote the letter I have quoted from in the direst of circumstances—in Germany, in December of 1942—and it was addressed to his fellow conspirators in the plot against Hitler. Earlier in the letter he explains how true Christian compassion demands action on behalf of victims: "We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's largeheartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real compassion that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ to all who suffer. Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behaviour. Christians are called to compassion and action, not in the first place by their own sufferings, but by the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, for whose sake Christ suffered" (484). Like the First Servant, Bonhoeffer paid the ultimate price for his active compassion when he was hanged after being tortured in April 1945.

dogs, though tethered, Gloucester can only endure. Cornwall explains himself with great candour:

> Though well we may not pass upon his life
> Without the form of justice, yet our power
> Shall do a curtsy to our wrath, which men
> May blame but not control. (14.22-5)

The chaotic interrogation which follows is not done in the name of justice, then, but simply to give the Duke a pretext for his "wrath." And like Gloucester himself Cornwall seems to feel that the victim is utterly hopeless, as his power puts him beyond the censure of his subjects' moralizing. It is astonishing how the duke and duchess, the political lords of half of Britain, then begin to torture the old man with their own hands. Shakespeare allows no distance between the persecuting power and the agents of persecution itself, as though James I and Anne of Denmark themselves gone down to the Tower dungeons to rack the Gunpowder Plotters. This is not the clinical, dispassionate work of professional torturers, but something raw and messy, as Cornwall attempts a Foucauldian imposition of his power onto the body of the victim with his own hands.

And yet it does not work. Cornwall succeeds, eventually, in mutilating Gloucester, but the blinding does not make for the straightforward demonstration of authority he expects. His act of sacrificial violence is upset by an act of radical pity by someone who does much more than merely blame him. After seeing the aged Gloucester tied up, after seeing his beard pulled in derision, and one of his eyes already mutilated, one of Cornwall's attendants can bear no more. He intervenes:

> Hold your hand, my lord.

> I have served you ever since I was a child,
> But better service have I never done you
> Than now to bid you hold. (14.69-72)

This intervention amounts to a sacrificial crisis. Given no name and less than a dozen lines the servant manages to make a substantial impact on the trajectory of the plot (killing Cornwall) and certainly on the emotional and thematic tenor of the scene. He does so because of compassion for Gloucester, because he cannot witness and thus silently endorse Cromwell's cruelty. In *Resistant Structures* Richard Strier claims that the servant's opposition is a moment of enormous political significance in a play deeply concerned with the problem of the duty a subject owes to a wicked prince. Strier calls this a radical statement of freedom of conscience: "Shakespeare is presenting the most radical possible sociopolitical act in a way that can only be interpreted as calling for the audience's approval" (*Resistant* 192). Regan and Cornwall's outrage at this violation of established boundaries—"A peasant stand up thus!" (14.77)—suggests the entrenchment of their sacrificial logic in the social fabric. The servant's resistance denies the duke and duchess the screen of unanimous assent their act requires, challenging any pretence that that their violence was anything more than a sordid imposition of power.

Strier is right that this is a radical political act, but it is based in Jacobean religious discourse: the doctrine of the persecuted church, which says that victims are blessed and cruelty is damnable. The servant is motivated by an aversion to cruelty and a sense of sympathy for victims whose inspirations in the early seventeenth century came from within the church. I have noted how the contemporary events offered the English no examples of such hands-on politics by

those in power. But the events of their recent past did. One of the leading villains of the Marian persecutions in The Book of Martyrs is Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London. Foxe portrays Bonner as a sadist, who gloats over his victims, whether children caught in his orchard, or the dozens of martyrs that were burned on his orders. The most striking example of Bonner's cruelty, though, must be his handling of the martyr Thomas Tompkins. Foxe reports that, "Doctor Bonner, Bishop of London, kept the said Tomkins with him in prison half a year. During which time the said Bishop was so rigorous unto him, that he beat him bitterly about the face, that his face was swelled" (1533). Bonner's abuse goes much farther than beating Tomkins, though. After trying unsuccessfully to convince Tompkins of his doctrinal errors, Bonner changes his tactics, taking up,

> a taper or a wax candle of three or four wicks…this Bishop took Tomkins by the fingers, and held his hand directly over the flame, supposing that by the smart and pain of the fire being terrified, he would leave off the defence of his doctrine, which he had received.
> In the which burning he never shrunk, till the veins shrunk, and the sinews burst, and the water did spurt into Master Harpsfield's face: In so much that the said Master Harpsfield moved with pity, desired the Bishop to stay, saying, that he had tried him enough. This burning was in the Hall at Fulham. (11, 1534)

Foxe knows very well what the effect of such gratuitous cruelty will be on even a mildly sympathetic reader. By torturing Tompkins with his own hands Bonner becomes a personal embodiment of the cruelty of the institution he represents. If the suggestion is made that the bishop burns Tompkins out of a desire to save him from a worse burning, Foxe undercuts it, suggesting that he is motivated by frustration rather than kindness, a Cornwall-like desire to break his victim. Also remarkable is how Bonner's brutality is condemned by his lackey, Harpsfield

(historically no friend to Foxe or his martyrs),[8] because of *pity*. Bonner's violence serves only to condemn him and the church he represents as un-Christian.

A second example from Foxe is even more enlightening. It involves the martyrdom of Anne Askew, a radical Protestant tortured and burned late in the reign of Henry VIII. Askew wrote a first-person account of her story, which was incorporated into the *Acts*. Askew is the only woman on record ever tortured in the tower of London—the government wanted her to confess the names of other gentlewomen who were secret Protestants, though she refused to submit—but her ordeal was notable also for two other reasons. First, the man who tortured her was no less than Thomas, Lord Wriothesley, who at that time was Henry's Lord Chancellor. It is also notable for the behaviour of one of Wriothesley's subordinates. Foxe recounts the incident thus:

> First, she was led down into a dungeon, where…the lieutenant commanded his gaoler to pinch her with the rack. Which being done so much as he thought sufficient, went about to take her down, supposing he had done enough. But Wriothesley the Chancellor not contented that she was loosed so soon confessing nothing, commanded the lieutenant to strain her on the rack again. Which because he denied to do, tendering the weakness of the woman, he was threatened therefore grievously of the said Wriothesley, saying, that he would signify his disobedience, unto the king: and so consequently upon the same, he and Master Riche throwing off their gowns, would needs play the tormenters themselves…and so quietly and patiently praying unto the Lord she abode their tyranny, till her bones and joints almost were plucked asunder, in such sort, as she was carried away in a chair. When the racking was past, Wriothesley and his fellow took their horse toward the court. (8, 1239)

[8] See Mozley 139. Harpsfield was one of Foxe's polemical opponents, and was eventually martyred himself in 1575 by Elizabeth's government.

Foxe goes on to explain that the lieutenant who, "for compassion," could not continue to watch Askew's racking, went directly to Henry's court and threw himself on the mercy of the king who, "seemed not very well to like their extreme handling of the woman," granted the lieutenant his pardon (8, 1239). While it would be an error to assume that the lieutenant or Harpsfield were motivated by a modern sense of individual rights, we must still be alive to the importance of their resistance. They reached a kind of saturation point, where the violence they witnessed could no longer be rationalized.

Both of these accounts are significant for the way a powerful representative of the establishment personally joins in an act of torture, and how the unacceptable cruelty is emphasized by the condemnation of an inferior who is moved with sympathy for the victim. Both examples offer a sacrificial crisis very like the one Shakespeare presents in *King Lear*. Strier is indeed correct to take issue with those critics who envision a conservative Shakespeare, only able to think in terms of the political philosophies of the day (*RS* 165). Invoking Luther and the Marian exiles Strier shows how a political discourse encouraging (or at least entertaining) the idea of resistance to ungodly princes was very much alive in the Renaissance. Foxe too helps us understand and contextualize the ethical and, ultimately, the religious issues raised in the blinding scene: the servant's disobedience reflects the same sacrificial crisis as these two vignettes from Foxe, where the violence of a superior fails to solidify his power, but rather raises compassion for the suffering victim and incites dissent instead of compliance. It was damaging for the Catholic Church or the English government to be linked with such grotesque acts as the burning of

Thomas Tompkins' arm by a leading bishop. Likewise, it is damaging for Regan and Cornwall's regime—though they do not realize it when he is thrust from the gates—for Gloucester to wander the countryside with his eyes torn out, generating antipathy toward them and attracting pity for himself, from people like the old tenant who endanger themselves to help him.

Shakespeare impresses on the audience just how little the first servant has to do with Gloucester: when the earl asks for Edmund, Regan scornfully explains that he, "made the overture of thy treasons to us, / Who is too good to pity thee" (86-7). Gloucester is not even pitied by his own son: what does it mean that a man he does not even know shows him such compassion—in the true etymological sense of "suffering with"—that he actually dies for him? Strier rightly points out that the radicalism of the intervention is heightened by the fact that this man is not Gloucester's servant—which would be natural, given that it is his castle—but Cornwall's. His proper allegiance is to the blinder, not the blinded traitor, but he assails his master to prevent him from carrying out this abomination on a stranger (193). In the Q text of the play the scene continues the theme of pity through other servants after Cornwall, Regan and Gloucester have exited:

> [Second Servant]: Let's follow the old Earl and get the bedlam
> To lead him where he would. His roguish madness
> Allows itself to anything.
> [Third Servant]: Go thou. I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs
> To apply to his bleeding face. Now heaven help him! (100-4)

This pity may be less spectacular than the first servant's overt defiance of Cornwall, but one cannot imagine Regan reacting mildly to the servants' generous attempt to ease Gloucester's pain and provide him a guide. They join with their dead

colleague by condemning the violence they have seen ("I'll never care what wickedness I do / If this man come to good" (96-7)), and by caring for the victim and refusing to treat him as the contaminated other. They too break sacrificial consensus.

I want to contend that these nameless servants epitomize the sacrificial dilemma at the heart of *King Lear*, and which confronts Shakespeare's society as a whole. It can be summed up as the dilemma between the sacrifice of the other and the sacrifice of the self.[9] Risking his life for a condemned traitor—under circumstances even more desperate than those surrounding the defiance of Kent or Cordelia—the servant foreshadows the end of the play, which underscores the dreadful necessity of resisting the victimage mechanism, and also the dreadful cost. Sacrificial violence is instrumental; it uses others as means to an end. In *King Lear* Shakespeare opposes it with the theme of self donation: the characters are forced to choose between suffering persecution or inflicting it. For Simone Weil this tragic dilemma is at the heart of the Christian experience: "Whoever takes up the sword shall perish by the sword. And whoever does not take up the sword (or lets it go) shall perish on the cross" (86). Weil's insight is articulated, though with less poetry, by the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe:

> The Gospels insist upon two antithetical truths which express the tragedy of the human condition: the first is that if you do not love you will not be alive; the second is that if you do love you will be killed. If you cannot love you remain self-enclosed and sterile, unable to create a future for yourself or others, unable to live. If, however, you do effectively love you will be a threat to the structures of domination upon which our society rests and you will be killed. (67)

[9] I am borrowing these terms from Girard's *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (236-42).

McCabe and Weil are both informed by a leftist conception of political resistance which is close to Dollimore's, but unlike him they understand that the tension between the oppressors and the oppressed is a central concern of the Christian scripture. They are then, much closer to the political radicalism of *King Lear*. The dilemma they perceive between sacrifice and self-donation comes near to what I think Cavell means in "The Avoidance of Love" when he claims that the thematic treatment of politics in *King Lear* stresses "the interpenetration and confusion of politics with love" (67). Again, Cavell is not writing historical criticism but he helps us to better understand the historical dimension of the tragedy, which was written in a period where love and politics were hopelessly entangled in the English church, which was caught between the idealized goals of the Beatitudes and its need to maintain uniformity. The moments of violence in this tragedy push the characters into a terrible choice between politics (the sacrifice of the other) and love (the sacrifice of the self). There is no third alternative, no safe place outside of the sacrificial cycle from which it may be observed.

This dilemma is so pronounced in *King Lear* that it is surprising that more critics have not noticed it. It is summed up beautifully and simply by Kent on the heath when he begs Lear to enter the hovel. Already slipping in and out of madness Lear asks him, "Wilt break my heart?" and Kent replies, "I had rather break my own. Good my lord, enter" (11.4-5). And it is not only the attendants at Gloucester's blinding who embody the sacrificial dilemma; he himself is blinded because he also chooses the sacrifice of the self. In Scene 14 Gloucester is not yet present when the two sisters discuss his treachery and Gonoril exceeds Regan's

suggestion of hanging by advising Cornwall, "pluck out his eyes" (4). Moments later when he is dragged on stage and asked why he helped Lear escape to Dover he replies, "Because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes" (53-4).[10] He will soon realize how justifiable this fear was. His eyes are lost so that Lear's may be saved. What is this but a secular act of substitutionary grace, one character taking another's suffering upon himself? It costs something to resist the sacrificial order, to stand outside the castle with the pariahs on the heath. This is interpenetration and confusion of politics with love.

Enforcing Charity:

The blinding scene depicts a sacrificial crisis triggered by compassion for the victim, and it also depicts the dilemma between the sacrifice of the self and the sacrifice of the other. I want to suggest that this anti-sacrificial imperative runs throughout the tragedy, and to prove this I want to spend the remainder of this chapter looking closely at three victims of the sacrificial order: Edgar, Lear and Cordelia. Each of them is persecuted, but their suffering is not a simple matter. Shakespeare's play condemns sacrificial violence, but the playwright is alive to what

[10] As these two quotations demonstrate, Shakespeare repeatedly emphasizes that Gloucester's eyes were not simply put out but *taken* out (for example Lear notes that there are "no eyes in [Gloucester's] head" (20.139) and Edgar tells Edmund that his conception cost Gloucester not his sight but his eyes (24.167-8)). The effect of this is to stress that Gloucester's blinding is an act of exclusion, that Gloucester himself is being "plucked out" of the human community in what Cornwall wants to represent as the result of collective violence.
For a discussion of the use of dismemberment in French martyr executions, see David Nicholls, "The Theatre of Martyrdom in the French Reformation." Nicholls explains that very often body parts were removed that were thought to have directly offended the Catholic church: Protestants used their tongues to utter "heretical propositions," and some used their hands to perform acts of iconoclasm, and these offending members had to go" (58). In light of this it is worth remembering Cavell's suggestion that Cornwall blinds Gloucester—rather than inflicting some other torment, or simply killing him—because he cannot endure that his evil be recognized and "censured"; he puts out Gloucester's eyes to prevent the earl from seeing (and therefore shaming) him (47).

Lake calls the "charisma of martyrdom," and the ideological leverage it offers. Edgar and, to a degree, Lear, are self-conscious victims, well aware of the cachet of victimhood, and the power of pity. Through the divestment they experience that night, each seems to conform to the pattern of tribulation and regeneration I describe as baptismal, and each claims that his suffering has awoken in him a new sense of empathy. But in neither case is this claim unproblematic. I want to offer readings of Edgar and Lear that account for their conflicted relationship to the sacrificial system, finally showing how both have their false-consciousness shaken through a genuine confrontation with the sacrifice of the other. In Edgar's case, this happens when he beholds the mutilation of Gloucester; in Lear's, it is through the loss of Cordelia, who knowingly makes the sacrifice of the self, weeping for her father but not for herself, and who reveals in her death the total injustice of the sacrificial order.

When Edmund usurps his inheritance and makes him an outlaw, Edgar undergoes a sort of self-death, a divestment of his former privileges, comforts and even his identity. But it is very telling that Shakespeare makes his self-death extraordinarily self-conscious. Edgar understands the stakes of his new victimhood and articulates them precisely. He says in soliloquy:

> While I may scape
> I will preserve myself, and am bethought
> To take the basest and most poorest shape
> That ever penury, in contempt of man,
> Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
> Blanket my loins, elf all my hairs in knots,
> And with presented nakedness outface
> The winds and persecutions of the sky.
> The country gives me proof and precedent
> Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,

> Strike in their numb'd and mortified arms
> Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;
> And with this horrible object from low farms,
> Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,
> Sometimes with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
> Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom!
> That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am. (7.167-83)

In a twist of powerful irony Edgar trumpets his new absence of identity as an identity. It is sensible enough, given his outlawed status, that like a Bronze Age Caleb Williams, he would try to evade capture by disguising himself as a wandering beggar or even, like Kent, a respectable member of the lower classes.[11] But freedom is not his object, nor is it the primary concern of this remarkable speech. Far from melting quietly into the background until the hunt dies down, Edgar will wear his destitution proudly, grasping for the charisma of martyrdom with both hands. His "presented nakedness" will be the sign and signal of his new victim status—he will win by losing. With no clothing or castle walls to protect him from the "winds and persecution of the sky" (like Lear Edgar interprets the storm as a metaphor for the cruelty he has suffered because of fate and his family) he will feel them all the more deeply and be all the more recognizably victimized; he will shame or "outface" the agents of his suffering. As he continues, he gives further suggestions of this agenda, taking as his model not simply poverty-stricken beggars, but mad, self-mutilating ones. No doubt this would make an effective disguise, but it would hardly be necessary if expedience were Edgar's chief aim.

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[11] The comparison with Kent says a great deal about Edgar's agenda here. Kent is able to disguise himself well enough that he can keep company with the very man who banished him—he sees no need to degrade himself so completely. Furthermore, Kent disguises himself in order to protect and help Lear, the very man who hurt him. Edgar never suggests he is motivated by an attitude of self-donation.

This disguise is born, I think, from an instinct that Harry Berger Jr. traces with devastating precision in his pair of essays "The Lear Family Romance," and "The Gloucester Family Romance." Attempting to uncover what he calls, "the social resources available to self-deception" and the ways in which characters use their social, political, and most significantly, familial relationships for selfish ends (25), Berger uncovers a web of conflicting, half-conscious impulses:

> At the ethical poles of King Lear are two scenarios: the mixed and good characters try to make others and themselves believe "I am more sinned against than sinning." The bad characters try to make others and themselves believe "I am more sinning than sinned against." My hypothesis about the play is that while any character pledges allegiance to one of these two scenarios, his language also betrays the presence of the second challenging the first. The language reveals the complementary pressures of a self-justifying function and a scapegoating function. It shows us that the characters tend to avoid recognizing their own contributions to the difficulties they face, while magnifying the complicity of others. (27)

In Edgar's case the "darker" first purpose is manifested in the attempt to portray himself as a victim unfairly afflicted; the "darkest" purpose underlying it is the suspicion that he actually deserves to be a victim and that the afflictions are very fair indeed. So Edgar is haunted by the fact that he lacked the courage or the love to confront his father over Edmund's lie, to trust him enough to clear the air. But because he cannot face Berger's "scapegoating function"—which suggests the awful truth that he too is guilty—he pours his energy into the "self-justifying function," playing up his victimhood for all it is worth, with "Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary." Michael Goldman, discussing Edgar's character in modern performance, says of his proposed metamorphosis,

> There is no reason not to take him at his word. On the stage Edgar must be filthy, grotesque, very nearly naked, and bear on his body

> evidence of horrible mutilation. He is the kind of beggar who *enforces* charity—so repellent, and nasty that you pay him to go away…. We give to him because we cannot stand him, because his body is a fearful reminder of the deformity that life may visit upon us at any instant. (97-8)

Edgar will compel empathy by aggressively advertising his abjection, punishing whomever he encounters with this reminder of their common frailty. If the victim of his attentions refuses to give, then he is branding himself as another of the beggar's persecutors. Realizing its value, Edgar will play up his victimization for all he is worth; in a perverse turn he will use his martyrdom, the sacrifice of self, as a weapon to sacrifice the other—he will punish his father by punishing himself.

Edgar's persecution and his response to it have some interesting parallels with the persecution of Catholic clergy in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. This has been noticed most famously by Greenblatt. In "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," Greenblatt ponders whether Edgar, the elder brother (and fraudulent exorcist), on the run from his usurping, illegitimate sibling, could stand for the Jesuits who had to hide from the persecution of what they considered a usurping, illegitimate new church (121). Unfortunately, Greenblatt does not really consider the implications of this proposition but is content to muse over the possibility that certain individuals in Jacobean England might have believed that, "*King Lear*…was not hostile, was strangely sympathetic, even, to the situation of persecuted Catholics" (122). Then what? What does it mean to see Edgar as fugitive Jesuit? It is a tenuous allegory to be sure, but is potentially enlightening if we examine the historical implications for an audience that might well have witnessed the executions of fugitive priests some of them in sympathy with the old beliefs.

Richard Wilson, in *Secret Shakespeare*, discusses how the relic-mad witches in *Macbeth* might also stand for Jesuits (193). Wilson's book is a provocative study of how the alleged Catholicism in Shakespeare's time could have affected his drama. I think the evidence is entirely too slender to posit what the adult Shakespeare's religious convictions were, but whether by 1605 they were Catholic, Protestant, or some vague and possibly sceptical combination of the two I can accept that his family's recusant history must have made him sensitive to the suffering of the Catholic priests sent to England as missionary martyrs. Wilson, as I see it, draws persuasive conclusions about *Macbeth*, arguing that Shakespeare's attitude toward the Jesuits was critical; he makes Macbeth a Catesby-like figure who destroys his life (and almost destroys the commonwealth) because he is inspired by their bloody-mindedness. Many English Catholics, clerical and lay (including that most venerable of all orders, the Benedictine), frowned on the recklessness of the Jesuits, who courted martyrdom with such irresponsible zeal (Wilson 195).

One did not have to be a convert to the new faith like John Donne was, to lament the death of ardent young Catholics (like Donne's brother Henry) who died because they were instructed that their faith could admit no compromise with the heresiarchs James and Elizabeth, and that God demanded their civil disobedience no matter the cost. As I noted in the first chapter, adherents of all the religious confessions agreed that those who proclaim the true gospel will attract persecution, but at the same time they are not supposed to seek it out.[12] *Pseudo-Martyr* is premised on this principle. The preface of *Pseudo-Martyr* is directed to "The

[12] See Brad S. Gregory (*Salvation* 286).

Priestes, and Jesuits, and to their Disciples in this Kingdome." Donne recognizes the contempt such people hold for apostate Catholics like himself (11), and he begins by explaining how important the issue of martyrdom is to him:

> I have been ever kept awake, in a mediation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stock and race, as, I beleeve, no family, (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches,) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, then it hath done. (8)

He next explains that his objective is, "to awaken you, if it please you to heare it, to a just love of your owne saftie, of the peace of your Countrey, of the honour and reputation of your Countreymen, and of the integritie of that, which you call the Catholicke cause" (28).[13] Throughout the text Donne makes no bones about his Protestant convictions,[14] spending many pages on the perceived abuses of the Roman church (such as the doctrine of Purgatory), but here he explains that the "just" respect of their individual lives, as well as the "integritie" of the Roman church itself requires that Catholics submit to the king. The church is not served, Donne contends, when its members rashly throw away lives that might better be lived through: "For we must neither pursue persecution so forwardly, that our naturall preservation be neglected, nor runne away from it so farre, that Gods cause be scandaliz'd, and his honour diminished" (28). Certain Christians will be

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[13] Brian Cummings writes that "*Pseudo-Martyr* shows a crisis of faith in the witness of martyrdom. For Donne, it was not obvious how to distinguish Thomas More from Tyndale, or Campion from Cranmer, as men 'that dye for theyre religion.' In this sense, *Pseudo-Martyr* is a work in equal parts of bad faith and benevolent scepticism. It exposes heroic death to a corrupt and corrosive irony, yet it does so by means of a passionate appeal to life" (374-5).

[14] Though, as Anthony Raspa rightly points out, he is silent about certain aspects of the Catholic faith which he clearly still has sympathy for. Raspa writes in the Introduction to *Pseudo-Martyr* that Donne, "left a great number of the prominent characteristics of contemporary Catholicism unattacked. Those aspects of the early seventeenth-century Roman Church that he did not denigrate are sometimes as revealing of Donne's religious convictions as those he ridiculed" (xliii).

called to die for their faith, but none should presume. Throwing one's life away is an act of "immature and undigested zeale" (33); it is not true martyrdom.

Donne asserts that the Roman confession "encourage[s] and excite[s] men to this vicious affectation of danger," through various false doctrines, including the doctrine of merits, whereby Catholics attempt to earn (or at least confirm) their salvation by dint of their goodness rather than their faith in Christ's atonement (37). Donne quotes the Jesuit Cardinal St. Robert Bellarmine who states that martyrdom, "*is so full a satisfaction, that it expiates all guiltinesse, contracted by all sinnes, how huge soever the number, or haynousnes thereof be*" (91; Donne's italics). Donne, however, contends that "the doctrine of merites, dooth misprovoke and inordinately put forward inconsiderate men, to this vitious affectation of Martyrdom" (92). With the doctrine of merits as their motivation, the would-be martyrs attempt the same things as Edgar: "enforcing charity" by destroying their own bodies, instead of receiving charity as God's freely-given gift. The implication is that one can compel the benefactor—whether God or a villager—by using one's suffering as leverage.

If we entertain Greenblatt's suggestion that Edgar is a Jesuit on the run, then we have to see him as something of a pseudo-martyr, in that he "affects" danger and makes his suffering an end in itself. Certainly, Edgar is genuinely persecuted by his wolfish brother and credulous father, but *he* is his worst persecutor, the one who perfects the degradations they have brought upon him. His brother betrayed him and his father doubted him, but neither forced him to go naked in the storm or to disfigure his own body. This is not self-sacrifice: it has

the same utilitarian, ends-driven agenda as the sacrificial violence of his brother, only disguised. Edgar's violence may be directed at himself, but it is still *his*, rather than theirs, and it is intended instrumentally, as a way of manipulating others. This is very different from the first servant whose violence (stabbing Cornwall and being stabbed himself) has no benefit to himself, but is only done to benefit others, both Gloucester and, as he sees it, Cornwall himself. It is the difference between enforcing charity and enacting it.

The disguised Edgar's first encounter with his father seems to suggest the fulfilment of this self-serving intention. Gloucester first meets Poor Tom on the heath, during his mission of mercy to King Lear. Still an established senior of the governing hierarchy, Gloucester can exercise a degree of pity in his secret missionary excursion outside the walls, but he cannot empathize. He is appalled by the king's situation; following one of Tom's rants he asks, "What, hath your grace no better company?" (11.126). Trying to convince the better members of the company to take shelter in his home, Gloucester will do no more in response to Tom's statement that he is cold than offer him the hovel: "In, fellow, there in t'hovel; keep thee warm" (11.150). It is a convenient, utterly transparent solution for separating himself from the degraded beggar even as he palliates his conscience. Later, when blind, he will disclose just how completely he served Edgar's purpose. When his tenant tells him that a mad beggar (whom he does not recognize as Edgar) stands nearby, Gloucester admits:

> In the last night's storm I such a fellow saw,
> Which made me think a man a worm. My son
> Came then into my mind, and yet my mind
> Was then scarce friends with him. (15.31-4)

The sight of Edgar's degradation disturbed Gloucester with the reminder of what lay beneath his own furred gown; thus, he punishes Edgar still further, both in his mind, and unknowingly through his rejection on the heath. When he dismisses Edgar to the hovel he disinherits him all over again. Edgar, at this point has achieved the darker purpose—his abject, "presented nakedness" has outfaced his father, winning him a kind of victory. He is self-aware enough to admit this; after Lear and Kent have left for Dover, Edgar reflects on his lowly condition. He realizes that it offers certain advantages he did not enjoy as a pampered scion of the world of the castle:

> Yet better thus and known to be contemned
> Than still contemned and flattered. To be worst,
> The low'st and most dejected thing of fortune,
> Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
> The lamentable change is from the best;
> The worst returns to laughter. (15.1-6)

His plight has given him a kind of freedom. There is no need to fear plots and machinations: what can his enemies do to him now?

Even as he crows over the paradoxical triumph of his victimhood, Edgar soon discovers how much further down the bottom is, when he sees his father, "parti-eyed" (15.7). This encounter is a pivotal moment for Edgar. It is essential to realize that Gloucester's new impairment ruins Edgar's self-serving self-sacrifice. The first way it does this is by preventing Gloucester from participating in his game: he is no longer able to see Edgar covered in grime, blood and marks of self-mutilation. Though Gloucester comes to understand that the man who guides him to Dover is the same mad beggar that revolted him the night before, he can no longer be shocked by the "basest and most poorest shape" Edgar has adopted. He

remembers the man—and asks the tenant to provide him with clothing (40-4)—but no longer recoils from his shape. If he cannot see Edgar, he cannot be "outfaced."

Even more significant is the effect that seeing the hideous cruelty of the blinding, the bloody rag wrapped around Gloucester's head, has on Edgar. He is foiled in the darker purpose, because his empathy for his father overcomes the histrionic pose of victimhood that he had played up so ardently. His attempt to take back his earlier, self-pitying complaint—"O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst?' / I am worse than e'er I was" (23-4)—is not just a bitter, nihilistic reflection on misery's infinite depths; it is an admission that the "worst" one can suffer includes not only the torments inflicted on the self, but on those the self loves. And Edgar, overhearing his father's moving confession of guilt and love, feels this keenly. Little knowing who stands nearby, Gloucester laments,

> Ah dear son Edgar,
> The food of thy abused father's wrath—
> Might I but live to see thee in my touch
> I'd say I had eyes again. (19-22)

Hearing this, Edgar has eyes again. Though he loosely maintains his performance on the road to Dover, it is to enact charity, not enforce it, and it can hardly be maintained in the face of his fellow-feeling for Gloucester: "Bless thy sweet eyes," he remarks, coming out of character, "they bleed" (52). The scene ends with the first iteration that Edgar will repeatedly make to his father: "Give me thy arm. / Poor Tom shall lead thee" (76-77). The phrase, or the variant "give me thy hand," saturates the relationship between Edgar and his blinded father. He makes this moving appeal to physical contact for the first time in Scene 15, agreeing as Poor

Tom to lead Gloucester to Dover, and the motif continues throughout Scene 20 and once more after the defeat of the French army in Scene 23.

If Edgar has been shaken out of his pseudo-martyr pose by this confrontation with Gloucester, then what are we to make of his management of Gloucester's attempted suicide? Edgar avows that he is trying to do away with Gloucester's desire for suicide: "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (20.33-4). The method is unsettling, though, as it is premised on deceit and the exploitation of his father's new vulnerability. And Cavell raises another important issue: one might think that the surest way for Edgar to cure Gloucester's despair would be to tell him who he is, and forgive him (54). Cavell believes that Edgar wants to delay the revelation as long as possible, to avoid being recognized by his father either because he is ashamed that he was "as gullible as his father was to Edmund's 'invention,'" or because he cannot bear to think of his father as someone broken, maimed and ultimately mortal (56). I want to suggest two other complementary possibilities.

The first one is that Edgar *is* trying to cure his father's despair. Berger contends that Edgar is trying "to prove his own merit," by curing him, and says that this is a "sad and chilling" denial of Gloucester's autonomy (63). While that may be pressing too far, though, Berger is alive to the important religious significance of Edgar's act. He claims that "this is an act of symbolic parricide: the old man (and the old Adam in Gloucester) must be 'killed' so that the father and son may slough off the former life and be reborn together" (63). "Symbolic parricide," is a strong description of what Edgar does (though surely preferable to

abetting actual suicide), but Berger is right to note its baptismal significance. Gloucester he nothing is:[15] the old man, who disinherited Edgar (and could be blinded by Cornwall) is dead, and Edgar wants him to put on the new. It is a commonplace of traditional readings of the play to note that Gloucester's loss of sight seems to give him inner sight, as the blinding coincides with Regan's cruel revelation that Edmund betrayed him and Edgar was innocent. But the most important thing Gloucester learns may be what Edgar tells him here: "Thy life's a miracle" (55). Edgar means that, given the great height Gloucester supposedly fell from it is extraordinary for him to have survived, but the weight of the words is greater than the intended meaning and the fictitious context. Gloucester is a degraded, abject fugitive: he has lost his high station, his wealth, and he needs to rely completely on one who is also a degraded fugitive, as well as the son whom he wronged. But Edgar's words condemn the sacrificial logic that would enable his scapegoating; they affirm the value of the suffering victim, they include the one who had been plucked out and excluded.

