

York's Paper Crown: "Bare Life" and Shakespeare's First Tragedy

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Shakespeare critics usually just employ the word *tragedy* as a generic given, or as a spontaneous tribute to genius, and start talking. To the extent that generic origins are taken into consideration at all, we are given a choice of two explanations, neither absolutely wrong but neither anywhere close to complete. One runs through the late medieval understanding of tragedy as the fall of a prince or great man through adverse fortune.¹ The other involves sixteenth-century classicism and stresses Shakespeare's indebtedness to Senecan and other models.² The former conception is intermittently present in the Shakespearean corpus (although more in the histories than the tragedies), in such speeches as Richard II's intention of reciting "sad stories of the death of kings" (3.2.151).³ The latter is occasionally applicable, especially to *Titus Andronicus*, that play normally considered the first of Shakespeare's tragedies. Accepting both as partial accounts, my aim here is to supplement them by broadening the frame of consideration.

In the course of this essay, I will propose several less bounded forms of literary and generic history, forms that escape constraints previously accepted as rules of the literary history game. I wish, for example, to consider one line of "nonliterary" descent, through the origins of the Tudor dynasty in the unusually internecine and horrific struggles of the three decades before Bosworth Field. Another line is theatrical, but has little relation to the physical theater or to formal dramatic production; this is the fifteenth-century origin, in chronicles and written histories, of an English equivalent to what Walter Benjamin calls tragic melodrama or "martyr-drama." Finally, I will offer a consideration that is neither "historical," in the sense of possessing a finite point of historical reference, or even necessarily "literary," although lending itself well to literary treatment. This is the recurrent, and generally human, predicament of what Benjamin calls *bloße Leben* or "bare life," that

state of revealed abjection in which life is either discovered to lack, or given an opportunity to reclaim, its sacrificial capacity.

I will work through these considerations in terms of a single example—the death of royal claimant Richard Duke of York at the hands of his Lancastrian adversaries after the battle of Wakefield in 1461. Within this example, I will focus on a particular detail that came to be associated with his death: his mock- or derisive coronation with a paper crown. Richard’s death is chosen in part because of the richness and creativity of its representation within fifteenth-century historical writing, and in part because it issues in that early play of (or at least largely by) Shakespeare, that I will argue is not coincidentally entitled *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*.

The fifteenth-century theater of cruelty

Persuasive arguments have been made that the actual tenor of English life was substantially uninterrupted by the dynastic disturbances we have come (after Shakespeare) to call the “Wars of the Roses.” Although all earlier centuries regarded this period as unprecedentedly self-destructive, the twentieth century has tended to minimize the impact of these events on the general society, first of all with respect to the scale of the events. The first battle of St. Albans, for example, may have involved no more than five thousand men, and other crucial engagements such as Barnet and Tewkesbury probably no more than ten thousand.⁴ One skeptical commentator has argued that the total period in which troops were in arms “amounted to little more than twelve or thirteen weeks in thirty-two years.”⁵ Moreover, the continuities of English daily life were scarcely interrupted; as A. J. Pollard has commented, “The arts of peace flourished, because society as a whole was for the most part untouched by the horrors of war.”⁶ These are indisputable points. Anyone who has, for example, looked at evidence of church-building and domestic architecture during that period can see immediately that life in the localities was substantially unchanged. Other sources, such as the Paston letters, record a mainly distant awareness of the broils. Although dimly Lancastrian (John Paston and John III fought in the retinue of the earl of Oxford against Edward IV at Barnet), the Pastons might be described as only distantly aware of what we now call the Wars of the Roses, and were much more preoccupied with the defense and augmentation of their own estates.⁷

Nevertheless, from at least one perspective, the events of 1459–85

were utterly wrenching, utterly dislocating, and resulted in unprecedented slaughter. This is the perspective of the aristocracy, and also of those chroniclers and diarists who recorded the vicissitudes of the English aristocracy in those hectic years—a perspective inevitably shared by those sixteenth-century readers of Vergil, Hall, Holinshed, and the other chronicle writers who reiterated this nightmarish narrative. For, in the many battles of those decades, this became the era, not of ransom and genteel confinement for aristocratic prisoners, but of “no prisoners” at all. In this era, aristocrats taken in battle—invariably found treasonous by their adversaries, whichever side they were on—were summarily beheaded or more elaborately and quasijudicially slain. Commynes points out that the disputed succession in England fostered a situation in which partisans of each side considered themselves justified in regarding their adversaries as traitors: “Et tous disoient qu’ilz estoient traistres, à cause qu’il y avoit deux maisons qui pretendoient à la couronne.”⁸ He assigns the officialization of this policy to Edward IV, who described his own habit after battle as mounting on horseback and crying out that common soldiers should be saved and gentlemen put to the sword, with few or none escaping.⁹ Commynes reports—accurately if we take him to include the whole barony—that according to his recollection, nearly eighty men of the royal house of England have died in consequence of these divisions (“Et ainsi, de ma souvenance, sont mores en ses divisions d’angleterre bien quatre vingtz homes de la lignée royalle d’Angleterre [*Mémoires*, I.7.81]).

Commynes says that these are people he knew personally, or about whom he had heard from English exiles sojourning with the duke of Burgundy. But accounts like his, together with near-contemporary chronicles, were broadcast to many. An impression of what struck a near-contemporary reader about one of these chronicles survives, as an addendum (in a subsequent and different hand) to the English chronicle of British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.16, fols. 210r–13v. This addendum amounts to a dolorous list of “the Names of dyuers lordis kynghtes and gentilmen the which haue ben slayn in the Realme of England Sith the good Duke of Glowcestre was mourdred at the p[ar]lement holden at Bury A[nn]o d[omi]ni Ml iiii xlj.” Here is a representative sample, commencing with the aftermath of Towton in 1471:

And after that the Erle of Wilshire the Erle of Devenshire and Sir Thomas ffulford at Exham in the North Countre were behedid.
 And after that was the lord Gray Rogemond taken and biheded.
 And after that the xxvith day of ffeurer Ao dni Mlccccxlj at the

Towre hill was biheded the Erle of Oxenford the lord Awbrey his son and hiere Sire Thomas Tudnam John Tirell and John Mountgomery. And after that was biheded in the North Contre Duke Henry of Somerset the lord Hungerford the lord Roos. And after that was biheded Sir Rauf Gray. And after that was the ffeelde at Hedgecotte and there was biheded the Erle of Penbroke called the lord Harbard and his broder Richard and the lord Lathemour slayn. And after that was biheded Richard Erle Ryvers the Erle Devenshire and Sir John Woodfeeld. And after that was [th]e batayle of Lyncolnshire and ther was beheded the lord Welles the lord Welughby and his son and heire and Sir Thomas Dymmok and Dalalaunde. And after that the xviiiith day of Octobre the yere of our lord Mlccccclxx was beheded the Erle of Worcestre at the Towre hill. And on Ester day next after that was the batayll of Barnet and there was slayn the Erle of Warwyk and the lord Markes Mountegew his broder the lord Say the lord Bowcer and Sir John Lyle. And after that was the batayll of Twexbury and there was slayn Prince Edward Kyng Hareyes sone the sixt and the Erle of Devenshire and the lord John of Somerset biheded and the lorde Wenlok was slayn in the felde. And the lorde of Saint Johns was beheded. And after that was [th]e Duke Edmond of Somerset Sir John Delves his son and sir Thomas Tressham beheded. (fols. 210v–11r)¹⁰

And so on; I have quoted about a quarter of this text. Notice that the writer tumbles together those killed “in the field,” those (like Prince Edward) killed in battle but possibly murdered, and those judicially and those extrajudicially executed. The writer is impressed by the extent of the carnage, including the death of those killed off the field; these deaths emerge as the crucial fact about the more lengthy and varied narrative he has just read. In summarizing the Cotton Vitellius chronicle, this reader has not necessarily misrepresented it. Although this staccato report is a radical summary, the chronicles do lay a great deal of emphasis on deaths on and off the battlefield, and frequently treat them as occasions of narrative and deliberative elaboration. These elaborations do, to be sure, proceed with the imaginative support of textual tradition. Nevertheless, the impetus for narrative enlargement comes, not from “tradition” alone, but from distinctive and prepossessing events in the world external to the text. To this extent, extratextual history asserts itself as occasion and as one more “source” of characteristic

fifteenth-century textual production. I wish now to turn to a particular battlefield murder that received unusually full textual elaboration, the apparent capture and subsequent murder of Richard Duke of York at Wakefield.

