

## The Dissected Body: Fascination and Horror on the Elizabethan Stage

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The English population of the second half of the 16th century was accustomed to witnessing the disintegration of convicted corpses on the gallows; violence and dismembered bodies were part of ordinary public shows. Fascination and horror intermingled in a "culture of dissection," where violent spectacles turned the streets into stages, just as the playhouses turned into anatomy theatres in which the characters' bodies were violently hewed into pieces and entrails were publicly displayed. The success of an Elizabethan play was dependent on the masterly use of a group of dramatic elements among which visual effects and violent scenes, where the body was subject to torture, mutilation and disintegration, were central. In this paper, it is our aim to explore the rhetorical and visual dissection of the characters' bodies in plays composed during the second half of the 16th century where the language of anatomy is principal.

Jonathan Sawday, in *The Body Emblazoned. Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, states: "The very violence of dissective culture was a factor in the production of some of the more familiar structures of great beauty and vitality which we associate with the term 'Renaissance'" (1996: 2). Sawday analyzes the reasons and cultural manifestations of a growing interest in the functioning and organization of the body's interior during the early modern period in Europe and, more precisely, in England. He asserts the body was an object of scrutiny for cultural spaces, such as the scientific, political or literary, which constituted what he names "a culture of dissection" (1996: 2), and shared what we could call a rhetoric of anatomy. Sawday highlights the link between the reduction of bodies and the effects of violence in a period where bodily torture and public executions were common practices. The English population of the second half of the 16th century was accustomed to witnessing the disintegration of convicted corpses on the gallows; violence and dismembered bodies were part of ordinary public shows. Fascination and horror intermingled in a "culture of dissection" where these spectacles turned the streets into stages just as the playhouses turned into anatomy theatres where the characters' bodies were violently hewed into pieces and where entrails were publicly displayed. The success of an Elizabethan play was dependent on the masterly use of a group of dramatic elements among which visual effects and violent scenes, in which the body was subject to torture, mutilation and disintegration, were central. In this exposition, it is our aim to explore the rhetorical and visual dissection of the characters' bodies in plays composed during the second half of the 16th century where the language of anatomy is principal.

In 1569 Thomas Preston writes *Cambyses* and presents tyranny as the central issue of the play. Cambyses imposes his authority through the use of an extreme violence on his victims' bodies. Sisammes is beheaded and his skin is pulled over his ears; Praxaspes' son's heart is pulled out and shown to the audience; and Cambyses' wife is executed while the tyrant states: "That flesh of thine these hands of mine in pieces small could tear" (1974: 1059). Preston recurrently makes references to this bodily exposure and publicly exhibits entrails, organs and fatally wounded bodies answering to an Elizabethan audience's morbid desire for blood on stage. Rebecca Bushnell raises the fact that tragic violence did not only have an exemplary effect, as Philip Sidney defended in *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), but that it was mainly aimed to make the "audience enjoy the spectacle for its own sake, whether for the pleasure of sorrow or pity, or more cynically, for the pleasure of seeing blood or watching the elaborate ritual that let that blood" (1990: 4). The dramatic effects of violence on stage depended on a ritualistic and stunning arrangement of characters and stage props that appealed to the playgoers' imagination and brought corporal destruction closer to the spectator. As Andrew Gurr remarks, "in the plot of the Admiral's *Battle of Alcazar* three characters are executed and disembowelled on stage. The appropriate book-holder's instruction is '3 violls of blood & a sheeps gather,' that is, a bladder holding liver, heart and lungs" (1999: 183-184). However, the Elizabethan spectator was always aware of the dramatic illusion and artificiality of such violent effects since they witnessed real bodily dismemberment as a public display in cities like London where "a garish, barbarous warning of sometimes as many as two or three dozen traitors' heads stuck up on poles" (Honan, 1999: 98). Consequently, the stage worked also as a subliminal political reminder of crime's punitive consequences. Paradoxically, stage violence was a source of enjoyment and horror.