For Greenblatt this scene epitomizes the concept of emptied-out charisma: the devil that Edgar tells Gloucester about after his "fall" was a lie; there was no fiend to exorcise. But once again, there are implications that need to be examined. For most Protestants the age of explicit miracles was over, there was now only the single triumphant miracle of the individual's salvation in Christ. But there is no "evacuation" here: the falsity of the first miracle by no means suggested the falsity of the second; for the believer it enhanced it. Likewise, if this scene exposes the

[15] This is true in a technical, as well as symbolic sense; Edmund is now considered earl of Gloucester.

ritual of exorcism as a theatrical fraud it resonates with the miracle of common humanity, not because Shakespeare is articulating a Protestant theory of salvation, but because he transposes the concept of regenerative suffering and the low being raised high from the spiritual to the social plane.

The second reason I want to suggest for Edgar's delay follows closely on the first: he wants triumphantly to embody this principle of regenerative suffering for his father. This may be well-intentioned, but it is misguided. He believes, famously, that "Ripeness is all" (23.11) and so he decides to wait until he is able to appear before his father at the moment of ripeness: no longer as an object of degradation and victimhood, but as the armoured princeling he used to be. He tells Albany and his dying brother that he had resolved to keep his identity secret, "Until some half hour past, when I was armed" (24.189). Only when he heard the distant trumpets of the friendly French host, could Edgar resume the trappings of his privileged former identity, and only then could he reveal himself to his father. Clearly he intends this rearming to mark his happy ending, but of course that intention is at least partly fatuous. If Gloucester could no longer see, and be disgusted by, Edgar's naked wretchedness, neither can he see him in his armoured splendour. This is not to suggest that Edgar should have been content to remain a dispossessed fugitive, but that there is something problematic with the way he resumes his former status. He will no longer be vulnerable. The armour suggests a subconscious attempt to defend himself from Gloucester and control the relationship: now Edgar is the strong, lordly one, and his father broken, maimed, and disinherited. Edgar will offer love and forgiveness on his own terms. The

steel plate protects Edgar, but also sunders him symbolically from his father, and marks his invulnerability.[16]

If it is true that the armour suggests Edgar's desire to dominate the recognition-scene with his father, it is even truer of his reunion with Edmund. When Edgar re-arms he becomes a sacrificer, and Edmund is his victim.[17] He envisions a heroic return, securing justice and a happy ending, outfacing the villain as he removes his helm. Battenhouse, arguing for the traditional view of a Christian tragedy of redemption, draws this conclusion. He writes that Edgar's reincarnation and the subsequent defeat of Edmund "signals the emergence into public view of a redemptive power from the underworld of the *Lear* universe"—as a subplot, it is overshadowed by Lear's anguish, but it provides a healthy corrective to it (275). But consider what he says to Edmund after defeating him:

> Let's exchange charity.
> I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund.
> If more, the more ignobly thou hast wronged me.
> [*He takes off his helmet*]
> My name is Edgar, and thy father's son.
> The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to scourge us.
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got
> Cost him his eyes. (24.161-8)

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16 Cavell offers a similar take on the encounter: "Armed, and with the old man all but seeped away, he feels safe enough to give his father vision again and bear his recognition" (57). I appreciate Cavell's use of the Pauline trope of putting off the old man and putting on the new, but I believe he has it backwards: if anything it is the regenerated, new man that has seeped away.

[17] When Edgar later explains that his father died, "'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief" (24.194) the standard assumption is that Gloucester is torn between happiness at Edgar's return and forgiveness and the sorrow of his own guilt. But there is another possibility that could coexist with the first: Gloucester is torn because he knows that one of his sons must be sacrificed—if he regains Edgar, he must lose Edmund. This is not to deny Gloucester's understandable resentment at Edmund's betrayal, but simply to note the emotional complexity of the situation.

Once again, Edgar is enforcing charity, though now this means making his brother bleed instead of himself. Certainly the charity in this extraordinary speech is icy and bitter, and I think one could go much farther than Bradley who writes, "We wish Edgar would not speak so of their dead father to his dying brother" (254). In confessing, "I am no less in blood than thou art," Edgar is responding to Edmund's remark, "If thou beest noble, / I do forgive thee" (161-2), but there is, of course, a powerful underlying implication in the words: Edgar, too, has bloody hands, and is complicit in the sacrificial system, as a sacrificer of the other, ordained by the just gods. In this poisonous speech, Edmund's birth is used to stigmatise him and he becomes a living punishment for Gloucester's sin, to be punished himself in turn. Edgar does not need to remind Edmund of his bastardy at the moment of his dying; he does so because it makes his brother something alien and unnatural, something that needs to be rooted out of the human community. Edgar thus relieves himself of responsibility: he is not killing Edmund for the sake of vengeance, he is simply the agent of a higher power, compelled to act because of a train of reasoning that their father set in motion with his sin. Even Gloucester's blinding, which had affected Edgar so deeply, is rationalized: it was not the violence that took place in a dark and vicious cell which cost him his eyes, but the adultery, and the bastard which it produced.[18] Not only does this ignore the very real act of self-donation which I discussed above—

[18] Of course there is also profound misogyny in Edgar's statement, reminiscent of Lear's comparison of female genitals to hell. Edgar's scapegoating includes Edmund's mother as well as their father.

Gloucester sacrificing his eyes for Lear's—it absolves Cornwall and Regan. Edgar would not agree but his moralism pulls him toward that conclusion.

Edgar fights Edmund to prove his difference, his essential superiority; however, he ends up showing how very like Edmund he is. Both brothers believe they have the right to sacrifice the other: if Edgar puts his faith in the just gods, Edmund dedicates himself to the worship of his goddess Nature (2.1). Though Edgar rationalizes Edmund's death, explaining that the wrongs he and his father suffered justify it, this is ultimately doing the same thing that Edmund does when he targets Edgar for his very *unnatural* legitimacy. Indeed, both brothers have the same prurient urge to speculate about the other's conception: Edmund's parents met in a dark and vicious place, while Edgar was conceived in the pitifully bloodless circumstances of conservative marriage, a "stale, dull-eyed bed" (2.13). Convention demands that we condemn Edmund's violence and accept Edgar's (just as a certain spirit of iconoclasm or social Darwinism might demand the opposite), but Shakespeare is more radical in recognizing both brothers as sacrificers.

We must remember that at the imaginary bottom of their imaginary cliff Edgar had described himself to Gloucester as,

> A most poor man, made lame by fortune's blows,
> Who by the art of known and feeling sorrows
> Am pregnant to good pity. (20.210-2)

He is evidently, in his armour and at the resumption of his inheritance, poor no longer and he seems to have forgotten the art he learned. Edgar betrays a desire for narrative coherence; he plays the character of the romantic hero who survives

his tribulation, and re-emerges from it bit wiser and better, fit to dispense justice and apportion praise and blame. And so he must armour himself. No more will Edgar be lamed by Fortune's blows and learn pity thereby. His pity, like his charity, will be compromised. And at this moment, Edgar seems to have arranged his ending very nicely: those on stage will soon be told of the deaths of Gonoril and Regan and so with all the scapegoats safely dead, and even Gloucester's death rationalized as the sad, but just result of his twenty year-old sin one can assume that the world of the castle will be regenerated. It is then that the king returns, carrying the body of Cordelia. But before I discuss this unredeemed Good Friday, which condemns Edgar's false charity and blights the promised end, I will return to the storm on the heath and examine how the sacrificial crisis operates in the character of King Lear.

"They Told Me I Was Everything":

Lear goes out to the heath in a fit of childish indignation, but when he does so, exposing himself to the terrible storm, he learns what it is to suffer truly. In this moment he exemplifies the Christian understanding of regenerative suffering described by Tyndale, in that the tempest he endures changes his perception of other victims. When he speaks to Gloucester and Edgar, he explains how recent events have shattered the solipsism that Gonoril and Regan used to encourage:

> When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found them, there I smelt them out. Go to, they are not men of their words. They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (20.98-102)

A night in the driving wind and rain exposes Lear's flawed—and sacrificial—conception of himself as different from the other; it teaches him that he is not everything. Initially Lear tries to tell Kent that he does not notice the storm, because his mind is full of the "greater malady" (11.8)—Gonoril and Regan's betrayal. Like Edgar, Lear has established a metaphoric equivalency between their supposed persecution and the storm; indeed, he accuses it of aiding them in his victimization, saying it has,

> with two pernicious daughters joined
> Your high engendered battle 'gainst a head
> So old and white as this" (9.21-3).

But though he may not realise it, the material reality of cold, wind and rain begins to tell on Lear: while he stands exposed to the elements his massively self-centred attitude diminishes as he suffers and so becomes aware of others' suffering. When Kent finds him in Scene 9 the emphasis is entirely on what he is owed: he had been busy proclaiming himself "more sinned against than sinning," while relishing the thought of other peoples' "Close pent-up guilts" being exposed and punished by the merciless storm (59.57). Kent then reminds him of very practical considerations: his own body's exposure to the elements and the advisability of shelter. The reminder disrupts the king's solipsism; he realizes, "My wit begins to turn" (67), and is reminded of his Fool, shivering beside him:

> Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
> I am cold myself.—Where is this straw, my fellow?
> …Come, your hovel—
> Poor fool and knave, I have one part of my heart
> That sorrows yet for thee. (68-73)

At this point the Fool is even more degraded and vulnerable than the king he followed onto the heath. Lear's suffering brings him not only an awareness of his own discomfort, but concern for the discomfort of the person who followed him.

Later, the "one part" of Lear's heart expands a little more, in his famous soliloquy on the many degraded and vulnerable ones scattered across his kingdom. As he stands before the hovel he understands that this night—so extraordinary for him—is the common lot of many of his subjects. The growth of empathy that he exhibited with the Fool continues to the point where he begins to acknowledge two things: first, that he is not the only victim of the storm, and second, that he might bear some responsibility for the others who are suffering from it:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless night,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel.
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just. (11.25-33)

Lear is no longer able to maintain his solipsism, the strangely comforting lie that he is somehow the particular, undeserving target of the hostile universe. His suffering is no longer a mark of distinction that sets him apart; instead it is the very thing that connects him to the poor. Compared to Lear's earlier histrionics, there is a remarkable softening of tone in this speech. The grandiosity has no place now; he is not unique, but simply one suffering person among many. Even more remarkable is the admission that he has failed in making the personal sacrifice—perhaps only of "superflux'" but a sacrifice all the same—that might have mitigated

their pain. Realizing this allows him to view his anguish as a positive good, a course of painful but necessary "physic." The speech also shows a dawning awareness that the poor are, in a sense, persecuted; they are not simply unlucky fated to misery but victims who cannot "defend" themselves. Lear is now one of them, and understands his affinity with them.

Perhaps I have made this sound too easy—after a dark and stormy night the king imbibes a simple, humbling truism and goes forth a better man. Of course, it is not remotely simple, and nor is it either unproblematic or particularly original to note that Lear's sympathies are stirred up by his first taste of real discomfort. I am cautious about trusting Lear's expressions of compassion too far. For me they are a great deal more than empty rhetoric; they are genuine revelations, brought about by genuine suffering, but only permeating his consciousness intermittently, and even more rarely permeating to the level of action. It is not simply that his sanity waxes and wanes, but that he has trouble allowing this new sense of empathy to expand beyond certain comfortable boundaries. It is one thing for him to feel for the "Poor naked wretches," wheresoe'er they may be, and to forgive the manifestly innocent Cordelia. It is another to acknowledge his wrongs toward Gonoril and Regan.

I am once again made mindful of Harry Berger's suggestion that the characters in this play attempt to sell the audience on a particular version of the truth—of their experiences, of their motives, and of the meaning of both—that suits their own conceits but that should not be accepted unreservedly. In the case of Lear, Berger says,

> Lear tells himself of his own folly and others' knavery, generalizes his vision to all mankind, sees himself as Mankind, speaks as one who has learned to love too late and has attained wisdom through suffering.
>
> What the text shows, as I read it, is that these are stories they prefer to hear about themselves, rather than others that strike closer to home and that they would find harder to bear. (66)

I think that in the storm Lear does begin to realize what is demanded of him as a human being and a king, and tries, in the time left to him, to present himself as a changed man, a member of the suffering minority that makes a disinterested sacrifice of self. But he is not wholly changed, and so I want to avoid describing Lear as a repentant sinner who has acknowledged his crimes and turned a fresh leaf. Instead, he is a confused, broken man who is both complicit in the system of victimization, and one of its casualties, and dies without ever really sorting out the distinction. Even his statement "take physic, pomp," is framed not as a moment of self-diagnosis—though it is that too—but as a command to the class of people who have ejected him.

There is a degree of Edgar's manipulative victimhood in Lear's suffering. While in the hovel, protected from the storm's blast (and all it implies metaphorically), Lear makes a statement that epitomizes his confusion, when he moans that the cruelty he received at their hands must be "Judicious punishment" for having produced such "pelican daughters" (11.64; 65). Any editor will point out that the pelican, which was thought to nourish its hatchlings with its own blood, was a medieval emblem for Christ's relationship to his church. I think the allusion bears looking at more closely, in light of Debora Shuger's discussion of sixteenth-century Calvinist passion narratives. Shuger explains that the pelican

emblem was used by English Reformed writers who tended to describe Christ's death in untraditionally stark, disquieting, morbid terms. The reader is not able to observe the crucifixion from a distant perch of supposed detachment; instead, he is rudely hurled into a welter of pain and complicity, forced to see through the eyes of both tortured victim and victimizing torturer. The pelican motif accentuates this. Shuger—who makes the connection to Lear's statement herself, in passing—explains that the narratives shift the focus from the praiseworthy selflessness of the parent to the violence of the chicks,

> who tear out the bowels and womb (the terms are Nashe's) of their parent. The image of maternal sacrifice, rewritten as filial ingratitude, emblematizes the guilty awareness of one's own cruelty. It sketches in miniature the shift from the pathos of the late medieval passions to the problematic violence of the Calvinist passion narratives. The sacrificial pelican, like the martyr, recedes, displaced by vicious little birds. (*Bible* 114-5)

Shuger writes that in the narrow confines of this bleak world-view, "one is either a victim or violent" (*Bible* 115). Just as in the vision of Christianity articulated by Weil and McCabe, there is no safe space in these narratives outside the circle of sacrificial guilt and sacrificial pain.

Lear's problem, though, is that he massively misunderstands the second half of the pelican metaphor and, by extension, the principle of "exposure" he himself acknowledged in the storm. For Lear it does not signal a "guilty awareness of [his] own cruelty'" but is rather another verbal weapon (hardly the worst he employs), a further indictment of Gonoril and Regan. He shows that he too is like the small, vicious hatchlings—a persecutor. But of course whether it is seen simply as a parent or as a type of Christ, the pelican traditionally is commended for

making the sacrifice of self, providing for its children despite the personal cost. In his seventeenth-century collection of emblems, the English poet George Wither reprinted a depiction of the pelican that was drawn by the Dutch emblematist Gabriel Rollenhagens. The emblem shows blood spurting from the pelican's breast to the upturned mouths of its chicks while, in the background, Christ is being crucified. Wither includes his own poem as commentary, which runs:

> Looke here, and marke (her sickly birds to feed)
> How freely this kind *Pelican* doth bleed.
> See, how (when other *salves* could not be found)
> To cure their sorrows, she, her selfe doth wound;
> And when this holy *Emblem*, thou shalt see,
> Lift up thy soule to him, who dy'd for thee.
> …And, in whose eyes, the teares of pitty stood,
> When he behold his own unthankful *Brood*
> His Favours, and his Mercies, then, contemne,
> When with his wings he would have brooded them:
> And, sought their endlesse peace to have confirm'd,
> Though, to procure his ruine, they were arm'd.
> To be their *Food*, himself he freely gave;
> His *Heart* was pierc'd, that he their *Soules* might save.
> Because, they disobey'd the *Sacred will*,
> He, did the *Law of Rightousnesse* fulfil;
> And, to that end (though guiltlesse he had bin)
> Was offred, for our *Universal sinne*.
> Let me Oh *God*! for ever, fixe mine eyes
> Upon the Merit of that *Sacrifize*:
> Let me retain a due commemoration
> Of those deare *Mercies, and* that bloudy *Passion*,
> Which here is meant; and, by true *Faith*, still, feed
> Upon the drops, this *Pelican* did bleed.
> (quoted Moseley 245, Wither's italics)

Though Gonoril and Regan may be like the vicious hatchlings, Lear has hardly been like the altruistic pelican, which grieves for the sins of his "unthankful *Brood*" but offers himself for their sustenance all the same. This in no way pardons Regan and Gonoril's crimes, but simply asserts that in the hovel as in the courtyard Lear

still does not fully understand that these relationships—fatherhood in particular—do not exist purely for his benefit. Just as Edgar sacrificially reduced Edmund's existence to a punishment for Gloucester (and himself), Lear's one-sided use of the pelican metaphor as a condemnation of his daughters serves only to underscore his own complicity, and his ignorance of what love requires of him.

At the death of Cordelia, Lear is confronted with the true cost of sacrifice, and what it means to be the pelican destroyed by the hatchlings. The reason Cordelia's death is so devastating to Lear, and to the audience, is directly related to the reunion scene. Their reconciliation, it is important to note, is not predicated on the sort of assessment made by a gentleman in the previous scene which so many critics seem eager to agree with:

> Thou hast one daughter
> Who redeems nature from the general curse
> Which twain hath brought her to. (20.191-3)

This statement divides Cordelia from her wicked sisters (and to a lesser extent the rest of humanity as well), by attributing to her some special transcendent otherness. When he wakes up from his long restorative sleep and sees her standing above him Lear seems eager to come to this conclusion, but she does not let him. Lear's reconciliation of Cordelia depends upon the same sense of common humanity that he sensed when he looked at Poor Tom and realized that, "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (11.90-2). Woken from his swoon Lear tells Cordelia,

> You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.
> Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
> Upon a wheel of fire. (21.43-6)

Whether or not this humility is genuine, Lear is wrong: he is not dead and in hell and the woman above him is not "a soul in bliss." Rather than coddle him, Cordelia realises this and begs him, "Sir, know me" (46). Still delusional he persists, saying "You're a spirit, I know. Where did you die?" (47). Kneeling to her father Cordelia implores him,

> O look upon me, sir,
> And hold your hands in benediction o'er me.
> No, sir, you must not kneel. (55-7)

Throughout the play Lear's instinct has always been to see his daughters as either angels or demons; Cordelia begs him for proper recognition, that he look directly at her and resist the urge toward categorization that renders her a spirit now, just as it rendered her a devil in Scene 1. Lear acknowledged in the previous scene that his own hand "smells of mortality" (20.127), now he must make the same recognition here, tentatively venturing,

> Do not laugh at me,
> For as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child, Cordelia. (65-7)

She replies, "And so I am" to which he asks, "Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not" (67, 69). The tactile contact is a vital detail—Lear touches his daughter's tears and so establishes for himself her mortality, and thus her capacity to suffer.

Thus, I cannot entirely agree with Stanley Cavell's censure of Lear in the last scene: "The final scene opens with Lear and Cordelia repeating or completing their actions in their opening scene; again Lear abdicates, and again Cordelia loves and is silent" (67). Yes, he aims to retreat with her from his cares, but there is a

different quality in the abdication he now proposes in the "let's away to prison" speech:

> We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage.
> …so we'll live
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news,
> …and we'll wear out
> In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones
> That ebb and flow by th' moon. (24.9; 11-4; 17-9)

There is no more talk of requiring a hundred knights, or any other trappings, to sustain his lion-in-winter dignity—the court, the nobility, the accoutrements of power are now an amusingly distasteful memory. Cavell writes that the speech expresses, "the same fantasy he brings on the stage with him in the first scene, the thwarting of which causes his maddened destructiveness" (69). But surely Lear's rage is due less to the ruin of his fantasy, in either case, than to the denial of what the fantasy is predicated upon—and the predicate is different in each case. In the throne room scene Lear's ultimate design might have been to throw himself on Cordelia's "kind nursery" (1.113) but the gratification of his ego was required before he would submit to it. In the latter instance, Cordelia herself is the first principle. In the first instance, Lear sacrificed the other—his daughter—rather than make the sacrifice of self supposedly entailed in accepting Cordelia's qualified declaration of love. If Cordelia had died in the throne room before uttering her refusal, Lear's heart would not have cracked with grief. Now, on his last day, he rages because he had begun (however imperfectly) to consider his daughter as a being whose value was commensurate to his own. Maynard Mack writes, "When Lear dies…with his whole being launched toward another, with even his last gasp

an expression of hope that she lives, the image before us is deeply tragic; yet it is also, in the play's terms, a kind of victory." (100)

If there is anything at all victorious about *King Lear* it is this: that Cordelia's death devastates the king as much as it does. The very fact of the anguish means that he sees her in a different way. Nevertheless, Lear does not understand this, and he dies in the throes of sacrificial confusion. Cordelia herself is not confused; she understands the ruthless logic which propels her to her death. Though very poised as she is led away to prison—"Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" (24.7)—she nevertheless explains to Lear that any resilience she might be able to summon on her own behalf cannot compensate her for his suffering: "For thee, oppressèd King, am I cast down, / Myself could else outfrown false fortune's frown" (5-6).[19] So if she is able to divest from her own painful situation, it is only because she has made so great an investment in the good of another; she does not want to die, but her investment in the other is self-sacrificial. When Lear mentions her tears in line 23 I think we are to understand that she is weeping for his sake, rather than her own. She certainly shows much greater prescience than her father, who cavalierly scoffs that his enemies will never see him weeping, not realising that very soon his friends will (23-5).

Lear's pain at the sacrifice of his daughter makes him hunger for further sacrifices as an antidote to his pain. Certainly his fury belies the earlier optimism of

[19] Harry Berger reads those lines as a "tactful oxymoron": "She means to say 'I'm sorrier for you than for myself,' but the phrase also incurs a worse meaning: 'I have been cast down on your account, defeated and imprisoned because I came to relieve your oppression" (46). I think Cordelia's tears work to offset this suspicion, and the admittedly stiff formality conveyed by the couplets in her "For thee, oppressèd king" speech. She never could "heave / [her] heart into her mouth"(1.80-1), and so the tears express what her words cannot.

his physician, who predicted that, "The great rage…is cured in him" (22.76-7). Instead, like Edgar, he takes up his sword, though unlike Edgar he has no armour to protect him. Venting his grief, he castigates those around him for what happened: "A plague upon you, murderous traitors all' (24.264). In a hopeful turn, he seems about to acknowledge his own role and include himself in the blame, saying, "I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever" (265). But further lines show precisely how he thinks himself culpable. Lear does not think he could have saved Cordelia by having demanded more of himself than he had of her, he thinks he could have saved her with greater violence. He tells the dead woman, "I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee" (24.269), as if the soldier's death could recoup the smallest fraction of his loss, and he next implies that the sharper reflexes and stronger arms he used to enjoy would have made the difference:

> I have seen the day with my good biting falchion
> I would have made them skip. I am old now,
> And these same *crosses* spoil me" (271-3; my italics).

This is a stunningly loaded turn of phrase—Lear refers to his failures by using the quintessential metaphor for the sacrifice of self. But the true "crosses" that he has proven unequal to are not physical trials, but the moments of daily self-denial, when he might have expended himself for his daughter rather than requiring her to expend herself for him. In *Pseudo-Martyr* Donne uses the term "crosses" in this very sense, when he explains that true martyrdom is suffered daily by all Christians, whether or not they die for the faith:

> So it is the treasure and crowne of Martyredome seposed for them, who take up devoutly the *crosses* of this life, whether of poverty, or anguished consciences, or obedience of lawes which seeme burdenous, and distastefull to them; for all that time a man serves

> for his freedome, and God keeps his reckoning, from the inchoation of his Martyredome, which was from his first submission to these tribulations. (32; my italics).

Spoiled beyond his expectation by the crosses, Lear reaches again for the sword. Shakespeare has made the line between good and evil distinct, but the cost of goodness is terrifying. Cordelia, like Christ, is an antitype of the pelican who is willingly torn by the hatchlings—and here I am talking less about her death at the hands of her enemies than of the vulnerability and anguish she admits at her *father's* downfall. Lear is now torn apart as she falls herself: this is his Christian tragedy.

"Who Ever Perished, Being Innocent?":

King Lear's interrogation of sacrificial violence is complex. It asks us not only to sympathize with the innocent victim, but to understand why she suffers, and to recognize how deeply the sacrificial mechanism is imbedded in the social order. In this way *King Lear* is truly anti-sacrificial; it does not rest content with simplistic moralism. As bad as Cornwall, Regan, Edmund and Gonoril are, plain villainy is never suggested as the reason for their crimes. This is very clear in the worst crime of all—Cordelia's death. In a significant exchange in the final scene Shakespeare makes it plain that this sacrificial compulsion is not simply an aberration manifesting itself in a perversely "evil" character, but rather is a cultural first principle. Edmund suggests as much when he charges the captain with Lear and Cordelia's murder:

> Come hither, captain. Hark.
> Take thou this note. Go follow them to prison.
> One step I have advanced thee; if thou dost
> As this instructs thee, thou dost make thy way

> To noble fortunes…
> Either say thou'lt do't,
> Or thrive by other means. (24.26-30; 33-4)

The metaphor of steps is perfect, offering an image of individual advancement, whatever the cost to the individuals who are trodden on. Promotion for the captain (as it has been for Edmund) is over the backs of others. And the captain's reply shows how comfortable he is with this logic: "I cannot draw a cart, / Nor eat dried oats. If it be man's work, I'll do't" (37-8).[20] This is pure mercenary heartlessness, but the captain is quite obviously inculcated with this philosophy and understands that such gristly "work" is the proper road for advancement. The strained circumstances of war and political upheaval may make what Edmund calls the "means" more severe, but the logic is consistent with what he understands.

King Lear exposes the root causes of the sacrificial order, the emotional and psychological patterns that allow the captain to view the murder of a young woman and an old man as "man's work." This recognition of the systemic nature of sacrificial violence—that Edgar is "no less in blood" than Edmund—perfects its radicalism. The tragedy refuses to condone, even as it enacts, the scapegoating of the villains. No one has set a more effective precedent in exposing the "darker purposes" of all the characters in this play than Harry Berger Jr., yet Berger himself understands the danger in doing so:

> I am also eager to resist the temptation to assume a role that the play ironically offers us—ironically, because its representation of the role puts it in question. The play, that is, tests us by tempting us to adopt the unpleasant perspective of the ethical judge who voyeuristically penetrates the speech of the "good" characters and searches out the wickedness that flaws the heart…. The play puts

[20] It also shows how extraordinary the resistance of the first servant really was.

> us in jeopardy so that we may discover our own complicity, our kinship with what we condemn, and come to "see feelingly" without, however, refusing to see critically. It encourages us to assign responsibility; it does not encourage us to confuse this with assigning guilt. (52)

This tragedy is centred on the condemnation of sacrificial violence, and that means not only condemning the blinding of Gloucester or the hanging of Cordelia, but also resisting the sacrificial solution to such crimes. No one's death can make up for Cordelia's.

When Albany learns of Edmund's death he waves it off, remarking, "That's but a trifle here," (289). We in the audience who have witnessed Edmund's crimes and are focused on the dead Cordelia and the dying Lear may quite naturally agree. When, a short while before that, Albany pronounces Gonoril and Regan's deaths the "justice of the heavens" that "touches us not with pity" (225; 226) we will also likely agree. Who could pause to spare a thought for Edmund's passing while Lear weeps over the body of Cordelia? Who could feel pity for Gonoril and Regan, who were not innocent victims as Cordelia was, but victims of their own hateful machinations? Yet to agree with Albany is to deny what Berger calls, "our own complicity, our kinship with what we condemn." Albany is seeking sacrificial closure that the tragedy as a whole resists. When he rationalizes the villains' deaths as the justice of the heavens he makes a statement worthy of Eliphaz the Temanite who says to his suffering friend Job, "who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off? Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same." (Job 4: 7-8). But if they got what they deserve, did Cordelia too?

Before Lear returns Albany does a strange thing, ordering an attendant to "Produce [the sisters'] bodies, be they alive or dead" (224). He points them out to the newly arrived Kent (233), who cannot understand his satisfaction—"Alack, why thus?" (234). The duke seems to be trying to make an example of the pair's villainy, exposing them to posthumous censure. But it results in a very curious final tableau. The audience that feels such pity for Cordelia and so little for Gonoril and Regan are confronted with all three bodies, and despite the frantic attempts of Lear to convince himself otherwise, all three are equally dead. Cordelia was better than her wicked sisters, and Lear's terrible question, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (300-1) is entirely reasonable. But in asking it Lear is forgetting the very premise of his reconciliation with Cordelia: the denial of her separateness.

Now, with Cordelia dead, Lear tries once again to believe in her difference, to believe that the gods have thrown incense on *this* sacrifice, to believe that the feather will stir and all sorrows will be redeemed. Peter Womack has written that what fundamentally distinguishes Nahum Tate's melodramatic rewriting of *King Lear* from Shakespeare's play is that Tate applies cause-and-effect logic to all the characters, their speeches and their motives. As Womack has it, Tate drags the play into the Enlightenment at the cost of its transcendence. Tate gives us Cordelia as a purely rational being with clear, deliberate ends, whereas Shakespeare gives us "the stage image of a saint," a woman who is "adorned with fantastically wrought hagiographical description and verbal echoes of Christ, and appearing to the ruined king as a soul in bliss to lead him out of purgatory" (104-5). Cordelia is

undeniably surrounded by the language of saintliness, but Womack goes too far when he claims that, "Shakespeare's Cordelia does not inhabit the probable world" (103); indeed, the world she inhabits is governed by the exacting probability of sacrificial logic. Cordelia dies without transcendence and so denies Lear the transcendence that would ameliorate her sacrifice.

In this she is like Foxe's martyrs, who are shown to be very ordinary in death, and not at all superhuman. Hugh Latimer, for example, goes to the stake looking decidedly shabby, but his humble clothing has a polemical effect. In contrast to the finery of his friend Ridley, Latimer wore,

> a poor Bristow frieze frock all worn, with his buttoned cap, and a kerchief on his head, all ready to the fire, a new long shroud hanging over his hose down to the feet, which at the first sight, stirred men's hearts to rue upon them, beholding…the calamity whereunto they were fallen. (11, 1769)

Latimer's worn garb connects him to the majority of the witnesses; it is an acknowledgement of his vulnerability. In a different way Ridley, though dressed as befits a bishop, acknowledges the same thing. He makes a point of giving his fine clothing to his brother-in-law who, Foxe explains, had used his own money to provide Ridley with "necessaries" during his imprisonment. Foxe continues,

> He gave away besides, divers other small things to gentlemen standing by, and divers of them pitifully weeping, as to Sir Henry Lea, he gave a new groat, and to divers of my Lord Williams' gentlemen, some napkins, some nutmegs, and races of ginger, his [sun]dial, and such other things as he had about him, to every one that stood next him. (1769)

Finally, he is left wearing nothing but his shirt (1770),[21] having divested himself of everything else. The account is poignant; in distributing these minor valuables Ridley is affirming the bonds which connect him to the community of onlookers. He does this most powerfully just before the fire is kindled, when he speaks to the blacksmith chaining him to the stake.

> The smith took a chain of iron, and brought the same about both Doctor Ridley's, and Master Latimer's middles: and as he was knocking in a staple, Doctor Ridley took the chain in his hand, and shaked the same, for it did gird in his belly, and looking aside to the smith, said: good fellow knock it in hard, for the flesh will have his course. (1770)

Ridley is not expecting a miracle; no gift of supernatural fortitude will prevent him from feeling the full pain of the flames, and recoiling from them. Unwilling to allow Catholic controversialists to question his faith, Ridley asks to be firmly bound.

For the characters of *King Lear*, as for Foxe's martyrs, suffering indicates common humanity, rather than transcendent separateness. There have been many examples of its levelling power, but the greatest is Cordelia. Shakespeare undercuts any attempt to do what Lear (and others) have done since the first scene: separate Cordelia from her sisters. Like Lear on the heath, she is shown to be tragically ordinary in her final suffering—her life was indeed a miracle, but only for the same reasons as the life of the blinded, broken outlaw's. Her death is terrible because it is not miraculous but mundane. Like Christ, indeed, like every sacrificial victim, she dies forsaken, robbed of all transcendence. Now, the feather stirs at her lips no

[21] Before being chained Ridley asks Latimer whether he should wear his "truss" (a jacket). Latimer tells him no, as "it will put you to more pain, and the truss will do a poor man good" (1770).

more than it would have at the lips of Gonoril, Regan, or Edmund whose deaths, we are told, are trifles. Any attempt to differentiate the deserving from the undeserving, to determine who is more sinned against than sinning and by how much is foiled by this last scene.