York's paper crown: As mock-coronation

Little enough is actually known about Richard Duke of York's death, except that he ended up in an imprudent engagement with a superior Lancastrian force at Wakefield, and that he and his youngest son Rutland were either slain in battle or captured and beheaded afterward. York's head appears to have been displayed on the gates of the city of York, probably mockingly adorned with a paper crown. The detail of the paper crown appears in an anonymous set of fifteenth-century *Annales* mistakenly assigned to William of Worcester.¹¹ In this account Richard, somewhat ignominiously foraging for food, is drawn into battle and killed on the field. His body is taken to York, and, the next day, beheaded and a paper crown placed spitefully upon his severed head: "Caput quoque ducis Eboraci in despectu coronaverunt carta." Whether historical or invented, the notion of placing a paper crown on Richard's head begs for some consideration here, as does the fact that this action was performed spitefully ("in despectu").¹²

This "crowning" (*coronaverunt*) depends for its meaning upon a tradition of mock-coronation, and it references a series of mock-crownings of unrightful, or at least unsuccessful, pretenders to the throne. At the end of the thirteenth century, for example, the head of the Welsh rebel Llewelyn, who had cited prophecies of Merlin in support of his claim to the crown of Britain, was mounted on a stake and brought to London for display on the Tower, crowned with a derisive garland of ivy: "caput ejusdem Leolini amputatum, et apud civitatem Londoniensem, ubi Brutus solebat coronari, deportatumque, paloque superpositum et hedera, id est 'yvi,' coronatum, super Turrim Londoniensem fuit erectum, ipsius Merlini exponens prophetiam."¹³ Similarly, in 1305 the Scottish rebel Wallace was brought to trial in Westminster Hall, and enstated on a dais and crowned with laurel (with the dais or *scamnum* standing in for enthronement in the coronation ritual), the explanation being the popular report that he had previously said he should wear the crown in that very hall: "cum lauri coronatus; pro eo quod ipse asseruit, tempore praeteritot, coronam in eadem auala portare deberet, sicut vulgariter dicebatur."¹⁴

The point of crownings in this tradition revolves around the claimant's immodest presumption—an implication to which Richard was

uncommonly vulnerable. Activated by this crowning is the fact of Richard's aspiration to secular kingship, his very worldly aspiration to wear an earthly crown. Mocked here is his desire for the ceremony of coronation, the wished-for consequence of his late-career decision to put aside decades of prevarication and to go all-out in pursuit of the throne. As manifested in his actions upon his return from Ireland in 1460, this was—or at least seemed to skittish contemporaries—so blatant as not only to affront the Lancastrians, but also to embarrass his most loyal supporters. Thus, even the mainly Yorkist Whethamstede has him, upon his recent return from Ireland, clutching at the cushion on the king's throne, and looking eagerly to those assembled for their (unforthcoming) acclamation.¹⁵ The Crowland continuator has him make for the throne, claiming the sole right of sitting upon it, spouting genealogy all the while; and then, offensively, moving into the king's apartments.¹⁶ York's paper crown may thus associate him with Llewelyn and Wallace: in all these cases, the point of the derision is an ironical inversion, in which the claimant is given something he sought, but not in the form in which he sought it.

Derision is a hard thing to control. Although the paper crowning is presumably assignable to York's Lancastrian adversaries, even a mock-coronation could already be said, backhandedly or under a sign of negation, to grant some of his claims. Though Richard is mocked, and even though the readership of this passage is at least provisionally invited to join in the mockery, the effect of this ridicule is to reclothe him in at least some of his ambitions and attributes. Even if proffered with derision, the paper crown reconstitutes him, not just as a suffering body or a gory head with a severed trunk, but as a claimant of the throne, a man of ambition, a dynast who has just suffered the death of his youngest son. Meaning to dispatch his claims, his adversaries run the risk of relaunching some of them, in a backhanded concession of the very meanings they had meant not to acknowledge. In consequence of its potential symbolic density, the tradition of the paper crown was not soon to disappear.

The effective canonization of the tradition of the paper crown was its adoption into Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble Houses*. Hall departs from the *Annales* in portraying Richard entering into battle as a chivalric hothead rather than as a mere forager for food. And he finds his own vivid language for the description of Richard's ill-fortuned sally into the hands of Clifford, which left him "enuironed on euery side, like a fishe in a net or a deere in a buckestall," and "within halfe an houre slain and ded."¹⁷ But then, although somewhat condensing the *Annales*' chronology, Hall adopts

its ascribed motive of mockery, agreeing that the crown was placed for purposes of amusement on York's decapitated head:

And [cruell Clifford] came to the place wher the dead corps of the duke of Yorke lay, and caused his head to be stryken of, and set on it a croune of paper, and so fixed it on a pole, & presented it to the Quene . . . in grete despite and much derision, sayyng: Madame, your warre done, here is your kynges raunsome, at which present, was much ioy, and great reioysing.¹⁸

Appropriately to his more detached vantage point, Hall deftly balances his perspectives here. On the one hand, "cruell" Clifford is the perpetrator, and his violation of York's corpse and the elaborately courteous presentation of the severed head as a gift to Margaret is likely to cause recoil. On the other hand, the head as "ransome" reminds the audience that York has held Henry as his captive, and held the crown itself captive to his ultimate succession;¹⁹ in the brief apparent respite between York's death and the rise of his son Edward, Henry will be "ransomed" or freed and Prince Edward will resume his previous place in the royal succession. Confirming the centrality of the "paper crown" tradition in the sixteenth century is, by the way, its adoption within the first (1559) edition of the *Mirror for Magistrates*—mostly likely, since the *Mirror* authors claim him as a frequent source—from Hall. In the monologue of Richard Duke of York, the order of events and spirit of Hall are carried forward, with Richard as example of "over rash boldnes." Speaking with "shrekyng voyce out of the weasande pipe of the headles bodye," Richard explains that, once his son was dead, Clifford

came to the campe where I lay dead,
Displyde my corps, and cut away my head.
And whan he had put a paper crowne theron,
As a gawring stocke he sent it to the Queen.²⁰

Adorned with the crown, York's head becomes a "gawring stocke" or object of display; a spectacular object, in the literal sense of the word. In the fifteenth century, response to this display might have divided along party lines, with Lancastrians joining in the derision and with Yorkists sourly contemplating the inadvertent ironies of incompletely acknowledged kingship. Now, the mid-sixteenth-century audience of Hall's *Union* or the writings of the *Mirror*-syndicate would have found less cause for either allegiance, but would presumably have found in Margaret's and Clifford's actions an effect

of misplaced (and short-lived) triumphalism. York's original and apparently senseless death has, in other words, already begun to accumulate meaning, and, more importantly, meaning over which even its impresario Clifford could have enjoyed little ultimate control.

