# Oaths and Bonds in Early Modern Drama

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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# This thesis is dedicated to

Roy Stacey

(1922-1991)

 $\quad \text{and} \quad$ 

Rose McLoughlin

(1939-1999)

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis will investigate the structural forms which emerge when the custom of swearing is regarded as the central organising principle of the plot. Studies of dramatic structure and oath-taking in Renaissance scholarship have been curiously neglected in recent years; my work is intended to redress this balance by arguing that the representation of mimetic action in early modern culture is unusually focussed at the moment of pledging. It will draw on recent critical interest in rhetoric and utterance, as well as the contextual pressures which shape the construction of narrative, to offer a detailed examination of the intricate and contested relationship between language and action on the Renaissance stage.

This thesis will consider the temporal properties of pledging across a range of plays, from the 1580s to the Caroline era. The breadth of study will demonstrate the pervasiveness of narratological models shaped by swearing to early modern dramatists through the period, whilst also considering its use as a form of influence. It will also demonstrate the range of creative responses to this structure by considering the different generic forms which pledging helps to facilitate, including revenge tragedy, roman drama, history plays, seventeenth century sex tragedy and the looser, more hybrid plots of the late period. Each chapter will begin with a study of the salient features of a particular social or cultural area in which swearing occurs, drawing on a range of contemporary sources, followed by an exploration of the actions opened up by the making of an oath in two plays. In some chapters the works will share obvious aesthetic influences; in others, they will be responsive to a mutual interest in a precise form of cultural pledging.

The original contributions made by this thesis to knowledge are three-fold. First, the placing of dramatic structure in the context of swearing will complement other recent developments in the contextualisation of narrative form; second, it will shed light on the authorial structures inherent in the linguistic formulation of swearing, which seek to channel the scope for self-agency into regulated patterns of action; and third, it will promote a revised model of pledging, in which the rhetorical ingenuity of making an oath will open up the possibility for actions which are not always anticipated by the terms of the original bond.

# INTRODUCTION

In a treatise aimed at disproving the theory of atheism, Martin Fotherby recourses to one of the most tangible proofs of God's existence in early modern culture: the oath. In contrast to the potential falsification of other discourses, the oath is a reliable guarantee that true intent is able to be discerned through the invocation of a higher authority. To demonstrate his argument, Fotherby recalls an example from the classical past of Rome, in which the citizens of the city cast a stone before witnesses to signal their fidelity to the state:

Yea and the *Romans* in their solemne Oathes; were wont to use this ceremonie, as *Rhodiginus* observeth out of Servius. They used to throw a stone out of their hand, with this execration: *Si sciens fallo, qui me despicit* (*salva urbe ac arte*) *bonis eijciat, ut ego hunc lapidem*. If I willingly deceive thee; then God that is above me (preserving the Cittie) caste me out from all good men, as I caste out this Stone.<sup>1</sup>

The throwing of the stone is a metaphorical action which prefigures the expulsion of the swearer should the terms of the oath be broken. As inner intent is impossible to discern, the rite is a way of coercing public behaviour into patterns which can be regulated. A good citizen who keeps their oath is permitted to function in the state; an oath-breaker will be thrown out like the rock, as he or she can no longer be trusted to operate within accepted obligatory structures. However, Fotherby's example is not quite as neat as he would like us to believe. The use of a stone in this manner is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Martin Fotherby, *Atheomastix clearing foure truthes, against atheists and infidels* (London: Nicholas Oakes, 1622), p. 43.

analogous to both a simile and a theatrical prop, which the early modern reader would associate with cultures of rhetorical performance and theatrical display. The only way in which the citizens of Rome can judge the veracity of what is being said, it seems, is through a ceremonial action which exploits a capacity for artifice. In this way, Fotherby's example tacitly exposes a crucial dilemma in the practice of oathtaking in early modern culture: what are the consequences for a custom which is prized for its truthfulness when its ceremonial properties are associated with ambiguity and even deceit?

As evidenced in Fotherby's example, oath-taking is replete with the traditions and formal principles of the theatre; we can immediately see that the swearer is required to use a designated prop, perform a ritualised action in the throwing of the stone, and utter the lines of a memorised script in order to communicate the sincerity of their inner political commitment. However, while oath-taking is regarded as an example of truth-telling in its most visceral form, the theatre is consciously fictitious and unreal, relying on and exploiting the concept of dissemblance to achieve its most pleasurable effects. What is the exact nature of the relationship between these two cultural discourses, so similar yet so deeply opposed? Is it possible to discern a more nuanced dialogue at work, in which the act of truth-telling is complicated or clarified by its depiction in mimetic art? Or is unvarnished truth an impossible ideal that is only partly achieved as an outer approximation dependent on the resources of theatrical performance? The overlap between the two forms of display so central to early modern society is an area which is ripe for scholarly engagement. This thesis will aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of this relationship through a sustained investigation of the status of swearing, and the ability of language to endorse or prohibit certain actions, when the process is duplicated on stage.

### Swearing and Structure

Martin Fotherby's example relies on a conception of God which Giorgio

Agamben has vigorously explored in his recent work on oath-taking, *The Sacrament of Language*:

Every oath swears on the name par excellence, that is on the name of God, because the oath is the experience of language that treats all of language as a proper name. Pure existence – the existence of the name – is not the result of a recognition, nor of a logical deduction: it is something that cannot be signified but only sworn, that is, affirmed as a name. The certainty of faith is the certainty of the name (of God).<sup>2</sup>

For Fotherby, oath-taking is a rebuttal of atheism because the very practice depends upon the invocation of God as a supreme judge. If swearing is regarded as a reliable medium of social communication, then God by his very nature is required to exist, as the custom would otherwise have no special ability to bind.<sup>3</sup> Agamben takes a different view of this *a priori* conception of swearing, focussing instead on the grammatical function of the divine 'logos' which appears to endow the act with its coercive function. As a performative verb, the word 'swear' asserts the creation of an altered set of circumstances the second it is uttered by the speaker, which is understood to constitute the obligation between the individual and the act that is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The refutation of atheism through reference to the custom of swearing is a recurring feature of Early Modern culture. In the poem *The hierarchie of the blessed angells*, Thomas Heywood notes 'That this god is, to Atheists may appeare; / Because by Him so frequently they sweare: / For, Who's so senselesse and obtuse a Sot, / To call to witnesse that thing which is not?' (*The hierarchie of the blessed angells* (London: Adam Islip, 1635), p. 21).

sworn before the deity which has been invoked. <sup>4</sup> However, for Agamben the word performs a very rare semantic function that is more nuanced and far-reaching than this popular conception would suggest: 'Like the *Sondergott*, the god invoked in the oath is not properly the witness of the assertion of the imprecation; he represents, he *is* the very event of language in which words and things are indissolubly linked'. <sup>5</sup> As a performative word-function, the divine entity does not refer to a named object, as in traditional constative language, but energises the process in which a simple utterance is turned into a deed. <sup>6</sup> What this amounts to is a significant shift in the philosophical conceptions of the textual act that comprises the formation of an oath. Whereas in previous thought it was regarded as a custom which could verify the truth of a statement or action by appealing to a higher power, thus reinforcing the belief in God, Agamben proposes that the notion of a divine judge arises as a semantic off-shoot from an early need to guarantee the truth of language itself. In other words, whereas the oath was used to underscore the truth of God's existence,

Agamben's conception of swearing is a highly significant critical paradigm within which to situate an exploration of the depiction of oath-taking on the early modern stage; indeed, it may be a notion with which the playwrights of the period

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The concept of the performative language was proposed by J.L. Austin to account for grammatical constructions in which 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action' (*How To Do Things With Words*, ed. by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 6). Austin's theory has been particularly influential for recent studies which explore the performative potential for mimetic utterance in Early Modern literature. See David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); James Loxley and Mark Robson, *Shakespeare, Jonson and the Claims of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Agamben, p. 46.

Agamben refines Austin's concept of performativity in relation to the verb 'swear', observing that 'the performative substitutes for the denotative relationship between speech and fact in a self-referential relation that, putting the former out of play, puts itself forward as the decisive fact.' As such, the sacred object which verifies the oath is a verb-function which performs or renders active the state of obligation between the swearer and their oath; 'god' emerges as a performative off-shoot of grammar, rather than a decisively omnipotent entity. Agamben, p. 55.

are familiar. As part of a project of mimetic replication, the theatre is engaged in representing the so-called 'real' world through the act of textual composition, taking the utterance of the individual as a point of departure. Although the recognisable framework of oath-taking is undeniably invoked when characters swear on stage, its manifestation as a medium of expression suggests that the grammatical content of pledging is a significant area of focus, alongside more conventional aspects such as the invocation of an object or entity which is regarded as sacred. As such, the actions that are permitted by the custom are not entirely subject to the divine scrutiny of a higher power, or are not so unquestioningly; rather, they are articulated by speaking entities and reinforced, spurred on and even frustrated by other textual creations. To refer back to Agamben, the action of the swearer is not wholly dictated from above, but is to an extent created through its existence as a legible utterance which is individually composed and assented unto. As part of a contribution to the emergent critical interest in the practice of swearing, this thesis will focus on the intersection between the language spoken by the swearer and the actions that are subsequently licensed throughout the duration of the play. In order to provide a sound methologological framework for such an exploration, it will take the concept of narrative structure, here defined as the organisation of the events of the plot into a successive whole, as the primary means through which the representation of action under oath can be considered.

Although the relationship between language and action is a familiar feature of early modern dramatic scholarship, the concept of action under oath has not been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For further scholarship which explores the mimetic properties of literary texts, see Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) and Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Mark Taylor considers some of the mimetic properties of imitation, particularly in relation to inter-textuality and role-playing, in *Shakespeare's Imitations* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002).

explored in much critical depth.<sup>8</sup> This is surprising considering its potential to encourage a range of nuanced investigations into the connection between language, self-agency and the various contextual areas within which the custom operates. If an oath is the primary means of endowing a future action with a degree of prestige, then the relationship between the swearer and the oath is not simply the animation of an established rite; rather, it is a space in which the demands of that action can be subtly questioned through the choice of what word is regarded as sacred, and the interpretation of the subsequent course of behaviour required to meet the strictures of the oath. The resulting friction provides the early modern playwright with a dynamic opportunity to explore the institutional and conceptual ties which regulate the capacity for action, and the possibility to arbitrate or question the coercive strategies on display. The inherent tension between the swearer and the oath also facilitates a subtle exploration of the social and political forces which shape the behaviour of the swearer, and what ends are achieved by the widespread use of the practice. As language is the primary means through which oaths are rendered legible, the linguistic assent of the swearer is a site in which the relationship between the self and the social sphere can be reinforced but also elided. This thesis will use the methodological focus on narrative structure to engage with the types of action which are opened up by the utterance of an oath, and examine whether such courses of behaviour can be adhered to as well as their desirability as a means of social regulation.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Frances A. Shirley has explored the relationship between swearing and structure, arguing that 'Shakespeare uses the oath as an organising device [...] to guide a character on a course of action that will influence the whole direction of the play' (*Swearing and Perjury in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 25). However, her model relies on a correlation between the custom of swearing and a linear process of structural development which misses some of the temporal fluidity and ethical ambiguity perceived by the recent scholarship of John Kerrigan, to be discussed later in the Introduction.

The study of narrative structure requires an engagement with recent critical developments in the area of literary aesthetics. It has become something of a commonplace to argue that the New Historicist and Cultural Materialist studies were guilty of neglecting or even dismissing the consideration of craft. Since the turn of the millennium, however, various critics have attempted to reintegrate the study of form into the academy and defend it as an area worthy of serious consideration. Interestingly, this debate has proved to be particularly vexed in relation to the study of oaths and vows. In a review of William Kerrigan's monograph *Shakespeare's Promises*, for instance, Richard Strier lambasts a perceived isolationism in his methodological approach, promoting in its place a revised Formalist model in which the technical properties of promising are informed by a heightened attention to the various contexts within which they function:

I think that we are ready for a "new formalism," for a return to close reading and verbal analysis, but the way back to these practices is not by ignoring what has supervened between them and the present but by using what we have learned from (for instance) deconstruction and new historicism to produce a kind of criticism that goes "beyond formalism" not by rejecting formalist techniques but by using them in the service of nonformalist ends.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Jean Howard, for example, characterises the Formalist conception of literary texts as 'ethereal entities floating above the urgencies and contradictions of history' ('The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies', *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), 13-43 (p. 15)). Similarly, Alan Liu asserts that 'formalism, we know, was embarrassed enough of the historical subject or Spirit (whether in the avatar of the author's biography or the story of his times) to transform poems into artefacts as seemingly emptied of historical subject as a Grecian Urn' ('The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism', *English Literary History*, 56 (1989), 721-771 (p. 740)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See John J. Joughlin and Simon Malpass (eds.) *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Richard Chamberlain, *Radical Spencer: Pastoral, Politics and the New Aestheticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Mark Robson, *The Sense of Early Modern Writing: Rhetoric, Politics, Aesthetics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), Stephen Cohen (ed.) *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

Richard Strier, reviewer, 'William Kerrigan, Shakespeare's Promises', Shakespeare Quarterly, 52 (2001), pp. 422-426 (pp. 425-426).

For Strier, Kerrigan's approach is limited because it does not recognise the capacity of obligatory language to constitute the relationship between the swearer or promisee and their social peers. This is all the more surprising as it is a form of discourse which is unusually amenable to historically based investigations by articulating the type of obligation demanded by a given culture at the moment of verbal assent. 12 The aesthetic features of the rhetoric of binding language are indeed important, but primarily because they provide the individual with a means of shaping the sphere which demands the promise; it is a dynamic two-way process between the individual speaker and their social context which Kerrigan, in his more remote formal analysis, has missed. As a scholar committed to the reintroduction of an invigorated formalism, Striers subsequently coined the term 'indexical' study to define a method through which the meanings generated by a text can be refined through placing it within its original semantic milieu. 13 This thesis will usefully draw on the concept of an 'indexical' method to explore the more precise readings which are activated when the telos of a plot is considered within the context of oath-taking. As a speaking entity, the language of the swearer at the moment of pledging will be regarded as a contribution, albeit in a muted form, to the social and cultural values which demand the obligation. Although oaths are fundamentally stratified devices, the attention to their technical properties will reveal a slightly more malleable utterance than conventional early modern accounts would suggest, opening up a nuanced relationship between the swearer and the language being imposed on them. This is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The focus on the oath as a social discourse as opposed to a political or religious institution is quite a recent development in historical scholarship. See John Spurr, 'A Profane History of Early Modern Oaths', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 11 (2001), 37-63; Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 233-253; David Martin Jones, *Conscience and Allegiance in Seventeenth Century England: The Political Significance of Oaths and Engagements* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1999); Edward Vallance, *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005). <sup>13</sup> Richard Strier, 'How Formalism Became a Dirty Word', in *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*, ed. by Mark David Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 207-215 (p. 211).

not to suggest that all oaths are routinely subverted, but that the rhetorical intricacy at the moment of pledging can often facilitate a subsequent course of action which is not wholly anticipated by the vow. A subtle swearer often has more room for manoeuvre on the Renaissance stage than a less gifted one.

The consideration of narrative structure as a primary area of dramatic technique is an emergent area in recent scholarship.<sup>14</sup> Lorna Hutson has offered a suggestive critical summation of the type of methodology which such studies might pursue:

If a form of representation involves narrative, as Renaissance drama does, there is no obvious reason why we should not ask how narrative itself, or the selection and sequence of represented actions, contributes to and reproduces, or transforms, the *doxa*, or the stereotypes of a particular culture.<sup>15</sup>

For Hutson, the arrangement of successive events into a coherent whole is not merely a passive reflection of early modern experience, but a means through which that experience can be transformed by the contemplation of its inner workings. The relevance of this insight to a study of the relationship between dramatic structure and swearing is far-reaching. The staging of an oath is a means through which a pattern of action that is fundamentally coercive can be reiterated before a wide cross-section

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Lorna Hutson uses the legal process of gathering evidence to construct a probable narrative of events as a model to explore the influence of law on the development of dramatic structure in *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Judith Haber explores the relationship between sexual desire and deferment to consider the impact of gender and courtship on the development of dramatic structure in *Desire and Dramatic Form in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). William

E. Engel and Peter G. Platt situate various theatrical structures within the rhetorical concepts of chiasmus and paradox respectively in *Chiastic Designs in English Literature from Sidney to Shakespeare* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) and *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Hutson, p. 114.

of the populace of early modern London. It might therefore be thought to be an orthodox practice, in which the duty of the subject in relation to a particularly stratified form of authority is reinforced. However, the oaths which we see on stage rarely conform to such a simple ethical or political formula. Rather, the individual swearer is often troubled by the demands placed upon him or her, and is placed in situations where the veracity of the original vow is challenged or questioned; indeed, a simple honoured oath is so rare on the Renaissance stage as to be almost non-existent. This thesis will regard the practice of swearing as a purportedly static process which is repeatedly contrasted with the changing contingencies of a fast-paced narrative telos. As such, a primary area of focus throughout will be on the structural movements which result from the clash between a projected view of events, and what actually occurs when the oath is compromised. In some instances, the staging of the variables which can scupper the process of swearing on the stage can encourage the audience to scrutinise and question its ability to bind.

Such an area of investigation will by necessity engage with conceptions of temporality, particularly as narrative structure is a device which artfully arranges and explores the causation of events through time. This is also an exciting area of focus in current scholarship. In a recent article outlining the paths which a renewed engagement with swearing might take, John Kerrigan proposes a model of temporality which is excitingly fluid and contingent: 'Time does not connect. The play unfolds in what is virtually a space of interruption, where oaths and vows

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris regards temporality as a 'polychronic network' which embeds a range of non-linear contextual meanings within specific objects or entities in *Untimely Matter in the Age of Shakespeare* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 16; David H. Wood explores the temporality of bodily fluctuations and dilations in *Time, Narrative and Emotion in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

contribute to the sense of events suspended, hung up between declaration and act'. 17 Kerrigan introduces a concept of relativistic time in relation to the teleological structures opened up by the act of swearing. The fracture between an anticipated future and its actualisation on stage encourages the audience to pay careful attention to the construction of events and scrutinise the motivations for certain patterns of behaviour. This thesis will employ Kerrigan's model of temporality as a mode of thinking about narrative structure. However, it will particularise the method by paying attention to the oath as a point of origin which initiates the subsequent course of action. Not only does the moment of bonding assume an unusual amount of importance as the source of the plot, but it is implicitly referred back to throughout the rest of the play; as such, this thesis will focus on the oath as an originator of action as well as a regulator of successive movements. 18 The two devices of assertory and promissory pledging, which compel the individual to attest to a prior piece of knowledge and adhere to a specified course of action, are used to manage time in a manner which coalesces around the binding act, particularly as the past is recalled to the present, or the future is anticipated. This arguably encourages the audience to question the competence or even desirability of the oath as a regulator of social movement when the initial terms are directly measured against the contingencies of succeeding events. The inflexibility of a pledge can often be more detrimental than the honouring of its terms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> John Kerrigan, 'Shakespeare, Oaths and Vows', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 167 (2010), 61-89 (p. 81).

Herbert J. Schlesinger argues that 'To the extent that we are serious about a promise and that it is a far-reaching one, we are giving up the freedom to base out future decisions on our perception of reality at that time'; as such, the act of swearing exerts a claim on a future time which delimits the autonomy of the swearer (*Promises, Oaths and Vows: On the Psychology of Promising* (London: The Analytic Press, 2008), p. 20). The anticipation of the imminent reduction of agency when a promissory oath is sworn is an exciting concept which early modern playwrights appear to have been aware of; Schlesinger's idea will be in evidence throughout this thesis.