Small wonder that the play is so famously painful—"All dark and comfortless" (14.82). In *King Lear* Shakespeare offers a tragedy without catharsis. It is not simply that Cordelia dies, but that her death is ruthlessly demystified. In the final moments of the play she has not redeemed nature from the general curse her sisters brought it to; she has been dragged down to their level. With unnerving honesty *King Lear* offers a solution to a culture of entrenched persecution that is so terrible it can hardly be faced: the cross and not the sword. Like the servant in the blinding scene it seems that Lear cannot renounce the sacrifice of the other—properly valuing his daughter (and ultimately, one would hope, the other people in his life)—without making the sacrifice of the self, dying when she dies. In the storm Kent had articulated the sacrifice of the self for Lear, explaining that he would rather his own heart were broken than the king's. Sadly, both hearts are broken, along with many others, with none of the metaphysical answers which would allow one to rationalize them. All Shakespeare seems to offer by way of comfort are a few moments of resistance to the persecutory order; they are fleeting, but there is some balm offered to the audience in that they are so intense, carrying with them the dream of a different way of life: Gloucester and the old tenant trying with equal fervour to help one another at a cost to themselves; Edgar offering his hand to the father who had wronged him; perhaps most poignantly of

all, Lear and Cordelia kneeling to one another (21, 55; 57). Lear hopes for a future with Cordelia where, "When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness" (24.10-1). This is no platitude—it is a radical statement, it is Shakespeare's solution to the sacrificial crisis. It sounds remarkably close to the society Martin Luther imagines in *Secular Authority*. In this treatise Luther tells the Duke of Saxony that, while he can see the good sense of a secular kingdom having secular policeman, "Among Christians there shall and can be no authority; but all are alike and subject to one another." In the truly Christian social order Luther envisions, only Christ will be pre-eminent, for in the suffering Church, "no one desires to be the superior, but each the other's inferior" (391-2). But whereas Luther believes that this ideal society—each poor, forked animal kneeling to his fellows—will come about in God's good time, for Shakespeare it remains confined to the small moments of mutual sufferance between the fools and madmen who stand outside the castle gates, lashed by wind and rain.

Chapter Three:
Tragic Participation: John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*

> The minute he saw the blood, he was sipping animality, and turned no more away. With eyes glued to the spectacle… He took a complicit joy in the fighting and was drunk with delight at the cruelty. No longer the person he was when he entered, he was now entered into the crowd, at one with those who forced him.
>
> St. Augustine speaking of his friend Alypius, who could not resist the power of the gladiatorial combats. *Confessions* 6, 14 (122)

> Violence is a relationship.
>
> René Girard, "Violence, Victims and Christianity"

Now I want to turn to the two tragedies of John Webster, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, both of which were first staged in the decade following *King Lear*. The plays are particularly appropriate given the claims of this study, which is in part an attempt to plot a course between two opposing critical errors regarding Christianity in Jacobean tragedy. On the one hand is the assumption that if and when religion appears it does so as an encoded doctrinal statement. On the other is the politicized interpretation of religion, which assumes that early modern Christianity is aligned with temporal power, so that when it is present in the theatre it stands as nothing more than the object of a radically sceptical critique. Both of these tendencies seem to be particularly egregious in criticism of Webster, and I want to show that neither properly accounts for Webster's Christian tragedy. The issue here, as with *Lear*, is not doctrine, but the response to violence, and both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess* are part of a cultural conversation over the place of sacrifice in a Christian society. I am not interested in finding a sprinkling of

Calvinist motifs and tenets, which seem to chafe against the many disturbing and disquieting parts of the stories, but rather Webster's total vision, which I contend amounts to a meditation on the place of violence in early modern religious culture.

My contention in this chapter is that Webster's dramatization of the sacrificial crisis is triggered when the audience realizes its own connection to the spectacle of violence. I describe this connection as "participation," a loaded term in the theological climate of Reformation England. Webster fills both tragedies with metatheatrical language that reminds the audience that they are partakers of the violence he depicts. In *The White Devil* this works to contradict what I call the lie of non-involvement, the fantasy that a spectator is somehow removed or detached from the violence he witnesses. Webster breaks the spell of unselfconsciousness, and in so doing reminds the witnesses of their proximity to the violence and their affinity to the other participants. In *The Duchess of Malfi* he intensifies this project, by focusing on the suffering of an undeserving, deeply sympathetic heroine, and the doomed struggle of one of her killers, Daniel Bosola, against his own participation. In this way, Webster shows his engagement with the crisis in English religious culture over sacrificial persecution.

"One Body, Many Members":

Webster seems especially to relish denying what the audience and, by extension, the critics expect of him. His dramatic energy, we might think, comes from disrupting consensus, rather than creating it, from shocking, unsettling, or simply confusing the spectator. This has been implied by innumerable critics of the plays, whatever

their approach. Webster subverts pieties, flouts conventions and denies expectations, and he does so with a consistently lurid fascination over the more disturbing manifestations of human behaviour: cruelty, compulsion, deceit and vice. T. S. Eliot's lines summarize Webster as a connoisseur of the macabre:

> Webster was much possessed by death
> And saw the skull beneath the skin….
> He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
> Tightening its lusts and luxuries. (1-2; 7-8)

This could stand as the representative epigram for criticism of Webster's tragedies in general, with the "skull" signifying any number of dark fixations, on any number of planes, whether the metaphysical, the sexual, or even the aesthetic.

Charles R. Forker, whose critical biography of Webster takes its name from the second line of Eliot's poem, discovers a playwright fascinated with the intersection between love and death—between lusts and dead limbs, to use Eliot's phrasing. In his Introduction, Forker explains that this intersection

> is a motif that profoundly informs Webster's language, his characterization, his dramatic construction, his special kind of irony, his theatrical texture and tone, and both his tragic and comic views of life. This pervasive union of opposites therefore has the deepest kinds of implication for our judgment of Webster's uniqueness—for his ideas about sexuality, psychology, politics, social relationship, religion, and even cosmology. (x)

So in *The White Devil*, for instance, we see how a sick society perverts the relationships between individuals:

> All of the institutions of a theoretically Christian society—family, palace, church, court of law are seen to be in an advanced state of disintegration, honeycombed by viciousness, corruption, and hypocrisy. In this climate, those who seek to order or fulfill their lives through human bonds reap only cruelty and disaster. (263)

As Forker has it, Webster is a serial violator on every plane, attacking the political order, traditional morality, and even literary convention.[1] One might feel that this is a tragedian who delights in prying up the rocks to watch the sordid scrambling of the insects below.

Forker is not the only critic that leaves one with a sense of gratuitous morbidity. For instance, Karin S. Codden in "*The Duchess of Malfi*: Tyranny and Spectacle in Jacobean Drama," attempts to locate the depictions of madness in the play within a wider Jacobean dramatic context. Coddon's interpretation of Webster is complicated: his drama is made to seem both scathingly critical of his culture but also strangely apathetic in terms of its own capacity to challenge it. Coddon claims that Webster's depictions of insanity join in "the relentless Jacobean deflation of absolutist mythology" (26), and argues that, "The mad tragic hero articulates and embodies untenable contradictions in an anachronistic

[1] Indeed, Forker is one of many critics to suggest that Webster's social and political morbidity extends to his artistic craftsmanship. For Forker, the unsettling coupling of love and death is echoed by a tendency to intermingle literary conventions: "The deliberate mixing of forms imparts to *The White Devil* a disorienting sense of fragmentation and uncertainty, a feeling that experience is puzzlingly discontinuous, its perspectives wrenched and shifting, its values unstable and self-canceling. Webster can therefore present the love between Bracciano and Vittoria as both a heroic passion and a sordid coupling of an ambitious 'strumpet' with her lustful victim" (254). This is common critical tendency. In a 1958 article, Inga-Stina Ekeblad borrowed a telling phrase from T. S. Eliot. Eliot had claimed that "The art of the Elizabethans is an impure art," by which he meant that an Elizabethan poet's aim "was to attain complete realism without surrendering any of the advantages which as artists they observed in unrealistic conventions" (*Essays* 96, 97). Ekeblad finds this concept of "impurity" particularly appropriate for Webster, noting that his tragedy "plays over the whole gamut between firm convention and complete realism," juxtaposing a highly artificial dumb-show with the disarmingly naturalistic preoccupation of a doomed mother for her little boy's cold. She argues that the "confusion of convention and realism" (254) is a particular strength of Webster's; that his most important scenes, such as the dungeon scenes in *The Duchess of Malfi*, show him "utiliz[ing] the very impurity of his art" (267). I do not deny that Webster likes to defy generic conventions and I certainly agree that his plays contemplate questions of violence, death, lust and deceit. But too often the implication, suggested by a word like "impurity," is that Webster's drama amounts to merely a compelling by-product or symptom of his neuroses, rather than something deliberate. Neither Forker nor Ekeblad would make such a claim, yet their language tends to suggest as much.

ideology…a tacit perception of the inadequacy of the dominant in fashioning subjects" (27-8). In a strange twist, Coddon suggests that this amounts to madness becoming a metonym for the dramatic spectacle itself (28), a kind of meaningful meaninglessness as "the dramas become themselves strangely useless, forgoing even the perfunctory claim to edification or affirmation of 'moral order'" (27). Of course, my contention is that Coddon's assumptions about the subversion of dominant ideology are the true anachronism, and that Webster's scepticism towards authority comes from an important facet of the religious culture (and moral order) which Coddon suggests he is rebelling against.[2]

Is this just a grotesque kind of titillation, or is there something more fundamental going on? Several pieces of materialist and New Historicist criticism have done valuable work in attempting to demonstrate that Webster's darkness and fragmentation amount to a coherent, deliberate response to the problems within his society. However, while this is in itself a worthwhile project, such criticism has tended to misunderstand Webster's relationship to English religious culture as one of opposition. Naturally, a Marxist critic like Jonathan Dollimore will see an attitude of political resistance in Webster's tragedies, with conservative institutions and ideologies, including the church, subjected to a withering blast of nihilistic disenchantment. Dollimore contends that in *The White Devil* Webster's process of fragmentation is a deliberate contradiction to classical models of tragic heroism:

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[2] Indeed, for Coddon Webster's tragedy anticipates modern political consciousness in its removal of madness from the individual, private sphere (as seen in Elizabethan dramas like *Hamlet*) to the social margins. This makes the forward-looking Webster a kind of Leveler, born two generations early: "This disciplining and displacement of the violence within is a necessary condition for the emergence of the reasoned resistance that will make revolution—and regicide—feasible in seventeenth-century England" (27).

> In no other play is the identity of the individual shown to depend so much on social interaction; even as they speak protagonists are, as it were, off-centre. It is a process of displacement which shifts attention from individuals to their context and above all to a dominating power structure which constructs them as either agents or victims of power, or both. (231)

Extending his *King Lear* argument, which I discussed in the previous chapter, Dollimore suggests that the anti-heroism, the violence and the "dislocated identities" (244) of the principal characters give the lie to Christian and Classical assumptions about the centrality of the individual, and thus expose the carnivorous power-relations at the heart of Jacobean society. In Dollimore's analysis, Webster's social criticism includes not just rulers and institutions, but the moral philosophy that upholds them. *The White Devil*, according to Dollimore, exposes traditional morality as a threadbare cloak used to shroud exploitation. Dollimore makes this claim by juxtaposing the seemingly ineffective piety of Cornelia with the brazen criminality of her children Flamineo and Vittoria:

> Whereas Cornelia internalises an oppressive conception of virtue, one which keeps her dutifully subservient, Vittoria and Flamineo reject virtue to become, like Lodovico, vicious. It is the tragic contradiction of this society that for those in it virtue involves false-consciousness while the struggle for true consciousness entails viciousness. The crimes of Flamineo and Vittoria reveal not their essential criminality but the operations of a criminal society. (237)

So vice and violence have become a necessary means of resistance to a broken social order.

In her monograph, *Between Worlds: A Study of the Plays of John Webster*, Dena Goldberg follows a similar line of argument in tracing Webster's shifting relationship to the law in his dramatic corpus. In *The Duchess of Malfi* and especially *The White Devil*, Goldberg sees a transgressive spirit, which resists the stifling of

natural passion by the external restraints of law and convention. She contends that Webster, disgusted with the hypocrisy of his society, and sceptical of established morality, forces us "to sympathize with those individuals whose passions and aspirations force them to defy this repressive establishment" (9). Goldberg is particularly interested in how Webster forces the audience to sympathize with different characters in turn, some of whom are morally repugnant. Of *The White Devil*, Goldberg writes,

> Our efforts to identify with a character or a group are repeatedly thwarted. When Vittoria has won us over in the arraignment scene, we are almost immediately asked to contend emotionally with the grief of Isabella's son. If we tend to identify with Flamineo, the responsive chord must be at least partially severed when he murders his brother. Even our distaste for the avengers is undermined when Francisco, in the mask of Mulinassar, becomes a sensitive observer of life. The play seems deliberately fashioned to threaten our system of values, whatever that may be. Webster seems to say: "you can't even tell the good guys from the bad guys, so how can you pretend to know right from wrong?" (78-9)

This is the crucial misunderstanding too often made about Webster's tragedy. Goldberg describes the emotional inconsistency of the play very accurately, but her conclusions are untenable. Certainly, Webster's darkness and dislocation are part of a systematic social critique, but this critique depends upon the audience's agreement over "our system of values"; there is no moral ambiguity surrounding the Cardinal's cynical attempt to destroy Vittoria through circumstantial evidence and slander; there is even less surrounding the murders of Isabella or Marcello.

The assumption, which I mentioned earlier, that Webster's drama works by disrupting consensus is only half true: yes, these tragedies do complicate the categories of "good guys" and "bad guys"; however, they do not anticipate a post-

modern critique of "right and wrong." We sympathize with Vittoria and Bracchiano, Bosola and even Ferdinand, despite the disquiet or even disgust their actions produce, and that "despite" is the touchstone of Webster's sacrificial crisis, and his radicalism. Webster invites condemnation of characters' actions, but inhibits condemnation of the characters themselves; this is his Christian tragedy. The arguments made by Goldberg and Dollimore are valuable insofar as they recognize that Webster systematically impedes judgement; he complicates the sacrificial instinct latent in the audience members that sees violence as a fitting solution. In the first chapter I argued that the doctrine of the persecuted church, so influential to the national religious discourse, renders untenable the assumption that early modern Christianity legitimates the political authorities. The work of Foxe in particular exemplifies the radicalism of the Beatitudes: the last are first, the great are brought low, and the poor and marginalized speak truth to power. The collective violence that confirms and unifies the majority by expelling the minority is indicted as abhorrent and antichristian. Following Foxe, Webster constructs his tragedy around the disruption of collective violence (no matter who the target is), and the denial of sacrificial satisfaction, or catharsis. The fragmented depiction of violence in *The White Devil* and the unsatisfying, incomplete revenge, as well as the sacrifice of a woman who is technically guilty but fundamentally innocent in *The Duchess of Malfi*, reveal Webster's engagement with the anti-sacrificial strain of Christianity within his culture.

Certainly, there have been critical efforts to understand the religious content of Webster's drama. The most notable is Huston Diehl's chapter on *The*

Duchess of Malfi, in her study *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage*. Diehl's argument, like my own, uses Foxe to demonstrate Webster's Protestant *bona fides*. Diehl summarizes:

> Perhaps more than any other play written for the Elizabethan and Jacobean commercial theaters, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) is deeply informed by English Calvinism. It explores Calvinist notions of predestination through the character of Bosola, an alienated malcontent who is unable "to do good when" he has "a mind to it." It raises the issue, prominent in Calvin, of the conflict between a corrupt ruler and the individual conscience. It draws on early Protestant satires of the Roman clergy, depicting the Cardinal as a hypocritical, sexually promiscuous, and morally corrupt man who spies on loved ones, betrays servants, and kills mistresses without compunction. And in its final act, the ruins of an ancient abbey elicit an elegiac meditation on the temporality and corruption of the traditional Church. (182-3)

Diehl goes on to analyze the play in terms of her argument about the Protestant response to iconography and spectacle. Thus, she contends that Webster, like Foxe, sanitizes the visual arts, cleansing them of idolatry. While Diehl's argument centres on iconoclasm, and mine centres on sacrifice, they overlap in that Diehl is interested in the concept of witnessing—in particular, the problems associated with witnessing violence. For Diehl, Webster is concerned not only with those who act and those who suffer, but also those who observe. This is a problem Webster's characters give voice to repeatedly, perhaps most clearly in Daniel Bosola who finds himself both an agent and a witness of the catastrophe:

> Through the character of Bosola, Webster thus explores the relation between looking and acting (in both senses of the word). How, he asks, is playacting akin to acting in the world? In what way does watching a representation of a violent act implicate the spectator in that act of violence? How is watching a play an action with moral consequences? What are the consequences of witnessing acts of cruelty and feeling no pity? And what difference does pity make? (199-200)

These are important questions, and they are posed not only by Webster but by Foxe. Looking at both the images and the text of *The Acts and Monuments*, Diehl discusses several points in the martyrology where Foxe stresses the impact of martyrdom on the beholders: "seeing itself is an act that will be judged by an all-seeing and all-knowing God" (193).

An audience to an act of sacrifice is never detached and distanced, never uninvolved or outside. And for Foxe and Webster this is true of represented, as well as actual, violence. Diehl understands that Foxe's accounts challenge the reader—with pictures and descriptions—just as the martyrs themselves challenged the watching crowds. Foxe writes to commemorate the dead, but even more to edify the living. Do the readers reject what they have seen, or do they accept it, like Julins Palmer, converted at Ridley and Latimer's execution and martyred himself a year later (12, 1934-40)? Diehl writes, "Witnessing…is a crucial element in Foxe's drama of reform, situating the readers at the very sites of execution and providing a way of experiencing suffering and death" (191). Webster occupies the same territory, insofar as he makes his tragedy not simply a spectacle to be observed, but a ritual to be experienced. Diehl rightly notes his fixation with his audience, and how he stages situations wherein one character observes the violence of another. Diehl explains that,

> Critical commentary has tended to ignore the distinctive way Webster structures the audience's sight through the repeated use of on-stage spectators. I would like to suggest that the presence of these fictional spectators is a metadramatic technique that constructs the real audience as participants, active witnesses to the action performed on stage. Engaged in watching characters watch, as well as act, Webster's audiences cannot help but attend to their own roles

> as watchers, spectators. As a result, they become aware of how their watching implicates them in the action. (195)

And this goes beyond a simple motif of voyeurism; in both tragedies there is a prominent meta-theatrical strain: this is a self-conscious tragedian, deeply concerned with the violence he choreographs, and its effect on the witnesses and himself. Watching the deaths he has commissioned, Bracciano shows all the relish of a sadistic audience member; Lodovico and Francisco describe themselves as tragedians as they plot murder; Bosola and the Duchess portray themselves as unwilling tragic actors. The characters never let the audience members forget that they are consumers of sacrifice.

Indeed, my chief criticism of Diehl's discussion of *The Duchess of Malfi* is that it does not push these insights about witnessing and watching far enough. Yes, Webster is concerned with the involvement of his audience. But this amounts to something more radical than "reflexively engaging his spectators in acts of looking, spying, and judging" (200). I want to suggest that the Jacobeans might have understood their involvement with the tragedies through the concept of participation. Earlier I quoted a passage where Diehl referred to the audience as participants, but the full implication this word had in Reformation England needs to be examined. Webster's drama is powerfully self-reflexive, requiring the audience member to examine his or her own motives and assumptions. But this is an intellectual end, and I think the relationship these tragedies conceive of with their audiences is metaphysical or, I should say, sacramental.

The word "participation" is particularly significant in the context of Reformation theological disputes over the status of the Eucharist. St. Paul

describes communicants as "participating" in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10: 16, NIV), but whether this was to be understood in the absolute terms of Aquinas, the symbolic terms of Zwingli, or the mediated interpretations of Luther and Calvin was the single most vexed question of Reformation. In Webster's England the concept of participation became central to the sacramental theology of Richard Hooker. In *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* Hooker develops what would eventually become the "Anglican" theory of the Eucharist, and in it the way in which Christ, the believers, and the communion elements "participate" in one another is crucial. In unpacking Christ's notoriously enigmatic statements, "this is my body," and "this is my blood," Hooker explains that there are three possible interpretations: there is the Ubiquitarian theory of the Lutherans, whereby the bread is filled with Christ's spirit by reason of his omnipresence; there is Aquinas' Transubstantiation, where the bread actually is "the very true and natural substance of [his] body" (294); and finally there is Hooker's own theory, where Christ participates with the bread and the believer in the moment of faithful consumption, so that Christ's statement at the Last Supper really means,

> *This hallowed foode, through concurrence of divine power, is in veritie and truth, unto faithful receivers, instrumentallie a cause of that mysticall participation, whereby I make myself whollie theires, so I give them in hande an actuall possession of all such saving grace as my sacrificed bodie can yeeld, and as their soules do presently need, this is "to them and in them" my bodie*. (*Laws* 5, 341; Hooker's italics)

The truth of participation, then, is in the precise triangulation of Christ, bread and church: Christ filling the faithful communicant as the bread is being taken rather than filling the bread first and then the believer at one remove. It is not a question of a communicant passively receiving the miracle of the sacrament; he is part of the

miracle. Hooker emphasizes that participation in the Eucharist as something intensely interactive.[3]

Hooker's moderate Reformed explanation of sacramental participation sheds real light on the ways in which an early modern audience might have understood their experience in the theatre. I am certainly not suggesting, as early New Historicists tended to do, that the stage offered a form of compensation for a citizenry that could no longer experience the ritual fulfilments of their Catholic ancestors—Hooker's Protestant theory would carry little weight in that case—but instead that his understanding of participation offered them a way of interpreting their experience of the theatre and Webster's dramatic project. I am not the first to do so. In a 1991 essay Joel Altman offered a reading of Shakespeare's *Henry V* which used Hooker's participation as a way of understanding "the play's power in terms of its crafted interaction with the needs of its players and its first audiences" (3). Altman too describes the theatre as a kind of sacrificial ritual, in which the participating audience confront, through King Harry's martial rhetoric, their ambivalent feelings toward a particular historical crisis: in this case Essex and Elizabeth's Irish war. Eucharistic participation enables Altman to explain the audience's uncomfortable engagement with the king, who famously "participates" with his people, in taverns, on the battlefield, or by offering them his very body—"a little touch of Harry" around their campfires (Prologue, 4.47)—and the French

[3] It is worth remembering that Reformed theology argued that the Communion sacrament should be understood and partaken of as a meal, shared between Christ and his people, rather than a rite that they witnessed from afar. Iconoclastic acts like the removal of communion rails, and the replacement of altars with simple tables made churchgoers even more like participants rather than spectators. See Horton Davies, 287. George Herbert's famous lyric, "Love" (III) is an example of the sense of almost domestic intimacy reformers sought to cultivate between God and the communicants.

enemy. Altman is fascinated by corporality in the play, the way the actor who embodies King Henry shares himself with the other players and the audience, thereby implicating their bodies in the spectacle as well as their minds: "Harry thus becomes, both for his troops and Shakespeare's audience, the chief participant in a national sacrificial ritual, the French become the host they feast upon" (29). And the theatre-goers become a part of Harry's campaign, a vexed and ambivalent contingent, their reservations over England's imperial ambitions in conflict with the king's rhetoric. Altman writes, "By means of an embracing ritual gesture, Shakespeare has joined past to present, audience to soldiery, in an honourable fellowship transcending time and space" (16).

Anthony Dawson expands Altman's argument in order to "develop a new way of thinking about theatrical reception, suggesting that the audience realized the dramatic truth of the performance by virtue of its communal response" (3). In so doing, Dawson engages more closely with Hooker's specific definition of sacramental participation, emphasizing the importance of the recipients to the theologian. The players and the audience are dependant on one another; of course, this is not a seamless process—the audience members know very well that they are watching something artificial and staged. Dawson does an admirable job explaining how the enigmatic position Hooker takes makes his theory so appropriate as an analogue for the experience of theatre-going: "The actor by participating his body, creates his part, constructs the person he represents; the audience participates the actor, exchanging its hold on ordinary reality for an embodied, but also of course impersonated, passion" (27). He posits a sacramental

link between the actor who offers himself up to the participants—the consumers—of his dramatic performance: "At the same time, by a peculiarly theatrical magic, the body of the actor, in the person of the character, participates in the process, imparting his flesh to the raucous spectators at the Rose in a temporary and secular re-enactment of Eucharistic communality" (13). This does not mean that anyone involved confused the theatre with the Eucharist, but that the same sort of bond was imagined.

What kind of bond? While I am certainly not claiming an actual spiritual bond I am suggesting something more than a metaphoric or conceptual one. The dramatist draws the audience into a kind of psychic relationship with the characters, so that the emotional residue of the performance includes a sense of responsibility, the uncomfortable acceptance that the witnesses have been a part of the spectacle and answerable for it, the spectacle thereby attaining a kind of momentary reality. Indeed, "psychic" may not be going far enough. Collectively, the actors and the audience embody the sacrificial crisis, and the simple physical presence of the audience members makes them complicit in the spectacle of violence. A good analogue for the process is found in the sixth book of Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine has been describing the difficulty his friend Alypius faced when he tried to disassociate himself from the gladiatorial combats he had formerly relished. One day, Augustine explains, Alypius' friends dragged him to the games against his will. He boasted to them that he would ignore the carnage on the arena floor, saying "I shall prove myself stronger than you or the games," but found the roar of the crowd "thrilled him so deeply that he could not

contain his curiosity." Opening his eyes Alypius, Augustine tells us, "fell more pitifully than the man whose fall had drawn that roar of excitement from the crowd." He writes:

> The minute he saw the blood, he was sipping animality, and turned no more away. With eyes glued to the spectacle… He took a complicit joy in the fighting and was drunk with delight at the cruelty. No longer the person he was when he entered, he was now entered into the crowd, at one with those who forced him. (122)

The passage describes a kind of ecstatic consummation between the agents, the victims and the witnesses of violence. As Augustine has it, Alypius himself is transformed by the experience of watching—he is unable to maintain any kind of detachment, but is drawn into the circle of persecutors and his very identity is changed. With its sacramental metaphors of consumption and its description of "complicit joy" the passage offers a perfect example of participation. Of course, there is no great distance between the tragic stage and the combats, though the violence is real in one and not in the other,[4] and certainly Augustine detests both spectacles, and the passions they arouse in the witnesses.[5] But if Augustine is suspicious of this participatory bond, in the theatre as well as the arena, Webster cultivates it.

Yet as he does so, Webster also makes his audience aware of their participation with those on the stage and those in the audience. Alypius could only become a consumer of the violence when he had "entered into the crowd," when he had let the duelling combatants become his victims, a sacrificial other. But

[4] Certainly another Church Father, Tertullian, makes this connection between the games and the theatre. See *De Spectaculis*, 263.
[5] For Augustine's condemnation of tragedy, and the false grief it inspires, see Book 3, Part 2 of *Confessions*.

Webster turns his tragedy decidedly away from sacrifice, into an uneasy gap where moralism and tidy sacrificial closure cannot be maintained. Webster tears down the conceit that one can ever be truly detached. His tragedy, for the viewer, becomes something more than another's story, viewed at a comfortable distance; it becomes a part of one's own story, even if one is, as it were, a very minor character. The Pauline metaphor of one body with many members comes to mind, for there is, certainly, a paradox here of union in differentiation. Webster, as much as any dramatist in his era, offers us not pure sacrifice, but the sacrificial crisis. If the audience is united, it is united in a sense of fragmentation and conflict, not in the catharsis of a successful scapegoating. As we have seen, the gallows' crowds of sixteenth-century heresy executions were likewise united in uncomfortable sacrificial participation. All were actors, all were involved with the victim, not simply the henchmen who wielded the axe, fit the noose or kindled the flames. Members of the crowd might, as individuals, be joined with the persecutors, or with the scapegoat. But in either case they partook.

The Audience on Trial—Bracciano and Vittoria:

Webster's fascination with participation is vividly demonstrated in one of the most curious and disturbing scenes in Jacobean drama: the death masques of Isabella and Camillo, where Bracciano, determined to clear away every obstacle that prevents him from marrying his lover, is both a murderer and an audience member. He commissions the death of his wife and Vittoria's husband and, with the aid of a magic dumb-show, watches them with cruel relish. In this strange scene Bracciano

manifests what could be called the lie of non-involvement: the comfortable assumption that a witness is not part of what he witnesses. Bracciano and Vittoria are known and even celebrated in Webster criticism for their unabashed determination to do anything to maintain their relationship. But beneath the impressive panache the psychological truth is more complex. They both wear a brazen mask for one another and the audience, but underneath they are deeply ashamed of their crimes, and their zeal is a function of that shame. In truth, they go to considerable lengths to justify the blood they spill as a necessary defence of their relationship. This becomes obvious in their first appearance on stage, when Vittoria tells Bracciano of a recent dream, with her pandering brother Flamineo applauding in the background:

> Methought I walked, about the mid of night,
> Into a churchyard, where a goodly yew tree
> Spread her large root in ground. Under that yew,
> As I sat sadly leaning on a grave,
> Checkered with cross-sticks, there came stealing in
> Your duchess and my husband. One of them
> A pickax bore, th'other a rusty spade,
> And in rough terms they gan to challenge me
> About this yew.
>
> [Bracciano]: That tree.
>
> [Vittoria]: This harmless yew.
> They told me my intent was to root up
> That well-grown yew, and plant i'th'stead of it
> A withered blackthorn, and for that they vowed
> To bury me alive. My husband straight
> With pickax gan to dig, and your fell duchess
> With shovel, like a Fury, voided out
> The earth and scattered bones….
> When to my rescue there arose, methought,
> A whirlwind, which let fall a massy arm
> From that strong plant,
> And both were struck dead by that sacred yew
> In that base shallow grave that was their due. (1.2.232-47; 251-55)

Vittoria's desire here is clear enough, and her auditors have no trouble discerning it. Flamineo cackles, "She hath taught him in a dream / To make away his duchess and her husband" (257-8). Bracciano draws the same conclusion and immediately puts her suggestions into practice.[6]

This speech establishes the lie of non-involvement, implying that the lovers are compelled to do what they do. Bracciano promises Vittoria to raise their relationship "above law and above scandal" (1.2.263),[7] but in this scene one can discern the need they have to escape scandal, justifying themselves as victims who are compelled to sacrifice Camillo and Isabella to save themselves (this despite the fact that the former is a gullible non-entity and the latter abject and pathologically submissive; neither poses any material threat to the adulterous liaison). Vittoria wants to suggest that her relationship with Bracciano is in itself benign: that any violence against the spouses is purely defensive. In the dream she sits passively beneath the tree as the angry pair accosts her. She denies having any desire or power to act; Camillo and Isabella declare that they will bury her alive, and it is the tree she sits beneath which saves her, crushing them with a fallen limb. Vittoria says that the pair wrongly charges her with wanting to do violence to the yew tree, while it is they who carry the spade and pickaxe—implements that might dig a grave and uproot a tree. She makes it clear that the tree she leans against, and

[6] This exchange must be kept in mind throughout the play, when we are offered the chance to shift all the blame for the lovers' crimes to Bracciano. He will be established as the more malevolent figure, but right at the outset his malevolence is sanctioned and encouraged by Vittoria.

[7] He cannot fulfil this promise. Bracciano himself, at a point of crisis in the relationship, will remark that "all the world speaks ill of thee" (4.2.104), as though he himself had nothing to do with this ruined reputation. She can only agree with him, saying "What have I gained by thee but infamy?" (109).

which protects her, is Bracciano. While the traditional accoutrement of English churchyards, the tree also has a name that puns with "you," and Bracciano pauses on it, underscoring the intended reference to himself. Moreover, it is a "harmless yew," only killing Isabella and Camillo when an external crisis dislodges its "massy arms." Bracciano is eager to make the noble self-sacrifice of a limb for his beloved, telling her, "Sweetly shall I interpret this your dream. / You are lodged within his arms who shall protect you" (259-60).