York's paper crown: As political martyrdom

If the paper crown participates in a tradition of mock-coronations, it participates at least equally in an even more powerful symbolic tradition, that of the mock-crucifixion.²¹ In this tradition, the victim is rescued from opprobrium via association with Christ's spiteful crowning by his tormentors in the Gospels. This is, as one would suppose, an extremely volatile comparison, since any possibility of comparing his victim's sufferings to those of the crucified Christ implies an ultimate possibility of sharing in Christ's final glory. One doubts that a persecutor with any sense would leave open the door to it. But misguided attempts to wield one or another element of Christological imagery for demeaning purposes do seem sporadically to have been made. A point of reference for the later medieval period was the martyrdom of Jan Hus, subjected in his final hours to what Foxe describes as "contemnelious obprobries." As Foxe tells his story, commencing immediately after his degradation, "there remayned another knacke of reproche, for thei caused to be made a certaine crowne of paper, almoste a cubite deepe, in the whiche were paynted thre deuils of wonderfull uglye shape, and this title set ouer their heades, Heresiarcha." His cap falling to the ground when he kneels to pray, the "souldiours" guarding him replace it, saying "let vs put it agayne vpon his head that he may bee burned with his maisters the deuyls whome he hath serued." Reasonably enough, the door to so favorable a comparison having been opened, Hus turns it promptly to symbolic account: "The which whan he sawe, he sayd, my lorde Jesus Christ for my sake did weare a crowne of thorne: why should not I then for his sake again we[a]re this light crowne, be it neuer so ignominious: truly I will do it and that willingly." Then the tormentors—who like all tormentors in such cases seem unable to learn from their own errors—open the way to an additional, Christological turn: "When it was set vpon his head the bishops sayde, nowe we commit thy soule vnto the deuyl." To which Hus replies, "But I, saide John Hus (lifting his eyes vp towards the heauens) do commit my spiritie into thy hands."²²

Such spiteful crownings evidently become standard fare in the Spanish inquisitions of the following century, with mitres called "coro-

cas” placed upon the heads of burnt martyrs.²³ This is, of course, a highly unstable representational stratagem, since, as Hus’s attributed response well demonstrates, the deep tradition of Christ’s abjection immediately allows an inversion in which the intended symbol of degradation is converted to a marker of spiritual glory. In this vein, martyrs themselves often adopt one or another form of “crowning” in direct emulation of Christ. In Foxe’s account of yet another martyrdom, “Anthony Person, pullyng the straw vnto him, layd a good deale therof vpon the top of his head, saying: this is Gods hat: now am I dressed like a true souldiour of Christ.”²⁴ Person thus pits himself against the “souldiours” of the civil arm, who torment him as did the tormentors of Christ, even as he asserts a form of respectful emulation (at the distance prescribed by sixteenth-century Protestant decorums) of Christ. The mistake of these would-be mockers is to suppose that one derision can be isolated from another; that the derision directed against Christ by his tormentors can be safely quarantined from the derision *they* mean to direct against their victim. Person’s genius—and the genius of so many heretics—is to assert a common denominator with Christ, by suggesting that, precisely *as* objects of derision, they have more in common with Christ than their tormentors have supposed.

Whether manipulated by resourceful victims or introduced by sympathetic viewers or commentators, the elements of mock-crowning can hardly resist assimilation to the ubiquitous and more powerful imagery surrounding the sacrifice of Christ. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes with apparent inadvertence, this imagery is marshaled in defense of York’s disparaged claims. One such marshaling—the earliest that I know—occurs in Abbot John Whethamstede’s mid-fifteenth-century *Register*. In this account York, together with the earl of Salisbury, was taken alive at Wakefield (“ceperunt in bello vivos”), as a consequence of which he was not only decapitated, but was subjected to verbal and other symbolic mistreatment before his death. As the *Register* has it, York, especially among the captured lords, was mockingly mistreated, treated *multum ludibriose*, in the following fashion:

Nam statuentes eum super unum paruum formicarium colliculum, et quoddam sertum vile, ex palustri gramine confectum, imponentes per modum coronae super caput suum, non aliter quam Iudaei coram Domino, incurvaverunt genua sua coram ipso, dicentes illusorie, — “Ave, rex, sine regimine. Ave, rex, absque haeriditate. Ave, dux et princeps, absque omni populo penitus, et possessione.” Et hiis, una cum aliis variis, in eum pro-

bose opprobrioseque dictis, coegerunt ipsum demum, per capitis abscissionem, clameum relinquere suae justitiae vendicationis.

[For, standing him on a little anthill, and, placing on his head in the manner of a crown a sort of lowly chaplet, woven of marsh-grass, they bent their knees before him like the Jews before the Lord, saying, feigningly, “Hail, king, without kingdom. Hail, king, without inheritance. Hail, duke and prince, without a following, or possessions.” And with such shameful and opprobrious utterances, together with other variations, at last, by decapitation, they ended his pursuit of his rightful claim.]²⁵

The sheer theatricality of all this—a theatricality that requires no actual institution we would call “the theater”—prompts an observation I have made before. That, although Stephen Greenblatt at least acknowledges that there *was* a consequential Middle Ages in his suggestion that medieval sacramentalism is recycled as Renaissance theater, the point is that medieval culture was absolutely theatrical, long before the existence of the Renaissance stage.²⁶ In the present case, to treat Richard *ludibriose* is to treat him in game or play, with implied mockery; not necessarily to cast him in a literal “play,” but treat him with a mixture of festivity/trickery/mockery/theatricality that goes all the way back to the Plautine *ludus*, and still holds here. This “playful” near-pun is sustained by the fact that the torturers address Richard *illusorie*, “mockingly,” in Classical Latin, a sense still present here, but also, in the later medieval lexicon, in a spirit of invention, of feigning or illusion—a hypothetical state that may be likened to a “playlet” or deliberately composed spectacle. Centralizing York as an object of regard, casting themselves as mock-subjects, they turn him into the effective subject of a “play,” and the effect of a play is to create a zone of relative freedom, within which new meanings are invented and new associations formed.

Here, the meanings mainly involve analogies between York’s sufferings and those of Christ—right up to the final decapitation, the final terminus of the traitor and the saint, typically the last step in a process preceding the figurative crowning and the canonizing of the martyred saint. Once this kind of imagery begins to flow, York’s tormentors have already in effect lost their representational game. But I would like to pause a while, to see how they lost it. What, we must ask, is here being played *with*, and to what effect? Much demands exploration here, including the rather prepossessing—and, in Lancastrian terms, unfortunate—comparison of Richard with the cruci-

fied Christ. This passage is, of course, a conflation of several familiar Gospel passages, its chaplet of marsh-grass embracing the crown of thorns, the garment with which Christ is bedecked, and the reed with which he is beaten. These elements are to be found in the Gospels, already couched in the theatrical language of ludic play or “playful” mockery:

Matthew 27:29: And, plating a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand. And, bowing the knee before him, they mocked him [Vulgate: *illudebant ei*], saying, “Hail, king of the Jews” [*Ave rex iudaeorum*].