As a study which proposes to explore the construction of dramatic structure through the custom of swearing, it is necessary to consider some of the classical models of narrative which early modern playwrights are likely to have encountered, either during a grammar school education or at one of the privileged centres of learning. There are a surprising number of analogies between narratological theory and oath-taking in the work of Greek exemplars such as Aristotle and their Latin successor Quintilian. For Aristotle, the primary function of drama is to represent an action, rather than a character or a particular theme: 'For tragedy is a mimesis not of men [simply] but of actions – that is, of life. That's how it is that they certainly do not act in order to present their characters: they embrace their characters for the sake of the actions [they are to do]'. 19 The emphasis on the movement of the individual at the expense of inner reflection is strikingly analogous to the process of oath-taking, which tests the ethical substance of the swearer through his or her conduct in relation to the vow. If character is revealed through the application of personal inclination to a sequential process of events, then the ordered structure of an oath would seem to be consummate with Aristotelian theory. <sup>20</sup> Aristotle also associates the staging of action with a form of potentiality which has similarities with the conditional properties of swearing:

It is clear too from what has been said that the poet's business is to tell not what is happening but the sort of things that might [be expected to] happen – things that, according to likelihood and necessity, *can* [happen].<sup>21</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by George Whalley, ed. by John Baxter and Patrick Atherton (Montreal: McGill-Oueen's University Press, 1997), p. 73.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the impact of Aristotelian theory on the development of Early Modern dramatic theory, see Marvin Carlson, *Theories of Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 37-88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Aristotle, p. 81.

In traditional conceptions of pledging, the oath is designed to guard against the uncertainty which is promoted by Aristotle's theory of narrative construction. Yet early modern commentators are all too aware of the difficulty with which an obligation can be adhered to; according to Frances Rous, 'some say all promissory Oathes are absolutely unlawfull, because Oathes must be true and certaine; but all future effects of things are uncertaine'. <sup>22</sup> One of the opportunities afforded by the staging of an oath is the potential to explore the discrepancy between the expected behaviour of an individual and the actions that they actually pursue, particularly when the initial conditions are altered by the changing circumstances of the plot. Although a promissory telos is invoked, the crux of the drama lies in the unpredictability of human behaviour under duress; as such, the choice that is made whether to honour the oath or break it is analogous to Aristotle's recommendation that the potential to act in a moment of uncertainty is the most suitable narrative structure to adopt. The revelation of a character's mindset through his or her potential for action is therefore heightened when the oath is used as a structural principle as the temptation to step outside of its dictates is all the more intense, most notably in tragic plots which place the protagonist under increasing amounts of pressure. In using the oath as a structuring principle, not only is character primarily revealed through their potential to act for much of the play, but action is the primary means through which this form of aesthetic mimesis is achieved.

Quintilian regards the construction of narrative as an artificial process whose success is measured by the influence it has on a listener:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Frances Rous, *The bounds & bonds of publique obedience* (London: John Wright, 1649), p. 40.

In either case, our first concern must be that what we invent should be feasible; and our second, that it should conform to the person, the place, and the time, and have a credible structure and order; if possible, it should also be linked with something which is true, or be confirmed by an Argument which has a role in the Cause.<sup>23</sup>

As a method for recalling or re-constructing the past in a judicial context, it is surprising that Quintilian is so dismissive of the objective truth of a statement; rather, he advises that the most artfully crafted structure will stand a better chance of persuading the judge. The association between narration and dissemblance is evidently an influence on the organisation of successive events in a theatrical context. However, Quintilian later asserts that his own view of narrative is rendered vulnerable when pitted against an oath, as it is a more trusted form of truth-telling: 'the man who puts his opponent on oath is thought to be acting modestly in making his opponent the judge of the dispute, and also frees the person who hears the case from a burden, since he would surely prefer the decision to rest on another man's oath than on his own'. 24 Interestingly, Quintilian does not make a case for the ability of the oath to verify the truth of a past event in a more sincere manner to narrative construction; its special power derives from the culpability of the swearer should the oath be broken, which is regarded as so severe that the power of judgement is effectively removed from the court. As the two forms of attestation are juxtaposed in Quintilian's thinking, it is possible that his theory of narrative is shaped in dialogue with the alternative method of the oath; indeed, one of its pleasures is the ability to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (The Orator's Education), trans. by Donald A. Russell, 5 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), II, 4.2, p. 265. For an account of Quintilian's use as part of the university syllabuses at Oxford and Cambridge, see Peter Mack, Elizabethan Rhetoric: *Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 51-55. <sup>24</sup> Quintilian, II, 5.6, p. 335.

eschew the troubling scrutiny of a witness.<sup>25</sup> A careful reader of the classical source material may well have noticed that the oath is actually competing alongside narrative as a rival form. If the personal stakes are higher when the individual enters a bond to either recall a past event or embark upon a project, then it stands to reason that the action makes for a more complex investigation into the contextual and linguistic frameworks which exert a pull on the swearer.

### What is an oath?

In its broadest terms, swearing can be defined as an act which verifies the truth of a statement or ensures that a future action will be completed through the invocation of God or a supreme authority as witness. Concomitant to this is an implied punishment should the initial terms be broken, by penal chastisement (with the attendant threat of social estrangement) and divine vengeance. Writing in 1617, for example, Thomas Blundeville defines the practice as a 'religious affirming or denying some thing, by calling God to witnesse, which is the strongest bond that may be, to binde mans faith and conscience'. Should the oath be broken, the swearer will jeopardise their relationship with God as well as his or her reputation as a trustworthy individual. According to Edward Vallance, 'it was the threat of eternal damnation, even more than the temporal penalties that attended oath breaking, which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Quintilian observes that it is advisable to 'confine our fictions to matters which cannot be checked by a witness', as the detection of fictive elements in the narrative will be avoided. The contrast with swearing is evident, although primarily because the invocation of a divine witness substitutes for a more legal form of public scrutiny; nowhere does Quintilian endorse its sacral properties. Quintilian, II, 4.2, p. 267.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Thomas Blundeville, *The arte of logick Plainely taught in the English tongue* (London: William Stansby, 1617), p. 122.

gave the oath its power'. <sup>27</sup> The act of swearing is not simply a device through which the truth can be discerned; it is also the guarantee of potential chastisement should the terms be compromised, implying that truthful or trustworthy behaviour is maintained through coercion as well as piety or worship. As such, the custom of oath-taking is a double project, testifying both to God's fundamental benevolence and his potency as a punisher of wrong-doing. The ambiguous status of the divine entity that is invoked is a useful locus through which early modern playwrights can explore the coercive or threatening aspects of a custom which is generally regarded as spiritually sound.

There are various conditions under which an oath must function if it is to be regarded as binding. An oath must be sworn before God or an object or entity that is able to represent his majesty, such as a bible or an altar; the conditions must remain the same once the oath has been taken; the stipulation must not be impossible to perform; and the language of the oath must be taken in the sense with which it was administered. Loose swearing would result from the violation of any one of these dictates. There were also other conditions which would obscure the fundamental clarity of the act of swearing, such as the deliberate misinterpretation of the language of the oath in order to facilitate deception; the concealment of the true nature of the oath by the administrator; and, most troublingly, the use of a mental or inner reservation as part of a private communication with God at the moment of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Vallance, p. 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> John Cooper offers three primary conditions, advising '1 It must not onely be true, but so knowne to us, 2 It must bee honest that wee sweare to, 3 It must bee a truth of great importance' (*The Christians daily sacrifice containing a daily direction for a setled course of sanctification* (London: Walter Burre, 1615), p. 216)). For further information, see his chapter on the lawful tenets of swearing; Cooper, pp. 216-220.

swearing.<sup>29</sup> The presence of any one of these strategies would count as an act of oath breaking, and would result in both secular and divine punishment for the swearer or the administrator. There were also conditions which could retroactively negate an oath once it had been sworn, such as if the pledge would result in the harm of the swearer, or if it contradicts a previous lawful oath.<sup>30</sup> In the discovery of such instances, a binding pact would be regarded as invalid. Oaths, then, were not as fixed and immutable as their orthodox interpretation in early modern culture would suggest; rather, they could be surprisingly contingent, particularly if the language of the swearer was regarded as vague, deceitful or overly rhetorical.

The entity that is sworn on at the moment of oath-taking is an object which is regarded as sufficiently sacred that it is able to represent God's inviolable authority without ambiguity. By far the most common object chosen for this function in early modern culture is the bible. Not only is this a particular symbol of reformed theology in the late sixteenth century, with its emblematic stress on *sola scriptura* as a means of salvation, it also establishes an interesting synergy between sacred language and the act of swearing.<sup>31</sup> Writing in 1618, Thomas Morton defines the ritual process of the use of the object in detail:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> David Lindsay compares the use of a mental reservation at the moment of swearing to a fox who has hidden down a hole: 'They have promised unto themselves (as it is said) starting holes, so that they shall not be seene; they have setled a wicked speech among themselves, saying to one another; sweare, forsweare; and so make one oath, breake one oath' (*The godly mans journey to heaven containing ten severall treatises* (London: Richard Field, 1625), p. 485). Such an analogy establishes a correlation between lawful swearing and visibility, with rhetoric being characterised as a device which actively obscures the ability of the individual to be scrutinised.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Thomas Gibson quotes Saint Gregory to advise that 'when we have taken an evill oath, it is better that it be broken, then that we commit grievous sinnes, to the which, by our oath, we have bound our selves' (*Meditations upon the hundred and sixteen psalme* (London: Valentine Sims, 1607), p. 57). For more information, see his chapter 'Against rash athes and vowes', pp. 54-58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> For a more detailed exploration of the textuality of reformed doctrine and its impact on Renaissance literary culture see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Renaissance: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 187-280.

[The individual is required to] lay their hand upon the book of God, and to kisse it, swearing by the Contents thereof, that is, by the way of stipulation, pledging and pawning all the promises of salvation in Christ (which are recorded in that booke) upon that truth which they do professe to performe in *Swearing*. Then, their *kissing* and *handling* of that booke is the visible *Signe*, that the taking of an *Oath* is the worship of God in it selfe.<sup>32</sup>

Swearing on the bible invokes the deep covenant between man and God through the use of an object which articulates the very concept within its pages. The utterance of the oath is therefore displaced slightly from its own binding function through its juxtaposition with a textual entity which is more immutable than the language being spoken. However, this can work both ways; according to Morton, the bible also operates as a 'visible Signe' of fidelity which can be scrutinised by the spectator in a similar manner to a dramatic spectacle. As such, the use of the book exists in a semiotic double-space in which its function as a mimetic prop devoid of efficacy is potentially emphasised as much as its sacral properties. This ambiguity is one of the sources of the anxiety over dramatised swearing, but it is also a useful device with which early modern playwrights are able to explore the ability of various sacred entities to coerce the behaviour of the individual to act in accordance to the oath, particularly when those entities are transposed to the realm of ceremonial or theatrical representation.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Thomas Morton, *A defence of the innocencie of the three ceremonies of the Church of England* (London: Richard Field, 1618), p. 91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> In *The Alchemist*, Face caricatures a gentleman as someone who 'Will take his oath o'the Greek Xenophon, / If need be, in his pocket, and can court / His mistress out of Ovid' (I.ii.56-58). The implication is that one book is interchangeable for another depending on the cultural context, as all such rituals are contingent and socially constructed. The 'Greek Xenophon', a substitution for 'testament' according to the editors, is reduced to a prop alongside Ovid's poetry to aid the gentleman in cultivating a privileged public identity, rather than providing him with a sacred object with which to swear by. Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. by Peter Holland and William Sherman, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), III, pp. 541-710 (footnote for 'Xenophon', p. 576).

Sometimes the book is disregarded in favour of a gesture involving the hand or the ritual touching of an object. Francis Johnson explains that 'Abraham did himself lift up his hand to the Lord, when he sware or vowed unto him', relocating the pact to a divine space which bypasses language altogether.<sup>34</sup> This might be a desired choice if the complex use of the book as a ceremonial object is considered too slippery or unstable. However, there are also problems with the use of a gesture to signal the assent of the swearer. In orthodox Protestant theology, the body is a site of contention as it is regarded as mutable, especially when compared against the immutability of God. The hand is therefore an unreliable substitute for a more trusted sacred entity, as it cannot be entirely trusted to guarantee that the terms of the oath will be met. In tandem with the ambiguous attitude to the flesh is a nervousness over the inclusion of a gesture which is less easy to decipher than an object such as the bible. The raised hand may be read as a personal assent rooted in the body, but it could also be interpreted as an oath which is impossible to keep in light of doctrine, possibly rendering it void. Also, the personal punishment to swearer should he or she fail, presaged on a form of physical harm, is tacitly prioritised over the benevolent qualities of divine mercy, emphasising once again the coercive strategies in a custom which is designed to bring the individual closer to God. When a character on the early modern stage is required to assent to an oath through a bodily gesture, it is arguably a more fraught ritual than other forms of pledging.

Other trends include the touching of the altar rather than the bible. According to Martin Fotherby, it is common for the swearer to 'lay his hand upon the Altar, as acknowledging that he spake in the presence of God: and that he offered up the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup>Francis Johnson, *An answer to Maister H. Iacob his defence of the churches and minstery of England* (Amsterdam: S.N., 1600), sig. B2r.

inward truth of his soule, upon the Altar of God'. This particular ritual act endows the space itself with a form of potency, rather than a single object or prop. As the altar is traditionally the most sacred part of the church, its use in oath-taking is suggestive of a potentially less troubling form of swearing which is more consummate with the ritual aspects of worship. In contemporary accounts, the touching of the altar often occurs in moments of heightened theatricality involving stylised movement and costume change. Samuel Daniel's pamphlet describing the investment ceremony of Prince Henry draws attention to the theatrical properties of the oath-taking ceremony in the moments after the swearers had made 'low reverence towards the Altar':

then they departed to their chamber to be disrobed of their Hermits weeds, & new reuested againe in Robes of Crimson taffata lined with white sarcenet, having white hats on their heads with white feathers, white boots on their legs, & white gloves tyed to the strings of their ma~tles.<sup>37</sup>

Swearing on an altar is a form of assent which exploits the significance attached to different parts of the church. Although it seems slightly odd that Daniel depicts the sacred act as a theatrical performance, the symbolic shift in status affected by the oath is a supplement to the spiritual conversion at the altar. The 'Robes of Crimson taffata' are not too dissimilar to the garments worn during a coronation ceremony, so it is possible that the touching of the altar is an act which prefigures the deep oath

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Fotherby, p. 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> For a detailed discussion of the symbolic properties of the altar in Early Modern dramaturgy, see Elizabeth Williamson, *The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 71-108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Samuel Daniel, *The order and solemnitie of the creation of the High and mightie Prince Henrie* (London: William Stansbie, 1610), sig. C3v.

Henry will take on his ascension to the throne. The ritual use of space provides a more stable semiotic framework than the raised hand whilst avoiding the awkward juxtaposition between verbal assent and holy scripture. However, as Daniel's account suggests, the propensity of excessive theatricality, and the reduction of the sacred space of the church to a theatrical stage, is one of the major risks of this kind of swearing.

In a short pamphlet outlining the main tenets of oath-taking, Christopher White draws our attention to a signet ring worn by Gregory of Nyssa, 'wherin is engraven Pythagoras word, Fear an Oath'. The epithet is there to remind him of the risk of breaking a bond sworn before God, although the classical reference suggests that this is only one manifestation of a much richer historical tradition, stretching back to antiquity. Oaths are fearful entities because they can damn the swearer if the pact is broken; uttering the word in a rash or irresponsible manner is liable to tie the individual to an obligation from which it is impossible to be released. Edmond Bicknoll relates the story of a 'desperate Boy' who 'devised new othes, such as were not in common use: but the Lord sent a canker, or some worse disease, that ate out his tongue, even the very instrument where with he blasphemed God'.<sup>39</sup> According to Bicknoll, taking an oath in anger can invert the corporal aspects of the swearing process to burn out the tongue of the individual, making all future pledging, and indeed speech, impossible. Such warnings mark off swearing as a discourse which is not to be attempted rashly, as the ramifications are far more severe than for other forms of social utterance.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Christopher White, *Of oaths their object, forme and bond* (London: Ralph Mab, 1627), sig. C4v. <sup>39</sup> Edmond Bicknoll, *A sword against swearyng* (London: Richard Watkins, 1579), p. 40.

However, the mimetic replication of swearing in a fictive theatrical context would appear to traverse this deep cultural censure. As noted earlier, Agamben has provocatively questioned the association between swearing and sacredness, arguing that this connection is an anachronism which renders the process 'void of sense or an indeterminate value of signification'. 40 As such, the endowment of oath-taking with sacred properties accompanied by divine punishment has been used to serve secular or even political ends behind a mask of sanctity. The theatrical representation of swearing by Renaissance dramatists is often intriguingly consonant with Agamben's view. If oath-taking is notionally regarded as sacred discourse, then the individual has a stake, however minimal, in mapping out or contributing towards a semantic framework in which that sacredness can be conceptualised. We see such a process in As You Like It when Rosalind swears 'by all pretty oaths that are not dangerous' (IV.i.152). 41 This is a tautological act, as situating all non-dangerous oaths as an entity to swear by is itself likely to be regarded as sacrilegious; however, it also articulates a desire to carve out a privileged textual space in which pledging can be offered without the risk of punishment. Similarly, the sacred aspect of promissory swearing is designed to curtail human action into a preconceived pattern of behaviour, but there are instances where an oath is used to legitimise a suspect or ambiguous act; think of the communal vow in *Titus Andronicus* when the 'heavy people' (III.i.277) circle about Titus to justify a self-enforced exile which will ultimately result in the political dominance of the Andronici. 42 Language is a complex site in which the obligatory demands made upon the individual can be reiterated but also subtly questioned through the choice of the sacred word or phrase

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Agamben, pp. 14-15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: New Cambridge Shakespeare, 2000).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1995).

which is placed at the centre of the custom. This word or phrase can in turn be used to offer a different inflection on what is regarded as sacrosanct in any given cultural or contextual framework, and legitimise a potential course of promissory behaviour which can be quite different from the one that is intended.

As the early modern period progressed, the language of swearing became increasingly more complex, with Conal Condren arguing that 'The imagined erosion of the sanctity of oaths resulted in greatly adumbrated detail in the content of the oath and the use of an elaborate vocabulary to the oath-taking act itself'. <sup>43</sup> This is a tendency which early modern dramatists are aware of in the often intricate rhetoric that accompanies the act of swearing. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne purportedly forgoes the deceptive language of seduction to cultivate a discourse that is as plain and clear as swearing an oath:

I do forswear them, and I here protest,
By this white glove – how white the hand, God knows! –
Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed
In russet yeas and honest kersey noes. 44 V.i.410-413

The sacred object used by Berowne is a 'white glove' which adorns the hand of his idealised love object. The image is a delicate evocation of the subtle clothing worn by the female; its whiteness is an allusion not only to her imagined virginity, but the occupation of a social status which involves minimal hard work. There may indeed be a note of satire that the woman who Berowne seduces will not be able to live up to his own poetic idealisation. However, the position of the 'white glove' as a sacred entity in the mock-formation of an oath is far more radical than an immediate

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Condren, p. 249.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. by H.R Woudhuysen (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1998).

reading would suggest, as it substitutes for an object which is genuinely regarded as binding, in this case the hand of the woman which was a crucial gesture of amity in hand-fasting ceremonies. As such, Shakespeare associates the deep rhetoric of swearing with the theatricalised props and costumes which facilitate the artifice of theatrical display. In *Twelfth Night*, Feste quips that 'A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit; how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward' (III.i.11-13). Here, the glove works in a not too dissimilar way, revealing the binding oath as a textual utterance which has a capacity to obfuscate the intentions of the swearer, and their possible obligations, behind a rhetorical flourish. We might think of Shakespeare's 'white glove' as an aesthetic keynote as we move through the thesis; not only does it substitute artifice for substance when an oath is sworn on stage, but its status as a crafted rhetorical discourse is subtly emphasised through its mimetic utterance by the costumed performers.