To the audience this exchange is all too transparent, but we must recognize that the lovers are desperate for a smoke-screen, however specious, to cover up the truth of their violence. As Vittoria tells it, her protector does not even actively kill the victims, but only drops the lethal branch when an external force—the storm—causes him to do so. Bracciano reveals just how deeply he fears responsibility, and how strongly this dream resonates with him when Vittoria's mother Cornelia bursts in upon the lovers from her place of concealment, and condemns their viciousness. She undermines Vittoria's interpretation of the tree metaphor by lamenting of their fallen house:

> Oh, that this fair garden
> Had with all poisoned herbs of Thessaly
> At first been planted, made a nursery
> For witchcraft, rather than a burial plot
> For both your honours. (1.2.274-78)

Cornelia's garden of death has to remind us of the image of the withered blackthorn that Camillo and Isabella described. Vittoria begs for her mother's sympathy, complaining that "blood"—her membership in an impoverished, cash-hungry family—was the only reason she accepted Camillo as a husband (292). This

appeal is met with indifference by Cornelia, who asks her to reconsider the scheme. She succeeds only in solidifying Bracciano's resolve. He stalks off to bed after telling her,

> Uncharitable woman, thy rash tongue
> Hath raised a fearful and prodigious storm.
> Be thou the cause of all ensuing harm. (1.2.305-7)

He is reinforcing Vittoria's interpretation of the dream, joining her in the metphorization of murder. He suggests that an external crisis—what she calls a whirlwind and he calls a storm—is responsible for the fall of the massy arm. Bracciano now seizes on Cornelia's outcry as that crisis, as though the idea of murdering Camillo and Isabella had never been contemplated, and thus he waives responsibility for coldly premeditated murder.

Bracciano's crimes are ruthless and deliberate while at the same time they are desperately blanketed in layers of denial and special pleading. Having convinced himself that he is not a participant in the deaths of his obstacles, Bracciano can view them with detachment. They are sacrificed to his desire—both his desire as Vittoria's lover and his desire as sadistic spectator—and he enjoys the spectacle of their suffering. He is a consumer of sacrifice, or a communicant in a dark sacrament, and as such, he is ravenous. As I have already mentioned, these are not attractive people Bracciano kills: Camillo is a cuckold (his brother-in-law Flamineo delights in duping him), while Isabella is an alienating combination of bitterness and abjection. They are certainly not like *Lear*'s Cordelia, and might be easy sacrifices for an audience to make. But in watching Bracciano's perverse pleasure in the arms-length sacrifice of Camillo and Isabella, we have to recognize

our own position. When Bracciano watches what he calls, "the…murder of Camillo / And our loathed duchess" (2.2.3-4) appear before him by magic, his cruelty becomes monumental. Through the dumb show Bracciano is able to view his wife's bedchamber and so he witnesses his henchmen soak his portrait in poison and "*depart laughing.*" Then the stage directions say:

> *Enter Isabella in her nightgown as to bedward, with lights after her, Count Lodovico, Giovanni, and others waiting on her. She kneels down as to prayer, then draws the curtain of the picture, does three reverences to it, and kisses it thrice. She faints, and will not suffer them to come near it; dies. Sorrow expressed in Giovanni and in Count Lodovico.*

Her husband's response: "Excellent! Then she's dead?" (24). After explaining that kissing the portrait was Isabella's nightly custom—a revelation which draws no comment from the duke—the conjuror instructs his client to "turn another way" (34) to watch Flamineo break Camillo's neck. Having done so, Bracciano comments, "'Twas quaintly done, but yet each circumstance I taste not fully" (38-9). In this callous statement Webster encapsulates tragic participation. Bracciano is viewing what he watches at a remove; it appears before him through the art of the conjuror and his charmed nightcap. The duke is at least as naive as Lady Macbeth in assuming that his violence will not stain him, that he is outside it, connected only on an aesthetic level; thus, he expresses approval for the action but feels that it lacks a certain zest. But the truth is that he is a participant, who willed the violence he witnesses. Isabella abases herself before Bracciano's portrait before she dies, and this certainly underscores his egomaniacal cruelty but it also reminds us that Bracciano specifically is the agent of her death, and that he participates, even if he is not physically before her.

So do the audience members bear a degree of responsibility commensurate with Bracciano's? That would be an exaggeration. But I am trying to suggest that Webster has a complex understanding of tragic violence: watching means involvement. The conjuror who arranges the enchanted dumb show for Bracciano seems to understand this. He sees himself as a kind of tragedian, proclaiming, "Strike louder music from this charmèd ground, / To yield, as fits the act, a tragic sound!" (36-7). But he is a tragedian sick of his business, carrying guilt his patron does not feel. He is as responsible as the duke in offering up this spectacle of violence, but he acknowledges this culpability and, unlike Bracciano, sees the dead Camillo and Isabella as objects of pity: "I'll show you by my strong-commanding art / The circumstance that breaks your duchess' heart" (22-3). At the outset he tells Bracciano,

> You have won me by your bounty to a deed
> I do not often practice. Some there are
> Which, by sophistic tricks, aspire that name
> Which I would gladly lose, of nigromancer.
> As some that use to juggle upon cards,
> Seeming to conjure, when indeed they cheat;
> Others that raise up their confederate spirits
> 'Bout windmills, and endanger their own necks,
> For making of a squib; and some there are
> Will keep a curtal to show juggling tricks
> And give out 'tis a spirit. (5-15)

There is a warning here, though Bracciano is not listening; it is a warning to those who might see the conjuror's art, and the spectacles it can create, as mere entertainment—squibs, windmills, juggling—rather than the business of death. Webster quietly insists upon the seriousness of his project; yes, he is a professional conjuror, which requires that he give his paying customers entertainment rather

than pious moralizing, but he does so by drawing his patrons into the world he creates. Like Bracciano, they too consume the violence, and in this scene, which approaches meta-theatre so frankly, the test here is not simply to condemn Bracciano for sacrificing his wife, but to keep the lesson of this scene in our minds when we see Bracciano himself dying in agony two acts later. Like his first wife, he too will be killed by poison smeared across a familiar object—his helm. As he writhes in agony, trying to pull it off, do we catch ourselves complaining that we "taste not fully?"

So Duke Bracciano presents us with a paradox: he is a vicious man who actively enjoys the suffering he has caused, but at the same time he is deeply afraid of his violence, and seeks to evade responsibility through aesthetic distance. Watching Vittoria face her accusers in the trial scene we observe another paradox, closely related to Bracciano's, but even more astonishing. Vittoria is officially charged with the murder of Camillo, but though she is guilty (in the first act, as we saw, she licensed Bracciano's plot), her trial wins her considerable sympathy. Vittoria's prosecution is depicted as an unjust persecution, a groundless scapegoating, and it turns a murderer into a martyr in the course of a single scene. This is not to say that we forget her guilt, but that we are compelled, by Webster's handling of the scene, to view her with sympathy. In Act 3, Scene 2 she is arraigned for the murder of Camillo (Webster delays the discovery of Isabella's death), but in 3, 1 her persecutors discuss the pending case. Cardinal Monticelso, Camillo's uncle, is to preside at the trial, and he explains to Francisco that his intention is to make up for a lack of real evidence by sullying Vittoria's reputation.

He has invited several ambassadors to the trial in order to better disseminate his propaganda:

> For, sir, you know we have naught but circumstances
> To charge her with, about her husband's death;
> [The ambassadors'] approbation therefore to the proofs
> Of her black lust shall make her infamous
> To all our neighbouring kingdoms. (3.1.4-8)

Webster is preparing the ground here for a presentation of a new Vittoria, different from the one we've come to recognize; she becomes Vittoria, the brave woman of conviction, who outfaces her persecutors. The fact that the persecutors are technically right in their suspicions somehow carries less weight than their contemptible methods and the defendant's courage.

In this scene Webster is playing with a dramatic trope characteristic of the Renaissance stage. It can be seen in the plays of Christopher Marlowe, who often puts words of truth in the mouth of a wicked character who speaks them for patently wicked reasons. The most vivid example of this must be Mephistopheles in *Doctor Faustus*. Though actively seeking Faustus' damnation, Mephistopheles never deceives him over the terms of their deal or its consequences. Throughout the first four acts of the play Faustus repeatedly tries to convince himself that the punishments he is threatened with have been exaggerated. Mephistopheles refuses to concur:

> [Faustus]: Come, I think hell's a fable.
> [Mephistopheles]: Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind.
> (2.1.128-9)

When first summoned, Mephistopheles leaves Faustus with no doubts about the anguish his bargain entails:

> Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God
> And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
> Am not tormented with ten thousand hells
> In being deprived of everlasting bliss?
> O Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,
> Which strike a terror to my fainting soul! (1.3.79-84)

This honesty, besides being so unexpected from a devil, would seem to cut against Mephistopheles' purpose. This is no Blakean demon, challenging heaven's justice, but an oddly orthodox one who acknowledges it, and begs his would-be victim to repent in moving terms. Yet everything Mephistopheles says, we have to recognize, is done for the darkest and most malicious of motives: damning Faustus eternally. In an aside, he groans out his desire: "Oh, what will not I do to obtain his soul?" (2.1.73). The orthodox truths are not offered for truth's sake, or for Faustus' sake, but in spite of them. Perhaps Mephistopheles is playing on the perverse turn of his victim's mind (Faustus tends to define himself by opposition to received wisdom), or perhaps securing a soul in the face of God's infinite mercy requires an exacting, scrupulous commitment to transparency, so that the damned has no grounds for appeal. Whatever the reason, the audience is made to recognize the great distance between Mephistopheles' pious words and their infernal purpose. With Vittoria we have something very similar. Her objective may be less repellent, insofar as she desires her own pardon rather than another's damnation but nevertheless, this is a killer whose claims of innocence and mistreatment are no less stirring for all her cynicism. Vittoria is lying *and* sincere. She is guilty, but she is also a victim.

This effect is intensified partly because of the clearly corrupt motives of the prosecution, but it is also intensified through the trope of the trial. This scene

might seem to offer a moment ripe for materialist criticism, and a contention that Webster is displaying a post-Marxian political consciousness: a disenfranchised character subverts her attempted suppression at the hands of the dominant. Yet the emotional response generated by Vittoria is enabled by the Foxian sacrificial crisis. Readers of Foxe were as familiar with trials as they were with executions; it was just as important to the martyrologist to show his subjects' composure before a panel of inquisitors as it was to show their courage at the stake. For example, in *The Acts and Monuments* Foxe describes the arrest, trial, and execution of Lady Jane Grey, the brilliant sixteen year-old girl who was thrust onto the English throne for nine days by the will of the dying Edward VI and his council, only to be removed by the stronger faction of Mary Tudor. Jane was arrested upon Mary's ascension and beheaded after the Wyatt rebellion reminded Mary and her government of the temptation a potential Protestant sovereign could hold for English malcontents.

Jane's crime was political rather than spiritual, but Mary's due diligence required that an attempt at conversion be made. *The Acts* shows Jane to be a stubborn and remarkably learned young Protestant as she is examined two days before her death by one John Feckenham. Feckenham challenges her on the question of the Real Presence and she explains that, far from believing that the communion elements are Christ's actual body and blood,

> I think that at the [Lord's] Supper I neither receive flesh nor blood, but bread and wine: Which bread when it is broken, and the wine when it is dronken, putteth me in remembrance how that for my sins the body of Christ was broken, and his blood shed on the Cross. (1419)

She undoubtedly knew what would come next. Feckenham asks, "Why? doth not Christ speak these words: 'Take eat, this is my body?' Require you any plainer words? Doth he not say it is his body?" Jane shows a penetrating understanding of the matter when she replies, "I grant he sayeth so: and so he sayeth, I am the vine, I am the door, but he is never the more for that the door nor the vine. Doth not S. Paul say, 'He calleth things that are not as though they were? (1419).'" This sophisticated distinction between the metaphorical and the literal in the Gospels and Paul's Epistles shows Jane's superiority to her persecutors, and reminds the reader that she staked her life on thoughtfully considered Christian truths.

Webster's Vittoria is obviously not based upon Jane, the devout martyr, but she is located in the same emotional matrix. What Webster is doing here is audacious: his victim is not only technically guilty; she avidly desires the death of her rivals for the sake of her gratification. Vittoria's guilt matters, but in this moment it fades into the background of the audience members' consciousness. But Webster has begun an emotional process that will make Vittoria—momentarily—seem as much a victim as Isabella. Her guilt is less important than her courage and the persecution she suffers. Though she is eventually sentenced to confinement in a house of repentant prostitutes, she burns the image of herself as an innocent sufferer in the minds of the spectators, crying, "A rape! A rape! / …you have ravished Justice, / Forced her to do your pleasure" (3.2.278-80). The proceedings have been expropriated, and the prosecutors are the ones condemned.

When the trial begins, Vittoria slips smoothly into the role of an innocent victim. Like a Foxian martyr, intent on gaining the sympathy of the crowd, she

demands that the proceedings be rendered not in Latin or stilted legalese but the plain vernacular. When Francisco asks if she can understand the prosecutor, she replies,

> I do, sir, but amongst this auditory
> Which come to hear my cause, the half or more
> May be ignorant in't….
> I will not have my accusation clouded
> In a strange tongue. All this assembly
> Shall hear what you can charge me with. (3.2.15-7; 18-20)

This is beating Monticelso at his own game; she too wants her story to be heard and disseminated, confident that her interpretation will prevail. Throughout the trial she displays boldness, intelligence and great wit, worthy of Anne Askew, who proudly recorded her consistent defiance in an account of her trial printed in *The Acts and Monuments*. When Anne is asked by her interrogator to parse a verse from Acts she states, "I answered, I would not throw pearls among swine, for acorns were good enough" (8, 1234). Later, when falsely accused of mocking the doctrine of Transubstantiation by musing on whether a mouse which ate the consecrated host received God, she explains to the reader that, "This question did I never ask, but indeed they asked it of me, whereunto I made them no answer but smiled" (8, 1235). Askew makes it clear to the court that her inquisitors only disgrace themselves and the church they serve with such questions. This irreverence does not condemn her, but empowers her, allowing Askew to wrestle the proceedings away from the prosecution, and claim a moral victory even in defeat.

Certainly, in the case of Vittoria, Monticelso and Francisco have trouble making their slurs stick. The prosecution turns to character assassination and conjecture and this makes the defendant seem even more like an innocent victim

suffering unjustly. Francisco notes the strangeness of Camillo's death—"That from some two yards' height a slender man / Should break his neck?" (116-7)—and the Cardinal moves to a discussion of Vittoria's appearance: "She comes not like a widow; she comes armed / With scorn and impudence. Is this a mourning habit?" (122-3). Vittoria rises above this invective. She replies:

> For your names
> Of whore and murd'ress, they proceed from you
> As if a man should spit against the wind;
> The filth returns in's face. (150-3)

She is entirely right, despite the fact that the charges are true. We know that Vittoria is an adulteress and that she is complicit in Camillo's murder. But the arraignment vindicates her before the crowd and diminishes her accusers. She readily agrees with the Cardinal that Bracciano tried to arrange assignations with her and proves the better lawyer:

> Grant I was tempted;
> Temptation to lust proves not the act.
> Casta est quam nemo rogavit. (200-2)[8]

Again, we know that she did commit the "act," but the Cardinal cannot prove it and Vittoria shows the weightlessness of his case:

> Sum up my faults, I pray, and you shall find
> That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,
> And a good stomach to a feast are all,
> All the poor crimes that you can charge me with.
> In faith, my lord, you might go pistol flies;
> The sport would be more noble. (209-14)

Vittoria is identifying herself as the Cardinal's scapegoat: an innocent victim, whose superficial differences are seized by the persecutor as an excuse for

[8] The Norton anthology translates this Latin tag, "She is chaste whom no man has solicited" (Ovid, *Amores*, 1.8.43 (1696, n. 2)).

undeserved violence. Webster is deftly manipulating a certain moral and emotional proclivity that favours the weak over the strong, even though the weak are also the guilty.

The Cardinal rallies again to accuse Vittoria with bare circumstances: her receipt of a thousand ducats from Bracciano must be "interest for his lust" (226); she declares it was given to rescue Camillo from debt (224-5) and tells him,

> If you be my accuser,
> Pray cease to be my judge; come from the bench
> Give in your evidence 'gainst me, and let these
> Be moderators. (227-30).

She is exposing the Cardinal for what he is: a participant. The flimsy veneer of objectivity has been peeled back, and it is apparent that the man who purports to weigh Vittoria's case and dispense justice has a stake in her condemnation. Judgement is not an act of the disembodied consciousness; it is not merely an intellectual phenomenon. Vittoria demands that the Cardinal declare his stake, and makes the same demand of all those who watch the arraignment, calling for "these"—the spectators of the trial—to arbitrate. Indeed, they already do. The handful of foreign ambassadors Monticelso invited (to help disseminate his propaganda), are sifting the evidence as they watch, and the two competing characterizations of Vittoria are reflected in their interjections. As the arraignment proceeds the French envoy tells his fellows, "She hath lived ill," but his English colleague qualifies him saying, "True, but the Cardinal's too bitter" (108, 109). When Vittoria tells the cardinal, "I scorn to hold my life / At yours or any man's entreaty" (140-1), the same ambassador—whose nationality ensures that his words will resonate with Webster's audience—declares, "She hath a brave spirit" (142).

The ambassadors, then, are also participants. Their various assessments of the trial carry weight and have effect. Officially, each ambassador is present to observe and to speak; they supposedly embody not an independent, active self, but a channel of communication between one government and another. Through a co-operative agreement in a political fiction, they are supposed to be outside the proceedings, tantamount to a sixteenth-century satellite link between two courts. Vittoria knows better, though. She knows that her enemy invited them to her trial because witnessing matters. By the end of the tragedy her assumption is borne out; in the last scene of the tragedy these ambassadors become true participants in the quasi-sacramental sense I have described. Their involvement comes to a bloody consummation when they join Giovanni in confronting and shooting Lodovico and his henchmen moments after they have murdered Vittoria and Flamineo. They actively share in the violence of the final catastrophe, killing Vittoria's killers.

And yet Vittoria's invitation does not only include the other characters on the stage; "these" refers to everyone in the theatre. This appeal leaves us with nowhere to hide. By reminding the audience of their status as participants, Vittoria inhibits the unconscious consensus upon which sacrificial victimage relies. And this does not mean vindication for Vittoria (unlike the ambassadors we witnessed her conversation with Bracciano), but it does mean that we see both sides, and resist the rhetoric of the Cardinal who would sacrifice a woman for the sake of vengeance. A moderator is more than an auditor; he does simply stand back and watch, but is involved, standing between two opposing parties. If we do that, we see bad faith and corrupt motives on the side of the accuser: this will not mean a

vindication of Vittoria, whose defence is based on a bare-faced lie, but it will make the sacrificial solution, whereby an act of unanimous violence satisfies and pacifies the crowd, untenable. Ultimately, the Cardinal's attempt to scapegoat Vittoria fails because his sordid all-against-one agenda is exposed, and we are reminded of the complexity of the situation, and that the destruction of one cannot satisfy. Even though the audience has seen the proof of Vittoria's crimes, this scene shows both the futility and the ugliness of a sacrificial solution.

The last act of *The White Devil* gives us an unravelling spiral of bloodshed as all the violent forces in the tragedy converge. The resulting dénouement seems chaotic and arbitrary as the characters are pitted against one another in various combinations, making for a messy, even confusing ending. Below the turmoil of the surface, though, there is powerful symmetry. The characters take turns making victims of one another, and this eventually results in the murder of Vittoria and Flamineo, who die bravely, with scorn for their enemies, recognition of their sins, and renewed fidelity to one another. It is worth noting that Webster could have composed the last scene—and developed sympathy for the Corombona siblings—much more simply. Lodovico could have interrupted them in a moment of quiet. Instead, the brother and sister have been struggling to kill one another. The scene establishes and repeats a pattern of sacrificial violence, with characters playing victimizer and victim in turn. Flamineo interrupts his newly-widowed sister as she reads a devotional book. He wants to procure for himself a portion of the late duke's money, but Vittoria—mourning her husband but also her other brother, recently killed by Flamineo—tells him his portion will be that "Which Cain

groaned under having slain his brother" (5.6.14). Instead of simply threatening her, Flamineo begins to act "distracted" (23) and produces two pairs of pistols. He tells Vittoria that he promised Bracciano that "Neither yourself nor I should outlive him / The numb'ring of four hours" (35-6) and proposes that they die together. At Zanche's quiet suggestion Vittoria asks him to "teach / The way to death" (75-6) by letting them kill him first. He agrees, and instructs the women to shoot him first and then themselves. They comply only with the first order, shooting Flamineo and then running over to kick and curse his fallen body, with zeal motivated by much more than self-preservation. But of course "The pistols held no bullets; 'twas a plot" (152), and now Flamineo stands and threatens the women with the other pair of loaded weapons. But even as he does so, Lodovico and his associates enter to hold all three of them at gunpoint, before binding and stabbing them. Finally, as Zanche, Vittoria and Flamineo die, Giovanni and the ambassadors make the final interruption and perform the final act of violence, shooting the stabbers and dragging them away, wounded, "to prison and to torture" (292).

What is the effect of this confusing, overlapping, unstable violence? No doubt there are several, but I want to suggest first of all that it is to demystify violence. Sacrifice requires a certain degree of functional simplicity and cause-and-effect logic. The end of *The White Devil* denies these requirements even as it seems to grant them superficially. Yes, Giovanni, the new Duke, enters with the ambassadors to shoot the malefactors and restore order. But really, he is like every other killer (or would-be killer) in the scene; he embraces the right to administer

justice, to sanctify certain acts of violence as punishment for others—this is exactly what Vittoria does with her "Cain" remark to Flamineo. It should be remembered that in Genesis, though Abel's blood cries out for justice, God puts a mark on Cain so that no one else will kill him—his punishment is banishment but not death. In trying to kill her brother Vittoria is proving herself a Cain (Genesis 4: 10-6). As the final killer and the new ruler, the temptation is to agree with Giovanni, and ratify his violence, seeing it as an embodiment of cosmic justice that has rehabilitated the society and purged it of corruption. But Giovanni and his comrades are simply the last in a series to wield the sacrificial blade. The cumulative effect of the scene makes their overthrow of Lodovico and his cronies something arbitrary rather than something definitive and final. Indeed, when Giovanni passes his sentence of torture and death on Lodovico it hints not at closure, but at another wave of bloodshed lying beyond the borders of the play, another round in an endless spiral. Like the death of Marlowe's Barabas in his own trap, or the unsatisfying killing of Macbeth by Macduff, the various loyalties, rationales and passions that motivate the characters in *The White Devil* are all rendered less important than the mere fact of violence itself.

Consider how even the very characters of Vittoria and Flamineo are inconstant, shifting from naked hatred to solidarity in the course of a few lines, while also achieving what Forker describes as "a moral victory from their ruin" (277). He continues,

> Having lived out their antagonism and selfishness to criminal extremes, they perish together with a panache that somehow transfigures what has gone before and suspends us mysteriously

> between condemnation and the emotional equivalent of applause. (277)

Is it an accident that these sibling-criminals have reaffirmed their bond, and in so doing re-established the sympathy of the audience? Or is it not simply the effect of violence which in Webster's hands necessarily creates pity for its victims? Foolish Camillo and insipid Isabella win our sympathy as they suffer under Bracciano's torments; Bracciano himself then becomes an object of pity, dying (as I earlier mentioned), a death very similar to his wife's. Francisco, his killer and brother-in-law, obviously appreciates the irony of this symmetrical violence, but the echo has effects that he cannot control. By making Bracciano suffer like Isabella did, he implicitly equates them. This is not to say that Bracciano's death will arouse the same compassion in the audience that Isabella's did; but it does compromise Francisco's revenge. To applaud Bracciano's death is to behave as he did before the dumb show of Isabella's death: "Excellent, then [he's] dead!" Francisco may delight in this piece of cruel irony, but his nephew, Bracciano's son, does not. In the third act we see Giovanni grieve poignantly for his mother (3.2.332-9); he grieves again an act later as Bracciano dies of Francisco's poison, crying, "Oh, my most loved father" (5.3.16). This may be much more than Bracciano deserves, but it is also a completely natural response from his son, and it gives the lie to any rationalization that regards the second killing as more satisfying than the first. And as I have suggested, even the attempt of Giovanni himself at violent closure—however good his intentions—is unsettling rather than comforting. The sacrificial crisis has permeated this play so thoroughly that all violence is compromised, always a disease, and never a cure. One leaves this play feeling that though many

of the characters are guilty, and deserving of punishment, none are fit to punish them.

In my discussion of Bracciano and the lethal dumb-show I defined what I called the lie of non-involvement. But if the father was an audience member, the son seems to epitomize another denial of sacrificial participation, in that he represents himself as transcending the action, until finally descending like a *deus-ex-machina* to settle the fates of the agents. After entering the room and passing sentence, he tells his companions, "All that have hands in this shall taste our justice" (293), but there are more hands than he perhaps realizes. He may have better, or at least more civic-minded motives, but he follows his father in suggesting that he is not a participant; he also follows his father in that his interactions with the other characters show the falsity of this presumption. Giovanni asks Lodovico, "By what authority have you committed / This massacre?" (285-6), and is told, "By thine" (286). Giovanni understandably challenges this strange reply, and so Lodovico unpacks it for him: "Yes, thy uncle, / Which is a part of thee, enjoined us to't" (286-7). This is at once entirely specious and entirely accurate: Giovanni is related to the authorizer of the massacre; he is in that sense a "part" of the killer, and thus a participant. And while this is suggested by his kinship to Francisco, it is reinforced by his actions: in passing his terrible sentence, we have to feel that Giovanni is on the verge of becoming just like his father and his uncle—the two bitter enemies who had far more in common than they realized. In making himself an agent of violence, Giovanni shares their culpability. He is not alone. The ambassadors, who I earlier

suggested were representative of the audience as a whole, also share it. Though Giovanni passes the sentence of death and torment, it is the English ambassador who tells the guards upon entering, "Keep back the Prince. Shoot, shoot!" (283). The inclusion of these characters at this moment is pointless, unless Webster is interested in these larger questions of involvement and culpability.

When he is being dragged away, wounded, to the torture chamber, the vicious Lodovico passes perhaps the strangest comment on the whole affair. He exults to his captors, "I limbed this night-piece and it was my best" (298). This is a final, chilling reminder of tragic participation, another metatheatrical echo. For the second time, the tragedian has spoken through the voice of a murderer. Lodovico's fierce pride in what he has done is very different from the conjuror's guilt and resignation. Taken together, though, the two comments help us understand the ambivalence Webster brings to his tragedy, and which makes his tragedy what it is. *The White Devil* is a fiction, crafted to entertain, and it succeeds in its sublime and savage chaos. But Webster's sensitivity to the violence of his culture is also present, making him an uneasy participant, and making us uneasy in our turn. Indeed, to be reminded of one's participation, as Webster reminds the audience, is to be made uneasy, as the sacrificial act requires unconscious unanimity, the absolute certainty that one is witnessing the working-out of transcendent necessity. *The White Devil* shows the falsity of this presumption, and shows that a witness is connected to what he witnesses, and therefore responsible. One body, many members.

Unwilling Actors—The Duchess and Daniel Bosola:

The Duchess of Malfi is a more intense examination of persecution than any other play in the Renaissance. In this tragedy Webster continues to work on the problems that engaged him in *The White Devil* but its mood is very different. Where *The White Devil* is a play without a hero, a play that alienates the audience from each character in turn, *The Duchess of Malfi* has a stable moral and emotional centre in the deeply sympathetic protagonist. The Duchess' personal charm and many attractions should not cloud the fact that Webster is again considering the issue of our sacrificial participation. His duchess is very carefully crafted. She is warm, witty, vital and passionate; she suffers the appalling cruelty of her more powerful brothers with great dignity; however, she also has something of Vittoria's transgressive spirit, flouting the prohibitions of Ferdinand and the Cardinal with casual hubris. Vittoria is a guilty criminal who won considerable sympathy because of the persecution she suffers. The duchess, contrariwise, is an innocent victim insofar as her punishment is massively disproportionate to her offence, and the offence itself—marrying the man she loves—is understandable, or even laudable. She is guilty insofar as she does transgress—eagerly—the boundary her brothers set. She is also guilty because she repeatedly shows herself to be imperfect, flawed: a sensual, impulsive woman, and not the pure, obedient automaton that Ferdinand and the Cardinal require.

Webster strikes a very careful balance here; his heroine presents a dilemma similar to those posed by many Catholic martyrs at the time Webster was writing. By this I mean that she is damned by the letter of the law—as ordained Catholic

clergy were by the plain fact of their vocation—but morally vindicated in the eyes of the audience because of the bravery of her death and the purity of her motives. This comparison is not arbitrary; it goes to the heart of the Duchess's presentation. As I established in the first chapter, in sixteenth-century England executions of religious dissidents were increasingly characterized by a dilemma over the status of the victim. Whatever the arguments of partisans of either extreme might demand, there were those in the middle who were open to the claims of each. Webster builds his tragedy around this ambivalence; the conflicted response to a subject who is technically guilty but, in a truer, more profound sense, innocent.

In Webster's time this dilemma was centred on Catholic clergymen and their lay helpers, but I think it can be best explained through Foxe, who did so much to articulate and shape it. Earlier I discussed Foxe's presentation of Lady Jane Grey who, despite being a teenage girl charged with treason, shows faith, courage and intelligence markedly greater than that of her persecutors. But I want to come back to Jane who was, after all, a convicted criminal; she is sentenced to death, like the priests of Webster's day, for treason rather than heresy. Like many of those priests, she manages the dilemma by acknowledging the queen's supremacy and right to govern, but also expressing her own faith. She would have posed a problem for readers of Foxe. Though she was a Protestant, she was also convicted of treason and whatever bad memories Mary's reign conjured, the old queen had been Henry VIII's daughter, and the Tudor succession which eventually resulted in Elizabeth must long have seemed a providential *fait accompli*.

On the scaffold before her death Jane repents for her part in the failed attempt to claim Edward's throne. She declares to the spectators:

> good people I am come hither to die, and by a law I am condemned to the same. The fact against the Queen's highness was unlawful, and the consenting thereunto by me: but touching the procurement and desire thereof by me or on my behalf, I doe wash my hands thereof in innocency before God, and the face of you, good Christian people, this day: and therewith she wrung her hands, wherein she had her book. (1422)

She is a picture of holy penitence, readily conceding Mary's authority and her own sin, but confidently expressing her assurance of God's forgiveness. So while Jane is dying a traitor's death, Foxe makes it clear that she is a heroine of conscience. She tells the onlookers,

> I pray you all, good Christian people, to bear me witness that I die a true Christian woman, and that I do look to be saved by no other mean, but only by the mercy of God in the blood of his only son Jesus Christ: and I confess that when I did know the word of God, I neglected the same, loved my self and the world, & therfore this plague and punishment is happily and worthily happened unto me for my sins: and yet I thank God of his goodness that he hath thus given me a time and respite to repent: and now (good people) while I am alive I pray you assist me with your prayers. (1422)

Foxe describes her last moments thus:

> Then the hangman kneeled down and asked her forgiveness, whom she forgave most willingly. Then he willed her to stand upon the straw: which doing she saw the block. Then she said, I pray you dispatch me quickly. Then she kneeled down, saying: will you take it off before I lay me down? And the hangman said, no Madame. Then tied she the kerchief about her eyes, and feeling for the block she said: what shall I doe? where is it? where is it? One of the standers by guiding her thereunto, she laid her head down upon the block, and then stretched forth her body and said: Lord into thy hands I commend my spirit, and so finished her life. (1422)

There are many things to be noted here. The first is the small but important shift Jane makes in her declaration; the act of acknowledging her guilt allows her to

claim or possess what is happening to her; her persecution is transmuted, and becomes a blessing, an example of God's "goodness." And so Jane wins by losing; though a traitor, a condemned enemy of the Crown, she presents herself as a willing victim, meekly deferring to the headsman, who is filled with remorse at the duty he must perform. This attitude of quiet, composed surrender to the sacrificial act is something the duchess will reflect before her executioner, and which will be put into relief by the very forgivable panic Cariola displays under the same circumstances.