Mark 15:17–19: And they clothed him with purple; and, plating a crown of thorns, they put it upon him. And they began to salute him: Hail, king of the Jews [*Ave rex iudaeorum*]. And they struck his head with a reed [*arundine*]. . . . (my trans.)

All these suggestions are woven in, but our passage also shows the productive influence of concurrent vernacular elaborations. Consider, for example, its exploration of the ironies of Richard’s situation as aspirant to the throne, well known for his royal ambitions, but currently possessed of nothing more solid than his negotiated status as Henry’s heir. Imagining himself king, he enjoys none of that office’s appurtenances: “Hail, king, without kingdom. Hail, king, without inheritance. Hail, duke and prince, completely without a people, or possessions.” A parallel situation is attributed, in the nearly contemporary York mystery plays, to Christ, when his tormentors, unable to grasp the nature of his claims, mistake his heavenly pretensions for earthly ones and deride the unfounded nature of his rule. Crowning him with “brere,” placing a purple cape upon his shoulders, and fetching a reed for a scepter, they seat him upon a throne and show mock-reverence, in order to “gudly hym grete on this grounde.”

Aue, riall roy and rex judeorum!

Hayle, comely kyng that no kyngdom has kende.

Hayll vndugthy duke, thi dedis ere dom,

Hayll, man vnmyghty thi menye to mende.

Hayll, lord withoute lande for to lende.²⁷

The “ground” is itself a kind a *platea*, center of a performance that toys with the audience’s sense of unsought (but, ultimately and ironically, earned) reverence. Our “duke without possessions” cannot avoid—nor is his represen-

tation in Whethamstede intended to avoid—association with his precursor, the divine but “Vndughty duke . . . vnmyghty [his] menye to mende.”

In fact, although Whethamstede finds York suffering from *probose opprobrioseque*, “shameful and opprobrious,” utterances, he remains an extreme symbolic beneficiary of this exchange. What he has to give it is, in effect, nothing—his destitution, his separation from any possibility of succor, his silence. Yet silence is the “language” that marks his separation from the community, as embodied in the verbose torturers, and its denial of his achievements. His silence is discovered, in turn, to possess a proclivity for the sacred, as revealed in the imagery of Christ’s sacrifice, including Christ’s own silence at the hands of the torturers. In consequence, we are left looking at a monumental collapse of Lancastrian “spin,” in which Whethamstede, with his intermittent but persistent Yorkism, glimpses quasidivine stature at the moment of this presumptuous claimant’s lonely death. Here the languages and trajectories of religion and secular politics enjoy a brief but potent convergence. This application of the language of religious martyrdom to the vicissitudes and sufferings of a life whose ordinary coordinates lie fully and even emphatically within the secular sphere constitutes a major imaginative pre-working of materials vital to the development of Shakespearean tragedy.

To Shakespeare, via Abraham Fleming

Shakespeare acquires Whethamstede as a source by a virtual accident. Whethamstede’s analysis might have been a kind of “sport,” likely to have died on the vine, and indeed it languished for a hundred years before the Holinshed compilers restored it to view. In his first edition of the *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), Holinshed prints the Hall account, with its emphasis on mock-coronation, more or less verbatim, as the now-standard sixteenth-century version. No sooner is it done, though, than, in their 1586 edition, Abraham Fleming and his collaborators reinstate the alternate tradition, by turning to Whethamstede (whom they marginally credit) as an add-on. Describing the decapitation of the dead York, and his head’s presentation, fixed on a pole and crowned with paper, to queen Margaret, they add,

Some write that the duke was taken alive, and in dereision caused to stand on a molehill, on whose head they put a garland in steed of a crowne, which they had fashioned and made of sedges or bulrushes; and having so crowned him with that garland, they

kneeled downe afore him (as the Jewes did unto Christ) in scorne, saieng to him; Haile king without rule, haile king without heritage, haile duke and prince without people or possessions. . . .²⁸

They retain Worcester's molehill in preference to Whethamstede's anthill, but carry most of the latter's other materials into this addendum.

Certainly, as far as a dramatic intention can be derived from the scene of York's death in Shakespeare's *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke and the death of the Good King Henrie the Sixt* (i.e., *3 Henry VI*), it remains a secular event, conceived within the tradition of the mock-coronation.²⁹ Although Shakespeare's scene possesses a certain cousinship to accounts of Christ's taunting by his torturers (since that taunting relies upon his pretensions to kingship), its symbolic ambit less obviously relies upon the Gospels than upon orthodox medieval coronation-behaviors.³⁰ "Doggèd York," as Gloucester calls him (*2H6* 3.1.158) has, of course, repeatedly and promiscuously sought the trappings of kingship, and the reality of office they portray — the scepter (*2H6* 5.1.9), the throne (*3H6* 1.1.51), and, of course, the crown (*3H6* 1.1.114, 166, etc.). It is this ambition to which Margaret speaks, in the mock-crowning as she devises it:

York cannot speak unless he wear a crown.
A crown for York, and, lords, bow low to him.
Hold you his hands whilst I do set it on.
Ay, marry, sir, now looks he like a king,
Ay, this is he that took King Henry's chair,
And this is he was his adopted heir.
But how is it that great Plantagenet
Is crowned so soon and broke his solemn [*Tragedie*: "holy"] oath?
(*3H6* 1.4.94–101)

Following the Worcester-Hall tradition, Margaret evidently places a paper crown (rather than a garment of rushes) on York's head.³¹

The referents here seem mainly to York's earthly ambitions, evoked by Margaret's reference to the parliamentary maneuvering through which York supplanted Prince Edward as Henry's heir; and by her citation of his now-violated oath that Henry should reign undisturbed until death; and her later (1.4.105) reference to Richard's intent to rob Henry's "temples of the diadem." Assuming for herself the role of archbishop and presiding cleric, she constitutes her followers as beholders and participants in a coronation

ceremony, and when she suggests that they “bow low to him” the object of her irony is his failure to attain an earthly, rather than a heavenly, crown.³²

Yet here Margaret stages a play, and—as in Whethamstede’s fifteenth-century rendition of Richard’s death—the play-within-a-play is a privileged area with respect to reaccommodation of the sacred, a propitious circuit for a return of the sacral repressed.³³ The premise of this much-altered and augmented playlet remains the same as that of Whethamstede: the reduction of Richard to a state of abjection, coupled with the kinds of *probose opprobrioseque* taunts with which we have become familiar. At least at this momentary juncture, Margaret possesses a sovereign’s rights with respect to York’s ultimate fate. Once York falls into the hands of the Lancastrians, he becomes, in effect, Margaret’s subject, and is already as good as dead, has *already* died a symbolic death at her hands, awaiting only the completion of the process by his literal death, his murder: his decapitation and his head’s display. Thus abandoned to an external will, a will that expresses itself playfully and mockingly by prolonging his torment, Richard awaits, and then receives, his death. And the prepossessing fact about Richard’s death is this: even in a Shakespearean form, held rather consciously distant from traditions of martyrdom, and even when treated by Margaret as a murder pure and simple, it cannot finally resist or withstand reattachment to the Christian vocabulary and imagery of sacrifice.