The physical actions that accompany the depiction of oath-taking by the actor can also offer us an insight into the conceptual implications of the ritual act of swearing. When two or more characters take an oath, they are often directed to place themselves near the lower spaces of the stage. Edward and Warwick's political alliance in *Henry VI Part 3*, for instance, is accompanied by a stage direction in which the two characters take an oath on their knees, side by side: 'O Warwick, I do bend my knee with thine, / And in this vow do chain my soul to thine. / And, ere my knee rise from the earth's cold face, / I throw my hands, mine eyes, my heart to Thee' (II.iii.33-36). The spatial rhetoric that is facilitated by this particular tableaux is a visually orthodox representation of the hierarchical properties of swearing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. by Keir Elam (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008).

 $<sup>^{46}</sup>$  William Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3*, ed. by John D. Cox and Mark Rasmussen (London: Arden  $3^{rd}$ , 2001).

Shakespeare encourages the spectators to follow a vertical line upwards from the kneeling actors to the space at the top of the stage to emphasise their submission to a higher power. Although this is slightly undercut by the mutual embrace of Edward and Warwick, conveying their political scheming as they simultaneously endorse a stratified form of rule, it suggests that scenes of oath-taking can be read spatially and visually as well as rhetorically. When an oath is directed at a different part of the stage, or the conventional associations attached to different parts of the playing space are reworked, it can often encourage the audience to bring an interpretative model to bear which complements the linguistic implications of the staged oath. Hamlet is famously unable to focus on his vow because the voice of the Ghost underneath his feet keeps shifting its position:

Hamlet: Consent to swear.

Horatio: Propose the oath, my lord. Hamlet: Never to speak of this that you have seen,

Swear by my sword.

Ghost: Swear.

Hamlet: *Hic et ubique*? Then we'll shift our ground. I.v.152-156<sup>47</sup>

Shakespeare locates the focal point of the oath in the ambiguous playing space underneath the stage. This could be evocative of hell, purgatory or even limbo; in any case, it is obviously designed to subvert the more traditional spatial properties that associate swearing with orthodox heavenly justice. <sup>48</sup> As the Ghost moves his location, Hamlet correspondingly 'shifts' the space in which the oath is taken,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Tiffany Stern explores the 'metaphorical' associations of various stage spaces in depth, arguing that 'the area below the stage' was commonly regarded as 'hell'; as such, Early Modern spectators would have perceived the place where Hamlet's vow emits from and is addressed to as the direct opposite of the heavenly terminus point of lawful oaths (*Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 26).

suggesting a deep uncertainty regarding the compliancy of the swearer and the wider capacity of the oath to fix an action in place. The contrast between the stillness of ritualised oaths which gesture upwards, such as in the scene from *Henry VI Part 3*, and the frenzied lower movements here, imply that Hamlet's swearing is an unorthodox practice controlled by ambiguous ethical forces. It also suggests that the requisite punishment should the terms be broken might not be as binding as in a more conventional oath. The symbolic or conceptual associations that accrue to different parts of the playing space are therefore a resource which playwrights can use to shape the nature of the pledge being staged. If the oath is more formal, then a focus on the higher area appears to suggest a form of social orthodoxy; however, if these coded playing rules are violated, as in *Hamlet*, then the audience is encouraged to regard the oath as a more ambiguous entity, with a loosened hold on the swearer.

We are also able to detect various vocal and physical clues to the actor which enable us to reconstruct the particular inflections that were possibly used to denote the process of swearing in performance. In *Antonio's Revenge*, for example, Pandulpho parodies the tendency of the stage revenger to 'swagger, quarrel, swear, stamp, rave and chide / To stab in fume of blood' (I.ii.324-325). <sup>49</sup> It is implied that the intonation would be loud in volume, accompanied by an equally noisy stamping style of movement around the stage. Such actions associate swearing with passion and instability rather than fixity and ritual order; the discourse is also possibly defined by a heightened phonetic delivery, marking out as a more charged and excessive form of rhetoric than other modes of address. <sup>50</sup> The staging of swearing is also a performance within itself, requiring the actor to make their character 'act'; in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, ed. by W. Reavley Gair (Manchester: Revels, 1978). <sup>50</sup> For a more detailed account of playing styles in the Early Modern theatre, see David Mann, *The* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> For a more detailed account of playing styles in the Early Modern theatre, see David Mann, *The Elizabethan Player: Contemporary Stage Representation* (London: Routledge, 1991); Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Henry Chettle's play *Hoffman*, for instance, Austria is unwilling to complete his alliance with Saxony because in 'vows of combination, there's a grace / That shows the intention in the outward face' (II.ii.59-60).<sup>51</sup> We may surmise that such a line would be communicated by a heightened or obviously theatrical delivery, once again associating the mimetic replication of swearing with artifice. However, Jonson presents a different perspective on the playing style in *Every Man in His Humour*:

Lorenzo Jr: He moulded himself so perfectly, observing every trick of their action – as varying the accent, swearing with an *emphasis*, indeed all with so special and exquisite a grace - that, hadst thou seen him, thou wouldst have sworn he might have been the Tamburlaine or the Agamemnon of the rout.<sup>52</sup>

III.ii.12-16

The actor is imagined to swear with an 'Emphasis', appearing to indicate a similar type of performance style espoused by Marston. However, instead of bombast, the actor focuses the solemnity of the occasion through a 'grace' that is 'special and exquisite' as opposed to vulgar; it is possible that the vocal action involved heightened annunciation and clarity, drawing special attention to the rhetorical construction of the words being uttered. There is evidently an alternative playing style associated with swearing which is defined by a quiet intensity and stillness rather than aggression. Because this is indicative of an earlier era in dramaturgy as suggested by the reference to Tamburlaine, it revises the assumption that the earlier performance styles of actors such as Edward Alleyn were largely unsubtle and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup>Henry Chettle, *Hoffman's Revenge*, ed. by Emma Smith, in *Five Revenge Tragedies* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 243-324.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Ben Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour* (*Q*), ed. by David Bevington, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), I, pp. 111-227.

bombastic.<sup>53</sup> The technique described by Jonson is so effective that the spectator might swear to the truth of what they had witnessed, even though an actor is reciting the lines on stage. There are evidently a complex range of performance styles which could be drawn upon to delineate the practice, from emotional excess to quiet solemnity, each of which offer a different inflection on the exact nature of the oath being sworn. The language of swearing is therefore not simply an inflection of the binding terms of the custom, but a subtle indication to the performer as to the techniques they should adopt when delivering the line; attention to these clues can allow the contemporary reader to address certain interpretative possibilities through the mode of delivery which are not immediately apparent on first reading.

## Vocabulary

The lexicon available in early modern culture to delineate the practice of swearing is replete with its own intricacies. Kerrigan has already begun to map out some of the different contexts within which the words 'oath', 'vow' and 'swear' operate. The OED defines the word oath as 'A solemn or formal declaration invoking God (or a god, or other object of reverence) as witness to the truth of a statement, or to the binding nature of a promise or undertaking'. In this definition we can see a faithful replication of the orthodox tenets of early modern oath-taking;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones characterises the perception of Alleyn's style by his younger contemporaries as 'huffing', 'old-fashioned', 'crude' and 'noisy', although she acknowledges that such a view may be a marketing attempt by the newer companies to differentiate their own 'sophisticated acting style' from that of the Admiral's Men and its leading actor (*Shakespeare: An Ungentle Life* (London: Arden, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2010), pp. 177-178).

<sup>54</sup> Kerrigan, pp. 70-71.

<sup>55 &</sup>quot;oath, n. 1a.". OED Online. April 2014. Oxford University Press.

the invocation of God as a witness, and the twin modes of declarative and promissory swearing. However, the etymological root of 'oath' is slightly more complex and may contain a form of textual instability or slippage deep within the word itself. The OED posits that one of its oldest sources may be the Indo-European base word i- or ei-, meaning 'to go'. <sup>56</sup> This generates a complex semantic space in which the practice of swearing is associated with movement or a profound shift, as opposed to fixity. Early modern pamphleteers often depict the oath as a secure framework designed to keep the swearer in place; in his 1613 pamphlet, for example, Abraham Gibson asserts that 'an Oath is a divine thing; for it is a holy Anchor-hold, to which we flee when mans wisdome can goe no further'. <sup>57</sup> Perhaps some of the anxiety in its early modern contextual manifestation is generated by a word which suggests a movement the instant it is spoken; we might think of Richard's assertion that 'an oath is of no moment' (I.ii.21) in *Henry VI Part 3*; it is an oath but also ei-, fixed and fluid simultaneously, allowing the swearer to move away from its terms almost in the very act of intonation.

In contrast, Kerrigan argues that the word 'vow' is 'attractive to Shakespeare because, unlike *oath*, it was lexically well connected (*devotion*, *devout*, and so on) and quick to coin new forms – terms like *votary* and *votaress*'. There are other complexities that enrich or even work against the OED definition of the word as 'A solemn promise made to God, or to any deity or saint, to perform some act, or make some gift or sacrifice, in return for some special favour'. The word 'vow' has a probable source of origin in the Latin word 'votum', meaning to participate or vote.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> "oath, n. Etymology.". OED Online. April 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Abraham Gibson, *The lands mourning, for vaine swearing: or The downe-fall of oathes* (London: Ralph Mab, 1613), p. 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Kerrigan, pp. 69-70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> "vow, n. 1a.". OED Online. April 2014. Oxford University Press.

Interestingly, this particular derivation was undergoing a semantic revision in the mid-sixteenth century to denote 'A formal expression of opinion by a member of a deliberative assembly'; 60 as such, there may be an interesting political connection between vowing and 'voting' in a parliamentary context defined by participation. 'Vow' also has a double property in that it is an abstract noun as well as a verb, enabling the swearer to regard their pledge as an object or entity and as a means of action. This creates a greater degree of grammatical fluidity by allowing the word to be compared to other verbs associated with pledging such as 'swear', 'make' or 'take'. It is also worth pointing out that one of the origins of the word 'swear' is the Old English form 'swerian', meaning to attest to the truth of a statement; when coupled with the prefix 'an', suggesting against or opposite, we have the word 'answear' or answer. 61 So even in this word there is the subtle echo of an implied response, the faint invitation to engage in dialogue. The vocabulary available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries to depict oath-taking is far more nuanced than its strict application in orthodox culture would suggest, characterised by a sense of movement, grammatical slippage and implied reciprocity. 'Oaths' and 'vows' are quite different entities from the 'Anchor-holds' imagined by Abraham Gibson and many of his contemporaries.

Some of the prepositions which are used to define the entity that is sworn on can arbitrate the relationship between the swearer and the oath in interesting ways. The most common modifiers are the prepositions 'on', 'to' and 'by'. To swear 'to' something is almost kinetic in its nature, prioritising future action over a more abstract contemplation of the efficacy of swearing. When Sir Walter Terrill describes

 <sup>60 &</sup>quot;vote, n. 4a.". OED Online. April 2014. Oxford University Press.
 61 "swear, v. Etymology.". OED Online. April 2014. Oxford University Press.

an oath he has sworn to the King in Dekker's *Satiriomastix*, he asserts that 'A King containes / A thousand thousand; when I swore to him, / I swore to them' (V.i.44-46). 62 This is used by Dekker to facilitate a chain of public relationships in which fidelity to the sovereign is grammatically mediated across the state. To swear 'to' an action is usually indicative of connections between two or more disparate characters via a proposed action, creating more charged obligatory relationships between the various figures on stage. These need not be stratified, as in the oath that is sworn to God; indeed, the unusual propensity for inter-communication enabled by this word stresses the reciprocity of swearing, and its binding potential, in ways that are not always apparent in the use of alternative prepositions. In contrast, to swear 'on' an object is often used to gesture towards a prop or a more concrete entity. When Pursenet commands Tailby to swear 'on this sword' to 'set spurs to your horse, not to look back' (III.i.91-92), in Middleton's Your Five Gallants, the sword is signalled as a physical object which can guarantee truth by its symbolic connotations of knighthood and valour, as well as the sacredness embodied in the possible shape of a cross. 63 Swearing 'on' something is a useful linguistic choice because it can allow the actor to interact with a prop in a manner which unifies the abstract meaning of the rhetoric of the oath with a visible object. As such, it has the potential to facilitate a more mobile relationship between swearer and sacred entity, in which the oath is rendered tangible rather than conceptual. There is also a subtle implication that when an individual swears 'on' something, they are placed above it or positioned at an advantageous tangent; this not only emphasises the special relationship between the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Thomas Dekker, *Satiriomastix*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), I, pp. 299-395. <sup>63</sup> Thomas Middleton, *Your Five Gallants*, ed. by Ralph Alan Cohen and John Jowett, in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 594-636.

swearer and their sacred entity, but also privileges what they regard as inviolable over any coercive punishment.

Perhaps the most intricate preposition in terms of the ability of language to delineate the entity that is sworn on is the word 'by'. This is often used by Shakespeare to contrast the sacredness of the object in question with the rhetorical exuberance and possible falsity that is an unavoidable consequence of ingenious swearing. When Romeo vows by the 'yonder blessed moon' that 'tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops' (II.i.107-108), his oath is rejected by Juliet for the fickleness implied by the sacred central image of the changing moon.<sup>64</sup> This is a dangerous lexical choice to make at such a delicate moment because it could jeopardise the future success of the binding love-match through a recognition of change and loss. Unlike other prepositions, the word 'by' has the potential to establish a degree of spatial or hierarchical equivalence between the individual swearer and the language they choose, almost as if they are semantically placed beside the image or object rather than deferential to it. Instead of the oath defining the swearer, as in accepted formations, therefore, the swearer has the ability to cultivate a form of self-definition through the sacred image that they choose to situate in a potent grammatical space. Juliet's wariness of the symbolic properties of the 'blessed moon' which Romeo swears by is indicative of the affective power that is imagined to emit from the word when a vow is made, attesting to the danger of its misuse. Once again, swearing as an act that is not immediately orthodox is regarded as both enabling and perilous. Jonson is also alert to the contrast between sincerity and self-display at the rhetorical heart of this particular type of swearing. In Every Man In His Humour, Cob uses the custom to explore different models of self-advancement:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Rene Weis (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012).

Cob:

By the life of Pharaoh. There's an oath! How many waterbearers shall you hear swear such an oath? Oh, I have a guest, he teacheth me, he doth swear the best of any man christened: 'By Phoebus', 'By the life of Pharaoh', 'By the body of me', 'As I am gentleman and a soldier' – such dainty oaths! And withal he doth take this same filthy, roguish tobacco. Liii.54-58

In pledging by an exotic rarefied entity such as a 'Pharaoh', Cob imagines a correlation to exist between the object he chooses to swear by and the enhancement of his public identity, particularly as the word displays a rudimentary knowledge of classical history. Jonson places this word as one among many that Cob is able to choose from, even though Bobadilla who teaches him the practice is himself a partaker of 'filthy roguish tobacco' and therefore socially ambiguous. It is no coincidence that the last sacred entity, 'By the body of me', is a reflexive push back to the figure of the original swearer. The use of swearing as a method of social display, according to Jonson, is almost entirely self-absorbed. Not only does pledging by a flamboyant image desecrate the sacral properties of the custom, but it also enables a greater degree of falsity to occur through the exploitation of a discourse which has an unusual amount of prestige in early modern culture, and is therefore primed to deceive the gullible. Swearing 'by' an entity, then, is a process through which the desires of the individual can be articulated in a manner that often runs counter to the curbing of agency that is encouraged by the more orthodox forms of oath-taking, and is rendered with suspicion as well as opportunity.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Every Man in his Humour, pp. 111-227.

#### Chapters

Chapter One offers an examination of the swearer's attempt to construct their own vow when the available social mechanisms prove insufficient to license a desired action. First it will outline some of the central figurations of the self in contemporary theories of swearing, before considering the structural function of the oath of revenge in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*. Throughout this chapter, there will be particular attention paid to the evident need of the revenge protagonist to validate his or her bloody course of action with a custom which is ironically designed to guard against unregulated behaviour. The structural consequences of the revenge oath, and what the terminus point of each play suggests about the efficacy of self-willed swearing as a legitimate course of action, will be held in focus throughout. As a starting point both for this thesis and the narratological development of early modern drama through the influence of *The Spanish Tragedy*, this chapter will establish the primacy of oathtaking as a method of constructing a plot when the potential for action is placed within the coercive structures of a bond.

The next two chapters are broadly linked through a shared focus on the efficacy of political swearing, albeit in very different contexts. Chapter Two considers the narrative movements which characterise Roman drama. In *Titus Andronicus* and *Catiline*, Shakespeare and Jonson both dramatise a structure in which a group of disaffected aristocrats are exiled from the city state, only to return at the head of an army. This political telos is facilitated by scenes of group oathtaking, in which the faction swears to take control of Rome in order to further their

own agenda. Communal swearing is therefore situated as a key device through which aggressive political action can be endorsed. However, both playwrights have very different attitudes to the practice; whereas Shakespeare is interested in the potential of group swearing to facilitate a change in regime, Jonson warns against its ability to wrest control of the state away from the more trusted forms of stratified rule. In contrast, Chapter Three explores the power of the coronation oath to bind the subject to the monarch. Although early modern culture often asserts that fealty is a natural obligation owed to the king, Marlowe's *Edward II* and Shakespeare's *Richard II* promote a very different view. Marlowe shows that a secure grasp of the rhetoric of fealty is a necessary feature of kingship, as the ability of a usurper to slip into the established lexical referents of homage is tantamount to a political coup. In contrast, Shakespeare regards the articulation of competing sacred entities as a space in which rival forms of royal government can be subtly debated. For both plays, the structural movement which facilitates a transference in power is deeply connected to the increasing textual ambiguity of pledges of loyalty to the king.