In *Tamburlaine Part I* (1587) and *Part II* (1588), Marlowe continuously alludes to images of mutilated, decomposed and crushed bodies that are rhetorically and visually spread on stage. The audience witnessed Captain Balsera's defeat and agony with his "liver pierc'd" (*TII*, III, iv, 5), "mangled and torn, and my entrails bath'd / In blood that staineth from their orifex" (8-9); and the scene in which Bajazeth and Zabina brain themselves against a cage (V, ii) cruelly brings forward a degrading vision of a body exposed to the most savage self-inflicted violence. Dramatic scenes of bodily fragmentation looked back to Senecan and Ovidian texts, where corporal dismemberment was central. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, for example, advises his son Techelles to stop his enemies from "draw[ing] thee piecemeal, like Hippolytus, / Through rocks more steep and sharp than Caspian cliffs" (*TII*, V, iii, 241-242). Inserted in Thomas Newton's popular collection of English translations of Seneca's plays in 1581, Studley's translation of *Hippolytus* (1581) described Hippolytus' body as "scattered scraps of body torne" (V, 183). The Elizabethan spectator's familiarity with classical references to mutilated bodies rose the dramatic force of these scenes.

The audience found on stage elements they could culturally relate to; there was then a dramatic recognition necessary for the play's success. The audience shared a cultural experience that was reinforced by the collective image that they all had of the current and brutal corporal anatomizations they found in everyday life. Whereas the political, social and scientific discourses placed the body as an object of violence, study and fascination, the playwrights' return to classical literary works strengthened such vision.

These plays also show a rhetorical connection between bodily destruction and the eating process. The image of the human body being threatened by the appetite of an animal was common on the Renaissance stage. The most recurrent image regarding the predatory nature of animals was the one that represented birds of prey devouring human entrails. For instance, in Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* (1594), a title that makes evident use of the rhetoric of anatomy, Scilla orders the executioner to carry out Carbo's mutilation along these lines: "You part the head and body both in twain. / I know that Carbo longs to know the cause, / And shall: thy body for the ravens, thy head for daws" (V, i, 76-78). Likewise, in *The Tragical Reign of Selimus* (1594), a play where eyes are pulled out and hands are chopped off, Baiazet commands the execution of his son Alemshae's murderer by saying: "Off with his head and spoyle him of his Armes, / And leave his bodie for the ayrie birds" (712-713). Seneca and Ovid already used such image. Thyestes wonders about his children's whereabouts and asks Atreus: "Lye they in fieldes, a food out for fleeyng fowles to wast? Or are they kept a pray, for yld and brutish beastes to eate?" (V, 90). In Arthur Golding's popular translation of the *Metamorphoses* in 1567, Tereus is described as "the ravening fowle with greedie eyes [that] upon his pray doth gape" (VI, 660). But apart from just having clear classical literary sources, these scenes turned the playhouse again into a threatening reminder of real execution sites since a "sentencing formula from Germany, for example, announced that the body 'shall remain on the gallows so that it shall be given over to the birds of the air and taken away from the earth'" (Sawday, 1996: 22). The stage and the gibbet reinforced the image of corporal disintegration and demeaned the value of a human body immersed in a frightening process of consumption.

In these plays the bodies are gnawed and eaten away but, at the same time, they can also die of hunger. The image of characters lost in the woods, desperately looking for food and dying of hunger, was already present in the Ovidian narration of Filoctetes' story (XIII) and it is also central in plays such as *The Battle of Alcazar* (II, 17; 35-36), *Selimus* (1937-1938), *The Wounds of Civil War* (III, iv, 16) and *Lochrine* (IV, iv, 47). As in Ovid's narration, in these plays the characters' political defeat places them into a natural realm that signals their loss of power, pictured as a lack of food and a consequent physical decline. Bodily appearance is then portrayed as an image of authority. Hunger dramatically represents political ruin.

In *Tamburlaine*, references to the eating process and hunger are also connected with cannibal connotations. Bajazeth, as prisoner, rejects the food that he is being offered and constant references to cannibalism turn the scene into a sordid and, at the same time, mocking spectacle. Grim humour and extreme corporal violence increase the dramatic tension of a scene where Bajazeth is offered her wife's flesh as food (IV, iv, 51-54). Cannibalism was a repetitive theme in classical works such as Seneca's *Thyestes*, Ovid's narration of the story of Tereus and Philomel (VI) or of Lycaon (I), or anecdotes in *The Aeneid*, as when Dido imagines Aeneas eating her own son Ascanius as punishment (IV). But also, these references inevitably bring to our minds Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" (1603), a clear picture of the violence exerted on the body at the time and a denunciation of the Europeans' bloody acts against their enemies' bodies as more barbarous than the cannibalistic rituals of some Indian tribes. The brutal connotations of actual violence on the body at the time and the tragic depth of the classics' violence were theatrically distorted by Marlowe's mordacious dramatic touch. The audience was induced to laugh at dramatic spectacles that were constantly reminding them that they could be potential victims of those tortures. Again, dramatic violence ironically turned entertainment into a cynical warning.