As with the Lancastrian torturers in the Whethamstede account, Margaret’s taunts are no doubt intended ironically, pointing to the gap between York’s inflated regal ambitions on the one hand and his human vulnerability on the other. But a veneer of irony is a very weak control, over so powerful a body of imagery as this. For the imagery of Christ’s sacrifice is liable, if not certain, to break out of its own ironic encryption, and to assert itself in unpremeditated ways; it becomes, almost inevitably, imagery out of control, imagery at odds with the apparent purposes of the act. Mocking Richard’s destitution, Margaret’s ironic pretense inadvertently opens a “side door” through which the sacred can reenter this play. Any kind of “play” with the elements of the sacred is “dangerous” play for monarchs who would consolidate their authority by denying their subjects the dignity of sacrifice. In the York mystery cycle, Christ’s torturers became, by ironic inversion, his unwitting prophets, testifying to the elements of his majesty for a biblical or dramatic audience that knows how to interpret the signs; similarly these secular torturers risk giving York, not just his death, but the gift of a sacrificial death. Where these torturers go wrong is not just in attempting to

construct irony from such powerful and potentially “runaway” elements, but in accepting these elements within an imaginative form of symbolic play, in which fusion, or perhaps I should say “fission,” can occur in the presence of any Christological imagery at all.

Margaret’s staging of her little play may thus be said to escape its apparent purpose:

Come make him stand upon this molehill here,
That wrought at mountains with outstretchèd arms
Yet parted but the shadow with his hand.
What — was it you that would be England’s king? (3H6
1.4.68–71)
[*Tragedie*: Was it you that reuelde in our Parliament,
And made a preachment of your high descent?]

She clearly intends reference to York’s earthly claims. Kingship was certainly York’s objective, and notoriously so, and the quarto variant is, in a sense, even more “worldly” in its recognition of the stir York made in Parliament and the genealogical terms in which he cast his actual claim. The “molehill” is no longer Calvary in her figure, but rather a diminished equivalent of his inflated or “mountainous” objectives, diminished first by being worldly rather than spiritual, and second by York’s present defeat. Nevertheless, Shakespeare presumably knew the cancelled Whethamstede-Holinshed alternative, and his living Richard, atop the molehill, cannot escape some of the Christological significance that the Shakespearean treatment (or at any rate Margaret, as architect of this scene) seems mainly to avoid. York, atop his molehill, object of taunts, allows Whethamstede’s cancelled sacrificial imagery to rejoin itself to this scene. Does he stand on his molehill “with outstretchèd arms”? Margaret’s taunt refers to his former ambitions rather than his present degradation. Yet her reference also would seem to constitute an implied stage direction, with Richard’s arms *now* “outstretchèd” not in a “power grab” but in an enforced repetition of the crucifixion of Christ.

This playlet thus becomes an arena for the unintended rediscovery of York’s potential for redemption. York, destitute on the stage, first alone and stripped of his followers, and then in the hands of his enemies, joins the procession of characters in the *Contention* and the *Tragedie* who are stripped down to life’s physical rudiments, to life without meaning or possible redemption. But then the imagery of sacrifice, eluding Margaret’s stage-managerial control, awards him the possibility of an escape from the condi-

tions of bare life, even when such an escape was least to be expected. So, too, does Margaret, engaging in a kind of frenzy of self-defeating symbolizations, redouble this sacrificial aura by presenting York with a devotional object or relic for his cult of secular martyrdom:

Look, York, I stained this napkin with the blood
That valiant Clifford with his rapier's point
Made issue from the bosom of thy boy.
And if thine eyes can water for his death,
I give thee this to dry thy cheeks withal. (*3H6* 1.4.80–84)

Once again, within the imaginatively favorable compass of the play-within-a-play, imagery breaks through the constraints of its original purpose. Rutland here becomes martyr, his suffering metonymically emblemized in his own blood like a Christian saint.

Furthering this imagery of martyrdom is, of course, York's paper crown, to be introduced by Margaret in her mock-coronation of lines 93 ff. This play has, of course, been saturated with discussion of the crown, crowns, and the strife over their getting and having, their wanting and refusal, their possession, dispossession, and spoilage. A bare hint of the crown's ubiquity is the fact that it is mentioned some sixteen times in Act 1, scene 1 alone. Crownings and seizures of the crown are vividly and repeatedly imagined, epitomizing York's political imaginary and that of his sons:

RICHARD: Father, tear the crown from the usurper's head.
EDWARD: Sweet father, do so—set it on your head. (*3H6*
1.1.113–14)

Now finding himself with a crown indeed, but not the one he had sought, York sets out to rework its symbolism. The unwanted crown, the derisive paper crown, is returned to Margaret with his curse:

There, take the crown—and with the crown, my curse:
And in thy need such comfort come to thee
As now I reap at thy too cruel hand. (1.4.165–67)

But the implicitly sacred imagery of this play-within-a-play has opened the way to the revalorization of this crown as a symbol of martyrdom. Renouncing the worldly crown, York is quick to announce the symbolic gain he has accomplished:

Hard-hearted Clifford, take me from the world.
My soul to heaven, my blood upon your heads. (1.4.168–69)

And then, stabbed by Clifford and Margaret,

Open thy gate of mercy, gracious God—
My soul flies through these wounds to seek out thee.
(1.4.179–80)
[*Tragedie: My soule flies foorth to meet with thee.*]

York is not wrong in concluding that his treatment at the hands of his tormentors has given him that right so often accorded to solitary sufferers in Shakespearean drama: the right of victimage. As Michael O'Connell has perceptively observed, "in Shakespeare . . . bodies in pain, bodies that have suffered violence and death, achieve a kind of authority and power over those who have inflicted their suffering."³⁴ For this authority to be realized, however, the presence of an external, and stabilizing, vocabulary of sacrifice is required. That is what Clifford and Margaret concede to York by virtue of their rather heedless plunge into the symbolic vocabulary of martyrdom. Granting him the imagery of sacrifice, alluding—even in a displaced way—to outstretched arms, displaying a *de facto* relic, these tormentors who would delimit and seal up the meaning of his death by mockery, actually allow their victim to claim a sacrificial view of his own demise. Conceiving himself as a martyr, York imagines his soul's immediate access to heaven. His martyrdom is, of course, implicitly Christological—a reading strengthened in the later folio edition of the play, in which York's soul not only issues to meet God, but issues from his wounds. York might be said, rhetorically, to overplay his hand here, in this evocation of Christ's wounds and his own soul's rapturous ascent to God; but the point is that, in their reckless deployment of imagery and charged language, Margaret and Clifford have given him a hand to play.³⁵

York's travails, in Whethamstede's imagination and Shakespeare's amplification, thus introduce the subject of worldly martyrdom to the larger English dramatic tradition. This introduction does not rely upon the sponsorship of medieval "tragedy" *per se*, since that tradition has more to do with the operations of Fortune and with divine retribution than with the imagery of martyrdom. Nor does it have anything at all to do with Senecan conceptions. It relies upon the vital imaginative pre-working of ultimately Shakespearean materials by Whethamstede and other late medieval writers, who

were responsible for undercredited but crucial contributions to the invention of early modern tragic form.

Bloße Leben

Amply represented in Shakespeare's chronicle sources, the politically motivated slaying of a captive or helpless adversary is repeatedly staged in the Henry VI plays. Again and again, a claimant or adversary is brought to center stage, isolated, reduced to a condition of ignomy, and mercilessly dispatched. A considerably curtailed list, limited only to the last two plays (albeit the first two in order of composition) would include Suffolk, Rutland, Clifford, Warwick, Somerset, Edward Prince of Wales, and ultimately King Henry himself. So recurrent is the event in Shakespeare's plays that we might suppose its repetition not simply to be a matter of historical reportage, but also a willing acceptance of the pressure of external history on theatricality itself; an instance in which external history provides an incentive to foreground and examine something essential to the theatrical situation. The predicament of the single individual, isolated and slain, provides matter for extensive reflection on the attraction of theater to extreme situations, its resources for discovering meaning exactly at the moment of meaning's own most radical impoverishment, and the contribution of such excruciating depictions to Shakespearean tragedy itself.