The final two chapters are concerned with the binding nature of amatory and sexual bonds. Chapter Four takes its point of departure from the staged ceremonies of marriage which are a recurring feature of Jacobean and Caroline drama. As a miniature rite with its own depiction of swearing, staged marriages, or their off-stage depiction, are often contrasted with the wider amatory plots which they help to facilitate. The first section explores the perversion of marriage vows by the political tyrant in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*; the second considers the generic and structural flux to which the ceremony has been reduced in the relatively late play *The Broken Heart* by Ford. Throughout the chapter, the comic associations of marriage are often revealed to be distorted when the pledge is staged before an

audience early in the plot, primarily because the playwrights under consideration have a deep interest in investigating the uncertain binding potential of amatory vows. Chapter Five explores the figure of the loose and unchaste female who is unable or unwilling to honour her oaths of fidelity. Although such behaviour is routinely condemned in early modern culture, the dramatisation of such women on stage reveals that sexual profligacy is often a source of structural agency, even innovation. The first section considers the narrative strategies of an under-explored play, William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker*, while the final section of the thesis investigates Middleton's gendered inversion of this recognisable telos in *More Dissemblers Besides Women*. Throughout, the chapter will suggest that the condemnatory attitude to female oath-breaking in early modern literature is somewhat revised by the resourcefulness of such figures when the concept is transferred to the area of dramatic plot.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

# OATHS AND REVENGE

#### Introduction

At the conclusion of Henry Chettle's revenge tragedy *Hoffman*, the lead character offers a meta-theatrical summation of the genre's main tenets for the amusement of a knowing audience; it has been the familiar story of 'A man resolved in blood, bound by a vow / For no less vengeance than his father's death' (V.iii.158-159). These are arguably the defining features of a plot structure known for its use of violence to offer restitution for those who perceive themselves to have been excluded from established forms of justice. However, Chettle's observation that his revenger has been acting under the duress of a 'vow' is more surprising than it first appears, as it is a custom which directly invokes the presence of God. Why would Hoffman use the ritual of pledging to oversee a promissory act which amounts to murder? What type of ethical sanction and social endorsement can he expect by placing his revenge in a framework which is designed to prevent the type of behaviour he is desperate to pursue?

The solemn vow taken over the corpse of a murdered family member is one of the most recognisable tenets of revenge structure, although it has received minimal critical attention in relation to other aspects of the form. This chapter will

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Henry Chettle, *Hoffman*, in *Five Revenge Tragedies*, ed. by Emma Smith (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. 243-325.

explore the complex relationship between the narrative of revenge as a dramatic plot or teleology, and the actions that are enabled by the early modern custom of swearing an oath. Traditional conceptions of pledging before God insist on the sublimation of individual willpower to an over-arching project, but revenge tragedy offers the opposite movement, in which an act is endorsed which appears to gratify a personal desire for vengeance. From one perspective, characters such as Hieronimo and Antonio are able to use a respected ritual to circumvent the deficiencies in the law, but this involves a radical redefinition of the central facets of the custom of pledging, particularly the invocation of God, or a figure which represents a much more potent form of authority than that possessed by the swearer. What emerges is a dramatic structure that builds towards a bloodbath sanctioned under oath, but which is able to question in detail the established forms of power, particularly at the level of language, that license some actions and prohibit others in early modern culture.

## Oaths and Selfhood in Context

When Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost* decides to defy the oath which has committed him to a period of sexless study, he articulates a problem which would have resonated with the early modern audience: 'Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves, / Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths' (IV.iii.335-336). This is a masterful example of the rhetorical trope of antimetabole, in which two or more words are repeated in reverse order in successive clauses. 'Oaths' and 'ourselves' are playfully opposed to suggest the irreconcilability of the bond which the King has compelled the young men to swear in order to curb their desires. The notion that the

self is 'lost' when placed within the strictures of an oath recognises the mutability of emotional feeling as a defining aspect of youthful male identity, as well as suggesting that the bonds imposed upon the individual are an unsatisfying substitute for companionship. Once his circumstances have been altered through his love for Rosaline, Berowne regards the person who swore the oath at the start of the play as another self which is no longer compatible with the strictures placed upon him at earlier moment in time, when a period of chaste study seemed like a sensible, even worthy project to pursue. Integrating the desires of the individual with a regulated oath is an attractive concept, but it is one which is tricky to articulate in a way that does not reduce the import of one state or the other.<sup>2</sup>

Henry Peacham observes that one of the most contentious features of antimetabole is its propensity to 'confute by the inversion of the sentence'. In order to communicate the precise terms of the obligation to the swearer and the assembled witnesses, orthodox swearing relies upon the clarity of linguistic expression, as any confusion over meaning has the potential to obfuscate the terms of the agreement. Yet the trope which Shakespeare uses in order to delineate Berowne's relationship to the oath he has been compelled to swear is suggestive of syntactic and semantic inversion. When placed within a coercive textual framework, he responds by exposing the multiplicity and riddling complexity at the heart of a discourse which publicly aims to avoid slippery speech. Evidently Berowne's oath is unable to be fully reconciled with his amatory wishes, which are bridled by a form of expression which prohibits the artful display of intelligent utterance; the two are simply

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Thomas Dekker may have been influenced by this line in his play *Satiriomastix* when Terrill exclaims 'See how I loose my selfe, amongst my thoughts, / Thinking to finde my selfe; my oath, my oath' (III.i.333-334). However, the simpler antimetabole between losing and finding the self misses some of the ethical compromise between the swearer and the oath captured in Shakespeare's original. Thomas Dekker, *Satiriomastix* in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), I, pp. 299-396.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London: H Jackson, 1593), sig. Z2v.

incompatible. But if the desires of an individual constitute the centre of their feeling 'self', as Berowne appears to indicate, then what are the consequences for inner subjectivity when it is placed under oath? Can it be said to exist with any coherence? This is a dilemma which engages the interests of early modern playwrights, who explore the consequences that ensue when an individual project is unable to be facilitated by the traditional structures which license human behaviour. If the type of oath required to legitimise an action is unsuitable or even unavailable, then the veracity of other types of pledging are often tested, with the startling possibility that a private pledge can be created and subsequently put into practice. However, the actions that ensue are not unleashed without ethical sanction; rather, they can often prove to be as prohibitive as the more orthodox oaths which are rejected for their unsuitability.

In orthodox formations of swearing, the oath is a mechanism which regulates the individual will by threatening the swearer with punishment if the terms of the agreement are broken. As God is typically invoked as an omnipotent judge, the speaker of a pledge is rendered prostrate before His majesty in a manner which reinforces divine power by insisting on a corresponding pose of submission. This form of oath-taking is apparent in the homily 'Against Swearing and Perjury', which was included in the first edition of *The Books of Homilies* in 1547 and circulated widely over the course of the sixteenth century:

Almighty God to the intent his most holy name should be had in honour, & evermore be magnified of the people, commaundeth that no man shoulde take

his name vainely in his mouth, threatening punishment into him that unreverently abuseth it, by swearing, forswearing, & blasphemie.<sup>4</sup>

As the homily was compiled by the state church, reprinted in three major editions and read out on rotation throughout England, it not only articulated the most orthodox conception of swearing in early modern society but was disseminated to the widest section of the population.<sup>5</sup> It can therefore be regarded as a fairly definitive expression of how the self was understood to exist in relation to the wider framework of the oath. The notion that man will take God's name 'in his mouth' alludes to the more intimate communication with God that is opened up through the entrance of the speaker into the privileged discourse of swearing. As language under oath is directly scrutinised by God through His invocation as witness, it is imagined to be placed within the idiolect or 'mouth' of the swearer from outside, rather than originating from within. The implication here is that the human propensity for sin is so strong that language is an imperfect medium through which such privileged spiritual contact is able to occur; to offset this possibility, the more refined discourse of God is offered as a substitute gift in a not too dissimilar fashion to more orthodox doctrinal theories of sola fide. When the individual swears, then, he or she is imagined to reinforce God's potency by inhabiting a register which is subject to personal scrutiny and interpretation. This establishes a framework in which God's authority in relation to the individual is emphasised over His use as an invoked entity

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Anon., Certaine Sermons appointed by the Queens Majestie (London: Edward Allde, 1595), sig.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ashley Null, 'Official Tudor Homilies', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, ed. by Hugh Adlington, Peter McCullough and Emma Rhatigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.348-365 (p. 350).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For a succinct exploration of the relationship between language and reformed doctrine see: Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation* (London: Orion, 2003), pp. 27-41.

to oversee human transactions, whilst subordinating the language of the swearer to inspection by a divine addressee.

As part of this stratified conception, the self is regarded as inherently unstable and in need of regulation. Christopher White exemplifies this idea when he describes the oath as a 'moderator' which is able to bring the self more securely in line with God's precepts: 'What hopes then can there be from him in himselfe, of certainety in his word, who is the subject of *mutabilite*? But when hee *sweares*, hee hath (as much as in him is) renounc'd himselfe'. The oath is regarded as a stabilising device which is able to regulate the self through bringing it in line with God's insistence on truth and plain dealing. In White's expression of this concept, it is imagined to be completely 'renounc'd' at the moment an oath is uttered, and replaced by a state in which his or her promise is rendered infallible through the framework which God both provides and oversees. The two main consequences for the depiction of the self in orthodox swearing in early modern culture, then, are the use of individual submission to reinforce the authority of the invoked entity, and the substitution of immutable language for human discourse at the moment when a pledge is made.

However, the relations that are invoked during state-endorsed swearing are only one type of oath formation in early modern culture. Other kinds, particularly those to be found in chronicle sources and the classical past, offer different opportunities for the depiction of the self when it is placed under a binding obligation. In his description of the political oath brokered between Edmund Ironside and Canute, Robert Jenison relates a model which adopts a more horizontal form of mutual pledging than that which is commonly encountered in theo-centric models:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Christopher White, Of oaths their object, forme, and bond (London: Ralph Mab, 1627), sig. B2r.

We read in our owne History, that *Edmund* surnamed *Ironside* (in whom *England* was lost) and *Knute* (the first *Danic King*) after many incounters and equall fight, at length imbraced a present agreement, which was made by parting *England* betweene them two, and confirmed by Oath and Sacrament, putting on each others Apparell and Armes, as a Ceremonie to expresse the atonement of their minds, as if they had made transaction of their persons each to other; *Knute* became *Edmund*, and *Edmund Knute*.<sup>8</sup>

The historical swearing described by Jenison foregoes a strong emphasis on the stratified relationship between the self and the divine entity to stress a binding pact between two individuals. In order to communicate the new political agreement to the gathered witnesses, Edmund and Knute wear each other's armour; such a gesture is imagined to effect a corresponding shift in their selfhood, in which one is symbolically and reciprocally inhabited by the other. The traditional 'Oath and Sacrament' is still placed at the centre of the ritual, although a careful reader would detect that the ceremony is designed to offset the fragmentation of the state by suggesting a form of co-rulership, rather than revise an existing model of fealty. However, the notion of an identity swap between two swearers may have been a desirable alternative for playwrights looking to explore a more nuanced relationship between individual will and the various customs within which a bond can be activated. For a character such as Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, a substitution such as the one expressed above may have provided a mental framework within which a vow could license the revenge for a son who is no longer alive to avenge himself. Just as Edmund and Knute make a 'transaction of their persons to each other', the revenger may cement a corresponding shift in the self when placed under oath in order to gratify a desire which would be unambiguously prohibited by orthodox conceptions of swearing. Nancy Selleck's observation that the 'positioning of the self as an object tends to make the other a subject' is as useful critical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Robert Jenison, *The Christians apparelling by Christ* (London: John Browne, 1625), p. 24.

framework within which to consider and perhaps revise the solitary nature of the project of vengeance. By entering into a pact which transfers the wrong done to the murdered party onto the revenger, a figure such as Hieronimo can be said to inhabit the selfhood of the dead. However, the displacement at the heart of this concept prevents the individual from truly assuming the ethical authority to take revenge; rather, it facilitates an examination of the identity of the revenger himself, who is to an extent defined by the promissory telos that has been entered into. <sup>10</sup>

There are a number of examples in classical culture which depict the transactional model of swearing described by Robert Jenison. A careful reader of Aristotle would have encountered a scene in which a citizen of the state is required to 'forfeit and pay to the Temple of Apollo in the Cittie of Delphos, an Image of massie gold, weying as much as himselfe' near the 'stone where the publike proclamations are usually made' if any pact is 'transgressed'. Rather than invoking a deity to punish the swearer if the terms are not observed, a golden statue is donated to signify a reduction in personal wealth alongside a concomitant decline in their social credit as a trustworthy member of society. The transactional model of swearing not only offers an opportunity to explore the impact upon the self when it enters into a pact with another person, but it also confronts some of the debasements which are occasioned if the oath is not kept. In Aristotle's account of swearing in Greece, an object substituting for the personhood of the individual is offered to redeem the loss to their public identity occasioned by their inability to honour a civic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Nancy Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare*, *Donne*, *and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> In an influential argument, John Kerrigan notes that revenge plots are defined by a 'structure of displaced agency', in which the obligation of the revenger to procure justice is marred by the fact that the murder is not theirs to avenge (*Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotles politiques, or Discourses of government*, trans. Loys Le Roy (London: Adam Islip, 1598), p. 133.

bond. Such anxieties are a feature of the structural development of revenge tragedy, which relies on the swearing of an oath to transfer the grievance of the murder victim to the central protagonist, 'extend[ing] the register of self-referentiality', to quote Richard Hillman, by connecting both figures in a shared project. However, the pull on the identity of a character such as Hieronimo is so strong that his vengeance is not fulfilled without a serious reduction in his selfhood. An oath may legitimise a form of behaviour prohibited in conventional legal and religious thinking, but it does not provide an uncomplicated form of restitution; rather, the transference of the promissory act of vengeance to a substitute encroaches upon the identity of the swearer by inducting them into a course of action which they are not strictly permitted to adopt. The exploration of the consequences of revenge oaths for the protagonist, and the custom of oath-taking itself, will constitute the remainder of this chapter.

## The Spanish Tragedy

As the son of a scrivener or 'Noverint', <sup>13</sup> Thomas Kyd would have been in a better position than most early modern playwrights to observe the care with which binding language was composed. His father Francis is recorded as taking the oath that was required for acceptance by the Scriveners Company of London on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1557. At this occasion, he would have placed his hands on the 'Holy Ev'ngelies' and solemnly sworn to transcribe his copies truly, leave no sections of the paper blank,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Richard Hillman, *Self-Speaking in Early Modern English Drama: Subjectivity, Discourse and the Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997), p. 119.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Thomas Nashe, 'Preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*' in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. by Ronald B. McKerrow, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 5 vols (Oxford: Blackwell), III, 310-329 (p. 315).

and examine all copy before it was authenticated by the official seal. <sup>14</sup> This was crucial because it helped to prevent the forging of any part of the document which would obfuscate or corrupt the terms of the agreement. The need of an oath to discourage this possibility attests to the anxiety that was generated by the potential falsification of legally sanctioned obligations, particularly at the level of rhetoric. If language could be so easily faked, then the structures of reciprocation and trust which it both promoted and articulated could also be exposed as unstable. When a scrivener was handed the job of delineating in meticulous detail the commitment between two individuals in a civil agreement, they did so with their soul on the line.

In a pamphlet designed to outline the duties of the scrivener, William West asserts that the language used in binding agreements is a formal writing that is more trustworthy than other modes of discourse: 'For a written Bond, is a Contract whereby any man confesseth himselfe by his writing orderly made, sealed and delivered to owe any thing unto him whom he so Contracteth'. 15 The language of a contract is distinguished from other discourses by its use as a public record that can be independently scrutinised, as opposed to the unreliable testimony of an individual, and is a clearer and more reliable form of language than historical or artistic treatises, which can be speculative and overly figurative. One imagines that the clinical rhetoric of formal contracting would be conceptually at odds with a dramatic work such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, which explores the private grief of a man driven to memorialise his murdered son through the use of artistic language and spectacle. 16 However, the discourse of swearing is present throughout the text, not only in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Francis W. Steer, A History of the Worshipful Company of Scriveners of London (London: Phillimore, 1973), p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> William West, Symbolaeography [...] or The Notarie of a Scrivener (London: Richard Tottle,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* ed. by Clara Calvo and Jesus Tronch (London: Arden, 2013).

central 'vow' (IV.iv.126) which Hieronimo makes over the body of Horatio, but in the 'bonds' and 'supplications' which are presented to him by the citizens; indeed, to early modern theatregoers familiar with scrivening culture, such artefacts would have been composed under the very oath that Francis Kyd himself swore to guard against the falsification of rhetoric. <sup>17</sup> These are interesting conditions to bear in mind when Hieronimo takes a self-willed oath to license the revenge of his son Horatio. Through turning to a Senecan model, he is able to gratify his own need for vengeance by invoking a custom which authenticates his actions by appealing to a higher witness in the manner of orthodox swearing. However, by deferring to a classical rather than a Protestant authority, Hieronimo licenses a project which runs counter to the deepest ethical censures of early modern legal and religious culture. The detail with which the language of swearing is crafted in *The Spanish Tragedy* suggests that Kyd is deeply interested in exploring the efficacy of Hieronimo's oath when it exists both within and outside the custom as commonly understood. One the one hand, it is able to justify a course of retribution which operates as a viable alternative when accepted forms of justice fail. However, it also has the potential to rework the linguistic tenor of swearing to license a private impulse in a manner which is uncomfortably close to the corruption of binding language. This practice, we have seen, was regarded with deep suspicion in early modern culture.

Throughout his book, William West associates the rhetoric of the scrivener with plain dealing: 'it is to be faire written, and ingrossed in paper or parchment, without blotting, rasing, enterlying & writing every word plainely at length, without

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> It is very likely that Kyd was himself apprenticed as a scrivener, but the proof is uneven. Calvo and Tronch propose this as a possibility based on the 'neat and professional' handwriting in his letter to Sir John Puckering when he was interrogated for seditious writings. Calvo and Tonch, 'Introduction', p. 7.

any abreviations, ciphers, signes or notes which may breed any scruple or doubt'. 18 This suggests that the promise entered into by the individual not only affects his or her own public reputation if the terms are unclear, but can jeopardise the wider cohesiveness of the obligations upon which the state rests. <sup>19</sup> This attitude is articulated in many pamphlets which explore the social properties of the oath across late sixteenth and early seventeenth century culture; Abraham Gibson goes so far as to regard it as the 'chiefe bond of civil order'. <sup>20</sup> The language of the scrivener serves a crucial role in maintaining the stability facilitated by the oath by guarding against the perversion of its deepest linguistic bonds, the consequences of which can be severe if left unchecked or not policed adequately. In Richard III, for instance, the Scrivener's language, written in the 'set hand' practised by Kyd's father, is used to license the unlawful detainment of Hastings, to the disbelief of the Scrivener himself: 'Who is so gross / That cannot see this palpable device?' (III.vi.10-11).<sup>21</sup> Through falsifying his language, albeit under the compulsion of a tyrannous king, the Scrivener is participating in the erosion of the state by substituting deceptively authoritative rhetoric for the language of lawful transparency. <sup>22</sup> When Hieronimo turns from a legal to a Senecan framework the moment his oath is sworn, this might be how early modern playwrights interpreted his behaviour, associating his course of self-willed revenge with a corresponding corruption of civic order, regardless of his inability to achieve justice in the legal institutions that are available to him.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> West, sig. C2v.

<sup>19 &</sup>quot;civil, adj. 2a.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Gibson, p. 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. by John Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). <sup>22</sup> The scrivener was regarded as an ambiguous figure in Early Modern culture who was prone to pervert the very bonds they articulated in rhetoric; for instance, John Stephens caricatures the dishonest scrivener who profits by 'making that Bond, which he knowes will be forfeited' (*Essayes and characters, ironicall, and instructive* (London: Edward Allde, 1615), pp. 344-345).