Jane's execution also suggests participation. She asks the crowd, as she stands before them, to "bear [her] witness." This is a subtle inclusion of the audience—not to mention the reader—into the moral universe of the spectacle: it is important for Jane to engage the spectators, to draw them into her story. They do this by sympathizing, and by "assist[ing]" her with their prayers. And so Jane encourages sacrificial crisis by dividing the watching crowd from the persecuting state and its agents, and joining it to herself. She also encourages it simply by making them aware that, yes, despite their presumed role as spectators, they are involved in the sacrifice of a pious young woman who forgives her killer even though she is so afraid of the headsman's block that she cannot face it with uncovered eyes. No doubt Jane was unable to sway every person watching, but the important issue for me is the tension her performance creates, between her conceptualization of the execution and the authorities' idea of it. This tension is what Webster manipulates in the persecution and death of his duchess, when he forces the audience—not immediately, but over the course of the play—to

sympathize with her. This sympathy, as we shall see, is so great that even the man who kills her is caught up in it. Daniel Bosola is analogous to the nameless headsman who feels such pity for Jane Grey, and such guilt for what he has to do.

The final point I want to make about Foxe's depiction of Jane relates to a theme I discussed at length in the *King Lear* chapter: non-transcendence. Jane shows extraordinary courage here—declaring her faith, calmly forgiving the headsman, repeating the last words of Stephen—but the scene is made not only more moving but more accessible for the reader by the details Foxe includes. Though she is able to conceptualize it as beneficial, Jane does not want to be standing on this scaffold any more than the duchess wants to be locked in Ferdinand's dungeon with the supposed bodies of her loved ones. In the same way Jane shows all the heroism Calvin himself could have looked for, but she is also manifestly a teenage girl, afraid of death. She asks the executioner to dispatch her quickly, and she ties a kerchief around her eyes so tightly that she has trouble finding the terrible block and needs help from an anonymous participant (I use the word deliberately). Such realism is important in maintaining the historical accuracy Foxe always strives for but it is even more important for the emotive effect. Neither of these women seem otherworldly in their suffering; they are familiar, we can identify with their fear even as we admire their courage. They are suffering victims, with whom we participate, creating a bond which their non-transcendence only strengthens. They are not otherworldly villains or demigods, but ordinary people—they are like us. And so as they suffer, we participate.

The Duchess falls because she marries in defiance of her brothers' wishes. Their prohibition is unreasonable and unjustifiable, and the Duchess' determination to marry the man she loves is admirable. But the spirit of obstinate transgression with which she flouts their orders is disquieting. The Cardinal warns her that if she attempts a secret wedding, "The marriage night / Is the entrance to some prison" (1.1.325-6). This statement turns out to be dreadfully accurate though more than a decade is required before its fulfillment. Privately the Duchess scoffs at these threats, and her cavalier attitude is disturbing. Moments after Ferdinand has threatened her with a dagger she says in soliloquy:

> Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred
> Lay in my way unto this marriage,
> I'd make them my low footsteps…
> So I, through frights, and threat'nings, will assay
> This dangerous venture: let old wives report
> I wink'd and chose a husband. (342-4; 348-50)

Her playfully transgressive spirit is charming, but it is also unsettling. The Duchess is not denying the justice of the brothers' commands, nor does she try to explain that hers is a special case—she simply announces her intention to disobey them. Antonio remarks, after she has proposed to him,

> he's a fool
> That, being a-cold, would thrust his hands i'th'fire
> To warm them. (427-9)

Headstrong passion, among other qualities, characterizes the Duchess. We can see such passion in the second act, when she shows her impatience with the need for secrecy. She drops hints about her pregnancy (2.1.109-14) and her marriage (119-27) and, most pointedly, gobbles up the apricots Bosola brings to her; as intended, her gorging brings on the premature labour and ultimately her family's exposure—

"how greedily she eats them!" (147) remarks Bosola, as he watches. Christina Luckyj writes,

> The Duchess is above all, as she herself makes clear, an intensely sexual woman. The "apricocks" scene (II, i) becomes, in performance, not an indictment of the Duchess, but a further confirmation of the directness and sensual delight she exhibited in the wooing scene. ("Great Women," 276)

In fact, the scene does both things. It shows the Duchess' exuberant physicality, which, given the threat that hangs over her, is both engaging and sobering.

One of the strongest similarities the that Duchess shares with Vittoria is their assumption that their desire is self-justifying, that they must and should have their way. However, as the apricots demonstrate, her impulses are problematic, and passion alone is not enough to protect her. Her conversation with Antonio in Act One is littered with statements that foreshadow the coming catastrophe she wants to ignore. She calls her marriage "this sacred Gordian, which let violence / Never untwine" (481-2). Hardly an auspicious metaphor, since the first Gordian knot was not "untwined." Another classical allusion, as they leave the stage for their marriage bed, is equally unsettling. The Duchess jokes that they will only "lie, and talk together" (498), and so compares their situation to the old story of "Alexander and Lodowick," (501-4) wherein the latter was forced to sleep beside the wife of the former, and so laid a naked sword between them in the bed to prevent dishonour. The chilling implications of these allusions hardly need to be unpacked, but the Duchess rattles them off coyly and cheerfully. Antonio naturally enough asks her what his future brothers-in-law will think, and she replies with a grandiose false prophecy:

> All discord, without this circumference,
> Is only to be pitied, and not fear'd:
> Yet, should they know it, time will easily
> Scatter the tempest. (470-3)

"This circumference" may refer either to the boundaries of her estates or to the lovers' encircling arms. Either way, she is dreadfully wrong; the circumference will be penetrated and the tempest will destroy them both, and what happens in the succeeding acts is terrible but it is not unexpected.

The Duchess and Antonio's marriage vows are witnessed by the Duchess' servant, Cariola, and by the audience. I think that Huston Diehl is exactly right in equating the two:

> Like Cariola, the play's spectators peer into the private world of the Duchess, observing her secret, and like her, too, they are constructed as witnesses to the marriage, so that they are inclined to accept its legitimacy even if they are troubled by its secrecy. Through an identification with the maid, who hides and watches, they also are encouraged to evaluate what they see enacted before them and to feel both fear and pity. (195)

Cariola models the audience's participation in the tragedy. She loves and admires her mistress and she respects Antonio, but she is worried by what she sees. She says, in the last line of Act One,

> Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman
> Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows
> A fearful madness; I owe her much of pity. (505-7)

This articulates our own position as a tragic audience. The Duchess is great, in dignity, in spirit, in charm, but she is also fallible. The brothers expect purity and perfection from their sister; they want her raised above the natural stream of birth, fruitfulness, death and decay, and frozen. "Marry! They are most luxurious / Will wed twice," remarks Ferdinand, continuing, "Their livers are more spotted / Than

Laban's sheep" (1.1.299-300; 301-2). She is expected to remain pure and set apart, and she realizes it. When she woos Antonio she tells him,

> This is flesh, and blood, sir;
> 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
> Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!
> I do here put off all vain ceremony,
> And only do appear to you a young widow
> That claims you for her husband, and like a widow,
> I use but half a blush in't. (1.1.454-60)

She is not made of stone, and she will bleed and suffer for it. The Duchess is martyred by the ultra-fastidious Ferdinand and the cold, emotionless Cardinal because she refuses to be other than human—imperfect, impulsive, "flesh and blood." Her transgression comes from her very normalcy, insofar as the brothers have decided that the desires which she shares with the audience members are criminal. She asks Ferdinand,

> Why should only I,
> Of all the other princes of the world,
> Be cased up, like a holy relic? (140-2)

Ferdinand does not wait until the third act to begin dehumanizing the Duchess; she is already dehumanized for him, as a statue is dehumanized. We must remember that a relic is not only a sanctified object—the brothers have nothing to do with sanctity—but is also a dead one. The Duchess may actively make herself a victim by breaking the prohibition she is under, but we have to identify with her, because she wants to identify with us; the prohibition she faces is a prohibition of life.

The Duchess, then, has elements of Vittoria, the compelling transgressor who, with great panache, flouts custom and scorns prudence. But she also contains Vittoria's rival, Isabella, the innocent martyr who suffers at the hands of

those close to her. We in the audience are forced to watch the Duchess subjected to horrific psychological torments and finally murdered. Like Isabella she is the victim of such cruelty and colossal injustice that our sympathy washes away any prior rationalizations. It does not matter that the Duchess may have carelessly courted her disaster once we see her in the dungeon longing for easeful death; her suffering is out of all proportion to her faults. Finally, as in Isabella's case, Webster stages a horrific, transparently malicious scapegoating, but then immediately begins to undermine the audience's sacrificial antipathy for the agents of her misery. The "circumference" in which the Duchess expresses such confidence is visibly penetrated in the third act, when Ferdinand decides, after stewing for more than a decade, to confront his sister. Though the Duchess' end takes several weeks to play out, Webster begins her persecution in the same supposedly secure space where Isabella was murdered: the bedroom. Ferdinand sneaks in with a stolen key as she sits at her evening toilette, and so the sense of violation, of a private circumference breached, is powerful. Ferdinand enters the room behind the Duchess as she talks to Antonio and Cariola who are out of the room, playing a prank on her. This is the pivotal moment in the Duchess' life, the moment when her security becomes vulnerability, comfort becomes pain, and companionship becomes loneliness.

In her brother's black dungeon in Act Four we watch the Duchess of Malfi's martyrdom. Any rationalizations one may have been tempted to make about the Duchess inviting her fate die with her in the dungeon. Ferdinand does not simply want his sister to die; he wants her in hell (4.1.118), and so he subjects

her to a series of psychological tortures. The pervading motif in all these torments is loneliness, as though to cut the Duchess off from the community of life she defied him to join, as though to suggest that the community itself has unanimously expelled her. Ferdinand comes to her in the dark, pretending to forgive her, and gives her a dead man's hand instead of his own; she is shown waxen images of her dead husband and children; finally, she is surrounded by a wailing chorus of madmen. Though Cariola is allowed to be near her, her company does little to pierce the fog of isolation that surrounds the Duchess. In her loneliness and vulnerability she is, like Cordelia, a quintessential victim. She is both heroic and unheroic in the final scenes. Bosola can say, admiringly, that she "gives a majesty to adversity" (4.1.6), but she is hardly a stoic—she longs to die and so end her misery (4.1.111-2).

The Duchess exemplifies the dilemma of so many Foxian martyrs, who have much to live for but, when suffering at the stake, beg like John Hooper for more fire and a clean end. Again, the concept of participation is useful here. In Chapter One I discussed the fascinating account Lake and Questier provide of Henry Garnet's death, which was mercifully expedited by a Protestant crowd that minutes earlier had howled at him in anger. An even more painful example comes from the execution of Nicolas Ridley. Because of the arrangement of the wood and the peculiarities of the wind, like Hooper, Ridley suffers egregiously; the fire around him smoulders and refuses to burn with vigour. Like Hooper, he begs the crowd to stir up the fire. This leads to perhaps the most painful incident in his story, when his brother-in-law George Shipside attempts to help him:

> Which when his brother-in-law heard, but not well understood, intending to rid him out of his pain…in such sorrow, not well advised what he did, heaped faggots upon him, so that he clean covered him, which made the fire more vehement beneath, that it burned clean all his nether parts before it once touched the upper, and that made him leap up and down under the faggots, and often desire them to let the fire come unto him, saying: I cannot burn.
> Yet in all this torment he forgot not to call unto God still, having in his mouth: Lord have mercy upon me, intermeddling this cry, let the fire come unto me, I cannot burn. In which pains he laboured, till one of the standers by with his bill, pulled of the faggots above, and where he saw the fire flame up, [Ridley] wrested himself unto that side…falling down at M. Latimer's feet. (1770)

The account is deeply poignant and also deeply disturbing. Horribly burned but unable to die Ridley moves back and forth between begging God for mercy and begging the crowd to stir the fire. And his cries have an effect on the watchers, two of whom become participants. In a paradoxical twist it is Ridley's brother-in-law who prolongs his agony, through his earnest, incompetent attempt to help, and one of the guards who produces the necessary flames. What was the effect of an equivalent (or even crueller) scene of agony on *The Duchess of Malfi*'s audience? Webster creates in his paying customers a like desire to disrupt the spectacle, and so disrupt the sacrificial consensus that a man like Ferdinand needs to believe is complete.

The Duchess is tormented by other things than flames, but I think her desire for death can be understood in the context of suffering martyrs like Hooper, Ridley, or the so-called Catholic "traitors" who could hope to be mercifully dispatched by strangling before the desecration of their bodies began. It is not suicidal despair the Duchess is expressing—though she could hardly be blamed for it—but an understandable desire for the act of dying to be as quick and painless as

possible. True, Ferdinand comes very close to driving his victim to despair, when she curses the stars, and the seasons to destruction (4.1.96, 97-9). In fairness, though, she has just been shown the wax images of her husband and children; later she is composed again. Her famous affirmation, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.138), is equivalent to a martyr's refusal to recant, a declaration that the brothers have been unable to destroy her mind. In a powerful allusion to the model of all Christian martyrs, she forgives her executioners (4.2.203). And in a statement that is both excruciating and yet soberly pragmatic she remembers her children, telling Cariola,

> I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy
> Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
> Say her prayers, ere she sleep. (199-201)

This may mean that the Duchess has discovered the truth of the "bodies" she was shown, but given her relief at the repentant Bosola's admission (before she finally dies), that they were wax models, I think it more likely that she is simply distracted by confusion and pain. Either way, the request reminds us of the domestic warmth she has lost, reinforces her commitment to life, and reinforces, as if that were necessary, the depravity of the killers; when Bosola asks Ferdinand why he ordered the children killed the Duke replies, "The death / Of young wolves is never to be pitied" (256-7).

The Duchess does not transcend her circumstances or her execution, but neither is she reduced by them; they do not stain her. As the pity of Bosola himself demonstrates she is enhanced rather than diminished by the ugliness of her last

hours. Dressed as an old man, Bosola speaks with her before the end and recites a poem about the necessity of death. He chants,

> *Of what is't fools make such vain keeping?*
> *Sin their conception, their birth weeping;*
> *Their life a general mist of error,*
> *Their death a hideous storm of terror.* (181-4)

But the Duchess proves the last line wrong. There are no storms of terror when she is strangled; she simply kneels and lets them kill her (231-4), paradoxically triumphing over them as she does so. Her refutation of the last line implicitly refutes the other claims in the passage—the Duchess' life was not a mist of error, nor were the births of her children sin. One can assume that Ferdinand wanted the Duchess' death to be more like Cariola's, who tries to be brave (claiming "I will die with her" (198)), but fails. When the executioner approaches her Cariola begs, lies (inventing an engagement and a pregnancy), bites, and scratches (246-52). No one should blame Cariola for panicking in this moment, but Webster clearly wants to distinguish her desperation from the Duchess' composure. The manner of the Duchess' death is vitally important, in that it denies Ferdinand's obvious preference. He wants her to die as a damned criminal, as though to validate her sacrifice. Instead, she refuses to gratify him, and now, more than ever, the audience's sympathy is alienated from Ferdinand's programme. In Act Four, Scene One, the Duchess had told Bosola about how she longed for a release from her pain saying, "I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part against my will" (4.1.84-5). Here, as in *The White Devil*, Webster shows his tendency to provoke the spectator with a meta-theatrical comment, thus reminding his audience about their own position as consumers of the Duchess' tragedy. She is making the

theatrical equivalent of the request for more fire. Pity from the audience cannot change the role she is playing, but it can affirm her, and refute the sacrificial lie that her death is a necessary good.

Having looked at the suffering of the Duchess I want to conclude this chapter by looking at the ones who cause it. The sense that we, the audience, are culpable participants comes not only through the Duchess, but also through the villains. Ferdinand desires to make the Duchess' death a pure sacrifice, but his own participation betrays him, and includes him and Bosola in a sacrificial crisis. When he hears of his sister's first pregnancy Ferdinand's reaction is terrifying, bloodthirsty, and laced with sacrificial language. The Aragonian brothers see the issue as one of pollution and purgation; the low-born husband the Duchess has chosen—Ferdinand excites himself by imagining "some strong thigh'd bargeman; / Or one o'th'wood-yard" (2.5.43-4)—is considered an infection. Ferdinand is obsessed with the purity of his blood, and so the common Antonio represents a violation of his own most personal boundaries. The Cardinal, deliberately inflaming Ferdinand's anger, wonders,

> Shall our blood,
> The royal blood of Arragon and Castile,
> Be thus attainted?" (21-3)

Ferdinand declares:

> Apply desperate physic:
> We must not now use balsamum, but fire,
> The smarting cupping-glass, for that's the mean
> To purge infected blood, such blood as hers:—
> There is a kind of pity in mine eye,
> I'll give it to my handkercher; and now 'tis here,
> I'll bequeath this to her bastard. (23-9)

Ferdinand describes a medical procedure; a clinical act of purgation, divorced form emotion. Here the new husband is a blood infection that must be painfully removed from a patient; moments later the metaphor is varied, as he and the Duchess are plague-infested corpses that must be destroyed to save a town:

> I would have their bodies
> Burnt in a coal-pit, with the ventage stopp'd,
> That their curs'd smoke might not ascend to heaven. (67-9)

Ferdinand continues with the metaphors of burning—the bedclothes the Duchess lies in with her lover should be set alight, their child should be boiled "to a cullis" (72)—but the coal-pit fantasy is particularly interesting. In it, Ferdinand articulates the goal of sacrificial violence: containment. He wants to destroy the Duchess, her husband and her children, and then erase the evidence. He wants—or claims he wants—murders that are sealed off and set apart, beyond vengeance and, recalling his "handkercher" remark, beyond pity.

Ferdinand eventually finds that this is impossible. The smoke will ascend despite his best efforts, and the duchess' death will arouse pity not only in her children, but in the mercenary who was paid to strangle her, and in Ferdinand himself. Rather than cleanly removing the Duchess from life, making her a vilified scapegoat and maintaining sacrificial consensus, Ferdinand is drawn to pity his own victim. Recall that he had told Bosola, regarding the Duchess' children, that "The death / Of young wolves is never to be pitied" (4.2.256-7), but after they have been killed like their mother Ferdinand comes to realize that he is the wolf.[9] The lycanthropy that overtakes him is a vivid manifestation of his guilt for the murders,

[9] This is not the first time Ferdinand has made this comparison; earlier he had deliberately insulted the Duchess by referring to her children as "cubs" (4.1.33).

and also reminds us that those murders were unable to kill the thing he really hated because it was within and not without. Like Alypius Ferdinand drank deeply of animality, though he only realizes it after his sister is dead. The true infection remains in Ferdinand's blood even after she is gone, and her sacrifice has failed to solve Francisco's problem. The pity of the Duchess' death could not be contained in a handkerchief; Bosola and Ferdinand are contaminated by it, and will carry it from the dungeon with them.

Unlike Ferdinand, Bosola seems to understand the forces they have unleashed by killing the Duchess. Bosola is both better and worse than the diseased Duke, in that he knows the Duchess does not deserve death, but kills her anyway. He provokes the Duke, encouraging him to look at his dead sister's face, asking,

> Do you not weep?
> Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out:
> The element of water moistens the earth,
> But blood flies upwards, and bedews the heavens. (258-61)

Again, we have to think of Ferdinand's coal pit, and his conceit that the tell-tale smoke could be stopped up. The audience itself gives the lie to this fantasy—pity for the Duchess has already condemned Ferdinand in our eyes. Now, in the dungeon, Ferdinand cannot understand how his mercenary could have resisted sympathizing with her:

> Let me see her face again:—
> Why didst not thou pity her? What an excellent
> Honest man mightst thou have been
> If thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary!
> Or, bold in a good cause, oppos'd thyself
> With thy advanced sword above thy head,
> Between her innocence and my revenge!

> I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits,
> Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done't. (271-9)

What an effect it must create when the audience hears the question it has been asking of Bosola since the first act coming from Ferdinand's mouth. Their sacrificial crisis begins here over the Duchess' corpse as the enormity of their crime dawns on Bosola and Ferdinand.

And their sacrificial crisis, depicted on stage, accelerates the larger crisis that the audience is involved in; formerly our pity was stirred for the compromised but deeply sympathetic Duchess; now Webster dulls the revenge instinct we must naturally have for her killers. This is not to say that they are viewed with anything like the pity the Duchess engenders, but the audience's capacity to scapegoat them as compensation for her death is diminished. There is little point in sacrificing Ferdinand when he is begging for a sword to kill the wolf inside him. And at the same time Ferdinand sets the precedent for this sacrificial unease over the body; filled with irrational anger at Bosola for obeying his orders he nevertheless recalls the dilemma which faced his henchman:

> For thee (as we observe in tragedies
> That a good actor many times is curs'd
> For playing a villain's part) I hate thee for't:
> And for my sake say thou hast done much ill well. (287-90)

The Duchess is not the only actor who plays a part against her will. Bosola becomes, quite literally, an actor in the Duchess' tragedy, playing a role carefully scripted by Ferdinand. In the dungeon he appears dressed as an old man, continuing the torture-masque begun by the choir of madmen. He tells the Duchess that he is a tomb-maker (4.2.143-4), and that Ferdinand has sent him, "to

bring you / By degrees to mortification" (172-3). He then presides over her execution, still in costume. This is death by theatre: it is of a different style than Bracciano's dumb show, but it is equally suggestive of sacrificial participation. Bosola's curse, reiterated by various characters throughout the play, is that his villainy is scripted and that he is locked into his fated role. Earlier Antonio told him: "You would look up to heaven, but I think / The devil, that rules i'th'air, stands in your light" (2.1.95-6). Bosola himself laments when the Duchess is gone, "That we cannot be suffer'd / To do good when we have a mind to it!" (359-60). Arguing for the play's inherent Calvinism, Huston Diehl has stated that Bosola represents a soul predestined to damnation, unable to will himself to serve God even when he wants to, scripted—by God, the playwright, and his paymaster—to sin and be damned (*Staging* 182, 207). We cannot deny that Bosola chooses his villainy, but neither can we deny that it chooses him.

This connection can only serve to increase sympathy for him. Bosola participates as one compelled, as an actor who resents the role assigned to him by tragedian. Earlier, in passing, I compared Bosola to the nameless headsman in Foxe's account of Jane Grey, who asks for, and receives, Jane's forgiveness. In the last two acts of the play, Bosola struggles with his participation in Ferdinand and the Cardinal's sacrificial agenda, and while this does not absolve him for what were often great acts of cruelty (such as casually remarking after the Duchess has been garrotted, "some other strangle the children" (4.2.236)), it does complicate our response. He tries to redeem himself, he eases her passing and tries to protect her husband. Yet he accidentally kills Antonio despite dedicating himself to Antonio's

preservation. Even his attempt to mute the Duchess' agony when she revives, like Desdemona, for a brief moment, is deeply compromised. He tells her, truthfully enough, that the bodies of her family members were made of wax, and that Antonio lives. But he does not mention that he has just given the order for her children's murder, and he lies when he says that the brothers have forgiven Antonio. It is the sort of mercy that reminds one of Edmund in *Lear*, who tries to save Cordelia "in spite" of his nature but cannot. When Bosola tries to do evil, even with a tender conscience niggling him, he does it all too well; when he tries to do good, he fails utterly.

Whether he wills himself to good or evil, Bosola seems compelled to wickedness by the scripted fate which seems to poison every good impulse even as every bad one flourishes. But there is another, simpler reason for his villainous compulsion: poverty. Like Flamineo in *The White Devil* he believes that penury requires him to perform acts of violence; unlike Flamineo, he knows that it does not therefore justify them. In the first scene Delio tells Antonio that Bosola was sentenced to row in the galleys after a murder the Cardinal commissioned (69-71); when he accepts money from Ferdinand a short time later he asks, dreadfully aware of its significance, "Whose throat must I cut?" (251). He tries to return the money at one point:

> These curs'd gifts would make
> You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor;
> And should I take these, they'd take me to hell. (1.1.266-8)

But the money, and the position Ferdinand has secured for Bosola in the Duchess' household eventually seduce him. Crucially, however, he knows what may be

expected of him, despite Ferdinand's casual manner; he knows the bloody consequences of once more taking money from one of the Aragonian brethren. Bosola exposes and kills the Duchess because he is a mercenary, who feels obligated to glean scraps from the table of the powerful. This important detail helps us understand the systemic nature of sacrificial participation. The headsman who was forgiven by Jane Grey was also compelled by the paymaster to end her life. And the tragic actor, too, is also paid to enact the violence according to the script he follows. Again, in these metatheatrical references Webster quietly reaffirms the audience members' status as participants. The tragic actor acts because, for *our* sakes, he is paid to do much ill well.

Yet in the dungeon Ferdinand, wrestling with his guilt, momentarily tries to forget his connection to Bosola. Bosola asks to be paid the agreed-upon fee for his services, and Ferdinand refuses, telling Bosola that his only reward will be a pardon for the murder. When Bosola insists upon payment, Ferdinand lashes back with threats. Why? Because for Ferdinand to pay Bosola is to acknowledge his own participation in his sister's death—the gold and silver embodies their shared connection in the violence. And so Ferdinand withholds payment, as if to suggest that Bosola was an actor scripting his own tragedy. When Bosola challenges him Ferdinand goes so far as to ask him, "By what authority didst thou execute / This bloody sentence?" (4.2.297-8). When Bosola replies, "By yours," Ferdinand attempts to abdicate all responsibility:

> Mine? Was I her judge?
> Did any ceremonial form of law,
> Doom her to not being? Did a complete jury
> Deliver her conviction up I'th' court?

> Where shalt thou find this judgment register'd,
> Unless in hell? See, like a bloody fool,
> Th' hast forfeited thy life, and thou shalt die for't. (300-6)

The answer to Ferdinand's initial questions is "no," but he never paused to ask them before, and this speech is nothing more than a sad smokescreen. This exchange itself, with its threat of death at the end, belies the claim Ferdinand is making; he is advertising his power to condemn even as he abdicates it. But the underlying motivation this strange exchange implies must be taken seriously, and not written it off as an instance of Ferdinand's madness. Bosola responds with insight: "The office of justice is perverted quite, / When one thief hangs another" (307-8). The statement is reminiscent of Vittoria, who tells Monticelso, "If you be my accuser, / Pray cease to be my judge." Like Vittoria, Bosola is reminding his accuser that he too is a participant, and in doing so reminds the audience, who have likewise paid good money for violence. And as with Vittoria, such a reminder of sacrificial consumption can only inhibit the sacrificial instinct; by recognizing our attachment to the spectacle we lose the ability to condemn the other for it—one thief cannot hang another.

This, I think, helps us better understand Daniel Bosola, the villain who tries in the last act of the tragedy, to become a hero and cannot break out of his role. Bosola pledges himself to protect Antonio, and fantasizes, "It may be / I'll join with thee in a most just revenge" (5.2.361-2). Already Bosola's pity for Antonio is bound up with violence, as he dreams of vengeance on Antonio's behalf. Of course, by the end of the night, in the most vivid example of his powerlessness over fate, Bosola will have killed the very man he had dedicated himself to

protecting. Following this accidental death, Bosola does succeed in killing the Cardinal and Ferdinand (who stabs him in turn), but despite his claim that, "Now my revenge is perfect" (77), the killings hardly constitute revenge. The shadow of Predestinarian theology hangs over other characters than Bosola; hoping to expedite the removal of Julia's body the Cardinal has forbidden his attendants to enter his apartment, whatever cries they may hear. The killings then play out like something inevitable: Bosola and Ferdinand both stab the Cardinal—so it is unclear whose was the death wound—then they stab one another. As they lie dying, Bosola returns to the theme of revenge:

> Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered
> By the Arragonian brethren; for Antonio,
> Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
> Poison'd by this man; and lastly, for myself,
> That was an actor in the main of all
> Much 'gainst mine own good nature. (98-103)

An "*actor* in the main of all"—with his life ebbing away Bosola continues to offer meta-thatrical reminders of his position and our own. The word cuts against the intended meaning of his speech. Bosola wants to make sense of the catastrophe which he has both initiated and fallen prey to. He wants to interpret his death and the deaths of the brothers, as sacrifices, suggesting that they can compensate for the innocent deaths. But Webster's project is to indict the revenge instinct, not to satisfy it. While there is undoubtedly a conventional moral to be drawn about the way "These wretched eminent things" (to quote Delio (131)), destroy one another, the annihilation of the villains does not meet the emotional debt already incurred. And Bosola's theatrical language continues, reminding the audience members of their position as sacrificial interpreters. As an actor in the main of all that we have

witnessed, how should Bosola, in particular, be judged? When asked how Antonio died, Bosola replies,

> In a mist: I know not how—
> Such a mistake as I have often seen
> In a play. (112-4)

Can it be a "mistake" if it was scripted? The actor, who can only play the role he is assigned, may well think so. Unlike Lodovico, who brashly claimed to have "limbed" the "night-piece" which destroyed him along with his victims, Bosola sees himself as a man under compulsion, pushed into a tragic error against his will. Thus, he subtly waives responsibility, by implying that his violence—in the case, the accidental stabbing of Antonio—is not *his* violence, but something systemic, in which he is involved in spite of himself. If this is self-serving, it is also true. It does not absolve Bosola, but it does remind us that we have participated with him in sacrifice.

"Violence Is a Relationship":

In the course of *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster places the audience on much more intimate terms with Bosola—and thus with Ferdinand and the Cardinal—than it might like to think. Intimacy, as Aristotle noted, is one of the prerequisites of tragedy—violence between siblings or spouses engages the emotions to a degree that violence between mere acquaintances cannot (39). Webster exploits this principle, repeatedly stressing the closeness between victim and victimizer. In *The Duchess of Malfi* the blood motif, functioning as a symbol of violence and familial

ties alike, underscores this. When Bosola expresses pity for the Duchess in Act Four, Ferdinand curses her:

> Damn her! That body of hers,
> While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth
> Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call'd a soul. (4.1.123-5)

He implies that he has property rights over the body of his sister, sealed by the fact that her blood, by virtue of kinship, is also his. Ferdinand hates and fears the Duchess as he does because of her closeness to him; she is close enough to pollute his blood, so he must spill hers. This recognition of intimacy makes his cruelty properly tragic. He is consciously sacrificing a victim who is as close to him as anyone can be. He tells the Cardinal, brother to them both,

> I could kill her now,
> In you, or in myself, for I do think
> It is some sin in us, heaven doth revenge
> By her. (2.5.64-6)

The speech is made in a fit of terrifying choler, but it says much, inadvertently, about Ferdinand's perception of his sister and her supposed crime. Soon after the Duchess' death, Ferdinand's lycanthropy makes it clear that the thing he hated was inside him, all along. His physician describes the disorder:

> he howl'd fearfully;
> Said he was a wolf, only the difference
> Was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside,
> His on the inside; bade them take their swords,
> Rip up his flesh, and try. (5.2.12-9)

His violence has recoiled back on himself. The true infection remains in Ferdinand's blood even after his sister is gone, and her sacrifice has failed to solve his problem. Making the Duchess a scapegoat, a disease to be purged, or a beast to be eradicated only shows Ferdinand his own violence, his own animality. He is

unprepared for the revelation. "Cover her face," he says to Bosola in the dungeon, "mine eyes dazzle: she died young" (4.2.262). The murder they have committed appears ugly to both men now, and the Duchess' dead face now signals their condemnation.

The truth of the relationship between the vicious Ferdinand and his innocent victim is in this closeness. In the dungeon we learn an astonishing fact about the pair: they are not simply siblings, but twins. At the beginning of *The Duchess of Malfi* when his friend Delio asks Antonio whether the Aragonian brothers are twins Antonio replies, "In quality" (1.1.172), suggesting that they share the same corrupt nature. This is reasonable, but Ferdinand's actual twin is the Duchess herself. He reveals this fact to Bosola as they stand over her body (4.2.265), having remembered it too late. It cannot be forgotten by the participating spectator in the last act of the play, for if the Duchess was closer to Ferdinand than he liked to acknowledge, he is likewise closer to her than we, who have sympathized with her suffering, might like to acknowledge.