Chronicle history offers to Shakespearean theater an opportunity to consider a general and recurrent issue in human suffering, an issue that includes but exceeds the moment of its inscription. The resources of theater are, in turn, enlisted to assist in this issue's elucidation. Relentlessly exposed in the desolation of the solitary and defenseless victim is what Walter Benjamin calls *bloße Leben*: "mere" life or "bare" life, life stripped to its essence and undefended against whatever rebuke the state or temporary sovereign chooses to administer.³⁶ This is at once a particular and a universal condition—not only "universal" in its evocation of a final isolation at the moment of death that all will experience, but also in its presentation of a representational ground zero for the exposure and exploration of the absolute minimum condition of human life. The crucial point foregrounded by Benjamin and additionally developed by Giorgio Agamben is that the subject taken in this condition no longer exists for himself or herself. Rather, the suffering subject exists only as a demonstration of the sovereign's power over bare life. In Agamben's extension of Benjamin's theory, bare life becomes the "originary activity of sovereignty," and the decision on the disposition of bare life

the most characteristic “referent of the sovereign decision.” Viewed in this context, life’s prolongation or extinction is no longer a matter of choice for the subject, but rather an occasion for the exercise of the sovereign decision.³⁷ The crucial derivative point is that life in this situation is stripped of its sacredness, incapable even of sacrifice, since, in its vulnerability to the sovereign decision, its capacity for sacrifice has *already been ceded*, to the sovereign or to the law.

Exposure of the condition of “bare life” — on, as it were, a bare stage, without mitigating detail and with every avenue of exit barred — is “theatrical” in several important respects. This theatricality presupposes a situation of spectatorship, in which a viewing audience beholds and experiences these victims’ last moments. But it also involves a form of radical and paradoxical instability in the situation as it is depicted; for this is simultaneously a moment devoid of any mitigating possibility, and a moment when the necessity for some alleviation is absolute. This situation is grounded in the depleted condition of the victims themselves: victims utterly estranged from any possibility of rescue or redemption, and limited, in effect, to “making meaning” only on behalf of a sovereign other. Benjamin expresses the nullity of this situation when he says that human vulnerability to the sovereign rests in the fallibility of “mere life,” in the fact that life “vulnerable to injury by . . . fellow men” possesses no inherent sacredness. But the inherent dynamism of this situation rests in its intolerability. This is what Benjamin means when, despite his own pessimism and despair, and despite his inability to propose an alternative, he nevertheless insists that “man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him.” The paradox he identifies is that, just at the moment when alternate meanings have been utterly foreclosed, their discovery must begin. The victim, having been so stripped and curtailed in every respect, resides in a null situation in which the slightest gesture, in which practically *any* action or inclination or anything said about him at all, cannot fail to inaugurate a new significance. Performed for the viewing audience is the profoundly theatrical event of the protagonist’s rehabilitation to a world of signification.

Centrally important to Shakespeare’s numerous restagings of ignominious and symbolically destitute death-scenes is the extent to which the significance of the victim’s death exceeds or escapes the designs of his persecutors. The persecutor’s intention, as described by Benjamin and Agamben, is to employ the victim’s suffering in the magnification of persecutorial authority. For this purpose to be achieved, bare life is, and must remain, entirely subject to the sovereign decision, which means that the sovereign

possesses an unrestricted right to extinguish the life under his (or, in the case of Margaret, her) control. Agamben epitomizes this situation in his dictum that the condition of bare life allows its possessor to be “killed and yet not sacrificed.”³⁸ Bare life permits murder but not sacrifice because the subject of the sovereign decision is effectively *already sacrificed*; has already ceded the potential for sacrifice to the sovereign, or the law. If life is to be “mere” or “bare” in this sense, the vital point is that no restitution of the destitute subject’s lost capacity for sacrifice can be allowed to recur. Such a subject joins those who, according to Agamben, live in “abandonment,” or under the sovereign “ban.”³⁹ The solemn order to which the being finds itself subject asks of it only one thing, and that one thing is everything: “an absolute, solemn order, which prescribes nothing but abandonment. Being is not entrusted to a cause, a motor, to a principle; it is not left to its own substance, or even to its own subsistence. It is—in abandonment.” But, with the reinstatement of a possibility for sacrifice, the absolute condition of the ban—that it constitute “abandonment without recourse”—is irremediably violated.⁴⁰ This is York’s final opportunity, one that Margaret inadvertently affords him. It is the opportunity to reconstitute his own situation by the grateful embrace of the suddenly available language of sacrifice.

By emphasizing the extent to which sovereignty creates itself in the experience of human abjection, the Benjamin-Agamben formulation sharpens one’s sense of what might be called the “politics of suffering.” Moreover, by pointing the way to sacrifice and the drama of martyrdom as possible avenues of escape from tyranny, their formulation addresses and refines the connection between religious imagery and worldly politics. Whatever its doctrinal or salvific implications, the Christian imagery of sacrifice also turns out, in its trajectory from Whethamstede to Shakespeare, to possess a capacity to remake the world.⁴¹

From tragedy to *Trauerspiel*

Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies repeatedly centralize the body in mutilation and pain, the isolated and suffering victim, the moment when the hunted human quarry is run to ground and done to death. Why then treat Richard Duke of York as so special, rather than as a general illustrative instance? The answer lies in the special propensity of York’s situation to attract to itself the language of martyrdom. This point of difference is, in turn, expressed through a radical innovation in terminology, not necessarily with Shakespeare’s concurrence, but in any case upon the initiative

of contemporaries, printer “P.S.” and publisher Thomas Millington, who produced the 1595 quarto edition of *3 Henry VI*. Their chosen title was *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke, and the death of good King Henrie the Sixt*.⁴² Many beside York die in the *Contention* and in the *Tragedie*. Yet the latter play, according to its original title as York’s “Tragedie,” is the first play of Shakespeare’s to be called a “tragedy,” only later to be assimilated to a larger structure and downgraded in the folio edition of Shakespeare’s works to *The third Part of Henry the Sixt, with the death of the Duke of Yorke*. The term *tragedy* certainly does not govern the whole play’s structure, since York dies at the end of the first act. In balance, given the authority of his Act 2 meditation, seated on a molehill of his own, it is probably “Good King Henry’s” play. So what then of York’s *tragedy*, and how are we to understand it?