The gravity of Hieronimo's revenge oath would have been more heavily pronounced when his official role in the royal court as Knight Marshall to the King of Spain was taken into account. Part of the office would have required a detailed knowledge of the conceptual frameworks which were invoked when an oath was sworn in court. In a discussion of the legal function of swearing, Henry Goodcole observes that 'upon the holy Sacrament they [ie, the attendant magistrates] doe protest, true, and truly to try, and true deliverance make between our Sovereigne Lord the King, and the Prisoners at the Barre, So helpe them God, and the Contents of that Booke'. 23 The oath is designed to ensure that the authority of the king can be mediated in a way that associates lawful proceedings with political and religious stability. In a similar manner to William West, there is a tacit connection between correct legal swearing and wider social stability. However, whereas the scrivener's task ensures that all bonds are symbolically adhered to throughout the polity, the oath sworn in a court of law refracts that obligation through the specific figure of the king. Lawful swearing simultaneously ensures that bonds between subjects are maintained and fealty to the monarch is observed; one form of duty is imagined to co-exist alongside the other. Early modern theatregoers would have understood Hieronimo as Knight Marshall to operate within this particular political structure as both a fellow subject and a representative of the monarch, disseminating justice through a model which provided restitution whilst simultaneously insisting on royal supremacy.<sup>24</sup>

Henry Goodcole, *Londons cry ascended to God* (London: Barnard Alsop, 1620), sig. B3v.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Robert Pricket echoes this association when he notes that 'I (though his unworthie Subject) am by his gracious clemencie Authorized (as in his owne Person) according to his owne Oath, to administer Justice unto you his Subjects' (*The Lord Coke his speech and charge* (London: Christopher Pursett, 1607), sig. C2r).

However, the contentious nature of bonds and obligations in late sixteenthcentury law had the potential to complicate this schema. Andrew Zurcher notes that the Common Pleas often dealt with disputes over contracts in long cases which could be stretched over time with little resolution. In tandem with this, the increase in administration and access to the legal courts in the sixteenth century triggered a rise in contractual disputes, which often resulted in 'the interests of individuals' being 'pitted against one another, and against the common interest'. <sup>25</sup> The association between legal swearing and civic order was evidently problematic when two members of the commonwealth used the law to resolve a tense dispute over the nature of an agreement under oath, particular when the oath itself was emblematic of civic concord. In special cases, a particularly complex disagreement could be handled by the Star Chamber, who had a licence to resolve tensions over issues of 'contract'. <sup>26</sup> However, the aristocratic and exclusive nature of this particular body also served to foster an 'a confusing network of overlapping jurisdictions and competing standards and processes'. 27 As the son of a scrivener, Kyd would have been influenced by the debates regarding formal rhetorical agreements, which appeared to focalise some of the frictions that they were designed to arbitrate, particularly with regard to civil conflict and the privileges accorded to high ranking members of the state.

The nature of obligation in legal terms was also undergoing a shift throughout the period. The results of Slade's Case in 1602, in which the court found in favour of John Slade who had reached an agreement with Humphrey Morley based on a vocal promise rather than an official contract, recognised that a verbal

Andrew Zurcher, *Shakespeare and Law* (London: Arden, 2010), p. 32.
 Zurcher, p. 30.
 Zurcher, p. 32.

utterance was as equally binding in a court of law as a formally written oath.<sup>28</sup> David Harris Stacks observes that 'since there was no allegation of subsequent promise by the defendant, it was necessary for Slade's lawyers to collapse together the contract and the promise to perform it, thereby treating the making of a contract as the equivalent of a speech act'. <sup>29</sup> Although *The Spanish Tragedy* was written before the completion of Slade's Case, it is reasonable to suggest that the issues under consideration had been impacting upon early modern legal and verbal culture for quite some time; indeed, as the son of a scrivener, Kyd would have been aware of the increasing scepticism with which formally written contracts were regarded, particularly the impending move away from expensive obligations written under oath to more informal agreements. When Hieronimo makes his 'vow' (IV.iv.126) over the body of Horatio, he may be conceiving of his promise within this new type of conceptual structure.<sup>30</sup> Rather than a legal oath which implicitly invokes the authority of the monarch as part of its mode of obligation, Hieronimo uses other verbal structures to endow him with a culturally sanctioned licence for his revenge whilst bypassing the deference to the king.

The main reason Hieronimo is forced to turn away from the law is because its mechanisms are unable to provide him with the justice that he represents. This is because the murderers of his son are members of the royal courts of Spain and Portugal, and thus exempt from the censures which apply to other members of the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> For a more thorough exploration of the legal intricacies of Slade's Case, see David Ibbetson, 'Sixteenth Century Contract Law: Slade's Case in Context', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 4 (1984), 295-317.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> David Harris Stacks, 'The Promise and the Contract in Early Modern England: Slade's Case in Perspective', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 28-53 (p. 36).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Christopher W. Brooks observes that formal contracts were slowly being replaced during the late sixteenth century by 'informal agreements based either on verbal promises, or on writings' (*Law*, *Politics and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 316). Interestingly, one of the citizens notes that the bond which Hieronimo rips up has cost him 'ten pound' (III.xiii.124), reinforcing their status as objects of high value.

state.<sup>31</sup> As a figure who is placed within the established legal framework but displaced from it, Hieronimo is in an ideal position to test the veracity of the competing modes of obligation which were impacting upon sixteenth century law. When he is required to oversee the execution of Pedringano, he articulates a view of retribution which appears to be orthodox in sentiment, but is undercut by the recognition of his own anomalous exclusion from standard legal practice:

For blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge, Be satisfied, and the law discharged. And though myself cannot receive the like, Yet I will see that others have their right.

III.vi.35-38

Hieronimo encapsulates the retributive impulse of the law as 'blood' paid with 'blood' in a structure which is defined by symmetry. However, because his own situation prevents this schema from being taken as an objective truth about the law, Kyd initiates a gap between the idea of retribution and Hieronimo's linguistic conception of its constitutive features. The further the project of revenge is pursued, the more his obligation under oath to answer Horatio's death with the 'blood' of his murderers is distorted. In order to explore the consequences of this action, Kyd draws on some of the anxieties which surround the corruption of oaths in scrivening culture, particularly the falsification or imperfect rendering of rhetoric, and filling in gaps or lacunae with forged bonds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> For an essay which focuses on the political context within which the play operates, see Kevin Dunn, "'Action, Passion, Motion": The Gestural Politics of Council in *The Spanish Tragedy'*, *Renaissance Drama*, 31 (2002), 27-60.

In the early quartos of the text, Hieronimo is approached by four supplicants to help promote their legal suits to the court.<sup>32</sup> Kyd describes Hieronimo's role in this context as a 'corregidor' (III.xiii.58), which is derived from the word 'corrector' to mean 'One who corrects or sets right; one who points out errors or faults, and substitutes or indicates what is right'. 33 As 'corregidor', Hieronimo operates in a manner similar to Henry Goodcole's description of the magistrate as a figure who can 'true deliverance make between our Sovereigne' and the citizens; there may also be a subtle endorsement of Hieronimo's project to cleanse the law of the corruption of its processes by the royal family. However, the word also had a secondary meaning in the sixteenth century as 'A printer's employee who reads proofs and marks the corrections to be made in the type before printing off; a proof-reader'.<sup>34</sup> This draws on scrivening culture to associate Hieronimo's legal role with correct reading and the clarification of the rhetoric of obligation. As 'corregidor' in this sense, Hieronimo is ensuring that the 'declaration' (III.xiii.65) 'bond' (III.xiii.66) and 'lease' (III.xiii.66) he has been given are truly indicative of the civic duties which such documents represent. Hieronimo is crafted as a figure who ensures that the rhetoric of obligation exists in the terms which are most in line with convention, defined by scrivener's oath as guaranteeing that the bond be 'well and loyally made'.35

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Colvo and Tronch argue that this segment of the earlier text was replaced by the painter's scene in performance: 'This 'addition' was probably meant to substitute for 3.13.45-172, that is, the whole of 3.13 apart from Hieronimo's soliloquy'. As such, the more troubling implications of distorted oath rhetoric are replaced by a sustained focus on the deceptive properties of visual art. Calvo and Tronch, gloss, p. 245.

<sup>33 &</sup>quot;corregidor, n. Etymology.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> "corrector, n. 1a, 1b.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Steer, p. 32.

However, this commendable attitude to orthodox legal practice is complicated by the Senecan oath Hieronimo swears to exact revenge on Horatio's murderers. When he is given a supplication by the grieving father Bazulto, who has likewise lost a son, Hieronimo recognises a fellow sufferer from grief who is unable to find immediate restitution in the law: 'I in thy mishaps may see / The lively portrait of my dying self' (III.xiii.83-85). The similarity between the two fathers is a subtle modulation of the symmetrical 'blood for blood' concept which Hieronimo articulated during the execution of Pedringano. Whereas that form was based on death, however, this new conception derives from shared loss and fellow feeling. Yet this is not entirely the case. In Hieronimo's imagery, Bazulto is not merely a grieving father but a 'lively portrait', or a piece of art; similarly, Hieronimo is not a reflection of this state but a 'dying self' who is undergoing a slow transformation from a living being into a corpse. Instead of a clear obligation which recognises the concept of likeness or mutuality in relation to the law, Hieronimo describes a model in which the fellow sufferer is constructed as an idealised artistic 'portrait' who is substituted for an original self which is regarded as lifeless and obsolete. The two types of metamorphosis are indicative of the potential of Senecan concepts of revenge to retranslate the orthodox forms of legal obligation into a concept where art fills the gap left by death, rather than a desire for 'blood' (III.vi.35). Hieronimo's later description of Bazulto as a 'counterfeit' (III.xiii.115) implies that his role as 'corregidor' or corrector of false bonds is complicated by the turn from orthodox swearing to one that derives its potency from classical rhetoric and artistic composition; in place of shared grief is a mimetic replication of loss which locates the essence of feeling in the duplication of sincere emotion, rather than the sensation itself.

This concept is developed by Kyd when Hieronimo destroys the 'bond' (III.xiii.66) that has been entrusted to him: 'Then will I rend and tear them thus and thus, / Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth' (III.xiii.121-122). Hieronimo's established role as a 'corregidor' of false or suspect legal language is overturned in a stage act which severs the rhetoric that he is purportedly helping to protect. When accused by Bazulto of destroying his chance to attain justice for his son, Hieronimo refutes the claim by challenging him to show a 'drop of blood' (III.xiii.127) that has been shed by his action. Evidently he is mentally transforming the linguistic artefact into an object of revenge in a movement which brings the two frameworks of lawful and Senecan swearing into direct confusion. From Hieronimo's perspective, the letter as a substitute for Lorenzo and Balthazar is ineffective because it does not bleed, although in his frenzy he misses the most obvious point that his action impedes the legal bond from helping to articulate Bazulto's cause in a court of law. In her discussion of Kyd's use of 'judicial oratory', Carla Mazzio observes its tendency to 'obscure or splinter, rather than clearly index, an action'. 36 This is certainly true in relation not only to Hieronimo, whose desired vengeance is prefigured through its projection onto a paper document, but also Bazulto and the other citizens, whose chances of traditional justice have likewise been hindered. The association of lawful swearing with civic cohesion is distorted not only by the royal court, but also the intrusion of an alternative ethical oath which is able to 'put the law out of office', to quote Francis Bacon, by disrupting the linguistic bonds through which it disseminates its own notion of social and political order.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Carla Mazzio, *The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 120.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Francis Bacon, 'Of Revenge' in *The Major Works* ed. by Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 347-348 (p. 347).

The traditional legal conceptions of swearing are deeply complicated by Hieronimo's decision to set them in opposition to a classical model, which in turn violates the form of obligated recompense he has rejected. One consequence of this is that Hieronimo's Senecan oath encourages him to prioritise his own inner turmoil at the expense of other grieving fathers.<sup>38</sup> In a discussion of the subjective consequences of the move towards a looser form of verbal contract law, Luke Wilson notes that promising individuals are 'forced to assume a habit of constant self-examination, attending to their own consciousness and continually constructing intentional accounts of their accounts'. 39 This is a useful description not only of Hieronimo's inner scrutiny once Horatio has been murdered, but also his attempt to translate his destruction of Bazulto's bond into a Senecan dramatic plot. However, rather than provide a heightened degree of clarity, it only serves to further immerse Hieronimo in the telos of revenge which he has to a large degree constructed for himself: 'So is't my duty to regard his death / Who, when he lived, deserved my dearest blood' (III.vi.13-14). The word 'regard' is used in its primary sense of paying attention, but it also carries the secondary implication of taking care of one's own interest. <sup>40</sup> As part of the plot he initiates to exact vengeance for Horatio's murder. Hieronimo transforms both himself and his son into overly rhetorical entities, defined by Senecan notions of bloodlust rather than familial bonds. This is not confined to father and son, however; once Bazulto's bond has been torn, Hieronimo perceives him to be the 'lively image' of a 'fury' (III.xiii.159, 150) who is 'changed in death's black shade.' (III.xiii.143), even though he vehemently protests that he is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Hieronimo argues that Bazulto's grief is a 'lesser thing' (III.xiii.98) than his own based on the difference in their rank, associating Senecan rhetoric with a form of privilege which is meritocratic rather than aristocratic, based on his eventual murder of the royal family.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Luke Wilson, 'Ben Jonson and the Law of Contract', in *Rhetoric and Law in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 143-165 (p. 152).

<sup>40 &</sup>quot;regard, v. 4c, 2a.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

'not a ghost' (III.xiii.156). Entering into a Senecan oath has enabled Hieronimo to pursue the type of justice which is prohibited by the law, but the creative and artistic consequences are troublingly similar to the falsification of rhetoric and the invention of new linguistic bonds which the scrivener, in his oath, is expressly forbidden to practise.

The word 'shades' is associated with the concept of transformation earlier in the text. When Hieronimo discovers the 'murderous spectacle' (II.v.9) of Horatio's corpse for the first time, he declares 'he that whilom was my son' (II.v.15) is to be found in the 'dark and deathful shades' (II.v.22) of the underworld. This was evidently a moment which struck a chord with the earliest audiences of the play, but it also associates the move towards a Senecan structural framework with the metamorphosis of the figure that impels the cause for revenge. 41 A 'shade' is an image which suggests a form of liminality, or a trace of a former, more stable state. The word may have been attractive to Kyd because it depicts the deceased Horatio as a blank entity which is able to be substantiated through rhetorical description, at least from Hieronimo's perspective. The use of 'shades' in this manner could well be a Kydean innovation; the OED sites a semantic association of the word as denoting 'the darkness of the nether world' as first originating in Kyd's translation of Robert Garnier's play *Cornelia*. 42 Here, the lament 'When shall this soul of mine / Come visit thee in the Elysian shades?' (III.i.106-107) is used by Cornelia to suggest a temporary incursion to the land of the dead, but also one which is longingly imagined rather than definite. Kyd's characters are aware of the attractiveness of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> For a detailed account of the immediate cultural influence of the text, see Clara Colvo, 'Thomas Kyd and the Elizabethan Blockbuster: *The Spanish Tragedy*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by Ton Hoenselaars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 19-33.

<sup>42 &</sup>quot;shade, n. 2b.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

moving into another space through altering the state of their existence, but it is one which is a conditional 'visit' rather than an unambiguous point of arrival.

When Hieronimo enters into a Senecan framework by uttering the words of an oath derived from classical rhetoric, he invokes a structural pattern which purports to offer him a means of revenge, but is in fact replete with its own ethical ambiguities:

Seest thou this handkerchief besmeared with blood? It shall not from me till I take revenge.

Seest thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh? I'll not entomb them till I have revenge.

Then will I joy amidst my discontent.

Till then my sorrow never shall be spent.

II.v.51-56

The temporal distortion that will be unleashed once the oath is spoken is hinted at in the grammar of the first few lines. Hieronimo imagines that he will 'take' revenge by using a verb which conceptualises the imagined consummation of his desire, but one which is displaced to a future time by the word 'till'. However, Kyd subtly reinscribes this tense when Hieronimo states that he will 'have' revenge, suddenly imagining that his goal has been achieved. The verb is still used, but here it is placed in a future space in which the act is a memory or recollection of a murder which has obviously not occurred yet. The rhetorical device of parison is used to add a sense of stability to the oath through the intonation of the repeated clauses 'Seest thou', but this only serves to emphasise the subtle modulations of the tense structure

Spanish Tragedie (London: Edward White, 1592), sig. D3v.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> In the 1596 quarto, the second use of the word 'revenge' is in the past tense as 'reveng'd'. This is modified to the present tense by a compositor for the second quarto, and is adopted in all subsequent editions. However, the past tense may have been closer to Kyd's intentions with regard to the temporality that is opened up by the tense structure of promissory language. Thomas Kyd, *The* 

in relation to the set linguistic formula. As if to stress the point, Kyd semi-inverts a possible anaphora in the last two lines - 'Then will' / 'Till then' – which has the effect of sharply contrasting the completion of act with its future imminence.

Although the oath spoken over Horatio's corpse endows Hieronimo with a licence to pursue a teleology of revenge, the temporal framework which facilitates the act will be anything but linear, if the syntactical utterance which endorses the action is anything to go by.

Another factor which complicates the veracity of Hieronimo's vow is his decision to use the bloody handkerchief as something approaching a sacred entity. Andrew Sofer has characterised the object as a 'ghostly palimpsest that absorbs meaning through intertextual borrowing as well as through fresh symbolic resonance'. <sup>44</sup> As a 'palimpsest', the handkerchief is structurally as well as rhetorically unstable, invoking a number of competing generic frameworks to complicate the notion of a clear unified plot. If the handkerchief functions as a symbolic entity which will oversee the process of Hieronimo's revenge, then it is one which is defined by multiplicity as opposed to fixity, acting at various points in the text as a love token, a memorial object and a military insignia. When used to facilitate a structural movement, the various competing dramatic forms are subtly activated to threaten the singularity of Hieronimo's project by drawing attention to its status as one possible dramatic mode among many. <sup>45</sup> In tandem with this is the confusion as to whom Hieronimo addresses his vow when he implores an observer to 'see' what he is doing. As this could be directed at either himself, Horatio or the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Andrew Sofer, 'Absorbing Interests: Kyd's Bloody Handkerchief as Palimpsest', *Comparative Drama*, 34 (2000), 127-153 (p. 129).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> See: Linda Perkins Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 140-156. Marvin Carlson's concept of 'ghosting', in which the cultural memory attached to a prop is able to enhance or complicate the dialogue spoken alongside it, it also a useful idea within which to situate Kyd's technique ('The Haunted Stage: Recycling and Reception in the Theatre', *Theatre Survey*, 35 (1994), 5-18 (p. 12)).

audience, there is a corresponding ambiguity in the exact nature of the witness who will attest to the truth of what has been spoken. In orthodox legal swearing, the oath is scrutinised by a group of magistrates who represent the king, alongside the divine invocation of God. This is obviously eschewed in Hieronimo's vow, so the audience is primed to regard the pact as unorthodox in nature. Yet an analogy is encouraged through a form of witnessing which is a central feature of the custom of oath-taking. Kyd adopts this double strategy to intensify the connection between the plot and the audience's observation of it, but also to complicate the notion of Hieronimo's obligation as binding due to the very nature of that scrutiny, in which the audience is substituted for a magistrate or another privileged entity. Again, Kyd modifies the conceptual framework of the vow to question the extent to which it can be considered licit, particularly as the audience are in a passive position in relation to the action, with minimal chance of voicing either their censure or approval.