References to the tearing out of bowels are common in these plays and they emphasize the image of putrified bodies publicly displayed. *Tamburlaine*, for example, boasts about how they "use to march upon the slaughter'd foe, / Trampling their bowels with our horses' hoofs" (II, III, iii, 149-150). But references to bowels are also dramatically related to a violence exerted on natural elements, whose internal structure resembles the organization of the body-interior. In *Lochrine* (1594), Humber desperately states thirst and hunger are "raging in my entralls, eat[ing] me up" (IV, iv, 15) as he orders the gods to "rent my famisht arms" (20), "rippe my bowels up" (22) and "crack my sterved bones" (23). However, in this play the destruction and exposure of entrails and vital organs are transposed to the natural realm of the earth. For example, Thrasimachus, *Lochrine*'s brother, is determined to "rent the bowels of the earth, / Searching the entrailles of the brutish earth" (I, i, 78-79) if this can ease his father's pain. Also, in *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), Horatio's body is covered by a ground that his father Hieronimo wants to invade and penetrate. "Away! I'll rip the bowels of the earth!" (III, xii, 71), he cries out while he is frantically digging with his dagger. But, as the earth is presented as a victim of the characters' violent passions, it is also depicted as a threatening element that imprisons and devours their bodies. For instance, in *Gorboduc* (1561-1562), after her son Ferrex's decease, Videna calls up her own death, pictured as the image of a savage nature that rips off and gulps down her body: "Or should not this most hard and cruel soil, / (...) / Sometime had ruth of mine accursed life / To rend in twain, and swallow me therein?" (IV, i, 11; 13-14).

By portraying the image of an earth that threatens to swallow and is menaced to be devoured, the Elizabethan stage appropriated, once more, images that were continuously alluded to in the classics and, by so doing, it rhetorically pointed out what Sawday calls “a common bond of correspondence” (1996: 23) between the human and the natural, the interior and the exterior worlds. Such bond is also extended to the political realm of these plays. The rhetoric of anatomy is used so as to present political decadence as the state is, as nature, dramatically depicted as a corporal structure. Natural and political domains are theatrically anatomized. As in most plays at the time, in *Gorboduc*, for example, the state is beheaded when the king, its “worthy head” (I, ii, 36), dies. Britain is then described as “an open prey” (V, ii, 191) that will “be torn, / Dismember’d thus, and thus be rent in twain” (V, ii, 229-233) by political beasts and internal dissensions. As David George Hale argues, the traditional image of the body politic widely extended not only on the Elizabethan stage, but also in political, philosophical and religious discourses. In an age in which there existed “the legal fiction of the Elizabethan lawyers that the sovereign possesses two bodies –one natural and mortal, the other mystical and immortal” (Hale, 1971: 16), the theatrical image of a decomposing body politic brought back to the spectator’s mind the current image of the state as a living organism that had to be nourished with obedience and loyalty.

Bodily disintegration presented on the stage worked then on two levels. First, on face value, it was central to the spectacle, it was part of the dramatic illusion and served as enjoyment to an audience willing to see the disclosure of the body’s interior. Dismemberment was paradoxically considered an alluring show since, as we know from the theatrical impresario Philip Henslowe’s diary, the most violent plays got the higher takings. Second, as we have seen, rhetorical and visual corporal violence acquired wider cultural significance since they were part of a theatrical discourse whose dramatic impact depended on the audience’s immersion into a moving and interrelated spiral of social, political, scientific and literary discourses that presented the anatomized body as one of their controlling metaphors. The body was depicted as an organism whose correct functioning brought order to all spheres of ideological influence. Theatrical violence exerted on the body stood as a synonym for entertainment but also as a sign of emotional, natural and political disorders, threat, danger and punishment on a stage where, as Muriel Bradbrook noted, actors were “holding the mirror up to nature” (1990: 25) in scenes where bodies were violently dissected.

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