Looking at the succession of deaths in the *Contention* and the *Tragedie*, a difference may be noted in York’s case. For the normal tendency of the isolated victim, each in his turn stripped of allegiance and support and made to confront the condition of “bare life,” is in one way or another to refuse or reject compliance in the act; each, like York, associates his predicament with a discourse external to the event. But none, aside from York, seeks out meaning within the event itself, at the event’s own center, and only then secures that meaning in relation to external commentary. Suffolk provides one prepossessing example, disdaining entreaty with his pirate-captors, and stepping entirely outside of the circumference of events in which he finds himself, likening his situation to that of the Greats who died at the hands of inferiors:

A Roman sworder and banditto slave
Murdered sweet Tully; Brutus’ bastard hand
Stabbed Julius Caesar; savage islanders
Pompey the Great; and Suffolk dies by pirates. (*2H6* 4.2.137–40)

Certainly, Suffolk’s comments represent an attempt to escape the debased condition of “bare life,” but to escape from it to another register entirely—to the external circumstance of a great man undone by lesser assailants—rather than by seeking to alter its essential or inner meaning. Rutland, captured by Clifford in Act 3 scene 1 of the *Tragedie*, casts himself, successively, as prey, as hapless object of revenge, as prayerful supplicant, and, finally, as external commentator on the arc of Clifford’s career; but the common denominator of these stances is an attempt to escape the event’s consequences: he shouldn’t

be here at all. Clifford himself, concluding that he has “deserved no pity” (3H6 2.6.26), dies unaware of the taunts directed at his insentient corpse by Richard’s surviving sons. Prince Edward, surrounded by the sons of York, locates his own justification in his dynastic right (“I am your better, traitors as ye are / An thou usurp’st my father’s right and mine” [5.5.36–37]). King Henry characteristically veers toward the sacred, praying for his own forgiveness and soliciting pardon for his murderer Richard (5.6.60), but does not explore the latent idea of his own death as means or mediation for forgiveness. Only York delves the significance of his own death, and discovers its intrinsic meaning in the imagery of martyrdom and sacrifice in which it is arrayed. This interrogation of an event’s meaning is what seems to me exceptional in York’s case, and in turn to explain its exceptional and precocious designation as a *tragedy*.

Reaching for *tragedy* as a term of generic convenience, the publishers signal their sense that something noteworthy is happening in *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*.⁴³ Yet, despite its availability to be pressed into service, neither the medieval nor the Senecan sense of *tragedy* quite captures the distinctive attributes toward which Shakespeare’s publishers were gesturing. I return one last time to Benjamin, now for his interest in the Baroque form of the *Trauerspiel*, or, as he alternately calls it, the “martyr-drama.” The martyrdom in question is not, to be sure, of the earlier Christian sort, in which the likening of the victim’s sufferings to those of Christ underpins a salvific guarantee for all. Rather, the martyrdom of the *Trauerspiel* tends instead to concentrate on the suffering itself, and the challenge to human endurance that suffering poses. Benjamin sees an affinity between seventeenth-century German melodrama and the religious drama of the Middle Ages, “evident in the extent to which both share the character of the Passion-play,” even as he admits to a difference. As he explains it, the *Trauerspiel* lies in the line of descent from the Passion-play, even as it redirects its objectives. In the seventeenth century, “religious aspirations did not lose their importance; it was just that this century denied them a religious fulfillment, demanding of them, or imposing upon them, a secular solution instead.” Thus,

Whereas the middle ages present the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in the depths of this destiny itself rather than the fulfillment of a divine plan of salvation.⁴⁴

The applicability of this formulation to what I have called York's "political martyrdom" should be evident, in the case of Whethamstede, and in Shakespeare's *True Tragedie* as well. The pertinence of *Trauerspiel* to an inner description of the experience of Shakespearean tragedy was well noticed by Benjamin. It propels him to the audacious and stimulating claim that Shakespeare is not the ultimate tragedian at all, but rather, in his tragedies and especially in *Hamlet*, the ultimate practitioner of *Trauerspiel*. Distinguishing between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin observes that "Whereas tragedy ends with a decision—however uncertain this may be—there resides in the essence of the *Trauerspiel*, and especially the death-scene, an appeal of the kind which martyrs utter."⁴⁵ Salvation is beside the point in these dramas; what matters is that they offer the suffering hero a supplementary discourse that redeems him from the condition of bare life or symbolic destitution. The "appeal of the kind which martyrs utter" happens historically, in the case of Shakespeare, to be borne within residual Christian imagery, as in the case of York, or within what Benjamin would call Hamlet's "baroque" post-Christian melancholy, or within the more generalized movement from suffering to redemption discoverable in *Lear*.

This is not an argument for calling Shakespeare's tragedies *Trauerspiele*. Tragedies they are, by custom, and will remain. But it is an argument for understanding how very coincidental is our use of the term *tragedy* to describe these great Elizabethan plays, and how very independent they are of tragedy in either its medieval or its Senecan sense. Benjamin's argument points these plays' reliance on another and more pertinent medieval tradition, the medieval invention of what I have called political martyrdom. Conveyed in such forms as the martyr-drama of Richard Duke of York, this idiom contributed vitally to the form of Elizabethan "tragedy," and to vital traditions of political and secular martyrdom persisting to our own time.⁴⁶



Notes

This essay derives from an earlier lecture given at Duke University. I thank Liz Clark for her invitation, and David Aers, Sarah Beckwith, and others who were generous with their advice after the lecture and in a stimulating seminar session. It may be viewed as an alternate version of a chapter in my *"Politique": Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), which also treats the case of Whethamstede's Richard. In that case, however, the focus rests with martyrdom and political process; here my interest is in

enlarging the parameters within which we discuss the origins of Shakespearean tragedy.

- 1 As in Willard Farnham's classic *Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936). See also Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1997).
- 2 Seneca—although more completely known in the latter case—is actually a common denominator in each of these accounts.
- 3 See Dietrich Rolle, “The Concept of Tragedy in Plays and Theoretical Treatises of the Elizabethan Era,” *Kunstgriffe: Auskünfte zur Reichweite von Literaturtheorie und Literaturkritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989), 335–36.
- 4 Charles Ross, *The Wars of the Roses: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 135–40; A. J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, 2nd. ed. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 68–72.
- 5 J. R. Lander, *Crown and Nobility, 1450–1509* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), 62.
- 6 A. J. Pollard, ed., *The Wars of the Roses* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995), 18. For a similar comment see Ross, *Wars of the Roses*, 173.
- 7 Colin Richmond observes, tellingly, that “For the Pastons the Wars of the Roses was a matter of two dukes and an absentee earl. . . . Apart from a standard dislike of taxation . . . there is virtually no evidence to show whether the Pastons were Lancastrian or Yorkist.” *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 7–8.
- 8 Philippe de Commines, *Mémoires*, ed. Philippe Contamine (Paris: Impr. nationale éditions, 1994), II.2.117. Further citations are to book, chapter, and page numbers.
- 9 Commines, *Mémoires*, III.5.192: “il montoit à cheval et crioit qu'on sauvast le peuple et que on tuast les seigneurs; car de ceulx n'eschapoient nul ou bien peu.” Commines adds that, upon his departure from Flanders in 1471, Edward had resolved no longer to spare the common soldiers, because of his anger at the commons for their support of the earl of Warwick, and for other causes (III.7).
- 10 This passage, together with the chronicle to which it is appended, is printed in *Chronicles of London*, ed. Charles Lethbridge Kingsford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 276–79.
- 11 *Wilhelmi Wyrcester Annales* (London, Herald's College MS 48), in *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France . . .*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, Rolls Series 22, vol. 2, pt. 2 (London, 1864), 775. That Worcester was not actually the author of the anonymous (and multiauthored) *Annales* attributed to him was established by K. B. McFarlane, “William Worcester: A Preliminary Survey,” *England in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), 209–10.
- 12 Another chronicle source that does not mention the paper crown does imply its presence by saying that York's head was displayed “obprobiose” on the walls of York, together with those of others slain. London, College of Arms MS Arundel 5, in *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, ed. James Gairdner, Camden Society n.s. 28 (Westminster, 1880), 171–72.
- 13 *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, ed. William Stubbs, Rolls Series 76, vol. 1 (London, 1882), 90.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 139.