In Seneca's play *Thyestes*, a source text for *The Spanish Tragedy*, the Messenger tells the audience about the highest oath that is sworn by the gods in classical culture: 'fons stat sub umbra tristis et nigra piger / haeret palude; talis est dirae Stygis / deformis unda quae facit caelo fidem' [A dismal spring starts forth beneath the shadow, and sluggish in a black pool creeps along; such as the ugly waters of the dread Styx, on which the gods take oath]. <sup>46</sup> The word 'umbra' is conceptually similar to Kyd's use of the word 'shade' to denote a figure suspended between life and death, or who retains some aspects of life which are frustratingly insubstantial. As the most rarefied form of oath-taking in classical literature, it is possible to perceive the implications of this transition as one of the central

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Seneca, *Thyestes*, in *Tragedies*, ed. by Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1968), II, pp. 89-182, 665-666 (p. 147).

frameworks within which Hieronimo's vow is placed. <sup>47</sup> The river Styx is regarded as an inviolable entity by the gods because it is the point at which the living cross over to the land of the dead. As immortal beings, they are exempt from this shift, so it represents their own immutability; as such, it is a perfect sacred entity with which to stabilise a promised action. However, there are evident problems when this concept is invoked for humans, who are subject to change and therefore not encompassed by the lack of alteration which the river Styx represents. In Jasper Heywood's translation of this section of *Thyestes*, he gestures to some of the rhetorical difficulties in rendering the oath of the gods in language:

A lothsome springe stands under shade, and slouthfull course doth take,

With water blacke: even such as is: of yrkesome Stygian lake The ugly wave whereby art wont, to sweare the gods on hye. Here all the night the grisly ghosts and gods of death to erie The fame reportes. 48

Seneca's use of a simile is pointedly emphasised by Heywood to stress the comparative nature of the 'Stygian lake' to the scene he is describing; as such, there is a greater sense of it existing as a metaphor and not an actual feature of the landscape, or an oath which is tangibly sworn by any of the characters. Similarly, the use of word 'shade' in the place of 'umber' conveys the insubstantiality of the space in which the 'lothsome springe' exists whilst invoking the shadowy figures that populate the underworld. The liminal landscape is solidified by the metaphoric comparison with an oath which derives its potency from an immutable entity,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> This is quite a common trope in Early Modern poetry; for instance, William van de Passe mentions the 'inferior sphere [...] of blacke Styx, the most infernall lake / (Which is the gravest oath, the Gods can take)' (*The crowne of all Homers workes Batrachomyomachia* (London: John Bill, 1624), p. 23). <sup>48</sup> Seneca, *Thyestes*, in *Seneca his tenne tragedies*, trans. by Jasper Heywood (London: Thomas Marsh, 1581), p. 32.

although this exists slightly out of reach as a comparison rather than a defining aspect of the scene being described. As if to emphasise the point, Heywood states that this entire section of the text is a fiction reported to exist by 'fame', but of which there is no objective verification. In this creative interpretation of a Senecan oath by a near contemporary of Kyd, binding language exists in the vague temporal space of metaphoric language, shaded springs and 'grisly ghosts'. When Hieronimo swears in a similar fashion, he enters into a conceptual system defined by successive frames of rhetorical displacement rather than the concrete action and clear language which is the main task, as we have seen, of a figure concerned with civic bonds, such as a legally trained scrivener.

This is a useful context within which to explore the strategies used by Kyd to delineate Hieronimo's shift in character when he swears his vow:

O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears!

O life, no life, but lively form of death!

O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,

Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds!

III.ii.1-4

Hieronimo's living body is replaced by a series of metaphors which register his loss through creative ingenuity; where he once had eyes, for instance, now he possesses 'fountains fraught with tears' in an image which associates his grief with fluidity and change. Just as Horatio has been turned into a spectacle and a shade, Hieronimo exists in a metaphoric space which relocates Kerrigan's concept of 'displacement' to the realms of rhetoric. <sup>49</sup> Kyd may have detected the subtle process of this strategy from his reading of Seneca. In *Thyestes*, the ghost of Tantalus describes his ascent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Kerrigan, p. 8.

into the upper world as a movement which fills up the empty space with his revenge: 'regione quidquid impia cessat loci / complebo' [Whatever space is still empty in the unholy realm, I shall fill up]. Similar to Hieronimo, an imagined vacuum or vacancy is inhabited and subsequently transformed by an impulse to enact vengeance. Yet whereas this change is affected by Tantalus in his arrival, Hieronimo's shift is reflexively pushed back onto himself, initiating a process in which his new rhetorical identity fills a lacuna with a vow which could arguably be defined as unlawful. Hieronimo's later assertion that the world is 'filled with murder and misdeeds' appears to gesture to this aesthetic process, although it is unclear whether he is referring to the murder of Horatio or his own future action. Perhaps the temporal distortion is a deliberate implication designed to convey the horror that is unleashed when Hieronimo fills a vacated conceptual gap with classical rhetoric of revenge.

These are some of the conditions which are invoked when Hieronimo uses a Senecan oath to legitimise his act of retribution. However, this project is not a neat alternative to the legal forms of justice which Hieronimo has previously found so frustrating. Part of Kyd's strategy for situating the revenge plot in a more intricate ethical framework involves the use of fragments of Senecan rhetoric to comprise Hieronimo's dialogue, whilst encouraging the audience to trace them back to their position in the original text. The book which he is carrying during his entrance in act three, scene thirteen is subtly revealed to be an edition of Seneca when Hieronimo begins to quote from *Agamemnon*: 'Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter' [Through crime is ever the safest way for crime] (III.xiii.6).<sup>51</sup> The line appears to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Thyestes, 21-22, p. 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Seneca, *Agamemnon*, in *Tragedies*, ed. by Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1968), II, pp. 1-88, 115 (p. 11).

open up a space in which revenge can be spun out as a structural process through other criminal acts; not only is Hieronimo acting as a mouthpiece for a well-known Senecan revenger, he is using the language that they speak as a 'conductor' (III.xiii.8) with which to formulate a similarly brutal plot. As if to stress this point, Hieronimo immediately declares his intention to 'Strike, and strike home, where wrong is offered' (III.xiii.7). However, this is not all that the quotation is doing. An audience member familiar with Seneca would know that Clytemnestra's maxim is immediately challenged by the Nurse, who warns her that 'Quod metuit auget qui scelus scelere obruit' [Whoso piles crime on crime, makes greater what he dreads]. 52 An alternative teleology is offered in which the introduction of 'scelus' may well provide revenge, but the consequence will be extreme in its ability to recoil back on the revenger. Clytemnestra listens to this sage advice and modifies her original attitude, or at least registers its import, by stating 'O scelera semper sceleribus vincens domus!' [O house, that ever o'ertops crime with crime!]. 53 Rather than a simple endorsement of revenge, the Senecan text quoted by Hieronimo is one of a series of alternative courses which encompass the dire implications for the revenger once the final murder is committed – in Clytemnestra's case, the ruin of her dynasty – and the subsequent realisation of the moral cost of the action about to be taken. As a legitimate precedent for his own revenge, Hieronimo's use of Seneca is therefore only a partial application which misses the ethical intricacy with which the project is critiqued in the original text.

Kyd subtly encourages the audience to think about the source of Seneca's language in several ways. The book Hieronimo is reading is presumably a collected edition of texts, so his excerpt is obviously subjective and fragmentary; he may be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> *Agamemnon*, 151, p. 15. <sup>53</sup> *Agamemnon*, 169, p. 17.

quoting from the equivalent of a commonplace book, in which excerpts of classical texts were transcribed to provide the individual with a bespoke collection of trusted maxims.<sup>54</sup> Also, Hieronimo's taunt to the Viceroy of Portingale that his 'reconciled son / Marched in a net' (IV.iv.116-117) is an allusion to Clytemnestra's comparison of Agamemnon to a boar caught in a net before she murders him. This is used to establish a direct analogy between Hieronimo's revenge plot and the Senecan source which he quotes form and has been inspired by, regardless of the wider censures against the action expressed in the original text. Similarly, Hieronimo's assertion that 'For ignorance, I wot, and well they know, / Remedium malorum iners est' [An idle remedy of ills is ignorance (III.xiii.34-35) is most immediately an allusion to the recognised wisdom expressed in the citation from Seneca's play Oedipus. However, the shared knowledge assumed by Hieronimo could also apply to the text from which the quote is taken, suggesting that the other characters – and by extension, the audience – are familiar with both the expression itself and the classical source from which it originates. Part of Kyd's strategy is to complicate the framework from which Hieronimo derives his oath by revealing it as a partial and selective application of an ethically richer text. The action that he wishes to pursue may derive structural coherence and impetus from Senecan drama, but Hieronimo's refusal to acknowledge the scepticism with which such a process is explored, and the knowledge which a more literate reader of Seneca will bring to bear, renders his project suspect at best and immoral at worst.

The vow of revenge does not work in the way that Hieronimo intends because it relies on the implicit judgement of a witness. As previously discussed, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> For a comprehensive exploration of the practice of commonplacing, see Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

theatrical context from which the Senecan framework is derived encourages the audience to adopt this role; however, an observer who has had a grammar school or university education will be in a position to trace the Latin quotations back to their original point in the classical text, revealing the partiality with which Hieronimo has grasped Seneca's ethical endorsement of revenge. Sha a witness to the vow, he or she may well find it faulty due to a lack of clarity in his rhetoric, or a partial replication of an authoritative source. Perhaps Hieronimo is aware of this, though. In the final moments of the early quarto texts, he refuses to explain his motivation behind the murderous performance because it is something which he has 'vow'd inviolate' (IV.iv.184). The use of the custom to occlude his speech is a surprising new development for Hieronimo, as it inverts his previous reliance on swearing to open up different forms of discourse as well as license his actions throughout the play. There is also an uncertainty as to what exactly is vowed, as he has previously offered a lengthy account of his actions from lines 87-144.

Hieronimo's lack of clarity and his decision to render the vow inviolable is a means of eschewing any form of scrutiny by the other characters on stage as well as the audience. He is able to define the custom entirely on his own lexical terms through placing his language in an inner mental space which is inaccessible. This is especially pronounced in relation to the transference between entities which appears to have offered an alternative form of swearing to the more stratified legal frameworks which he has rejected earlier in the text. A Senecan model may have provided Hieronimo with the illusion of swapping places with Horatio, but this has

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> For an exploration of the impact that Senecan texts had on early modern culture, see Jessica Winston, 'English Seneca: Heywood to Hamlet', in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature*, *1485-1603*, ed. by Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 472-487 (p. 474). For a more sustained examination of Seneca's influence on early modern drama, see Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

not been a clear process; rather, it has reduced his son to a shade which is substantiated by Hieronimo through the construction of his 'image' (III.xiii.159) with the tools of classical rhetoric, pushing him further away from his son as a recently remembered human entity. In tandem with this process is a corresponding reduction in Hieronimo's own humanity, which suffers from ethical compromise when he becomes less of a father and more of a 'fury' (III.xiii.150), particularly in the notorious moment where he stabs Castile for no apparent reason (IV.iv.196). An audience member who has read Seneca carefully would know that this type of outcome is warned against in the source texts. However, by opening up a semantic space in which his language is 'inviolable', Hieronimo forgoes the structures of outside observation, allowing him to pursue forms of behaviour which are unable to be regulated by the censure of an external judge, and therefore dangerously hard to predict.

The playwrights who came after Kyd may have been troubled by the radical properties of this particular moment in the text. The 1602 additions in the fourth quarto, which Colvo and Tronch regard as 'substitution' for the earlier section, cut the word 'vow' entirely and replace it with the line 'Methinks since I grew inward with revenge, / I cannot look with scorn enough on death' (IV.iv.27-28). The sense of inertia is retained, but this is no longer protected with a sacred pledge, rendering Hieronimo more culpable through a muted acknowledgement of his absorption. As such, the excision of the oath is a possible indication of the anxiety over behaviour which is self-sanctioned, and thus evasive of external or accepted forms of scrutiny.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Calvo and Tronch, p. 310.

of The Spanish Tragedy concludes with Hieronimo speaking from a recognisably Christian hell in which 'murther god will bring to light: / Though long it be hid from mans sight'. There is no mention of a vow which enables Hieronimo is eschew any kind of conventional punishment (Anon., The Spanish tragedy, containing the lamentable murders of Horatio and Bellimperia (London: Henry Gosson, 1620), sig. A1r).

There may also have been concern over the potential of the word 'vow'd' to draw attention to the corruption of the custom of swearing by the figures who are charged with safeguarding its sanctity. However, the ambiguous presentation of the consequences of Hieronimo's oath throughout the play would suggest that such fears are unfounded, particularly as they prevent the more interrogative readings which Kyd is so keen to encourage. A self-willed vow can appear to endow all manner of acts with cultural pedigree, particularly if the promissory framework invoked is respected. Yet the necessary inclusion of an observer, be it legal, divine or theatrical, has the potential to point out any deficiencies which the swearer may not want to recognise. Perhaps this is the lesson that is learnt by Hieronimo in his decision to render his ultimate aim 'inviolable' (IV.iv.184). The conclusion of the play with an oath which nullifies the potential of ethically suspect behaviour to be called to account is what makes the fourth quarto additions so orthodox, and the original depiction of swearing so radical.

#### Antonio's Revenge

When Atreus is planning his revenge in *Thyestes*, he imagines that it will surpass any act that has gone before: 'scelera non ulciseris, / nisi vincis' [Crimes thou dost not avenge save as thou dost surpass them]. <sup>59</sup> The line reappears in John Marston's play *Antonio's Revenge* when the ghost of Andrugio is persuading his son

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> I discuss the semantic complexities of the word 'vow' in the Introduction: see the sub-section 'Vocabulary'. Linda Woodbridge's observation that Senecan tragedy 'could serve as a vehicle for dissent against tyranny' is a politicised framework within which to situate Hieronimo's assault on the royal family, particularly his desire to prevent the exercise of judgement in legal terms ('Resistance Theory Meets Drama: Tudor Seneca', *Renaissance Drama*, 38 (2010), 115-13 (p. 134)). <sup>59</sup> *Agamemnon*, 194-195, p. 105.

to kill his murderer Piero (III.i.51). <sup>60</sup> As part of his own plot, Antonio is exhorted to read Seneca and then exceed him, inventing a spectacle which will measure the success of revenge by the creativity with which the source material is reworked. This is a reflexive nod to the audience, who would have become aware of the generic interplay that defined the form on stage in the years after *The Spanish Tragedy* and provided one of its most pleasurable features. <sup>61</sup> Yet when Andrugio speaks in classical rhetoric, Marston is revealing that his characters have not only read Seneca but also Thomas Kyd, who similarly uses quotation to open up various possibilities for the staging of revenge. By encouraging the audience to trace the line back to its position in the classical source via the other utterances of Senecan text in popular theatrical culture, Marston is able to outline a more complex cultural process, in which not only Seneca's attitude to revenge can be invoked but also the interpretation of his rhetoric by other fictional revengers.

The quotation that Andrugio chooses to galvanise his son has a structural form in which one crime not only succeeds another but extends its reach. As such, it is a projected teleology of excess which will increase in intensity the deeper the project of 'scelus' is pursued. Marston's use of the quote at such a crucial place in the narrative reveals the wider implications of Senecan rhetoric as an activating device, particularly in terms of revenge structure. The imitation of a plot such as *Thyestes* will indeed provide a framework for violence to occur, but the creative challenge of reworking the text will contort the plot into ever more gruesome patterns. We see this when Antonio murders the innocent child Julio because he happens to be the son of Piero: 'He is all Piero, father, all; this blood, / This breast,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, ed. by W. Reavley Gair (Manchester: Revels, 1978).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> For a fuller account of the marketplace in which Marston's art was placed, see Reavley Gair, *The Children of Pauls: The Story of a Theatre Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

this heart, Piero, all, / Whom thus I mangle' (III.iii.56-58). Karen Robertson observes that 'Recompense to the injured party can be achieved only by an extra measure of punishment, exceeding in vengeance'; the original murder of a father is inverted by Antonio when he in turn murders a son, ensuring that the original crime has been surpassed by the butchering of a small child.<sup>62</sup> Yet Marston's description of the act as a mangling contains a knowing allusion to the ethical cost of this framework of structural inventiveness. A character may use Seneca in order to pursue revenge, but the context of the early modern stage ensures that he is also rewriting Kyd's reading of Seneca, forcing him further away from his desired ethical aim. The sense of deferment is unusually pronounced at the moment of swearing a classical oath, as the action it opens up is increasingly informed by aesthetic notions of artifice and imitation, as opposed to restitution for a perceived crime.

Marston is a careful reader of Kyd, who is in turn a careful reader of Seneca. The conceptual space crafted by Marston at the beginning of the play alludes to the familiar structure of a murderous impulse filling up an absent gap and transforming it into a place fir for revenge: 'If ought of these strains fill this consort up, / Th'arrive most welcome' (Prologue, 26-27). In a similar manner to *Thyestes* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marston's play conceives of the available formal model as a process which enacts a generic shift once the project of revenge is entered into; the movement is fundamentally transformative at the level of structure. This association is bolstered by the murderer Piero, who asserts that 'Will I not turn a glorious bridal morn / Unto a Stygian night?' (I.i.88-89). Not only is the tactic of filling up a gap with revenge adopted from Kyd's reading of Seneca, but also the association of the process with the taking of a classical oath. W. Reavely Gair defines the word 'Stygian' as 'black

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Karen Robertson, 'Antonio's Revenge: The Tyrant, The Stoic and the Passionate Man', Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England, 4 (1989), 91-106 (p. 97).

as the river Styx', so we see a subtle invocation of the vow which the gods swear to signal the most privileged form of obligation in classical culture. Marston uses these strategies in a similar manner to *The Spanish Tragedy* to construct the oath as a means through which revenge is permitted to occur. However, whereas Kyd is concerned with using it to explore the types of action which the custom is able to license, particularly with regard to the censure of the witness, Marston exhibits a more sceptical view based on its use as a means to facilitate a spectacle on the stage. As such, his depiction of swearing places the dramatisation of revenge in a slightly more aestheticised context, although Marston is suspicious of the implications of this particular aspect of the structural material he inherits for the ethical import of the revenger.

When Antonio is charged with carrying out the revenge of his father, he turns to the pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia* to express his discomfort with the task before him: 'Heu quo labor, quo vota ceciderunt mea?' (II.iv.19) [Alas! To what end my labour and my prayers?'].<sup>64</sup> The word 'vota' has a primary meaning as a prayer or an invocation to the gods, usually with the implication that help is required to resolve a particularly distressing circumstance. Yet it also carries a second implication of being a vow. As the phrase is spoken in Latin, the semantic complexity of this word will have been more pronounced in the original production, enabling a fluent audience member to construct the sentence as 'To what end my labour and my vows?' Although Antonio is implored by his father to inhabit a revenge structure defined by increasing acts of violence, his use of a Senecan quotation to question its feasibility is a means through which the teleologies practiced by stage revengers can

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Gair, p. 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Seneca, *Octavia*, in *Tragedies*, ed. by Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols, (London: Heinemann, 1968), II, pp. 399-490, 632, p. 147.

be weighed and tested. The 'vota' that appears in the original Senecan text is thus reinscribed on stage by an awareness of its earlier use by a character such as Hieronimo, who licenses his terrible act of revenge with a 'vow'; it therefore operates as a critique of how Seneca is applied in revenge structure, alongside its ability to provide Antonio with a rhetorical discourse with which to make his own desire for vengeance possible. Marston is not only thinking of the 'vota' in structural terms, but crafting a character who is able to question, albeit mutedly, the import of the plots and teleologies that the custom has been able to generate for other fictional characters, and whether they have been successful in their aims. He is thus immediately differentiated from Hieronimo, who uses Seneca in a more circumspect manner in order to ensure that his projected vengeance is fulfilled.