This sense of fundamental closeness is something Cornelia, in *The White Devil*, also expresses. In Act 5 of that play Marcello warns his brother Flamineo to end his affair with Zanche. Insults are exchanged and Marcello challenges Flamineo and then asks a courtier to carry his sword to his brother, so that Flamineo can find one of equal length for their duel. A scene later, as Marcello talks with their mother, Flamineo returns to the stage saying, "I have brought your weapon back," (5.2.14) as he runs him through. The murder is disgusting and cowardly, but it is also fitting. Stabbing him with his own weapon, Flamineo

reveals the sordid truth behind Marcello's cavalier gallantry. The only one who seems to understand this is the most aggrieved person on the stage, Cornelia. She rushes at her son's killer with a dagger, only to stop, remembering that the killer, too, is her son. Under no illusions about the enormity of Flamineo's crime, Cornelia nevertheless refuses to condemn him to the duke, saying "One arrow's grazed already; it were vain / T'lose this: for that will ne'er be found again" (68-9). She tells Flamineo,

> The God of heaven forgive thee. Dost not wonder
> I pray for thee? I'll tell thee what's the reason—
> I have scarce breath to number twenty minutes;
> I'd not spend that in cursing. Fare thee well—
> Half of thyself lies there. (53-7)

Goldberg[10] and Dollimore see Cornelia as a representative of bloodless, oppressive, traditional virtue, but she offers perhaps the most audacious statement in the play. Cornelia sums up Webster's fearless realism, which denies both simplistic moralizing and moral relativism in the same breath. There is no sentimentality in the mother's declaration that "Half of thyself lies there," simply the stark realization that the members of her family and her society are bound together more closely than the comforting lie of sacrificial otherness will admit. "Violence," in the words of René Girard, "is a relationship." And in Webster's hands, the family, bound by ties of blood, becomes a metonym for all those involved. Kinship may beget violence, but violence always begets kinship:

[10] Astonishingly, Goldberg goes so far as to agree with Bracciano, when he tells Cornelia that her shocked outburst over the lovers' plot is to blame for "all ensuing harm" (1.2.307). She claims that "This is not an idle expression of anger, but an attack upon the philosophy of respectability which—because Vittoria is not impervious to it—now forces him to commit more harmful acts in order to satisfy his desire. To spare Vittoria the opprobrium of adultery, he must commit the crime of murder" (27).

whether one is the victim, the victimizer, or an observer suspended somewhere on the line between pity and condemnation, one is a participant in the sacrament. John Webster's design is for his spectators to watch the grand, passionate violence of these decadent Italian aristocrats, and yet become something more than Alypius, who sipped animality and became drunk with cruelty. He wants his audience members to recognize their participation with the victims and persecutors, to see their affinity and hence, their own culpability. One body, many members.

Chapter Four:
Tragic Ambivalence: John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

> It was the sign of the regeneration of the human race. It superseded the Cross. Models of it were worn on the breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied…. The name of the strong man of Old Scripture had descended to the chief functionary who worked it; but, so armed, he was stronger than his namesake, and blinder, and tore away the gates of God's own Temple every day.
>
> Charles Dickens, On "La Guillotine," *A Tale of Two Cities*, 271.

> Samson with these immixt, inevitably
> Pulld down the same destruction on himself.
>
> *Samson Agonistes*, 1657-8.

It is fitting that this study of the sacrificial crisis in Renaissance tragedy should end with John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. While this means jumping ahead more than half a century, from the Red Bull and Blackfriars, to take up a closet drama written for a different audience in a different style, it would be a serious mistake not to engage with *Samson*. *Samson* is the final poetic work of John Milton's career, the final tragedy of the English Renaissance, and one of the most difficult, disturbing and controversial literary products of the century. A work that is overtly Greek in its structure and overtly Hebrew in its subject, written by a radical English Protestant, it ends in a final convulsion of shocking violence perpetrated by the hero against thousands of his enemies, and against himself as well. Huston Diehl calls *Samson* "perhaps the last English play to rehearse the central dialectics of Reformation culture" (215)." I would go even further: Milton's tragedy epitomizes the problem of all Christian tragedy—the response to sacrifice—in its purest and most inescapable form, distilling in the person of the blind hero the ambivalence

that surrounded early modern religious violence. In the last deed of Samson we are given both the resolution to suffer and die for the purposes of God, and also the urge to kill for them; we are given the persecuted church and the persecuting church; we are given, to go back to the terms I used in Chapter Two, the sacrifice of the self and the sacrifice of the other.

The central tension of *Samson Agonistes* comes from this opposition. The critical history of this play is full of those who want to solve Samson in one way or the other, declaring him right or wrong; but Milton, I contend, has deliberately given us a problem, not a solution; a problem within his religion that he himself has not satisfactorily solved. And so, in recent decades this tragedy has generated critical acrimony rivalled in heat and intensity by few other debates in seventeenth-century English studies. When one considers the hero's final act this is hardly surprising. *Titus Andronicus* or *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* far surpass Milton's drama in gratuitous and barbaric cruelty, but the body count generated by Samson's assault on the Philistines is unequalled by any other tragedy in the period. Beyond this one is struck by the significance of Samson's resolution to, as he says in the book of Judges, "die with the Philistines" (16: 30). Recently, a number of scholars have written about the implications this impulse has for our contemporary world, where the use of suicide to effect violent political change has unsettling resonances. One need not draw such inferences to be disturbed by this seeming endorsement of self-inflicted death which, I believe, is without precedent in the Judeo-Christian scriptures or Milton's corpus. In writing *Samson* Milton walks a troubling line between meaning, devotion, even holiness on one side and on the other, brutal,

barren nihilism. The French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy can perhaps shine light on the disquieting significance of Samson's actions. In a recent book Lévy describes speaking with someone he terms a "repentant kamikaze," a Sri Lankan woman who had trained with Tamil extremists for years as a suicide bomber. After this interview he claimed to be haunted by what he calls their "sacrificial solution." Lévy writes of "the enigma of this action in which one chooses to die in order to kill, to mingle one's holy death with the unclean death of one's victims" (xviii-xix).

With *Samson Agonistes*, as with Lévy's Sri Lankan interviewee, we get the same uncomfortable sense of blurred boundaries. If the sacrificial crisis in early modern England is predicated on uncertainty over the justice of the scapegoating and the sanctity of violence, then Milton's play is its purest expression. The profoundly shaken messenger who informs Manoa and the Chorus of how Samson killed the "choice nobility and flower" (1654) of the Philistine political and ecclesiastical establishment explains that, "Samson with these immixt, inevitably / Pulld down the same destruction on himself" (1657-8). Samson's body, but also, one is tempted to think, Samson's fundamental self, are combined, are blended, are intermingled, with what he hated. Reinforcing the idea, the Chorus in praising Samson says that his death "conjoin'd / [Him] with [his] slaughtered foes" (1666-7). Samson was not a Philistine, would not have known most of those he killed, but he is, in the final pile of rubble and broken bodies, indistinguishable from them, whatever alleged differences his kinsmen might, literally or figuratively, seize upon as they search for his remains.

The two descriptions of Samson's death underscore the enigma here, emphasising a sense of fusion, and challenging the supposed categories of Israelite and Philistine. This is not to say that Milton's attitude toward the chosen people and their enemies (either in his own time or Samson's) is indeterminate, or that he makes no distinction between the godly and the heathen. Collapsing the categories is what Samson, not the author does. Milton does not dull the tension created by the reader's conflicting emotional responses; he sharpens it. I will argue that the tragedy works by provoking ambivalence, insofar as both sides of Samson's violence are presented with unsettling honesty. Critics—with some notable exceptions—generally imply that Milton's design is for us to be either drawn to, or repelled from, Samson's violence. But I contend that reading the poem gives rise to both sensations. Samson encourages pity and aversion, and so do his enemies.

Many scholars point to substantial moments of doubt in the text where Samson's character and divine mandate are rendered questionable, or where the Philistines display unexpected decency or thoughtfulness. Others, though, point to ways in which Milton cleans up his hero, making him much more sympathetic and respectable than the amoral quasi-barbarian of the Judges text. His libido and his unthinking aggression are diminished and mitigated, his history is less compromising, his desire for personal revenge diminished. And both groups are right—there is evidence to support the notion that Milton is increasing sympathy for Samson, but there is also evidence that he is increasing antipathy. What might be referred to as Milton's biography creates further trouble. He is the only one of the three tragedians in this study whose religious convictions can be pinned down

with any certainty, but Milton's theology is complex, and shifts subtly over the course of a long life. Milton's life story and his doctrinal writings complicate the critical positioning of the hero and deepen the weighty sense of the poem's importance for a true understanding of the poet. Nevertheless, Samson's character speaks to Milton's, and Milton's speaks to Samson's. Derek Wood is no doubt correct to point out the problems inherent in ham-fisted associations of one with the other (*Exiled* 18), but while the caution is well taken, surely there is a reason for the recurrent impulse. I do not wish to imply that any kind of direct or absolute equation exists between them, but can anyone really escape the suspicion, however slight, that how John Milton felt about his last protagonist was also how he felt about John Milton? In *Samson Agonistes* one broken, blind, failed revolutionary writes about the last hours of another broken, blind, failed revolutionary. However we interpret Milton's character in his last decade, however we believe he grappled with the defeat of 1660, the failed Commonwealth must have influenced his tragedy. The political parallels between Milton and Samson's situation are not perfectly delineated, but they are substantial, nonetheless; indeed, Wood himself cannot resist the urge to examine Milton's life in the final chapter of his book, stressing that, "The great poems were written by a person whose visionary millenarian dreams, even expectations of regenerated life on earth in his time, had foundered in a sea of blood" (*Exiled* 179).

Barbara Lewalski has made a grand request regarding *Samson Agonistes*, declaring that, "anyone who would join—or rejoin—this critical debate at this juncture should declare his or her assumptions at the outset" ("New Acquist,"

233). The statement rests on the rather troubling assumption that there are only two principal conclusions we can draw about the tragedy: for or against. In this chapter I hope to demonstrate that this dichotomy is false to the conception of sacrificial violence of Milton's last years and to *Samson Agonistes* itself. The play is an honest reflection on the place of violence within a Christian society. As such, it is troubled and compromised. Samson's story is a tragedy because, to use Aristotle's terms, it evokes the pity *and* the terror of the sacrificial act, indeed, of the hero himself. There have been too many attempts to solve this tragedy in one way or the other, suggesting that Samson's destruction of the temple is to be applauded or condemned. Gregory F. Goekjian, interested in what he sees as the ambiguity of Samson's death, argues that

> What is disturbing about *Samson*…is that it seems to demand and then to ratify an absolute choice between conclusions it has placed in opposition. The choric interpretation of Samson's act is right or it is wrong, and choice between the two ordains the meaning of the play and of Samson's "great act." (254)

So meaning, for Goekjian, *depends* on acceptance or rejection. My reading, though, suggests that what disturbs us about this play is that we must not make an absolute choice between the conclusions; such a choice would mean the amputation of an important piece of the tragedy, in which approval and disapproval for the violence of Samson—and, by extension, the violence of the Roundheads—are "immixt" to the point of inseparability. I will begin by offering a critical survey of the major camps in the *Samson* debate. Next, I will discuss the sacrificial crisis in Milton's lifetime, and how his own attitude towards religious violence shifted in the years

after the Civil War. Finally, I will turn to *Samson Agonistes* in order to show how the poem displays what I call tragic ambivalence.

The Critical Battle Lines:

Samson's miserable condition at the beginning of the play is a direct result of his sin, the revelation of his secret to Dalila. His moral failure is symbolised by his blindness, his degraded, filthy condition, and his slack posture.[1] This, we can assume, is something all parties will agree on. But there is consensus on little else. It is not simply a question as to whether Samson acts from a divine impulse in his last moments—critics who agree on that issue will disagree vehemently over his spiritual status during his various conversations and thus, the purpose of those conversations. Are the dialogues evidence of internal growth, justifiable rage, or vain pretence and posturing? Is a given character shown to be Samson's moral equivalent or superior? To what degree are his actions, prior to the revelation of his secret, sinful? Hovering over all these questions is the problem of tragedy. Where does it lie? In the pointless deaths of a misguided fool and the piles of innocents he has slain, or in the painful but necessary suffering of a hero who can only, under the Old Covenant, earn salvation for himself and his people with blood? In his Prologue to the play Milton invokes the Aristotelian doctrine of *catharsis*, saying that tragedy has power,

[1] The Chorus is shocked when they see him for the first time: "See how he lies at random, carelessly diffus'd, / With languish't head unpropt, / As one past hope abandon'd, / And by himself, given over; / In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds / O're worn and soild" (118-23). They imply a connection between his psychological state and his appearance.

> by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. (799)

The traditional formula makes it no easier—indeed, it really complicates things even more—to find the moral centre of the play and diagnose just which part of the action purges which passion, or to explain what is to be pitied and what feared.

In their reactions to the violence of *Samson Agonistes* critics tend to fall into one of three groups. In many cases the arguments overlap, but fundamental differences about the meaning of the play make for clear, if porous, borders. The first two groups both claim that Milton approves of Samson. One articulates what can broadly be called the "Regenerationist" thesis. Scholars of this faction argue that Milton endorses Samson's story because of what it represents on the symbolic plane: the renewal of a debased, humiliated, fallen slave to a godly champion who has regained his calling and won salvation. The Regenerationist reading uses a typological framework which sees Samson's flesh-and-blood struggle as an imperfect, but highly resonant, Old Testament analogue for Christ's spiritual conquest of the forces of sin and death. Samson's violence is not to be emulated, but it can be read as the victorious climax to a struggle against the sort of despair and doubt faced by ordinary Christians. Northrop Frye sums up this position in an influential 1973 essay, "Agon and Logos," saying: "As the Old Testament prototype of Christ, Samson, in destroying the demonic temple, illustrates the kind of thing that, according to Milton, man by himself can do in self-redemption" (217). Superficially, the story may end with an act of great physical destruction but this is simply a regrettable aspect of life under the old covenant from which Christ

has happily freed us; Frye asserts, "For Milton there is no strength except spiritual strength, and no conflict except mental conflict" (202).

A few years after "Agon and Logos" Mary Ann Radzinowicz published *Toward Samson Agonistes*, still the single most respected contribution to the Regenerationist argument. Her argument is that Milton's play shows the moral and intellectual development of the hero: Samson begins the poem in despair, questioning God's plan, and ends as someone who, through faith and hard-won wisdom, fulfils it. She writes that the play "demonstrates the necessity of mental labour for tempering of the mind and control of the passions" and "leaves us freer for our own efforts to free ourselves from our own incompatible passions and disharmonies" (7). Radzinowicz is almost cavalier in her dismissal of the poem's bloody conclusion as an entirely symbolic depiction of God's power, an "exemplary act which teaches how God gives freedom" (346). The cost of that freedom is not important compared to what Samson learns in his final hours.

A very recent example of the regenerationist thesis is Stanley Fish's *How Milton Works*. Indebted more to his own idiosyncratic stylistics than to typology, Fish argues against a clearly discernable arc of moral development saying of the connection between Samson's moral renewal and his death, "I am admitting that I am unable to construct a formula which links them in a cause-and-effect relationship" (392). In Fish's reading the hero goes back and forth between a sinful mindset of pride and despair and a healthier one of humility and faith. Samson and his fellow Israelites, Fish argues, are beset by the "Temptation of Understanding," a compulsion to force their choices and God's will into a

meaningful, coherent schema that cannot properly contain them, as Milton structures the story so "as to leave unanswered the very questions it raises." Yet though he tries to undermine a simplistic, black-and-white reading of God's intentions, Fish does assume regeneration to have occurred at the "Yet" of line 1377, when Samson changes his mind and agrees to go to the temple for no clear reason:

> the very arbitrariness of the decision—its independence from any rational or legalistic process—is its value, because as a nonreasonable act it manifests Samson's willingness to come to terms with the world as it is, rather than as he would like it to be…. [H]e affirms his belief in a benevolence whose kind is *not* always known and the evidence of which is *not* always seen or understood. (418, Fish's italics)

In a highly controversial move, Fish then argues that Milton has undermined any attempt on the part of the reader to judge Samson's action so that

> In the end, the only value we can put on Samson's action is the value he gives it in his context. Within the situation, it is an expression, however provisionally, of his reading of the divine will; and insofar as it represents his desire to conform to the will, it is a virtuous action. *No other standard for evaluating it exists*. (426, Fish's italics)

As he no doubt intended, the statement opens up Fish's argument to major ethical challenges. How many people in modern society would be prepared to justify the death of three thousand people simply because the perpetrator acted in good conscience? Though few members of the Regenerationist camp would go to the rhetorical lengths that Fish does, his analysis accentuates the chief weakness in their position. As I will soon discuss, readers of the third group will take great umbrage with the view that Milton's God could use so many lives to enable one man's moral awakening.

With the dominance enjoyed in Renaissance studies by cultural materialism over the past two decades, another group of critics have coalesced around what might be termed the "Revenge" thesis. Emphasising *Samson Agonistes'* political and social context, as well as the poet's biography, these scholars agree that Milton endorses the ending of the poem, but not for the spiritual lessons it imparts so much as its value as an aggressive political statement in line with Milton's iconoclastic, anti-monarchical, radical sympathies. A respected proponent of this argument is Christopher Hill, who offers a Marxist reading of the poet in *Milton and the English Revolution*. As the title suggests, Hill saw the struggle as more than a civil war over issues like ship money; for him it represents an ideologically driven revolt against the establishment culture and he is much more interested in Milton's political rather than his spiritual motives. Having surveyed Milton's career, through the highs of the 40s and the lows of the Restoration, Hill writes that *Samson Agonistes* is a rallying cry for the Good Old Cause, "a call of hope to the defeated" (441). The Revolution's leaders may have proven weak and unfit, the nation itself undeserving, but then Fallen Man is naturally unworthy—just as God's grace uses Samson's sin against his enemies, so can God redeem the Cause from this seeming defeat: "It was believed in the seventeenth century that the name Samson meant 'here the second time.' Samson had his second chance and took it. So perhaps might the English people" (434). To the Fryes, constructing a Milton whose motives are essentially cerebral and spiritual, Hill writes, "Milton was not a modern liberal Christian" (45). It is a point continually reiterated in both *Milton and the English Revolution* and *The Experience of Defeat*, where he asserts that Milton

remained a militant Christian until his death, concluding, "And if Milton did believe it a Christian duty to hate God's enemies, who could be more clearly God's enemies than the Philistine aristocracy and priests, or their counterparts in restoration England?" (317).

"Revenge" proponents have continued to read a deep undercurrent of violence within the ousted Republicans, and particularly within *Samson*. The Puritan resurgence Samson represents is a call to arms to Milton's revolutionary brothers, prophesying bloody vengeance on the Royalist-Laudian Philistines. For David Loewenstein,

> Milton's is an unsettling drama…about the mightiness of the Spirit of God which comes upon the militant saint yet once more and prompts him to commit an act of "horrid" destruction (1542)—one whose apocalyptic and dreadful character can be closely aligned with the fiery radical religious discourse of the Revolution and its aftermath. ("Revenge," 160)

Michael Lieb presents perhaps the most strident argument for Milton's commitment to political violence. For Lieb *Samson Agonistes* is "a work that exults in violence, while it gives expression to profound and deeply disturbing elements of vehemence and rage" ("Dread," 4). Lieb totally repudiates the idea that bloodshed is incidental to Milton's Samson, writing in *Milton and the Culture of Violence*, "The drama is a work of violence to its very core. It extols violence. Indeed, it exults in violence" (237).[2]

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[2] Lieb goes so far as to resurrect William Riley Parker's argument that a significant portion (if not a full draft) of *Samson Agonistes* was written between 1646-53, well before the bloom had worn off the Republican rose (and *not* after the years of failure and disappointment during which certain scholars argue that Milton partly reconsidered his former positions). The advantage for Lieb is that he can tie *Samson* to the period of regicide and revolt—which includes the release of *Areopagitica* wherein Milton famously compared the rebellious English people to Samson. Wood, taking issue with critics who read the tragedy through the militant prose of the 1640s and 50s, makes what seems to

The third group of critics fall under what might be called the "Pacifist" heading. Its proponents argue that *Samson Agonistes* is critical of its hero and his ruin of the temple. In a *TLS* article published on the first anniversary of 11 September 2001, John Carey attacks Regenerationists (particularly Fish) and the Revenge faction, which incorrectly, Carey believes, interprets *Samson* as "a work in praise of terrorism" (15). Fish's previously quoted statement that the only value we can assign to Samson's action is the one Samson assigns it himself is denounced as "monstrous—a licence for any fanatic to commit an atrocity" (15). Carey reminds us, "Milton was a subtle-minded poet not a murderous bigot" (15). For Carey this means a heterodox reading wherein Milton rises above contemporary politics and even challenges the conclusions of scripture by showing "a drastic rewriting of the Samson story" (15).[3] Carey's outrage is almost shrill, and his article is much too short to support his assertions properly, but the *TLS* piece is simply the most prominent and controversial example of several critical works questioning Milton's supposed endorsement of Samson.[4]

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me the decisive point: "Even if Milton had written part of *Samson* years before, it is unthinkable that so consummate a craftsman could have tossed in a juvenile work with *Paradise Regained* as little more than padding, simply to fill out the slim volume for the printer: that he would not have fashioned it meticulously to express his latest thoughts on what mattered most to him, the right Christian life. This was his tragedy, 'the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems'" (*Exiled* 28).

[3] This article is a modification of Carey's earlier position—he had read *Samson* with extreme distaste, calling the ending "morally disgusting" (*Complete* 333).

[4] For a very able riposte to Carey's article, see Feisal G. Mohamed's "Confronting Religious Violence: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*." Mohamed argues that "If Fish is to be faulted, it is not for being too strenuous in asserting that Samson Agonistes is a work that looks favorably on Samson's final action but rather for not being strenuous enough in doing so" (329). Mohamed claims that *Samson Agonistes* is a difficult play because it refuses to comply with the tendency of liberals (like Carey) to see the touchstones of Western culture as "fundamentally rational and non-violent" and ignores the fact that "libertinism, in Milton's day and our own, [tends] to privilege the freedoms of the elect above those of the marginal" (337).

Several critics have argued for the Pacifist thesis from a more nuanced position, attempting to show that Milton was criticising Samson from within the Biblical tradition. In his influential 1986 monograph *Interpreting Samson Agonistes*, Joseph Wittreich couples an ironic reading of the play with extensive historical contextualisation. Wittreich castigates those scholars who take the traditional typological position of Luther or Calvin on Samson as the "base line of a hermeneutic that Milton's poetry is everywhere thought to affirm" (25). Instead, Wittreich assembles a legion of seventeenth-century commentators and theologians who criticise Samson's actions:

> not all Puritans said the same thing about Samson. Moreover, the Puritan literature that does confront Samson in the 1640s and 50s is a literature of shifting accents and concerns, where an initial muddling of the differences between Samson and Christ modulates into an accentuation of their differences. (27)[5]

Wittreich believes that the Old and New Testaments present contradictory interpretations of Samson's character—"the somewhat negative example from Judges" and "the positively heroic portrait derived from Hebrews" (61). He makes the further claim that those points in the poem which differ from the Judges narrative affirm rather than deny the truth of scripture; that Judges itself is offering a critique of its subject which the author of Hebrews misses:

> His objective is to wring from scriptural history its highest truths; and if attaining that goal necessitates the creation of certain fictions (that Samson and Dalila were married, for instance), Milton plays

[5] It needs to be noted that Wittreich's scholarship concerning his collection of Post-Reformation anti-Samson commentators has been substantially challenged by a number of critics, Anthony Low and Philip Gallagher in particular. The critique amounts to a charge that Wittreich saw what he wanted to in the commentators. See Wood, *Exiled from Light* (9-14) for a good summary of the controversy. Wood gives Wittreich credit for many valuable points but says of his examples, "Almost invariably, the authors who voice criticisms of Samson accept without reservation the pronouncement in Hebrews that Samson was a hero of the faith" (13).

> with those fictions, the child of truth in the belief, apparently, that what are fictions in form may in their substance be truth. Milton reaches for the truth of history, then, by compelling ideas about history in the Judges narrative into their most perfect shape. (60)

Milton, the argument runs, pays the Judges author a backhanded compliment by gently steering the story nearer to where he believes it was intended to go: "*Samson Agonistes* is not an encoding but a decoding of the Samson story" (56-7).

Derek Wood gives a subtler interpretation of the Pacifist position in his book *Exiled from Light*. Though Wood praises Mary Ann Radzinowicz's study of the play for its great insight, he criticises her "unreserved exultation in Samson's achievement"—her attempt to reduce the body count to a spiritual equation (7). Like Wittreich, Wood believes that Judges deliberately presents a flawed hero whose faults Milton correctly recognizes. But a criticism of Hebrews does not necessarily follow. Wood disrupts traditional typology, which says that Samson's self-sacrifice essentially prefigures Christ's, by arguing that Hebrews insists on a fundamental difference between the Heroes of the Faith and the Church of the New Covenant:

> Indeed, much of their behaviour, apart from their acts of faith, may have been unsavoury or even sinful, as in the case of David or the prostitute, Rehab. The focus of Hebrews, then, is on us: "God having provided some better thing for us" (Hebrews 11:40). (xvi)

In this reading, the book of Hebrews does not simplistically represent Samson's life as Christian growth with a few rough edges; rather, the "heroes" provide a counterpoint to Christianity. Though their faith and devotion are admirable, their law-bound efforts are imperfect, and bear questionable fruit—they have neither the knowledge nor the spiritual guidance that Christ's atonement and the Holy Spirit

provide. Wood emphasises that *Samson Agonistes* is "rich in intertextual allusions to Hebrews, allusions that have meanings for the reader unavailable to the personae in the play," and which remind the reader of the distance between Samson's behaviour and Christian behaviour (xvii). This distance is the source of tragedy in Wood's view.[6] He writes that this

> is the tragedy of fallen humanity, of the stunted and darkened moral consciousness of the fallen human spirit, brutal, literalistic, ignorant of charity, blind, starved, enslaved and terrified, denied the exemplary beauty and sweetness of Christ's human life in time. The fallen human beings peer dimly through the murk for a sign, uncertain if the sign when it comes is from God or the Flesh or Satan…. Samson's death made many widows and orphans, delighted Manoa and the Danites, and achieved nothing…. nothing came of his sacrifice. (164-5)

Wood writes against both the Radzinowicz and the Lieb positions, giving us a Milton who is deeply concerned with Samson's violence and with his own. The long, dark and, for a time, dangerous years following the return of the monarchy gave Milton leisure to reconsider the Good Old Cause. Wood does well to remind us that,

> When Manoa and the Israelites rejoice in God's presence "favouring and assisting to the end," and when they go to separate the remains of Samson's body from those of his broken enemies, "soaked in his enemies' blood" and "clotted gore," blind Milton had more terrible, familiar images of what they will find than most modern readers can imagine. (176)

[6] Wood demonstrates that Milton had a more radical attitude toward the Mosaic Law than was typical among orthodox theologians: "While other Christian reformers might agree to abolish only the ceremonial part of the Law, Milton believes that the entire Law is dead and gone," no bad thing as "the Decalogue…held humanity in bondage" (xix). Many scholars of the Regenerationist camp see the same tension between Law and Grace in the play that Wood does, particularly Frye. In sum, they argue that Samson's violence represents the only kind of right action available to the Hebrews who had to fight physical battles rather than spiritual ones.

Milton lived through a time of political violence, was intimately familiar with its consequences, and had many acquaintances among those who suffered the ultimate punishment for their involvement with the Republican cause. It would be impossible for him to see Samson's deeds in the Regenerationists' abstract, metaphorised terms. Whether he could have nonetheless advocated such violence—such a sacrifice—for the greater good of the English people is the harder question.[7] That it cannot be definitively answered is the main contention of this chapter.

The Royal Martyr:

While problematic, the passionate critical debate over Samson's status is nonetheless understandable. Reputation matters to Samson; he cares immensely about how other people—his allies and his enemies—interpret him. Even more than that, he worries about how God interprets him, and finally, how those who consider his story will interpret his God. Milton doubtless understood the stakes here more clearly than anyone. Curiously, the physical setting of Samson's final act is both a temple to the Philistine god Dagon, and a theatre. The Hebrew messenger tells Manoa and the Danites that,

> The building was a spacious Theatre
> Half round on two main Pillars vaulted high,
> With seats where all the Lords and each degree
> Of sort, might sit in order to behold,
> The other side was op'n, where the throng

[7] Wood believes that in the last decade and a half of his life Milton reconsidered the possibility of Christian violence, and claims that critics like Hill put too much emphasis on the early prose and do not understand the radical pacifism of the New Testament as Milton came to see it (see *Exiled* 186-90).

On banks and scaffolds under Skie might stand. (1605-10)

There is no obvious reason for depicting the temple as a theatre; doing so underscores the sharp convergence of religion, politics and poetry that this story symbolized for Milton. More than any other tragedy *Samson Agonistes* represents conflict between true and false religion, the persecuted and the persecuting church; it is tragedy as the sacrificial crisis aestheticized.

We can better understand Milton's intriguing decision to make Samson's place of death a theatre by considering the prosecution of one of Milton's most prominent Royalist enemies, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, who was tried and beheaded by the Long Parliament in 1641. This trial—one of the most important milestones on the road to war—offers a suggestive example of the sacrificial crisis in Milton's lifetime. Strafford had been one of Charles' ablest lieutenants during the Personal Rule; during the Bishop's War he became a symbol of everything the Parliamentary and Low Church factions hated about those years. His execution was a triumph for Parliament whose fears of secret Catholic plots brewing in the royal family and its intimates were as genuine as they were hysterical: Strafford, who had been serving as the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland during the Bishops' War, was accused of assembling an army of Catholic Irishmen to be used by the king in quelling the English dissenters. In *The Noble Revolt*, his massive study of the 1640-1 crisis, John Adamson goes into great detail describing the secret political machinations which eventually resulted in the fatal bill of attainder. At the same time Adamson talks extensively about the performative aspect of the trial. It was the largest in living memory, and it was held in

Westminster Hall, the largest "secular, covered space" in England (216). Furthermore, Strafford's contemporaries described the trial as a kind of national drama. Adamson remarks that commentators would "easily slip into the language of the theatre" (216). The place of the trial was "the theatre" and Strafford was "this great Personage, now upon the stage" (quoted 216, 217).

The dramatic aspect of the trial was heightened by the unprecedented move of opening it to the public—a thousand Londoners could cram themselves into the back of the Hall to witness Strafford parrying his antagonists' thrusts (220). The prosecutors succeeded in marginalizing the King, forcing him to sit off to the side rather than in the throne of state, so that it seemed that the earl held "dispute against the whole Kingdome" (225), an impression that was enhanced by the far more numerous Commons piling in behind the Lords on either side (224): the whole weight of England's judgment was focused on the solitary figure in the dock. The earl's situation—one man facing the hostile gaze of a nation, in a forum that is at once a theatre and also the sharp end of *realpolitik*—is strikingly similar to Samson's. Both men are victims at the mercy of the crowd. St. John, Strafford's most able prosecutor, told those assembled that the earl's death was an absolute necessity. Adamson writes:

> Strafford, St. John maintained, was like a marauding animal, a predator that endangered the life of the entire body politic. "It was never accounted either cruelty or foul play," he insisted, "to knock foxes and wolves on the head as they can be found, because they are beasts of prey." For the safety of the realm, nothing short of Strafford's execution would suffice. (272)

By dehumanizing the condemned, St. John attempts to circumvent the consciences of those who sit in judgment: killing the defendant does not raise profound moral

questions, he implies. There is a subtle paradox at work here: the victim becomes both bigger and smaller than a normal person. Strafford—like Samson to the Philistines—is dangerous, and will cause further suffering if unchecked. At the same time though, his death is a light matter, tantamount to a farmer ridding his land of vermin, equivalent to the Philistines' mockery of their most famous mill worker. Even St. John's flippant suggestion that they "knock" the defendant on the head (rather than remove the head), has rhetorical weight. Strafford's death is a simple, obvious, necessary expedient for the good of the realm. Though St. John and his faction eventually won—convincing a majority to vote for the attainder which demanded Strafford's death—it was a difficult contest with several rounds, and Strafford was a capable opponent who knew the stakes. He strove against his prosecutors to control the way he was perceived; Adamson discusses the carefully crafted image he presented to the spectators: his hair and clothing carefully dishevelled, Strafford did his best to appear a tragic victim, rather than a monster (215).