- 15 John Whethamstede, *Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whethamstede*, ed. Henry T. Riley, Rolls Series 28, vol. 6, pt. 1 (London, 1872), 377.
- 16 *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations: 1459–1486*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and John Cox (London: Sutton for Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, 1986), 111.
- 17 Edward Hall, *The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre & Yorke* (London, 1548), fol. 183r.
- 18 *Ibid.*, fol. 183v.
- 19 William Gregory's *Chronicle* describes his confinement in the bishop's palace in London, and the duke's mocking "torchelyght" visit. See *The Historical Recollections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. James Gairdner, Camden Society n.s. 17 (Westminster, 1876), 208.
- 20 *The Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. Lily B. Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 181–90, quotation at ll. 139–42.
- 21 For a recent overview of the intersections of fifteenth-century political and religious language and symbolism, see Miri Rubin, "Religious Symbols and Political Culture in Fifteenth-Century England," in *Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Linda Clark and Christine Carpenter (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2004), 1–12.
- 22 John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (1563), Oxford, Magdalen College, Arch.B.I.4.13, fol. 240b.
- 23 The detail about the "corocas" is a subsequent addition; *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, 4th ed., ed. Josiah Pratt, 8 vols. (London: Religious Tract Society, [1877]), 4:453. With respect to typicality, we read of the martyrdom of Frances San Romane, "As he was led to the place of suffering, they put vpon him a Miter of paper, paynted full of deuils, after the Spanish guise" (from the 1583 edition, vol. 2, p. 930). The variety of my citations of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* is a consequence of the numerous changes and augmentations of that volume in the course of its early printing history.
- 24 John Foxe, *Ecclesiastical History* [i.e., *Acts and Monuments*] (London, n.d.), Oxford, Magdalen Authors, Magd. T. 136, vol. 2, 1398.
- 25 Wethamstede, *Registrum Abbatiae*, 382–83, quotation at 382; my trans.
- 26 Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 248–54. Greenblatt argues that the years intervening between the end of the fifteenth and the end of the sixteenth centuries detached the materials of Catholic sacramentality from their cultural basis, opening them to an afterlife of theatrical reappropriation. While accepting the overall contour of this argument, I would like to adjust its application in at least two important respects. First of all, with respect to the medieval period, I would say that Greenblatt rather unaccountably loses hold of his own starting-point as well as its corollary. As he himself so spectacularly demonstrates at the outset, medieval theology always and inevitably possesses its own theatrical component. The corollary is that the metatheater of both periods *always* provided a privileged site for such reconsideration and renewal of the terms and conditions of sacredness. Second, I do not think that the line between a "spiritual" Middle Ages and a "secular" early modern period can ever satisfactorily be drawn. For a view consistent with mine, and perhaps a bit more adamant, see Sarah Beckwith, "Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet* and the Forms of Oblivion," *Journal of Medieval and*

- Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 272, 275: “Greenblatt fails to see the centrality of performance to medieval and Reformation religiosity in both its theological and theatrical senses. This is ultimately why he can see theater as replacing purgatory/religion. . . . Shakespeare’s theater does not represent the supersession and succession of religion, purgatory, and ritual action by a disenchanting theater, but the persistence of its historical concerns in the incarnation of performance.”
- 27 *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), “Christ before Pilate,” ll. 408–12. Looking ahead to my discussion of Shakespeare’s *True Tragedie*, I might note that Emrys Jones discerns common ground in the Christological elements of York’s sacrifice and the passion sequences of the mystery cycles. I do not disagree, although I would doubt that the mystery cycles are the most proximate source for Shakespeare’s treatment. See *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 54–56.
 - 28 Raphael Holinshed et al., *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 3 vols. (London, 1586), 3:245.
 - 29 As argued in David M. Bergeron, “The Play-within-a-Play in *3 Henry VI*,” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 22 (1977): 37–45.
 - 30 Principal quotations of both *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*, cited as *2H6* and *3H6*, will be taken, for convenience, from Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, ed. Stanley W. Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). The 1600 quarto edition of *3 Henry VI*, printed as *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke and the death of the Good King Henrie the Sixt*, is quoted from *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York, 1600* (London: Tudor Facsimile Texts, 1913). Selective citations from the 1600 quarto of *3H6*, designated as *Tragedie*, will be cited for comparative purposes, in cases of significant deviation; while quotations of variants from *2H6*, designated as *Contention*, are quoted from *The whole contention betweene the two famous houses, Lancaster and Yorke* (1619).
 - 31 Modern editorial tradition accepts this supposition, inserting a stage direction after line 96, dictating the placing of a “paper crown” on York’s head, in place of Whethamstede’s marsh-grass or Holinshed’s bulrushes. Authority for this editorial gesture includes the reprise of this situation we are given in *Richard III*, when Richard taunts Margaret with recollection of the time “When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper” (1.3.172). See *William Shakespeare: A Textual Commentary*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (New York: Norton, 1997), 201.
 - 32 Margaret here plays what Sandra Billington calls a “king game,” in *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 145.
 - 33 This suggestion is indebted—like so much else in this essay—to my reading of Benjamin’s account of Baroque tragedy, in which he singles out “the worldly disguise of the play within a play” as the place where “transcendence was allowed its final word.” Nor is this identification of a particular dramatic resource with a characteristic content, in his mind, coincidental; for as he puts it, “the paradoxical reflection of play and appearance” stage a positive invitation to a drama of “salvation and redemption.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998), 82.
 - 34 Michael O’Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88.

- 35 On York's own slender credentials for his Christlike roll, see Billington, *Mock Kings*, 146.
- 36 Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), esp. 199–203; for translation, see Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 296–300.
- 37 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 83.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 39 As Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, "To *abandon* is to remit, entrust, or turn over to . . . a sovereign power, and to remit, entrust, or turn over to its *ban*, that is, to its proclaiming, to its convening, and to its sentencing" ("Abandoned Being," in *The Birth to Presence* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993], 44).
- 40 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 44, 47.
- 41 At this point, I come out closer to Benjamin than to Agamben, who seems to me a bit implacable in his conclusions. One of Agamben's contentions is that, once the sacrifice to sovereign power has been made, the condition of bare life cannot be modified or escaped. He argues, for example, that the Nazi murder of Jews in the camps cannot be reworked in the language of sacrifice, that "The wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews by means of the term 'Holocaust' was . . . an irresponsible historiographical blindness," since the Jew under Nazism is, in his terms, the ultimate example of the "life that may be killed but not sacrificed" (*Homo Sacer*, 114). Yet I should think that the missed point here, which Benjamin always takes care to allow, is that murder can always be reunderstood as sacrifice, so long as a different forum or external discourse presents itself, within which the discovery of sacrifice is possible. Sacrifice, that is, remains possible, so long as it occurs in respect to a different locus of authority than that posed by the Nazi, or the king. The possibility of sacrifice—which is always, I suppose, implicitly theological—can be inadvertently rediscovered, even by a secular society, as a form of imaginative, and deeply serious, "play."
- 42 See Andrew S. Cairncross, ed., *The Third Part of King Henry VI*, Arden edition (London: Methuen, 1986), xiii–xiv.
- 43 See Rolle, "Concept of Tragedy," 329–39.
- 44 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 76, 79, 81.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 127–28, 137.
- 46 See, for example, Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

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