There is an implicit scepticism regarding the ease with which Senecan dramaturgy can be used to license acts of stylised bloodshed. In 'Satyre IIII: Crassus', Marston's speaker parodies a individual named Gallus who vows that he will cease false swearing 'tomorrow', thus endlessly deferring his commitment whilst technically fulfilling his pledge: 'I asked lewd Gallus when he'll cease to sweare, [...] Tomorrow he doth vow he will forbear'. Marston's satire is directed at a cultural tendency to deflect an obligation through the use of the very custom which is designed to ensure its regularity; every time Gallus swears to stop swearing, the potency of the oath as coercive entity is reduced. The revenge plots that are to be found in Seneca, particularly the quotation from *Octavia* given to Andrugio, operate in a similar manner of displacement, in which an oath to commit one act results not in the completion of a prior bond but a more excessive murder. This initiates a structural pattern which threatens to get out of hand, as individuals die who are not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> John Marston, 'Satyre IIII: Crassus', in *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. by Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), pp. 118-124

encompassed within the terms of the original oath, and who will logically in turn require another revenger to provide the form of restitution demanded by the original victim. The legal framework which Hieronimo steps out of when he swears a Senecan oath is not defined by the same theatrical pressures of ever-increasing spectacle as its classical equivalent. In contrast, Marston's post-Kydean conception of what is termed by Barbara Baines as the 'aesthetic consciousness' of the play is particularly acute at the level of swearing, at is has the troubling potential to magnify the horror that it aims to diminish for the delight of the audience. The swearing of the same throughout throughout the same t

Antonio's vow in the third act is immediately preceded by the quotation of a passage from *Thyestes* which links various lines together from across the text. This focalises the citational aspect of Latin quotation by emphasising the subjective nature of Antonio's reading. The first citation contains the phrase 'durus umbrarum arbiter' (III.ii.16) [harsh judge of shades] which invokes Kyd's deep interest in the reduction of the swearer once an oath is sworn. We have earlier seen him use classical rhetoric to question the structural patterns which Seneca is able to unleash, so his eventual subsumation in the role of revenger is a transaction akin to Hieronimo's own adoption of Senecan rhetoric and the concomitant reduction in his humanity once he took his vow:

By the astoning terror of swart night,

By the infectious damps of clammy graves,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> The association between the end of revenge structure and cyclical repetition has been very influential in theatrical interpretations of the genre. Michael Boyd's 1997 production of *The Spanish Tragedy* for the RSC had the actor playing Horatio take Don Andrea's place in the final moments to heighten the 'endless tragedy' of the plot. Calvo and Tronch, 'Introduction', p. 83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Baines's argument that the self-reflexive properties of the text 'invites an assessment of the generic form' are interesting in relation to swearing, as it emerges more as a tenet of the genre which can be replicated rather than an act with genuinely affective potential ('*Antonio's Revenge*: Marston's Play on Revenge Plays', *Studies in English Literature*, 23 (1983), 277-294 (p. 280)).

Marston uses the rhetorical trope of parison encountered in Kyd's depiction of Hieronimo's vow to confer a similar degree of lexical structure on Antonio's language. The repeated clause 'by the –' places the future promissory action within a set formula which anticipates the successive action which is being unleashed at the moment of utterance. Yet in a similar manner to Kyd, Marston also crafts his language to complicate such a neat and confident projection. Working alongside parison through the text is another rhetorical strategy which might be usefully termed as reverse auxesis. Henry Peacham defines this trope as 'a forme of speech by which the Orator amplifieth by putting greatter word for a lesse'. 68 What we see instead is a miniaturisation in scale of the entities that are sworn on, from the 'swart night' to the mould that presses down on a human skull. In Peacham's view, auxesis is associated with growth based on a logical form of order and linearity, in which events can be conceptualised in a manner that is both causal and organic. As part of an utterance which initiates a future course of action, the process envisioned by Marston is static, defined by entities which diminish in semantic and structural import as they proceed forward. If the oath is designed to license a form of retribution, then the subtle language works to encompass some of the more inverted properties of a telos defined by death, in which all agents, including the swearer, are subject to unpredictable, often brutal events.

We can gain a sense of the import of Marston's technical strategy if we compare it to other instances of swearing throughout his corpus. In *Sophonisba*, the aged statesman Gelosso offers a definition of orthodox pledging which equates good

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Peacham, sig. Z4r.

swearing with sound public reputation: 'Our vow, our faith, our oath, why they're ourselves, / And he that's faithless to his proper self / May be excused if he break faith with princes' (II.i.83-85).<sup>69</sup> The true nature of the self is to be encountered in an honoured bond; anyone who breaks such a deep obligation is not imagined to be held by any ties, even the fidelity which is owed to the prince. Although this might be a naïve conception of swearing, it puts Antonio's murder of the ducal figure Piero in a more complex political light, as it reinforces the treasonous nature of his vow. As noted earlier, by entering into a Senecan pact he has already assumed a creative role in which the speech of revenge is shaped by classical source material as well as direct Latin quotation; thus, the decision to swear an oath permits Antonio to gratify his revenge at the expense of honouring the political bonds which constitute his public identity. Gelosso's assertion should not be taken as Marston's most definitive statement on the relationship between civic statehood and the self, particularly as it seems curiously naïve when compared with the *real politik* of the other courtiers. However, it does offer a glimpse into some of the politicised structures in which the social agent is both placed and read or deciphered by his or her peers. When Antonio substitutes this model for his own private pledge, a character such as Gelosso would not only regard him as untrustworthy in terms of social dealings, but may not even regard him as a recognisable or knowable entity, particularly in the context of the public world.

In order to ensure that the vengeance takes place, Antonio initiates two group oaths in which the other characters who have been wronged by Piero pledge their

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> John Marston, *Sophonisba*, in *The Selected Plays of John Marston*, ed. by MacDonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 395-483.

help. <sup>70</sup> This establishes a correlation between the original telos from *Medea* quoted by Andrugio and the widening of Antonio's vow; crime can only overtop crime if multiple oaths are able to facilitate new acts of murder. Marston's stage direction instructs the actors to walk about the stage with arms 'twined together' (V.iii.70) to convey their physical unity in the face of Piero's severance of bodies and familial bonds; there is a definite suggestion that his death will restore a form of social and familial cohesion which has been corrupted. However, the spectacle used to accomplish the task is staged in a manner which adds a different inflection on the terminus point to which the play in headed. Alberto is initially jubilant in his stabbing frenzy: 'This for them all! / And this, and this; sink to the heart of hell!' (V.v.78-79). Yet there is a faint echo of Hieronimo's more measured disclosure that 'As dear to me was my Horatio, / As yours, or yours, or yours, my lord, to you' (IV.iv.166-167). Whereas Kyd's oath is justified to an extent by a recapitulation of the legal concept of similitude, based on shared grief as well as his role as Knight Marshall, Alberto's sense of equilibrium is focussed on the repeated stabbing motions. Philip Ayres discusses Marston's desire to question the ethical ambiguity of The Spanish Tragedy when he says that he is 'working out a number of situations that involve his audience in an understanding of the real nature of the revenger'. 71 Two oaths have led to a similar outcome, but whereas one tests the limits to which the vow can be pushed in an attempt to rectify the perceived short-comings of the law, the other exposes the suspect pleasure in the spectacle of crime outdoing crime.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> The first oath occurs when the group 'swear by this Gordian knot of love' (IV.iv.89); the second when they exist the stage 'twined together' (V.iii.70).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Philip Ayres, 'Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*: The Morality of the Revenging Hero', *Studies in English Literature*, 12 (1972), 359-374 (p. 362).

Marston may have also been intrigued by Kyd's decision to close the first edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* with Hieronimo's cryptic vow, as his own play ends with the characters living as 'votaries' (V.vi.36) in seclusion. Whereas a final justification was eschewed, however, Antonio and his fellow avengers defer ultimate judgement towards God in a conclusion which appears to restore faith in an orthodox form of divine justice. However, the numerous bloody acts which have been licensed under the various staged oaths call the veracity of this final solemn 'vow' (V.vi.41) into doubt; surely they have been acting in direct opposition to the sanction against murder in holy scripture? Rather, the final obligation within which the characters place themselves conveniently prevents them from being held to account; perhaps the similarity with Piero's murderous acts would be too uncomfortable to confront. Marston appears to encourage the audience to view this final 'vow' as troublingly contingent when Antonio imagines an alternative afterlife which will replace the gap left by the secluded revengers as simulated characters in a 'black tragedy' (V.vi.63). Phoebe S. Spinrad argues that the play builds towards 'a transformation of the secular into the spiritual', but this neat schema is complicated by the imagined future staging of the story just witnessed. 72 Yet this is the exact opposite of the definitive end point which a promissory oath is designed to reach. Once 'scelus' is used to license revenge, the end point is not the pledging of a self-willed oath placed beyond the scrutiny of an audience, as Kyd appears to suggest; rather, it opens up a fictive cycle in which that revenge can be repeated endlessly for an audience, with no final point in sight. This may gratify a crowd eager for ever more flamboyant spectacles, but the ethical consequences for the murderer are troublingly deferred, almost indefinitely, in order for such gratification to occur. If an oath is able to license any

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Phoebe S. Spinrad, 'The Sacralization of Revenge in *Antonio's Revenge*', *Comparative Drama*, 39 (2005), 169-185 (p. 179).

concept within the structure of revenge tragedy, it may be the promise of witnessing ever more horrific spectacles, rather than a measured exploration of the consequences of using a privileged custom based on trust in order to facilitate murder.

# CHAPTER TWO

## COMMUNAL OATHS IN ROMAN DRAMA

#### Introduction

The play Caesar's Revenge exists in a garbled edition which is likely to be a memorial reconstruction of a university play. 1 It covers an unusually large swathe of Roman history, from the battle between Caesar and Pompey to the disintegration of the triumvirate, and utilises the cultural tropes of revenge tragedy throughout. At one point, the Ghost of Caesar compels Antony and Octavian to swear a binding oath, in which they will take control of Rome through exiling themselves and invading at the head of an army. When Antony is tasked with describing a suitable entity with which to swear by, the playwright settles on a number of recognisable Roman topoi:

> Then by the Gods that through the raging waves, Brought thee brave *Trojan* to old *Latium*, And great Quirinus placed now in Heaven: By the Gradinus that with shield of Brasse, Defendest *Rome*, by the overburning flames Of Vesta and Carpeian Towers of Jove Vowes Antony.<sup>2</sup>

The entities which are regarded as most inviolable are the cultural and mythological events of Rome's past, which exist in tandem with the invocation of a supreme deity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Anon., *The tragedie of Caesar and Pompey or Caesar's revenge* (London: John Wright, 1607).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Caesar's revenge, sig. H2v.

As such, the sacral properties inherent in the origin of the state are used to arbitrate the obligations of its citizens. There is evidently a deep respect not only for Rome's conception of its own past, but the civic society which it has founded. Yet the oath which is being sworn does not appear to respect this belief, as the action being legitimised is the destruction of Rome through a promissory act of aggression. There is an evident conflict between the language used to promote the republic as a political and cultural concept, and the iconoclastic behaviour that is enabled by swearing on it as a sacred entity; the two notions are at cross purposes, at least in relation to factional pledging.

Odd as it may seem, the oath in *Caesar's Revenge* is responsive to one of the central tenets of Roman drama in early modern theatrical culture. Communal oaths are typically sworn by a disaffected group of aristocrats or prominent public figures who wish to license a military attack on the state, initiating a structural process of exile and violent re-entry.<sup>3</sup> The shared cultural history that is being invoked when Rome is sworn on is not so much the deference to a sacred concept but a contingent device which is shrewdly deployed to add a selfless public aspect to what could be suspiciously regarded as private ambition. The communal oath in Roman drama is not a passive act but is rife with ideological contention, as it embodies a vision of solidarity which is representative of republican egalitarianism, but also the manipulation of such an emotive concept for personal ends. The distinction between acts of treason and loyalty is thus blurred, or sometimes even lost altogether. This chapter will explore the political and aesthetic intricacies of communal swearing in Roman drama. First it will flesh out the context of group oath-taking in the later

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Other early modern Roman plays which adopt this structure include Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*; Thomas Kyd's *Cornelia*; Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War*; George Chapman's *The Wars of Caesar and Pompey*; and Ben Jonson's *Catiline*.

sixteenth century, with a particular focus on the Instrument of an Association, before considering the different political inflections which accompany the actions unleashed by the vow in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*<sup>4</sup> and Ben Jonson's *Catiline*.<sup>5</sup>

#### The Instrument of an Association

In the early 1580s Elizabeth and her Protestant council felt increasingly isolated on the world stage. The assassination of Prince William of Orange by Catholic agents of Philip II of Spain in 1584 had demonstrated the ease with which a political leader associated with reformed doctrine could be killed, prompting the government to seriously consider what would occur in the aftermath of a possible assassination. The sense of paranoia was compounded by the presence of Mary Queen of Scots, who had been held as a prisoner of state since her forced abdication from the Scottish throne in 1568. Mary's position as an heir of Henry VIII through his eldest sister Margaret Tudor not only placed her nearest to Elizabeth in blood but created a highly visible religious alternative to the current monarch. Mary had established ties with the French monarchy and the Papacy and was often the focus of indirect plots on Elizabeth's life; just a few months after William's assassination, a plan by a Jesuit friar had been unmasked by Walsingham's spy network in Scotland.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate (London: Arden, 1995).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ben Jonson, *Catiline*, ed. by Inga Stina-Ewbank, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), IV, pp. 1-185.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> David Cressy, 'Binding the nation: The Bonds of Association, 1584 and 1969', in *Tudor Rule and Revolution: Essays for G.R. Elton from his American Friends*, ed. by Delloyd J. Guth and John M. McKenna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 217-234 (p. 217).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 136.

The possibility of a foreign Catholic plot to kill Elizabeth and replace her with the Scottish queen was a fear which reached a level approaching national paranoia.

These anxieties prompted Cecil and Walsingham to create a new state oath which was unprecedented in its political and governmental import. The Instrument of an Association was a group pact whereby English subjects communally swore to 'prosecute such person or persons to the death' who would 'attempt any act, or council or consent to any thing that shall tend to the harm of Her Majesty's royal person'. No details of the precise form of retribution were given, although the wording of the oath, promising 'utter extermination' to the enemy, implied that the resistance would be violent and militaristic. After the Instrument was publicly signed by the Privy Council on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1594, it was circulated amongst the aristocracy and the leading members of the clergy, before being given to local magistrates to disseminate amongst the populace. In the winter of 1584, signing the Instrument became something of a popular craze; there were so many subscriptions in the county of Richmondshire, for instance, that the lord lieutenant was unable to cope with his administrative duties. 9 The enthusiasm with which it was received amounted in effect to a spontaneous outburst of loyalty for the queen, in which the fealty that was owed to her by each and every subject was publicly and joyously reaffirmed.

The Instrument was unusual for a state oath in that it was circulated without the apparent knowledge of Elizabeth; indeed, in her speech to the Commons on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1586, she asserted that she 'never knew of it until three thousand hands with seal thereof were brought and showed unto me', effectively denying her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Elizabeth I, 'The Bond of the Association', in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. by Leah S. Marcus, Jane Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), pp. 183-185 (p. 185).

<sup>9</sup> Cressy, p. 223.

involvement in its wording or construction. 10 Elizabeth may have been displaying her characteristic caution in distancing herself from this particular political document, as although its purpose was to mobilise the populace in the event of a Catholic coup, it also opened up a space in which a collective body could influence state policy during a moment of extreme national crisis. Elizabeth's careful absence from the wording or formulation of the Instrument allowed her royal authority to remain uncompromised, yet it resulted in the existence of an ambiguous oath which bypassed the endorsement of the monarch in order to express a concept of orthodox fealty. As such, the type of political obligation which was encouraged was fundamentally paradoxical, in that it aimed to protect England's Protestant monarchical government but circumvented royal approval in order to carry out its task.11

Traditional forms of political pledging in early modern culture foregrounded the obedience of the subject in relation to the monarch. 12 When an individual was invited to join the Privy Council, they were required to swear an oath to 'be true and faithfull to the Queenes Majesty our most deare and Soveraigne Lady, and to her Highesse Heires and Successors'. 13 The wording insists upon the dominance of the queen and the concomitant position of deference into which the subject is placed, as well as extending fealty beyond the present monarch to their legitimate heirs. The expanded timeframe, which encompasses the future of the ruling dynasty, establishes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Elizabeth I: Collected Works, p. 189.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Patrick Collinson observes that the Instrument amounted to a 'quasi-republican statement' as it situated political power in the body politic as an abstract entity defined by 'collective responsibility' as opposed to the authority of an individual ('The Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I', in Elizabethan Essays (London: Continuum, 1994), pp. 31-57 (p. 50)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Patrick Collinson notes that 'Each Privy Councillor took a separate oath to the monarch' in a ceremony which pointedly isolated the swearers from each other; as such, its ritual elements were the polar opposite of the communal scenes of group swearing envisioned by Cecil and Walsingham. Collinson, p. 38.

Richard Garnet, *The book of oaths* (London: W. Lee, 1649), sig. B3r.

a mode in which obedience is situated within a singular and continuous royal authority, as opposed other political mechanisms such as the Privy Council or the commons. The individual is required to 'reveale, and disclose' any hidden plots that may jeopardise either the safety of the queen, as well as her heirs and successors, and 'keepe secret' any disclosures which could touch the 'fidelity, and truth to the Queenes Majesty' of topics that are discussed during council meetings. This coda is expressly designed to offset the potential for collective action on behalf of the Privy Council by the discussion of state policy between its members. The attempt to deflect the development of horizontal political relationships amongst the councillors attests to the anxiety over the potential of group bonds to encroach upon or even compromise the authority of singular rule. As arguably the most orthodox articulation of the type of royal service demanded by Elizabeth, the two concepts stressed in the Privy Council oath – recognition of the monarch as the sole figure of authority, and the promise not to engage in group discussion of policy without the knowledge of the queen – constructs a model of obligation which actively discourages communal engagement as an appropriate form of political action.

The Instrument went through several stages in order for it to become legally binding. At the meeting of the new parliament on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1584, it was proposed that a Bill for the Queen's Safety be introduced, allowing for the creation of an 'inter-reign' which provided for a form of government 'without reference to any rights or laws of succession'. <sup>14</sup> Effectively, the Privy Council would assume the office of the monarch as a collective group, exercising command of the state until a suitable individual was found. However, the binding tenets of the Bill were slightly different to those of the Instrument, as the original stipulation to pursue the heirs of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Collinson, p. 50.

the new successor was excised in favour of their 'counsellors, aiders and abettors'. 15 This provided the government with room to facilitate a possible Stuart succession through her son James in the event that the prime instigator of Elizabeth's assassination was found to be Mary, Queen of Scots. However, it also implied that the Instrument sworn so volubly by a large swathe of the country was a contingent artefact which could be reshaped at will, as opposed to a secure bond able to facilitate a form of genuine collective agency. David Cressy's observation that the swearers had potentially 'exposed themselves to perjury' implies that Cecil and Walsingham's indifference to the spiritual welfare of the swearers is evidence that they may not have regarded the Instrument as a truly binding artefact, at least in an orthodox religious sense; it is unlikely that anyone would have used the slight change in wording to doubt the veracity of political ties across the polity in the 1580s. However, in terms of the legislation of group oath-taking, it does suggest that the practice was an unusually loose custom, hence its ability to tailor itself to the changing political circumstances of the middle years of the decade. This raises doubts not only about the binding qualities of the Instrument in terms of its spiritual potency, but the veracity of group swearing as a legitimate tool of power.