Strafford was the first of three prominent Royalist martyrs in the 1640s; he would be followed in 1644 by his friend Archbishop Laud, and in 1649 by the king himself. All three men died because they offended the Parliamentarians for both political and religious reasons. So while Strafford was officially tried for treason the charge had religious implications just as it did for the Elizabethan Jesuits: the earl was a representative of Charles' High Church idolatry and hated ecclesiastical absolutism. By the publication of *Samson Agonistes* in 1671 England was a different place in terms of religious violence than it had been in Shakespeare or Webster's

time. The Civil War meant that the English had undoubtedly tired of bloodshed, but I would suggest that the sacrificial crisis which had been building for generations was at least as responsible as battle fatigue for the new distaste for religious violence.[8] Milton's close involvement in the war meant that he had been forced to grapple with the questions Foxe had held before the English in the sixteenth century. Certainly, Foxe had maintained his presence in the English imagination: successive editions of the Book were published, and Foxe himself continued to be highly regarded in England, particularly by those dissatisfied with the religious policies of Charles I. Damian Nussbaum has written about the reception of the *Acts and Monuments* in the seventeenth century, arguing that the Laudians recognized Foxe's popularity among moderate Calvinists as well as Puritans, and attempted to "level down Foxe's authority and mute his voice in debate" (334), a small part of Laud's campaign to conceive of his brand of High Church Protestantism as an organic development of England's Catholic past rather than a revolutionary rupture (334-5).[9] This came back to haunt Laud as, according to Nussbaum, the prosecutors at his treason trial in 1644 made much of allegations that the Archbishop slighted Foxe and attempted to suppress his work (329).[10]

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[8] I am talking here about the decrease in explicit martyr executions. I am not denying that religious violence endured: in the war itself, in Cromwell's Irish campaigns, or in the victims singled out for public death by Parliament, the army government or the restored monarchy. Certainly the Popish Plot demonstrated that anti-Catholic hysteria was never far below the surface. Once again, at issue is the desire for all parties to avoid the label of persecutor.

[9] David Cressy notes that the Star Chamber suppressed the publication of the *Acts and Monuments* during the Personal Rule (283). He goes on to say that after Parliament seized control of London in 1641 new editions began to appear (295).

[10] In *Salvation at Stake* Brad S. Gregory notes that three famous Puritans who suffered at the hands of Charles I's government saw themselves as part of the tradition Foxe commemorated: "In June 1637, William Prynne, Henry Burton, and John Bastwick were not executed for their open criticism of the Laudian church; they lost their ears and were sentenced to life imprisonment. Nonetheless,

The irony of the age: Foxe used to scapegoat a man despised as, among other things, a scapegoater.

While Strafford and Laud's examples help establish the sacrificial context in which *Samson* was written, I want to look more closely at Milton's own position and where he might have stood on the sacrificial crisis we traced in the religious and dramatic writing of the earlier period. The later Milton's attitude to religious violence is one of the great, vexed questions of his career. In 2007 a whole volume of essays, *Milton and Toleration*, was devoted to the subject; it gives one a sense of the difficulty of comparing a man like Milton—not only the possessor of sophisticated religious and political views, but one whose life and work endured an era of great change—to our contemporary standards of tolerance. Revered by the Whigs as an advocate of freedom of conscience, Milton nonetheless spent much of his life as a spokesman for the Church Militant, confidently asserting that a Christian must hate God's enemies, including the king whose execution he defended in print. There is plenty in Milton's corpus to support either interpretation. Critics can underscore the former by discussing the aloofness Jesus shows in *Paradise Regained* toward questions of temporal power, or the calls for free expression in *Areopagitica.* They can affirm the latter by pointing to the sonnets written in praise of Cromwell or Fairfax or the vicious polemic against bishops in *Of Reformation* which Paul Stevens calls "remarkable for the intensity of the writer's desire to punish…those people whose views and behaviour he considers intolerable" (244). *Samson Agonistes* is likely going to be a bellwether for most

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they understood themselves to be heirs to the Marian martyrs, suffering for Protestant truth, when they took their punishment before a large London crowd" (195).

critics interested in the issue: the hero will either speak to them of the tragedian's consistent militancy, or a newfound quietism.

Of course, heresy trials as such belonged to another era, but Milton had been born into that era, even if he, and the English people, had started to move beyond it. Nigel Smith reminds us that,

> Milton grew up in a world in which martyrdom was part of living memory: the martyrdom of radical Protestants and Roman Catholics, and before that, the memory of the Protestant martyrings during the reign of Queen Mary. The last men to be burned for heresy in England, the anti-trinitarians Edward Wightman and Bartholomew Legate, went to the flames in 1612 when Milton was three. There was also the memory and the continuing practice of imprisoning Puritan clergymen who would neither wear the required vestments nor use the Book or Common Prayer, or, later on, the Book of Sports. (39)

It was still an age of martyrs, though perhaps an effect of the sacrificial crisis was that the sacrificers tried still harder to convince the people, and themselves, that they were killing traitors. Milton himself manifested this instinct as a young man. It is worth remembering that the young John Milton had once thanked God for preserving a Stuart monarch from the violence of his enemies. In the Latin poetry he wrote about the Gunpowder Plot Milton condemned the conspirators' attempts to usurp falsely, as he saw it, the charisma of martyrdom:

> Cum simul in regem nuper satrapasque Britannos
> Ausus es infandum peride Fauxe nefas,
> Fallor? An & mitis voluisti ex parte videri,
> Et pensare mala cum pietate scelus.
> [*When, traitor Fawkes, you sinned your unmentionable sin at once against the King and the English nobility, did you, or am I wrong, think to be considered meek and gentle, and to cover your crimes with an evil piety?*]
> ("On the Gunpowder Plot," 1-4)[11]

[11] The poem and the translation are both from the Riverside Milton, 202.

The same rhetoric was again employed in 1649, this time to defend a successful act of regicide. Charles I is a false martyr, Milton contends in *Eikonoklastes*. Conjuring up a hated demon from England's recent past, he explains that at his trial the king was imitating, "not our Saviour, but his Grand-mother *Mary* Queen of Scots" (1094).[12] But it would prove much harder for Milton and his peers to hang this label of false piety over the body of Charles, whose dignified, brave, resigned comportment won him much sympathy when he faced his death in 1649.

This sympathy came at the expense of radicals like Milton who wanted Charles' death to stand as a successful sacrifice, which would establish a new order in English society, galvanizing the country around the killing of the ruthless "Charles Stuart, Man of Blood," justly punished for making war on God's people. In a recently published social history of the Civil War, Diane Purkiss underscores the sacrificial aspect of the proceedings against the king. Purkiss writes,

> Charles's blood was to inaugurate a new republic, and his head was to adorn it; it symbolized the new state's resolution. It also meant Charles's blood would be spilt to cleanse the land of the blood he had spilt. And it meant, too, that Charles would follow in the footsteps of Strafford and Laud, he would be just another traitor. The sky had not fallen when they died. (555)

Purkiss describes the sacrificial intentions of the Rump Parliament very clearly: Charles was to be a victim who would unite the country; his subjects were to be stronger—and holier—through the blessings conferred by his death. But sacrificial crisis prevented this. Purkiss writes that many onlookers spat upon the king as he

[12] This passage is quoted by Margaret Justice Dean in her useful article "Choosing Death: Adam's Temptation to Martyrdom in *Paradise Lost*" (32). Dean argues that Adam strikes an empty pose of martyrdom in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* when he claims he will fall with Eve for her sake: this false martyrdom is deliberately contrasted with the true self-sacrificing martyrdom of Christ.

was dragged from the court (555), but after his death sympathy for him steadily grew. Even Parliamentarian poet Andrew Marvell, writing in praise of Oliver Cromwell, cannot help but offer a sympathetic portrait of the regal martyr, underscoring the conceptual difficulty he presented for his enemies:

> …the royal actor borne,
> The tragic scaffold might adorn;
> While round the armèd bands
> Did clap their bloody hands.
> He nothing common did or mean
> Upon that memorable scene,
> But with his keener eye
> The ax's edge did try;
> Nor called the gods with vulgar spite
> To vindicate his helpless right;
> But bowed his comely head
> Down, as upon a bed. ("An Horatian Ode" 56, 53-64)

Displaying calm, almost gentle courage Charles is described as the complete Christian martyr, generating sympathy, Marvell suggests, in a way that Fawkes did not.

And Charles also succeeds in making his death a tragedy, which I think Marvell understands in the specifically Christian sense I am exploring—conflicted tension over the sacrificial act. Charles is described as an "actor" and even if the word connotes falsity—suggesting that the king was only playing his victimhood—Marvell implies that the performance was effective. The poem is not written to praise Charles, but Cromwell, whose final victory necessarily pollutes the "bloody hands" of those involved. But my reading of Marvell's ode is very close to my reading of *Samson Agonistes*, in that I think Marvell is drawn both to censure and admire: most of the admiration belongs to Cromwell, but the image of the king, refusing to gratify his enemies by appearing weak or bitter in death—"He nothing

common did or mean"—is clearly a difficult one for Marvell to accommodate, and there is the lingering worry that God may yet vindicate the king, though the "gods" did not. Foxe, in the prefatory material to the Book of Martyrs, offers an idea of the shift Charles was able to accomplish:

> And though the world judgeth prosperously of things, yet with God the true judge, certes such are to be reputed in deed, not that kill one an other with a weapon, but they which being rather killed in God's cause, do retain an invincible constancy against the threats of tyrants and violence of tormentors. Such as these, are the true conquerors of the world, by whom we learn true manhood, so many as fight under Christ, and not under the world. With this valiantness did that most mild Lamb and invincible Lion of the tribe of Judah first of all go before us, of whose unspeakable fortitude we hear this prophetical admiration: *who is this* (sayth he) *which walketh so in the multitude of his strength*?
> Forsooth the high son of the high God, once conquered of the world, and yet conquering the world after the same manner he was conquered. (1583, 15)

In death Charles did what he could not do in life: he shook off the mantle of tyrant, and made many of his enemies—or at least those sympathetic to his enemies—begin to see him as a victim. His gaze was sharper than the axe which killed him, and so conquered, he conquered. Here more than ever we might expect *non poena, sed causa, facit martyrem* to apply, but Marvell's poem suggests that Charles is now seen with new eyes.

In the years after Charles died, Milton certainly refused to admit such a thing, defending the English people in their regicide, and supporting Cromwell's government. This makes it natural enough to assume that the same spirit of muscular militancy persisted through *Samson Agonistes* to the end of Milton's life. Feisal G. Mohamed makes this assumption, contending that Greek tragedy typically raises greater sympathy for victims than *Samson Agonistes*.

> The kind of human suffering that elicits our horror over Hercules's actions and complicates our response to Pentheus's hubris simply does not emerge in Milton's portrait of the Philistine massacre. In presenting a hero of faith whose ultimate achievement is providential slaughter, Milton shows an ideology marginalizing the humanity of nonadherents—just as he did in his satisfaction over the beheading of Charles, in his triumphalism over Cromwell's Irish slaughters, and in his advocacy in the final days of the republic of military suppression of the "inconsiderate multitude['s]" desire for monarchy. (336)

Later I will address Mohamed's rather complacent assumption that *Samson Agonistes* dehumanizes the Philistines; for the moment I want to assert that Milton's position on religious violence did soften in the years following the Restoration. The question of whom to tolerate and how far is key to one of Milton's last pieces of writing, *Of True Religion* published in 1673. Milton wrote the pamphlet to address the mounting fears of Charles II and James Stuart's Catholic sympathies, and the king's simultaneous assault on Puritan liberties. The tract, though, is both an intolerant document, and a tolerant one. Milton expresses great flexibility where the various Protestant confessions are concerned, diagnosing their errors but maintaining that any sect which bases itself on the two essential precepts of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* is essentially Christian and that latitude should be shown to errors over *adiaphora*, or "things indifferent" (1154). Milton gives a list of the errors of the Protestant confessions—the Lutherans' Consubstantiation, the Calvinist's predestination, the Socinian's antitrinitarianism—but explains that though they are mistaken, the espousers of such doctrines must be treated generously: "What Protestant…would persecute, and not rather charitably tolerate such men as these, unless he mean to abjure the Principles of his own Religion? If it be askt how far they should be tolerated? I answer doubtless equally, as being all Protestants"

(1152). Fair enough: it is not surprising that a member of a defeated Protestant sect would plead for all Protestant sects to be treated with equal clemency (especially when the author holds antitrinitarian beliefs himself).[13] But the pamphlet goes further, offering an olive branch to his old enemies in the official church. This is not appeasement—Milton is surely the last person we can imagine currying favour—but a tacit admission that, just as they must tolerate him, he must tolerate them. Writing of the two essentials, faith and scripture, he singles out the Church of England's founding confessional document: "particularly the Church of *England* in Her thirty nine Articles, Arctic. 6th, 19th, 20th, 21st, and elsewhere, maintain these two points, as the main Principles of true Religion" (1151). Given the Articles' endorsement of bishops (36), and the monarch (37), I am fairly confident that Milton would have made this gesture thirty years earlier when writing *The Reason of Church Government*; even if he might have conceded the Laudians' essential Protestant *bona fides*.[14] Now, in 1673, the Church of England's episcopacy, and its acknowledgement of the Royal Supremacy are *adiaphora* that one Protestant must forgive in another.

The intolerance in *Of True Religion* is of course aimed at English Catholics, in the hope of discouraging the Royal family's drift toward Rome (or at least in the

[13] In her discussion of *Paradise Lost* this is what Dean assumes. She sees Milton as a firm adherent of the *non poena* doctrine, saying "In his controversialist denunciations of false martyrs, Milton joins a host of Reformation-era writers who, by application of Augustine's touchstone, extol the martyrs of their own side while damning those of the opposite" (35). While I can agree that *non poena* is central to Milton's vilification of Charles I in the 1650s, and that it offers a worthwhile way of understanding Adam's Fall, I believe it does not hold up as an explanation of the more nuanced view Milton himself evolved by the late '60s, as seen in *Of True Religion* and *Samson*.

[14] The same could be said of *Of True Religion*'s relationship to *The Readie and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, written thirteen years earlier on the eve of the Restoration, where the old move of linking bishop to king as the suppressers of English freedom is once again made (1138).

hope of generating the political will that could inhibit such a drift). Milton argues that freedom of religion should be denied to Catholics. He writes, "Toleration is either public or private; and the exercise of their Religion, as far as it is Idolatrous, can be tolerated neither way" (1153). However, the persecution he foresees is carefully limited:

> Are we to punish them by corporal punishment, or fines in their Estates, upon account of their Religion? I suppose it stands not with the Clemency of the Gospel, more then what appertains to the security of the State: But first we must remove their Idolatry, and all the furniture thereof, whether Idols, or the Mass wherein they adore their God under Bread and Wine. (1153)

Is this an "ideology marginalizing the humanity of nonadherents?" To a degree it is. Milton's call for proactive iconoclasm constitutes an attack on Catholic life that is not acceptable in a modern liberal society. But we need to recognize that this veteran polemicist of the Civil War has just taken violence off the table—the Gospel will accommodate an attack on neither the persons nor the property of Roman Catholics; they should not even be fined. Samson's deed, by Milton's definition, violates the "Clemency of the Gospel." It might be argued that the Philistines of *Samson Agonistes* are the determined enemies of God's people, but then that was how Milton identified the High Church party in the war years, to whom he now extends the hand of friendship. It might be argued that the Philistines, as worshippers of Dagon, are outside the Christian fold, and thus deserve no such consideration. But to Milton the papists are equivalent; they are idolaters who deny the two essentials of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*, and while Milton decides that their freedom of worship should be denied, Samson goes much

farther—his act of iconoclasm destroys a blasphemous temple and its idols, but also hundreds of people.

But I say all this not to contend that *Samson Agonistes* is a pacifist document, but a troubled document: a Christian tragedy in its thoroughgoing sacrificial ambivalence. To set up this contention I want to discuss one more piece of criticism. In a recent article entitled, "Intolerance and the Virtues of Sacred Vehemence," Paul Stevens offers a nuanced and enlightening explanation of the later Milton's attitude toward religious violence, with reference to *Samson Agonistes*. Stevens is concerned with criticism that would separate poetry from politics; however, he is equally concerned with criticism that reduces the poetic to nothing more than the political. So he first situates *Samson Agonistes* in the historical context, paying special attention to Milton's own post-Restoration political writing, and his continued commitment to radical principles. At the same time, though, Stevens stresses that *Samson* should be seen as a tragedy—as an aesthetic product whose violent language is geared toward producing different effects than those of a polemic. Stevens makes a distinction between "the *expressive* as opposed to the purely *pragmatic* or political significance of Milton's rhetoric of violence" (248, Stevens' italics). Looking first at Milton's polemical pamphlets of 1641-2, then at those surrounding the regicide in 1649-51, and finally at those published after the great poems in 1673-4, Stevens traces a softening of what he calls "vehemence" (249). Simply put, while Milton's core convictions about the struggle for true Reform were constant, the changes which took place in his life and in English

society meant that his invocations of violence served different ends, becoming contemplative, instead of militant:

> The truth is that Milton's rhetoric of violence is complex. It is subject to both considerable synchronic and diachronic variation—that is, while it comprehends a confusing range of different registers and functions, every bit as expressive as pragmatic, it also evolves over time in terms of sophistication. With experience and in response to various external political pressures, not to mention his own ambitions, Milton becomes more selective and reflective in the application of this kind of rhetoric. Most importantly, the great poems of the 1660s and -70s prove a watershed. Released from the immediate, adversarial pressures of writing polemical pamphlets, if not from the desire for political engagement, they provide Milton with the opportunity to distil and reflect on many things, not least his own vehemence. In *Samson Agonistes*, for instance, religious enthusiasm, vehemence, or zeal is no longer the unproblematized heroic virtue of the anti-prelatical tracts but something much more ambivalent. (247-8)

So *Samson Agonistes* is not a "pragmatic" rallying cry calling for the annihilation of Whitehall; it is rather an attempt to work through the problems caused by the defeat of 1660, when the English people had let their republic slip through their fingers.[15]

[15] Stevens writes that, "The nation's religious life between the Restoration and the Toleration Act was dominated by the struggle for comprehension. What distinguishes it from the earlier struggles of the 1640s and -50s is the powerful aversion among most English people to violent civil strife, and what the expressive force of Milton's last pamphlets indicate more than anything else is his own struggle to understand and adapt to this new reality" (264). As evidence, Stevens discusses the last pamphlet Milton published, the *Declaration, or Letters Patent* of 1674. The *Declaration* is a translation of a Latin announcement of the recent election of John Sobieski as King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Stevens follows Nicholas von Maltzhan in arguing that the reason Milton chose to devote his time to what seems an odd project is that it was "Milton's oblique way of commenting on the exclusion crisis" (265). By offering up the *Declaration* Milton was able to quietly remind his countrymen that more enlightened ways existed for choosing a head of state than primogeniture.

Insoluble Problems:

This tragedy has provoked high-quality scholarship and compelling arguments from all sides. But even more impressive than the critical response is the ability of *Samson Agonistes* itself to accommodate those arguments convincingly. Even those readings I find most compelling cannot settle all the doubts their opposites raise. The sooner critics of this play accept that readings of both condemnation and approval for Samson are at least partly compromised by significant doubts and challenges, the better we shall understand the poem. None of the major alternatives can be wholly ignored or wholly disproved, and anyone who makes a given camp's argument seem facile does a disservice to the play. A new way of conceiving Milton's tragedy is needed. In framing a new conception I want to start by identifying the doubts. There are arguments on either side of the debate which I consider largely indisputable, and which cause a problem for critics of opposing camps.

First, it needs to be acknowledged that Milton has taken steps to make Samson's character more presentable, sanding off some of the objectionable edges one finds in the Book of Judges. In "Agon and Logos" Frye declares that were it not for *Samson Agonistes* Samson would have seemed the Old Testament figure Milton would have been least likely to choose as a protagonist—a shaggy half-barbarian, with a very loose grasp on morality, and an even looser one on his vocation as national liberator and God's representative (218). The common view, summed up by Anthony Low, is that in "*Samson Agonistes* Milton has cleaned up the originally disreputable folk hero of the Book of Judges and made him presentable

to his readers" (21). He does this in several ways. Compromising details from the Judges narrative (such as Samson spending the night with a prostitute in Gaza or his burning the Philistines' grain which Judges 15 attributes to personal vengeance) are omitted.[16] He is properly married to Dalila rather than simply a participant in an undefined, morally questionable ménage.

Furthermore, Milton leaves out any mention of private revenge as Samson pushes apart the temple columns. The Biblical Samson prays "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judges 16:28); in Milton's play Samson makes no mention of revenge as he leaves for the temple and we only hear second-hand that he appeared to pray silently. One could argue that by removing any suggestion, at least in the dénouement, that Samson destroys the temple for personal reasons, the hero is further sanitised to suit the moral preferences of a Christian audience—his motivation is not a thirst for eye-for-an-eye reprisal but rather obedience to God's silent prompting. In addition, Milton deepens the sense of righteous destruction by depicting the Philistines as decadent, corrupted by wealth and high living. Harapha is as gaudily armed as his son Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, sporting a "Helmet / And Brigandine of brass," a "broad Habergeon, / Vaunt-brass and Greves, and Gauntlet" (1119-20, 20-21), a Cavalier popinjay contrasted with Samson's New Model austerity ("I only with an Oak'n staff will meet thee" (1123)). The comparison is heightened when one considers Barbara Lewalski's comparison of Dalila's stately manner and gorgeous appearance

[16] Frye notes that the Chorus "can only celebrate his feat of tearing up the gates of Gaza by suppressing the reason for his spending the night there" (218).

to "the seductive, sensuous ceremonials of Roman Catholic and high Anglican religious practice" ("To Try" 183).

The most important change Milton made in the story, though, is Milton's sparing of the lower-class Philistines. Samson, the Hebrew messenger explains, pulls the temple down upon

> Lords, Ladies, Captains, Councellors, or Priests,
> Their choice nobility and flower, not only
> Of this but each Philistian city round…
> The vulgar only scap'd who stood without. (1653-5, 1659)

Hill's comment on the incident is hard to shrug off: "Why should Milton have invented 'the vulgar only scap'd who stood without' if not to stress that God master-minded Samson's exploit" (*Revolution* 445). It seems as though Milton has played out the scene as humanely as possible, focusing the destruction only on that segment of the population responsible for the oppression of Israel and the worship of Dagon—and which most closely mirrors Milton's political enemies. The innocent masses, though, are providentially spared.

However, those scholars who, for whatever reason, think that the tragedy endorses the destruction of the temple face sizeable obstacles that are too often ignored. Like many others, I find moments of doubt littered throughout the play, doubt that robs Samson of credibility, doubt that renders Manoa and the Danites' celebration disquieting and doubt that disrupts the comfortable assumption that the Philistine dead are uniformly contemptible, corrupt and inhuman. Twenty-five years ago John Andrews was confident enough to say of Milton, "we can be certain that he took great pains to make it apparent to his readers that the inner voice heeded by Samson is the voice of God, not the voice of misguided personal

honour" (101). Even then support for Andrews' position was hardly unanimous. Still less certainty remains today.

We can begin by considering the result, or lack thereof, of Samson's final act. The angel who visited his parents prophesied that Samson's destiny was to liberate the Hebrews from the "Philistian yoke" (42). However, as many of those scholars arguing for the Pacifist thesis are quick to point out, Samson's great act of demolition achieves no particular political success; despite the thousands killed Israel faces Philistine oppression for decades to come, until the time of David and Solomon. The language of Judges makes it possible to see the destruction as simply an act of revenge with the work of freeing Israel left to one more pious and deserving; but how can those critics who see *Samson Agonistes* as an allegory of either Puritan reconquest or spiritual renewal accommodate the fact that Samson's destiny remains unfulfilled? Derek Wood writes that *Samson Agonistes* is "a play that demands to be interpreted by what follows in the rest of Judges" (*Exiled* 180). Indeed, not only Judges, but the Bible as a whole: Samson's own tribe of Dan, whose elders form the Chorus of his tragedy are, for their sins and idolatry, left out of the enumeration of redeemed Jews in Revelation 7. Berkeley and Khoddam state that, through the Chorus, "Milton obtrudes Samson's tribe upon our consciousness much more than the Book of Judges" (1). There is no particular reason for underscoring so deeply Samson's connection to this failed tribe; the fact that Milton does so necessarily raises the question of why. Milton is not Shakespeare, playing fast and loose with the details of the Wars of the Roses or Roman history. He will expect his readers to be aware of scriptural context and

theological implications. How close did Samson come to fulfilling his destiny if his own tribe is damned?

Furthermore, several scholars have pointed out that Samson's success is questionable in that it contributes to the failure of God's preferred system of government—judges guiding Israel at his inspiration—and leads to a monarchy with a few notable bright spots and a plethora of spectacular failures. Wood writes that theologians of the seventeenth century noticed this fact and he questions whether Milton, given his politics, could have missed it. Challenging Christopher Hill's assertion that Milton saw Samson's death as a triumphant political victory Wood states:

> Samson's murderous physical assault on the Philistine overlord was quite futile as an attempt to liberate Israel; in fact, it was a part of a process which one redactor in the Book of Judges welcomed as leading to the establishment of a monarchy in Israel. In 1671, having lived through one bloody and futile attempt to liberate Israel-in-England which led to the re-establishment of the monarchy, was Milton too simple to see that analogy? (*Exiled* 5-6)

Though the golden age of David may have encompassed the final defeat of the Philistines, the God of the Old Testament thinks no better of kingship than Milton does,[17] and David's successors eventually succumbed to other enemies and their own temptations; Wood is right to wonder whether Milton could have intended as an allegory for his hopes for England the story of a man whose failure led to the establishment of a monarchy.

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[17] See 1 Samuel 8, where the Israelites beg God for a king, "to judge us like all the nations" (5). Though He eventually accedes to their request, He takes as dim a view of monarchy as Milton does, warning them how a king will treat them: "He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself…And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to be bakers. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants" (11-4).

Perhaps the most significant challenge to a pro-Samson reading comes from the contradictions and doubts raised in the dialogues. Unlike the Judges account, or *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agonistes* is a tragedy, offering no narrating voice of objective truth, but rather the contingent statements of various characters. The speaker of the diffuse and brief epics, sublimely confident of his task of justifying the ways of God to men, has been replaced with a varied handful of speakers, each with his or her own agenda and subjective viewpoint. Milton's characters repeatedly cast doubt on one another's statements and their own in a way that is hard to ignore. Following Judges, Samson mentions that his first marriage, though disputed by his parents, was a part of God's plan. When questioned about marrying a foreigner Samson replies,

> The first I saw at Timna, and she pleas'd
> Mee, not my Parents, that I sought to wed,
> The daughter of an Infidel: they knew not
> That what I motion'd was of God; I knew
> From intimate impulse, and therefore urg'd
> The Marriage on; that by occasion hence
> I might begin *Israel*'s Deliverance,
> The work to which I was divinely call'd. (219-26)

However, during their dialogue Manoa—representing another subjective point of view—questions whether or not his son really did hear from God saying,

> thou didst plead
> Divine impulsion…
> I state not that; this I am sure; our Foes
> Found soon occasion thereby to make thee
> Thir Captive, and thir triumph; thou the sooner
> Temptation found'st. (421-2, 424-7)

Manoa apparently did not find the results of Samson's marriage to be of enough political significance to outweigh the potential sin and his own eventual

degradation. Both here, and in the final moments of the play, Manoa reveals a tendency to judge his son's means by what he believes their end to be; now, when the best he holds for Samson is a quiet life at home with him, he doubts the divine mandate. Whether or not Manoa is correct, coming from one of Samson's most ardent supporters, his statement casts further doubt onto the question of Samson's dispensation. Considering Manoa's reservations and the context of the book of Judges, Joseph Wittreich writes,

> No one who remembers Gideon's caution concerning divine inspiration, his repeated testing of God to determine its validity, can help but join Manoa in questioning Samson here, or later in his feeling some rousing motion and thereupon going forth to the temple. (152)

Though not conclusive the comparison of the one Judge to the other is persuasive.

Samson himself raises the most troubling doubts over the question of his vocation when he moves on to discuss Dalila:

> the next I took to Wife
> (O that I never had! fond wish too late.)
> Was in the Vale of *Sorec*, *Dalila*,
> That specious Monster, my accomplisht snare.
> I thought it lawful from my former act,
> And the same end; still watching to oppress
> *Israel*'s oppressours. (227-33)

So here Samson admits that he made the connection himself, rather than hearing from God. This candour does him some credit, but it also reinforces the possibility of God's followers making unwarranted assumptions on His behalf. Samson's reliability is further damaged during his argument with Dalila when he changes the story and suddenly claims to have married her for idealistic, romantic reasons:

> I before all the daughters of my Tribe
> And of my Nation chose thee from among
> My enemies, lov'd thee, as too well thou knew'st, (876-9)

This is a total contradiction of his earlier statement to the Chorus, which now sounds like a feeble self-justification—at first we were told the decision was prompted by religious and political motives, now, apparently, Samson defied these principles out of love for Dalila. He makes much the same defence to Harapha, telling him "Among the Daughters of the Philistines / I chose a wife, which argu'd me no foe" (1192-3). One could perhaps speculate that both motives were churning in his breast, but neither of the speeches, taken individually, suggests any internal conflict. Which statement is true? Either Samson intended to marry Dalila in order to "oppress / *Israel*'s oppressours" or in order to live peaceably among them. It is difficult to imagine the Chorus, much less Milton, overlooking the gross contradiction.

Samson's doubletalk is especially troubling because it mirrors the behaviour of the very person he despises most: Dalila. Opening the dialogue with talk of expiation and penance (736, 738), Dalila admits that she was weak and faithless, but for different reasons than we assume. She pleads overwhelming love for Samson, going so far as to ask him

> And what if Love, which thou intrepret'st hate,
> The jealousie of Love, powerful of sway,
> In human hearts, nor less in mine towards thee,
> Caus'd what I did? I saw thee mutable
> Of fancy, feard lest one day thou wouldst leave me
> As her at *Timna*, sought by all means therefore
> How to endear, and hold thee to me firmest:
> No better way I saw then by importuning
> To learn thy secrets…
> I knew that liberty

> Would draw thee forth to perilous enterprises,
> While I at home sate full of cares and fears
> Wailing thy absence in my widow'd bed;
> Here I should still enjoy thee day and night
> Mine and Loves prisoner. (790-798; 803-8)

Samson continually stresses Dalila's mercenary motives in betraying him, but she does not mention the money she received from her husband's enemies. Instead, she justifies herself by describing her bondage to "Loves law" (811).

This justification is hardly convincing, and does not stand up to Samson's withering rebuttal. Having been charged with lust, avarice and malice by her former husband, Dalila changes her tune, saying that political pressure forced her decision. She was

> press'd how just it was,
> How honourable, how glorious to entrap
> A common enemy, who had destroy'd
> Such numbers of our Nation: and the Priest
> Was not behind, but ever at my ear,
> Preaching how meritorious with the gods
> It would be to ensnare an irreligious
> Dishonourer of Dagon. (854-61)

The priest's rhetoric obviously has a delayed effect: after Samson hatefully rejects her offer to take him home, Dalila decides that she should be proud of her betrayal, predicting that in Philistia she will be as much a heroine as Jael is in Israel.[18] She proclaims:

> I shall be nam'd among the famousest
> Of Women, sung at solemn festivals,
> Living and dead recorded, who to save
> Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose

[18] The Jael parallel is a provocative one and does raise the issue of cultural perspective. Of course, one must ask whether the good opinion of the Philistines would be worth anything to a man of Milton's views. Fish points out an important difference between the two women, saying "Jael's superiority to Dalila is to be located in the extent to which her deed is a manifestation of her wish (intention) to serve God, rather than in the act itself, or in anything that can be said about it" (428). Dalila is much more concerned with how posterity, rather than Dagon, views her actions.

> Above the faith of wedlock-bands, my tomb
> With odours visited and annual flowers. (982-87)

This is obviously self-serving and, coming minutes after her lavish admission of guilt, it is patently unreliable. Yet it is not necessary to justify Dalila in order to see that Samson is no better—her shameless justifications underscore his.[19] At different times both seem to endorse her rule, "to the public good / Private respects must yield" (867-8). [20]

For me, the issue that crystallizes many of the problems surrounding Samson's relationship to the Philistines, his character and his mandate is his blindness. Samson's tremendous opening soliloquy is a lament for his lost sight, his "chief" complaint, regretted more than his bondage, humiliation, or the failure of his calling (66). But it necessarily raises questions of moral discernment and the symbolic status of the blind man. In a Regenerationist reading, Samson's blindness would be treated much like Gloucester's or Oedipus'—as a symbol of an inner, spiritual sight gained through trauma, an *anagnorisis*. He may not fully achieve the *anagnorisis* until his last hour, the argument runs, but the symbolic link can be taken for granted. This interpretation is suggested by the Semichorus who remark of their dead hero,

> But he though blind of sight,
> Despis'd and thought extinguish't quite,
> With inward eyes illuminated
> His fierie virtue rouz'd. (1687-90)

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[19] Frye interprets Dalila as (in her own mind at least) a woman facing an impossible choice, "a kind of Antigone, damned whether she does or doesn't." He writes "It is particularly in the last speech of Dalila that we can understand how Milton is a true poet, and of Dalila's party without knowing it, as long as he is speaking with her voice" (224).

[20] Consider Samson's refusal to return home with Manoa.

I would not dispute that Samson gains a degree of self-knowledge in his darkness—he certainly takes responsibility for his situation and refuses to blame anyone but himself. However, I find little symbolic evidence of second sight in Samson's statements, but rather a powerful commentary on his inability to distinguish between one thing and another. When he admits to being,

> dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
> Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
> Without all hope of day! (80-2)

he is not simply remarking on a physical fact, nor simply metaphorizing his enslavement. The metaphor extends to what I consider his most significant problem: differentiation.

Immediately after discussing his blind misery, Samson makes a crucial error upon hearing the sound of approaching footfalls:

> But who are these? For with joint pace I hear
> The tread of many feet stearing this way;
> Perhaps my enemies who come to stare
> At my affliction. (110-3)

The feet do not belong to Philistines, however, but to his fellow tribesmen, come not to mock him, but to commiserate. After the Chorus makes its opening speech, Samson remarks, "I hear the sound of words, thir sense the air / Dissolves unjointed, e're it reach my ear" (176-7). It is a curious statement; there is a physical reason Samson cannot see who approaches, but what would prevent him from hearing what they say? This is no coincidence; the failure to hear and the blindness are symbols of a broader problem that culminates in the toppling of the temple—Samson cannot differentiate. He cannot be relied on to interpret correctly, to distinguish. He makes an immediate judgment that those who come to see him are

enemies and though the misunderstanding may be harmless at this point, I see it as a symptom of the same wilful blindness that compelled him to take a second Philistine wife simply because he had a dispensation to marry the woman of Timna. But more important than Samson's inability to distinguish between wives, the episode with the approaching Chorus foreshadows a coming time when Samson will lash out against thousands of people, without being able to separate those who should die from those who should not.

Whatever one decides about Milton's view of Dalila or Harapha, the play is explicit in suggesting that a portion of the Philistines killed in the collapse of the temple should be viewed with sympathy. When Manoa leaves the Chorus to plead with the Philistine leadership for custody of his son he finds a range of views. Some, particularly the most fervent worshippers of Dagon, were "much averse…and wondrous harsh, / Contemptuous, proud, set on revenge and spite" (1461-2). However, there were "Others more moderate seeming, but thir aim / Private reward" (1464-5) while a third group was

> More generous far and civil, who confess'd
> They had anough reveng'd, having reduc't
> Thir foe to misery beneath thir fears,
> The rest was magnanimity to remit,
> If some convenient ransom were propos'd. (1467-71)

By this account the Philistines are hardly a homogenous mass; rather, his cross-section presents much the same mix of the contemptible, the grasping and the decent that we might find in ancient Hebrew society, Milton's society, or our own. But the blind hero in his final act of erasure ignores these distinctions. Even if Milton believed that divine judgment would still destroy the enemies of the godly,

could he have applauded a purge of such dimensions—one that killed not only the bitterest opponents of true religion but also their associates who may have held milder, more generous views?

Differentiation, I think, is one of the central themes of the play, a fact overlooked by too many critics. However, R. A. Shoaf, in his monograph, *Milton, Poet of Duality*, discusses the issue throughout Milton's corpus. Shoaf argues that the Christ of *Paradise Regained* illustrates a fundamental principle of differentiation. He never seeks to mirror the Father's authority, but rather distinguishes himself through total submission, achieving the fullness of his personality through the immolation of his will. Satan, however, who seeks to "double" God and tempts Christ to do the same, becomes a principle of "confusion" (155-6).[21] When Shoaf applies these principles to Samson, he makes some striking observations but also, I think, some omissions. Essentially, Shoaf sees Samson's destiny, as a Nazarite, to be one of separateness. His carnal relationship with Dalila was a betrayal of this principle (one has only to think of the sexual ideal of "one flesh" expressed in Genesis (2: 24) to see how the act can imply a kind of unity). Shoaf claims that in Milton, "Woman, and especially Dalilah, is confusion. And Samson's lot, once he has re(-)signed to Dalilah his 'part from heaven assigned' (1207) is thus to be no longer distinct or separate unto God, but a victim of confusion" (171). So when Dalila comes to speak to Samson on his last morning, Shoaf says, she is once again tempting him to put aside the Nazarite separateness for confused doubling (174).

[21] Shoaf's description of Satan is very like Fish's in *How Milton Works*. For Fish the obedient Christ represents a sort of quiet, pure-minded simplicity, while Satan is forever busy, like a "stage manager," always trying to play God: making deals, twisting words, and forcing the action (326).

I admire Shoaf's analysis of undifferentiation in the play, but I feel he has missed its most subtle, and insidious manifestation—within conflict.[22] Though Shaof may be right to suggest that Samson and Dalila's sexual union symbolizes "confusion," the sense of undifferentiation is much stronger, though perhaps more subtle, when they cease to be lovers and become antagonists. Samson is desperate to prove that he is fundamentally different from Dalila: his conduct was noble, his wife's conduct was base, and to a certain extent he may be right. But the reader has to notice how the conflict doubles rather than differentiates them, making each look more like the other. Both try to vindicate themselves by steering through the same narrow strait: justification through ardent passion on one side and justification through tribal and religious loyalty on the other. As we have seen, Dalila's shifting rationalizations serve to underscore Samson's own; indeed, her request "Let weakness then with weakness come to parl" (785) is an undeniably apt description of the encounter, while the repetition in the phrase further suggests doubling. She explains that they are both "So near related, or the same of kind" (786), and I think she is correct. Even Samson admits that,

> I gave…th'example,
> I led the way; bitter reproach but true,
> I to my self was false e'er thou to me. (822-4)

He is speaking of the breakdown of his marriage here, describing the union with Dalila as a betrayal to himself which anticipated her betrayal of him, but the word

[22] Undifferentiation is a crucial concept in Girard's anthropology of sacrifice: the good violence of sacrifice isolates and separates an individual from the group, while the bad violence of spiralling reciprocity ignores all distinctions and so threatens everyone. Thus, for Girard, widespread calamities in myth like floods, plagues and famines, which can affect any and all of the members of a society regardless of hierarchy or merit, are always metaphors for undifferentiated violence. Girard writes, "The *sacrificial crisis*, that s, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence" (*Violence* 49).

"example" foregrounds yet again the mimetic quality of their dispute. The husband was a model for the wife, whose behaviour resembles his own. To be sure, I can understand why critics like Lewalski comment on the symbolic potential of Dalila's lavish wardrobe, which makes her appear to the Chorus as a "stately ship," "ornate and gay" (714, 712) and oppose it to Samson's impoverished filthiness. But though his once "Gloriously rigg'd" ship (200) may have foundered while hers is still afloat, the shared metaphor suggests that such a difference is superficial. Both are "the same of kind"; both are ships.[23]

I think that the same can be said of Samson's outward differences from Harapha. The giant's garish armour may well connote Milton's class-prejudices, he may well be "bulk without spirit vast," and his faith is of course in "Baal-zebub" and Dagon rather than Yahweh (1238, 1231). None of that is discountable, but it is not a question of Harapha's rising to Samson's level, but rather of Samson, in their shouting match, sinking to his. Just as in his argument with Dalila, Samson mimics his antagonist, trading insults and macho threats. The oaken staff, meant to symbolise his unique purity of purpose, only differentiates him superficially, externally. Harapha and Dalila both double Samson; in each argument the rivals draw closer together despite the shared assumption that they are leagues apart. Samson's interactions with both characters are part of the pattern of undifferentiated conflict which does expands until all distinctions between Samson and the thousands of people who share the temple with him are erased by death.

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[23] Shoaf gives an interesting explanation: "Samson and Dalilah do *not* love each other: there is, alternately either too much difference between them (Jew and Philistian, for example) or too little (they lust after each other as identical carnal objects)" (176).

Conflicting Sacrifices:

Milton's Samson, then, inspires ambivalence. The fiercely bifurcated critical responses *Samson* has provoked are doubtless a response to the bifurcated nature of the hero. The poet makes him nobler, more cerebral, more soulful and less compromised than the Bible does. At the same time, though, he casts doubts, forcing us to question his choices, and the suggestion that what he does is divinely sanctioned. This ambivalence is the principle emotive effect of Milton's tragedy, and of his particular sacrificial crisis. It needs to be understood that Samson has two sacrificial roles in this tragedy: he is both a victim and agent of violence. Indeed, the concept of sacrifice is vividly present in this tragedy: the entire play pivots upon it. In the chapter on *King Lear* I discussed how Shakespeare bases his play on opposing conceptions of sacrifice: self and other. With Samson we have both.

Samson begins as a kind of sacrifice and ends as the sacrificer, both of himself and numberless others. The concept of sacrifice is given explicit mention three times by Milton. Following Judges[24] he emphasises—three times—that the Philistine's celebration is a religious festival in honour of Dagon, attended by sacrifices.[25] Near the end of the play, the officer who requests Samson at the feast remarks, "This day to *Dagon* is a solemn Feast, / With Sacrifices, Triumph, Pomp,

[24] "Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy unto our hand" (Judges 16: 23).

[25] Going by the description of Dagon in *Paradise Lost*, I assume this means sacrifices of animals, though the fiery offerings the epic associates with Moloch cannot be forgotten. Walter Burkert states: "Human sacrifice…is a possibility which, as a horrible threat, stands behind every sacrifice" ("Greek Tragedy" 111). One cannot downplay the symbolic importance of the ritual, whomever the victim.

and Games" (1311-2). Manoa gives a more pointed analysis of the event, stressing the role that his son plays in the festivities:

> This day the Philistines a popular Feast
> Here celebrate in Gaza; and proclaim
> Great Pomp, and Sacrifice, and Praises loud
> To Dagon, as their God who hath deliver'd
> Thee Samson bound and blind into thir hands,
> Them out of thine, who slew'st them many a slain.
> So Dagon shall be magnifi'd, and God,
> Besides whom is no God, compar'd with Idols,
> Disglorifi'd, blasphem'd, and had in scorn
> By th' Idolatrous rout amidst thir wine. (434-43)

The speech juxtaposes a mention of sacrifice with a mention of the defeated prisoner under the power of his vengeful enemies—a menacing suggestion of violent reprisal for the prisoner's former violence. Yes, Samson ends up destroying those enemies, but Milton does not let us forget his vulnerability.

Manoa's speech is the first of several times in which the Philistines' drinking is discussed alongside the event's religious character. This combination of wine and sacrificial blood produces what Frye calls the "spirit of frenzy"—the sort of maniacal fury seen in the protagonist of Greek tragedy, compelling Herakles to kill his children or Clytemnestra her husband:

> The "spirit of frenzy" is associated with drunkenness, the "jocund and sublime" Philistines being a contrast in this respect to the water-drinking Samson. It is still morning, but as Milton remarks in the Commonplace Book, people who are habitually drunk can get drunk without the aid of wine. This drunkenness however is a Dionysian drunkenness, an enthusiasm or possession by a god, or what they consider a god. (208)

The crowd is not simply raucous, and Milton is not offering us a criticism of wine, per se, but of the dangerous passions it can help fuel in this threatening sacrificial

context. When he is about to be led before the mob, Samson himself raises the issue of drunkenness, remarking:

> Lords are Lordliest in thir wine;
> And the well-feasted Priest then soonest fir'd
> With zeal, if aught Religion seem concern'd:
> No less the people on thir Holy-days
> Impetuous, insolent, unquenchable. (1418-22)

The final word, "unquenchable," is perhaps the most menacing, implying that the crowd must glut itself on something more than food or drink. Samson—at least by his own reckoning—needs to fear more than the malice of a small elite. Fired by a telling combination of religion and alcohol the worshippers become something uniformly ravenous. This suspicion is born out in the messenger's account of what happened in the temple. Describing the audience awaiting Samson's performance he says,

> The Feast and noon grew high, and Sacrifice
> Had fill'd thir hearts with mirth, high chear, & wine,
> When to thir sports they turn'd….
> At sight of him the people with a shout
> Rifted the Air clamouring thir god with praise,
> Who had made thir dreadful enemy thir thrall. (1612-4; 1620-2)

The mention of "mirth" and "high chear" sounds innocent enough, but, from the messenger's description, it is made to sound as though the crowd's drunken celebration was brought about by the ritual killings they have witnessed. As the passage continues, it grows still more ominous. When Samson is brought forward he is immediately the focal point of the group's aggression, the shout that goes up a chilling expression of mass hysteria.

As he is led away Samson seems to have a kind of insight into his status, and the way he is perceived by the crowd. As he leaves his grassy bank he refers to

himself in a telling turn of phrase, as a "common Enemy" (1416), a man who has provoked the hatred, not just of a fraction of the community, but of the whole community.[26] By this reckoning, Samson seems to be an ideal scapegoat. Alone in a crowd of enemies, unable even to see his accusers, and with no one to help or avenge him,[27] he seems an ideal candidate for the mob to unleash its resentment upon safely. Yet something happens in the process of humiliating and degrading this ideal scapegoat. Instead of a murder securing the peace and security of the crowd, the crowd itself becomes one with the victim, crushed, in an unmistakable irony, beneath the stones of their own pagan temple. This defenceless scapegoat, whom no one could be expected to avenge, has avenged himself through his own self-inflicted martyrdom.

Like Samson, the Philistines also are simultaneously the sacrifice and the sacrificer. Milton emphasizes the threat they pose to Samson as a single-minded mob, and also their vulnerability as Samson kills them all as one. The Philistines who intended to celebrate their victory and newly-consolidated power with sacrifices and the ritual mockery of their scapegoat, had violence "flood" down upon them, in the form of their own sanctuary. The falling temple embodies Samson's failure of differentiation and the sacrificial crisis Milton has created; it brings death to all without regard to station, class, ability or desert.[28] No longer are certain deserving targets singled out by Dagon's priests for a just death to protect

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[26] He has learned this phrase from Dalila, who used it to describe him at 857 when recalling how the priests and leaders pressured her into betraying him.

[27] Samson's kin, represented by the pathetic Manoa and the timorous Danites, hardly seem capable of avenging his death—Manoa can do no more than plead for his enemies' mercy. Furthermore, the tribe of Dan had already rejected and betrayed Samson once.

[28] See Girard's discussion of the plague motif in *Oedipus the King* (*Violence* 76-7).

the group; now anyone can be killed—both the blinded, despised enemy and "Lords, Ladies, Captains, Councellors, or Priests, / [The] choice nobility and flower" (1653-5). And Milton does not simply rest easy with a stern moral of the Hebrew God's terrible retribution on the wicked persecutors. The undifferentiated quality of the violence means that Samson not only kills the actively hostile first group Manoa mentions after his petitioning, and the second who simply want to profit, but the generous, open-handed third group dies as well. Though the "vulgar" may escape the cruel fate of their leaders, the erasure of substantial differences among those leaders is troubling.

Violence respects no social distinction; it reduces categories to insignificance, as the great undifferentiating leveller. However different Dalila's silks and Harapha's armour may appear next to Samson's rags, they will not protect their wearers from the falling masonry. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Milton foregrounds this question of undifferentiation by having the messenger describe Samson as "immixt" (1657) with his enemies. Any reader of the Old Testament knows that the Jews were repeatedly warned against "mixing" too closely with their heathen neighbours, for fear of spiritual contagion. Samson's Nazarite status further compounds the prohibition. Shoaf feels Samson achieves a sort of "secular," pre-Christian heroism (186-7), becoming once more "separate to God" through his death (170). However, when considering lines 1657-8 Shoaf has to admit that "He never finally escapes confusion" (186). The immixing of Samson with his enemies is equivalent to the final scene of *King Lear* where, despite a father's frantic attempts to suggest that one daughter is different from her

sisters—nobler, purer and deserving of life—the three bodies together on the stage declare the truth he cannot face, a truth of fundamental sameness that mocks human efforts to categorize, to reward and punish. Unable to make such distinctions among his enemies, Samson himself is now indistinguishable from them, physically depicting the doubling effected by his shouting matches with Dalila and Harapha, both of whom were only superficially unlike him. This act of violence embodies the sacrificial crisis of Christian tragedy so completely because it is a sacrifice desacrilized. The Hebrew God's greatest champion is rendered equivalent to the idolatrous worshippers of the Philistine fish god. In Milton's astonishing interpretation of the story Hebrew and Philistine are shown to be equally threatening and vulnerable, taking both sides at once in the sacrificial act. And then they are collapsed in upon one another like the pillars of the temple-theatre.

Like many of the critics who have written about this tragedy, Manoa and the Danites will resist this conclusion. They struggle with the undifferentiation manifested in the messenger's words as he implies that Samson is now one with his enemies. His father and fellow tribesmen, in their attempt to sanctify his deed, will struggle with this fact. In his last speech Manoa rallies the Chorus, saying

> Let us go find the body where it lies
> Sok't in his enemies blood, and from the stream
> With lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off
> The clotted gore. (1725-8)

Samson's body has been bathed in the blood of the Philistines and now the Israelites will attempt a bathing of their own to remove it. The blood is another potent symbol of undifferentiation and unfortunately for Manoa, the symbolic

weight of his language works to undercut his overt intention. Blood suggests shared kinship between the Nazarite and his foreign foes and one has to wonder how successful Manoa's washing will be at removing their enemies' blood from his son?[29] Perhaps sensing the implications of what he suggests, Manoa then explains that he will memorialise Samson, and so ensure that his interpretation of the day's events is posterity's interpretation. He will summon his friends and family,

> To fetch him hence and solemnly attend
> With silent obsequie and funeral train
> Home to his Fathers house: there will I build him
> A Monument, and plant it round with shade
> Of Laurel ever green, and branching Palm,
> With all his Trophies hung, and Acts enroll'd
> In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.
> Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
> And from his memory inflame thir breasts
> To matchless valour, and adventures high:
> The Virgins also shall on feastful days
> Visit his Tomb with flowers, only bewailing
> His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice. (1731-43)

Manoa shows a natural but problematic desire to claim what has happened; he wants to aestheticize Samson, covering over the ugly result of violence with vegetation and marble, as though to re-mystify the violence that Samson has demystified. And it is worth noting, as Maggie Kilgour and Mark Kelley do, how similar the honour Manoa intends to lavish on his son is to the honour Dalila intends to have lavished on herself (34; 157). Both Samson and Dalila's burial places will be sites of national recognition—another indication of the pair's deep-

[29] Girard: "Blood serves to illustrate the point that the same substance can stain or cleanse, contaminate or purify, drive men to fury and murder or appease their anger and restore them to life" (*Violence* 37). He continues, "As long as purity and impurity remain distinct, even the worst pollution can be washed away; but once they are allowed to mingle, purification is no longer possible" (38).

rooted sameness. As Kelley puts it, Manoa "wishes to contain the 'so horrid spectacle' of human destruction within the confining mythos of heroism, a pressure toward monumentalization as a recuperative measure" (157).

Manoa and the chorus, then, see Samson's death as more than an individual act of heroic greatness; it embodies a kind of redemption, for the nation as well as the man, a principle of renewal. This is vividly suggested by the famous simile of a phoenix the Chorus applies to their dead hero. To them, he was

> Like that self-begott'n bird
> In the *Arabian* woods embost,
> That no second knows nor third,
> And lay e're while a Holocaust,
> From out her ashie womb now teem'd,
> Revives, reflourishes…
> And though her body die, her fame survives,
> A secular bird ages of lives. (1699-1704; 1706-7)

A critic who believes Milton endorses Samson will point out that the phoenix has traditionally been viewed as a type of Christ, dying and rising again. True enough, but the Chorus describes it as a "secular" bird, a word which makes even Shoaf, a supporter of Samson, feel that Samson's heroism is qualified—heroic, well intended, but not holy or typologically Christian (186-8). And Samson's death only enables regeneration because it kills others besides himself. The type of regeneration the phoenix represents is the violent return to the sacrificial order, regular cycles of renewal through repeated "Holocausts." Certainly, the language of fire necessarily associated with the phoenix image is reflected in Manoa's vision of his son's tomb, where Israelite youths will come to be "inflamed" by Samson's memory, presumably going on to destroy temples themselves in a long war that will extend for generations.

This seems exactly like the kind of salvation Milton's Christ rejects in *Paradise Regained*, when Satan encourages him to go to war because it is his "Duty to free, / Thy Country from her Heathen servitude" (3, 175-6)—essentially urging him to follow the violent example of Samson. Christ refuses, explaining that his power will be based on very different principles, saying that God

> hath decreed that I shall first
> Be try'd in humble state, and things adverse,
> By tribulations, injuries, insults,
> Contempts, and scorns, and snares, and violence,
> Suffering, abstaining, quietly expecting. (3, 188-92)[30]

Like many critics, Christopher Hill has searched for Christ in Samson, looking for the old typological connection in Milton's poem, proof that there was a Christian relevance in the story to make it worthy of a Christian poet's celebration. Hill suggests that Samson stands in for Christ in the play, and "performs Christ-like actions, bringing salvation to his people by his own death" (*Revolution* 446). Contrariwise, Wood writes that Samson's tragic *hamartia* is his ignorance of Christ (87-8). However, neither position will fully answer. Certainly, the figure with his arms outstretched between the pillars has an undeniable typological association with Christ; Samson is the willing victim of the earthly powers who control him; he quietly follows the Philistine envoy to the temple where the mob waits. But unlike Christ Samson is a victim who makes more victims, as though on the cross Christ had called down the angels to destroy his persecutors.[31] In his death Samson gives

[30] Of course, this is a clear echo of *Paradise Lost*, when the speaker distinguishes his epic from the traditional ones by focusing on "the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" (9, 31-2), rather than martial themes.

[31] When a disciple strikes off the ear of the High Priest's servant in Gathsemane Christ tells him, "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than

us the redemption of both "La Guillotine" and the Cross. For now, the Hebrews may be glutted with bloody vengeance, temporarily sated, but as we have already seen, they have hardly found salvation, even of a temporal, political nature. What they have secured is one more round in the cycle of political oppression and redemption that characterizes Israelite history and is only broken, for Milton, by Christ.

Despite Barbara Lewalski's demand that critics endorse one of the entrenched positions, there is no solution to this play, or at least no way of tidily moralising it, finally and convincingly labelling Samson as a hero or a villain. The tragedy is ambivalent about its hero, Milton having delicately balanced the tension to draw us in two ways at once. No doubt there are those who will refuse to be pulled—a reader like John Carey, who called the ending of the tragedy "morally disgusting" (*CP* 333) may determine not to pity the hero; contrariwise, some Regenerationists may refuse to see the death Samson causes as anything more than a metaphor. But Samson is inseparably "immixt," playing two roles in his tragedy, victim and victimiser, sacrifice and sacrificer. In his blind, friendless state he is the target of the crowd, yet as he stands between the pillars the crowd becomes his target. Dagon's temple, with its pagan sacrifices and idolatrous worship may be justly destroyed, but the destruction is nonetheless a "horrid spectacle" and "sad event" even for the Hebrew messenger, who runs from it in dismay (1542, 1551).

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twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" (Matthew 26: 52-4).

Earlier I discussed Dean's contention that Adam's decision to die with Eve in *Paradise Lost* suggests the false martyrdom of Fawkes and Charles Stuart. She states that in Book 12 Michael looks forward to the day when Christ will correct this with a true martyrdom: "Milton corrects Adam's errors by explicating the ultimate sacrifice of the Son: Adam's false martyrdom results in death for himself and his seed, but the Son's sacrifice offers them life" (46).

At the beginning of my discussion I mentioned how unavoidable it seems for so many critics to see Samson through the lens of Milton himself. No one, of course, can prove definitively how, exactly, the post-1660 Milton viewed the revolution he had supported in his earlier years, and the sacrifice of Charles I to what he saw as the public good. But I want to suggest that this inability is partly because Milton could not, at any point after the Restoration, have seen the recent past in simple, unambiguous terms. His revolution, right though its guiding principles may still have seemed, had suffered a very grave setback. The English people had roused themselves like Samson, bringing destruction to their king and his party, but had not been able to live up to their ideals, any more than Israel under the Judges had been able to conquer its enemies, or the Danites secure a place in the Book of Life.

Thus, when critics like Lieb and Loewenstein read *Samson Agonistes* as Milton's revenge fantasy, an articulation of what he, in his blind desperation would like to do to the neo-Philistine Cavaliers who ruined his commonwealth, they press too far. This is not to say that the poet renounced the Good Old Cause, or what had been done to secure it, any more than the Israelites should have renounced their allegiance to Yahweh. But it does suggest that Milton was no longer certain, having been provided with undeniable proof that the Millennium had not begun, that kings and bishops had not been vanquished for all time, that the heirs of Charles I and William Laud could return to eclipse the heirs of Cromwell. Political or military victory was not a mark of God's eternal favour. Derek Wood asserts that Milton's old certainty in the rightness of the Cause and its tactics must have

eroded, producing a sense, however attenuated, of introspection and reconsideration. Writing in response to the Revenge school, Wood states,

> They argue as if a "quietist" Milton meant one who regretted the execution of the king and all the ferment of the revolution. For "quietist" they read "defeatist" and they defend their hero as if he was being accused of throwing in the towel, abandoning all he had fought for and believed in, and was settling down to live comfortably alongside the Philistines. Milton was not "quietist" in those senses but he did learn that the English people were not ready spiritually for liberty and a millenarian society: it was futile to shed blood to force upon them an ideal society they were not prepared to live in. (*EL* 185)

This reading does not imply a renunciation. It does not even deny what must have been real anguish in Milton at the return of the monarchy, which he stridently opposed—with *The Readie and Easie Way*—even in the final weeks preceding Charles' return. But the tension between that anguish and the bitter realisation that a great deal of blood had been spilled by God's people in a failed cause was a fruitful tension, producing a tragedy which refused to transcend the old dichotomies, but rather stared at them unflinchingly, with an admission of complicity and a spirit of self-criticism.

Conclusion:
"Because We Do Not Know"

> In the Christian West, orthodoxy is itself problematic and complex, fissured by a guilty disillusion over its own institutional bases, ambivalent about power, troubled by a bad conscience.
>
> Debora Shuger, "Subversive Fathers" (52)

In Book Eleven of *The Acts and Monuments* Foxe tells the story of the judge Sir James Hales. Hales was a respected Marian Protestant, imprisoned in the Marshalsea at the beginning of Mary's reign after he refused to recant. In prison, though, Hales did not show the confidence and resolve of the martyrs. Eventually he did recant (10, 1464), and then attempted suicide, unsuccessfully. Upon his release, Foxe explains that he tried again:

> he, either for the greatness of his sorrow, or for lack of good counsel, or for that he would avoid the necessity of hearing mass, having all things set in an order a good while before that, pertaining to his testament, casting himself into a shallow river, was drowned therein: which was about the beginning of the month of February, or in the month of January before, an. 1555. (11, 1533)

Far from being a hero of the Protestant faith like Rogers, Taylor or Ridley, Hales was not even a martyr. Rather than face the horrible choice between taking the Mass or facing the flames, Hales' courage failed him, and despair brought him to the river. Hales' suicide is nothing less than an embarrassment for his co-religionists: Foxe says that upon hearing of Hales' unsuccessful first attempt, Bishop Stephen Gardiner, Mary's chancellor (and before his death the supervisor of the persecutions), took "occasion thereby to blaspheme the doctrine of the Gospel, which he openly in the Star Chamber called the doctrine of desperation" (1533). It would not be surprising, given the age, if Foxe condemned the judge as a

coward and a betrayer of the martyrs; he might at least be expected to make complacent remarks about the eternal punishments Hales will suffer as a suicide. Instead, Foxe is careful to explain that we simply cannot know his fate:

> This in the meantime is certain and sure, that the deed of the man in my mind ought in no wise to be allowed; which if he did wittingly, then do I discommend the man's reason. But if he did it in frenzy and as being out of his wit, then do I greatly pity his case. (1533)

Foxe continues, after giving some examples of early Christians who committed suicide to in order to avoid being forced to sin:

> These examples I do not here inferred [sic] as going about either to excuse, or to maintain the heinous fact of Master Hales, which I would wish rather by silence might be drowned in oblivion: but yet notwithstanding as touching the person of the man, whatsoever his fact was, because *we are not sure* whether he at his last breath repented: Again, because *we do not know*, nor are able to comprehend the bottomless depth of the graces and mercies which are in Christ Jesu our saviour, we will leave therefore final judgement to him, who only is appointed judge of both the quick and the dead. (1533; my italics)

This is an extraordinary statement for the sixteenth century, both in its sympathy for the failed martyr, and in its humility toward what cannot be known: either the mind of God or the mind of another human being.

Foxe's humility is part of what makes his martyrology so powerful. The remarks about Hales say a great deal about Foxe's reverence, if that term is not excessive, before these questions of suffering and violence. God alone, Foxe declares, knows what awaited Hales beyond the river; God alone is responsible for punishing or rewarding. The complicated, ambiguous set of emotions that attends Foxe's portrait of Hales is present in another victim of drowning: Shakespeare's Ophelia. After her apparent suicide the crass speculations of the grave diggers and

the narrow piety of the priest—"She should in ground unsanctified have lodged" (5.1.211)—chafes against the sympathy natural to those who knew her and understood the horrible anguish which attended her death. To Gertrude she was "As one incapable of her own distress" (4.7.149), and her brother calls her "A minist'ring angel" as he berates the priest (5.1.224). There is no explicit appeal to the mercy of Christ, but these comments amount to an implicit one, that stands against received doctrine.

I have argued that because of a scriptural interpretation seen most vividly in Foxe the English Renaissance tragedians inherited a divided, unsettled understanding of sacrificial violence, shot through with sympathy for the suffering victim of persecution. This was not all they inherited. Foxe's characterizations of the martyrs, of the persecutors, and of men like Hales who fall in between them, show a profound sense of the complexity of individual psychology, and an equally profound sense of generosity for individual limitations. This dovetails closely with the common theme that has run through each chapter of this dissertation—namely, common humanity. Common humanity binds Cordelia to her sisters, Marcello to Flamineo, Ferdinand to the Duchess, Samson to the Philistines: ultimately, the audience to the actors. Foxe had told the queen, in his 1575 letter about the Anabaptists, that "It is the life of men that I favour, since I myself am a man." This theme pervaded English tragedy in the generations that followed him, and gave it much of its weight and poignancy.

The sacrificial crisis surrounding martyrdom in the Tudor-Stuart era did not mark the end of sacrificial violence. Religious riots periodically gripped the

kingdom well into the eighteenth century, and if religious executions declined sharply and eventually died out in the seventeenth century, executions as such certainly did not. Sacrificial violence is still with us today, though we have found clever ways of covering it over or pushing it to the margins. We did not inherit a liberal utopia from the Reformation era, but we did inherit the ambivalence that makes it nearly impossible for us to celebrate our violence. Debora Shuger, in her article on *King Lear*, notes that whatever its complicity in various oppressive political structures, Western Christianity is "problematic and complex, fissured by a guilty disillusion over its own institutional bases, ambivalent about power, troubled by a bad conscience" (52). There is perhaps no area of early modern culture in England that manifested this bad conscience more, or to greater effect, than the site of religious execution. Nowhere could an individual achieve a more striking imitation of Christ than as the suffering victim, enduring all the pain and degradation that the state could offer. Brad S. Gregory has written that, "What made sixteenth-century Christianity so explosive was the combination of shared and incompatible beliefs" (*Salvation* 342). This is a simple but potent insight. Magistrates knew the danger to social order—not to mention souls—that could be posed by dissenting religious minorities. At the same time, the persecutors and the victim worshiped the same suffering servant as their God, and they all knew his warning: "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24: 9). Though they were told that the cause, not the punishment, made the martyr, in the minds of those who watched a man or woman die on the pyre or the scaffold there must

oftentimes have been excruciating pressure between the conflict of compassion with obedience, or of pity with fear.

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