Several political theorists had noted the connection between communal swearing and the establishment of popular or proto-democratic states. In his political treatise *The six bookes of a common-weale*, Jean Bodin considers the ability of a group bond to facilitate rule by the 'popular estate' and ensure its survival as a long-term form of government:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Elizabeth I: Collected Works, p. 185.

But it is one thing to bind all together, and to bind everie one in particular: for so al the citisens particularly swore to the observation of the lawes, but not all together; for that every one of them in particular was bound unto the power of them all in generall. But an oath could not be given by them all: for why, the people in generall is a certaine universall bodie, in power and nature divided from every man in particular. <sup>16</sup>

A group oath may indeed purport to bind 'every one of them in particular', but the custom is defined by its fundamental reliance on notions of hierarchy; as Bodin later argues, 'an oath cannot bee made but by the lesser to the greater'. As such, the 'certaine universall bodie' of the popular government is unable to guarantee the social bonds which are a crucial feature of the polity, as the appeal to a higher authority to both oversee the pledge and punish the oath-breaker, a central aspect of traditional swearing, is not able to function in the way that is commonly understood. The concept of group pledging is therefore not only unsound in terms of legal redress, but also circumvents a wider notion of social order which relies on stratified modes of obligation in order to promote a sense of cohesion. Instead of serving as a tool to promote popular sovereignty, Bodin argues, the communal oath actually unties the notion of an orderly state by loosening the bonds which are a crucial component of successful government. If the hierarchical nature of the oath is replaced by one which is egalitarian in its concept of obligation, then the state itself, and the healthy relations between members of the commonwealth, cannot be imagined to exist.

The political concerns articulated here by Bodin are present in the rhetorical formation of the Instrument, although their import is curbed to an extent by the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Jean Bodin, *The six bookes of a common-weale*, trans. by Richard Knollys (London: Adam Islip, 1606), p. 99.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Bodin, p. 99.

religious aspect of Elizabeth's role as the head of the English Church. Stephen Alford has persuasively argued that the Protestant basis of the Tudor monarchy established a situation whereby 'the "true" religion became the prescriptive and authoritative guide to the actions of human governors' enabling the conduct of the monarch to be measured by how successfully they protected the reformed doctrine within the realm. 18 Through entering into a communal pact, the English swearers are not necessarily agreeing to engage in a form of popular sovereignty in the way that Bodin imagines, but ensure the survival of the 'Christian realm of civil state' as intended by God. The oath begins with a summation of the promissory project that defines the role of a Protestant monarch: 'Almighty God hath ordained kings, queens, and princes to have dominion and rule over all their subjects, and to preserve them in the possession and observation of the true Christian religion'. <sup>19</sup> By swearing 'every one of us to the other', the subscriber to the oath is not endorsing a form of popular government in extremis during the event of a coup, but defining his role as a subject in terms of the spiritual community to which he belongs. In this sense, the troubling potential for non-monarchical group action is subsumed within a Protestant royalist framework that interprets resistance as a form of worship by ensuring that Elizabeth, whom God has 'ordained', is able to complete her divine project. Therefore, the promissory purpose of the Instrument is arguably conceived of as a negative action, in that the swearer is declaring their refusal to impede the progress of God's work through the explicit protection of the person of his chosen deputy. If the group oath of the Instrument produces a sense of solidarity, it is Protestant rather than proto-democratic in nature.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Stephen Alford, 'A Politics of Emergency in the Reign of Elizabeth I', in *English Radicalism*, *1550-1860*, ed. by Glenn Burgess and Matthew Feinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 17-36 (p. 22).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth I: Collected Works, p. 185.

The Instrument is a significant document because it situates the origin of royal power in popular consent. There is no sense that Cecil or Walsingham intended to facilitate a long-term oligarchy, or promote elective monarchical succession as the political norm after the death of Elizabeth. However, in focussing on the basis of rule rather than the conduct of the ruling body, the document offers a view of statehood in which a sovereign can be legitimised by a consensual binding oath, as opposed to other concepts such as blood right. As such, it offers an alternative response to the different political models mooted in the succession crisis of the 1580s and early 1590s, when each potential claimant would require a different basis in order to justify their right to rule. For playwrights such as Shakespeare and Jonson, communal swearing offers a vision of egalitarian solidarity as an aspect of political change. Yet when we see the custom dramatised on stage, this ideal is almost always corrupted and revealed to be a rhetorical posture used to serve the political ambitions of factional courtiers and powerful families. The remainder of this chapter will explore the structural and political implications of communal swearing in *Titus* Andronicus and Catiline, and the question over whether communal oaths are potential agents of change or empty tools of oratory.

### Titus Andronicus

The title page of the 1594 quarto edition of *Titus Andronicus* proudly declares the history of the text by stating that it was 'Plaide by the Right Honourable

the Earle of *Darbie*, Earle of *Pembrooke*, and Earle of *Sussex* their Servants'.<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Bate argues that 'getting three lords for the price of one on to the title page was a good way of making the play seem very impressive indeed'. 21 As such, the discerning customer is able to own the copy of a text that has been tacitly endorsed by not one but a number of England's premier aristocrats, thus enhancing his or her own cultural prestige. However, a socially inquisitive reader can likewise have his or her responses shaped in ways which further the political agenda of the patron, a concept which would have been particularly acute in text which overtly tests the veracity of competing modes of government in the state of Rome. Of the three figures listed on the front page of *Titus Andronicus* the name which would arguably stand out is Ferdinando Stanley the Earl of Derby, who could trace his lineage back to Henry VII through his mother Margaret Clifford and was thus one of the most visible claimants to the English throne. A play endorsed by a possible successor to the queen which staged the transfer of power from one faction to another would surely catch the eye of anyone with a rudimentary interest in contemporary politics, especially considering the dominance of the succession in late sixteenth century culture.

Terrence G. Shoone-Jongen observes that 'it is certain *Titus Andronicus* was, at some point, played by Strange's Men', drawing particular attention to their notable popularity at court during the early 1590s.<sup>22</sup> Although there is no proof of an extant royal performance of *Titus Andronicus*, the inclusion of Derby's Men on the title page may have been used to associate the play with the notable court-centric

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (London: John Danter, 1594), sig. A1r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Bate, 'Introduction', p. 77.

Terrence Shoone-Jongen, *Shakespeare's Companies: William Shakespeare's Early Career and the Acting Companies, 1577-1594* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), p. 108. Shoone-Jongen also observes that the company played at court an 'unprecedented six times' (p. 104), thus signifying their evident popularity with a court coterie audience.

repertoire for which this company had become noted, and the political inflections which accompanied the playing of a text to a highly select aristocratic audience. One interesting connection not yet fully explored in current scholarship is the relation between communal swearing in *Titus Andronicus* and the instances of group oathtaking which followed the Instrument of Association throughout the 1580s. The two scenes in which the Andronici swear to right the wrongs of the Roman state in acts three and four would undoubtedly have recalled the popular rituals which were a feature of social life just a few years prior to the first performances. However, there may be a more nuanced relationship at work here, as Ferdinando, Lord Strange was one of the most prominent swearers of the Instrument as a participant in his father's public ceremony in Wigan.<sup>23</sup> If a reader or a spectator made the connection between the scenes in which the Andronici swear a group oath to restore the Roman state and the claims of the Stanley family via their descent from Mary Tudor, then the act of communal pledging is less secure as an unambiguous display of fealty and more of a contribution to the public debate over the different means through which power could be attained in the event of Elizabeth's death.

The Earls of Derby were notable participants in the ceremonies and rituals used by the Tudors to consolidate their rule. Thomas Stanley, the first Earl, was the step-father to Henry VII and was reported to have placed the crown on his head after his success at the Battle of Bosworth.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, his son was called upon to escort

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> David Cressy describes in detail the 'compelling spectacle' of the ceremony of swearing by the Stanleys in Wigan on I November. The Earl of Derby took his oath first, followed by his heir Ferdinando and then the gentry 'in groups of six', all knelt bareheaded before the bishop of Chester. This was obviously a ceremony designed to signal the loyalty of the Stanley faction, although the ordering of the swearers on successive lines could also be an allusion to their possible royal claim should Elizabeth be assassinated and the Instrument put into effect. Cressy, p. 222.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Catherine Grace Canino, *Shakespeare and the Nobility: The Negotiation of Lineage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 181.

Mary Tudor down the aisle as queen during her marriage to Philip II of Spain. 25 Not only were the Stanleys regarded as staunch Tudor loyalists, but this loyalty tended to be expressed during moments of pageantry or public display. However, by the late sixteenth century the Stanleys had incurred the distrust of Elizabeth due to the involvement of several members of the family in Norfolk's conspiratorial plot in 1572, and the activities of their kinsman William Stanley to promote the Catholic claims of Spain on the continent. Although Ferdinando himself was not associated with sedition, his role as a prominent claimant with suspect family connections often focalised contemporary fears of a Catholic transference of power; to quote Catherine Grace Canino, 'There is no indication that Derby was ever plotting for the throne; however, there was rampant speculation that he might have been'. <sup>26</sup> The public perception of Stanley as a claimant would possibly encourage a more charged interpretation of the properties of group oath-taking in the text, particularly as the Instrument is not simply focussed on the obedience owed to Elizabeth but is also designed to locate and endorse her successor.

The depiction of communal swearing in the play is therefore complex. On one hand it reinforces the public association of the Earl of Derby with the Instrument of an Association, stressing his obedience as a good subject by replicating the ceremonial posture of allegiance within a different cultural medium to which he has put his name. However, the fact that this oath results in the political dominance of the Andronici also stresses the potential of communal swearing to override the current regime by legitimising a takeover in power; it is only after the Andronici have pledged to exact 'Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths' (IV.i.93) that Lucius is able to invade Rome at the head of an army and assume the role of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Canino, p. 184. <sup>26</sup> Canino, p. 188.

emperor. This is not to argue that Shakespeare is fully committing himself to either a seditious or orthodox reading. Rather, it enables him to demonstrate in depth the fundamental ambiguity of communal and reciprocal swearing when it occurs in a monarchical or imperialist context. The custom may well act as a public display of fealty, but the potential for co-operation amongst the swearers has the potential to circumvent the very regime it is designed to uphold. Just as Stanley is able to reinforce his fidelity to Elizabeth, he is simultaneously associated with a text which uses the binding nature of group swearing to facilitate the change from one ruling dynasty to another. In *Titus Andronicus*, communal oaths emerge not as the devices imagined by Cecil and Walsingham to reinforce monarchical authority, but as supple, contingent entities which have the potential to focus attention on the next successor at the expense of the current ruler.

The first scene of *Titus Andronicus* opens with a complex debate on the different political forms which can facilitate the transference of power from one individual to another. T.J.B Spencer famously argues that 'The play does not assume a political situation known to Roman history; it is, rather, a summary of Roman politics'. As such, the audience is presented with a number of competing theories in which Saturninus promotes the concept of hereditary succession, Bassianus argues for a form of restricted election based upon the immediate blood claimants, and Marcus articulates a looser form of meritocratic succession in which fitness to rule is defined by military service to the state. As the three figures are attempting to lay the ground for a new ruler, it is possible to argue that George Peele evinces more of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> T.J.B. Spencer, 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), 27-38 (p. 32).

For a detailed exploration of the different political positions of the three individuals, see Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 156-158.

an interest in how the origins of power are defined and articulated, rather than the ways in which rule can be maintained once the individual is securely placed on the imperial throne. Marcus' role as both a tribune and the brother of Titus creates an implicit association between the Andronici as a political faction and the concept of meritocratic election based on consent; as part of his rhetoric, for instance, Marcus appeals to the 'common voice' (I.i.21) of the people in direct opposition to Saturninus' articulation of his 'successive title' (I.i.4) and Bassianus' stress on 'pure' election (I.i.16) from amongst the ruling bloodline. Of the three different models in play, the Andronici are shaped as a faction that is defined by their adherence to notions of consent and reciprocity, as opposed to the more stratified forms of social obligation that are espoused by the two other claimants.

The Rome depicted by Peele is not in a state of good political health; rather, it is severed and broken after the long, brutal war with the Goths. When Marcus announces that Titus' election as emperor will 'help to set a head on headless Rome' (I.i.189), it is a restorative image which associates the concept of communal election with physical wellbeing. Any other means through which power is attained is consequently a corruption which will rot the body politic, Marcus implies, as the healthiest state is imagined to involve the co-operation of all of its members. This neat schema is slightly complicated, however, by the wounds which Titus has received in the war, particularly as the shedding of his 'blood' in 'Rome's great quarrel' (III.i.4) is figured as a sacrifice through which his commitment to the state

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> For a comprehensive and compelling account of Peele's contribution to the composition of *Titus Andronicus*, see Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare*, *Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 'Titus Andronicus with George Peele', pp. 148-244. Some of the thematic readings enabled by Vickers' analysis, particularly with regard to the construction of the Roman state, are explored by Paul Hammond; see Paul Hammond, 'Shakespeare as Collaborator: The Case of *Titus Andronicus*', in *Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity in the Republic of Letters: Essays in Honour of Richard G. Maber*, ed. by Paul Scott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 193-208.

can be visibly demonstrated. Shakespeare often situates blood as the most sacred entity which can be sworn in the Roman culture. When Coriolanus appeals to the senate to license a war with Aufidius, for example, he swears 'By all the battles wherein we have fought, / By th'blood we have shed together' (I.vi.56-57). The substance of blood derives its sacredness from its communal shedding in warfare, emphasising the solidarity of the Roman soldiers when directed in combat against the enemy. However, Shakespeare's use of this image in *Titus Andronicus* introduces a subtle discrepancy into the connection between the ideal state and the rhetoric of bodily health, as opening up a wound and spilling blood is its direct opposite, presaging pain rather than health. There is evidently a problem with the use of blood as a sacred entity in the custom of swearing in relation to models of popular sovereignty, at least from the perspective of the Andronici. Either their view of Roman identity is amiss, or a modified form of swearing, with a different conception of the sacred, is needed in order to reconcile their own political view with rhetorical conceptions of public service. The same of the sacred is needed in order to reconcile their own political view with rhetorical conceptions of public service.

This is subtly evident throughout Peele's opening act, particularly in the human bloodshed demanded as restitution by the Andronici for their murdered kin. In contrast to Marcus' use of the imagery of bodily health, Peele crafts an alternative discourse in which severance and dismemberment are the defining linguistic traits of the Andronici; Lucius' repetition of the phrase 'hew his limbs' twice at I.i.100 and 132, for example, demonstrates the insistence with which this notion is pressed during his entrance. The concept of Titus' election by the 'common voice' (I.i.24),

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. by Peter Holland (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> For further critical accounts of Shakespeare's exploration of Rome, see Vivian Thomas, Shakespeare's Roman Worlds (London: Routledge, 1989); Heather James, Shakespeare's Troy: Drama, Politics and the Translation of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Maria del Sapio Gabero, ed. Identity, Otherness and Empire in Shakespeare's Rome (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

which is crucial in promoting a form of rulership based on consent, is undercut by the chopping apart of the body of Tamora's eldest son in a 'sacrifice' (I.i.127). Evidently there is something amiss with the type of rhetoric used to articulate the origin of power by popular will, and the type of display or ritual which the Andronici believe exemplify the spirit of public identity. When discussing the debate between Saturninus, Bassianus and Marcus, Eric Nelson observes that 'each of the three men emerges with precisely the political ideology that best advances his own bid for rulership'. <sup>32</sup> For the Andronici, body imagery is evidently a locus for a form of government which is not quite as consistent as an orator like Marcus would have the Romans believe. Rather, it emerges as a rhetorical posture which is designed to manipulate the political desires of a group which have been excluded from power, rather than a commitment to a sustained project of co-operation and conciliation across all areas of Roman culture.

These complexities become even more intricate when Titus stabs his son Mutius for impeding Saturninus' proposed marriage to Lavinia. Paradoxically, Titus' attempt to display his fealty results in the characterisation of his dynasty as a faction as opposed to the 'honourable family' which the emperor has previously promised to 'advance' (I.i.241-242). The act of infanticide not only replicates the sacrificial act which defines the public identity of the surviving Andronici in contrast to the defeated Goths, thus blurring the distinction between Rome and its opposite, but further distorts the rhetorical association between popular election and bodily health which Marcus has so carefully crafted. However, this concept is modulated slightly by Peele in the moment when the remaining Andronici beg Titus to allow them to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Eric Nelson, 'Shakespeare and the Best State of a Commonwealth', in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. by David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 253-270 (p. 262).

inter Mutius in the family tomb. Titus' decision to bury his son is a dynastic realignment of human remains which is achieved, or at least initiated, through the spatial action of kneeling and rising; not only does this assert Titus' dominance within the family structure, it also conveys the solidarity of the Andronici through a shared stage action. In contrast to Marcus' earlier association of the 'common voice' with bodily health, the Andronici regard the burial of Mutius' 'bones' (I.i.374) as an action which transfers the political ideal of communality to the family unit. When he takes over the play at the end of act one, Shakespeare is very keen to emphasise the shrewdness with which the Andronici respond to Saturninus' behaviour, particularly the way they use the conciliar properties of communal swearing to re-define their own factional project as operating in the best interests of Rome.

Peele's rhetorical construction of Roman oath-taking endorses Saturninus' view of monarchical government, as the most sacred entities to swear by are defined by their supreme authority. Saturninus and Tamara 'swear by all the Roman gods' (I.i.327) in 'sight of heaven' (I.i.334) to establish a correlation between the potency of godliness and the authority of imperial rule, and thus disseminate their own view of political power throughout the state.<sup>33</sup> However, when Shakespeare begins to create his own version of Rome from act two onwards, one of his earliest choices is to introduce another sacred entity to compete with those espoused by Saturninus and Tamora. In a kneeling posture redolent of the burial of Mutius, Titus makes a vow 'by [his] father's reverend tomb' (II.i.296), situating the family dynastic line as a sacred entity that is suitable to swear by alongside the more stratified forms practised by the imperial family. Robert Miola's observation that 'The family and city follow

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> This concept is extended to members of the Andronici by Peele; for instance Lucius 'vows' to 'heaven and his highness' (I.i.479) to reinforce the submission of his family in relation to the emperor and the concept of imperial rule he represents.

the same laws, esteem the same values, and obey the same patriarch '34 provides

Titus with the impetus to insert familial allegiance into a linguistic custom used to
bolster an established form of government. However, this would have also been
considered a shocking act within classical Roman culture; Antonio de Guevara notes
that 'in Rome there was an ancient Law, that no man should make any solemne oath,
but that first they should demaund licence of the Senate'. By situating the tomb of
his family within the sacred space of the grammatical vow, Titus makes a pact that is
not only highly personal but crafted without the express endorsement of the senate or
the emperor. Rather, he appeals to a version of Roman identity in which the state and
the family unit are regarded as mutually privileged entities; as a consequence, the
promissory action which it licenses is licit in the sense that it can be regarded as
acting in the wider interests of Rome, but unorthodox through its uneasy relation to
established ideas of imperial government.

Although the Andronici have been marked as factional conspirators by Saturninus and Tamora, they still adhere to certain notions of civic obligation, although these are increasingly perverted throughout the course of the play. In a similar manner to Peele, the imagery used by Shakespeare to shape the concept of communality involves body parts, mostly of hands and fingers. When Titus is offered his two sons in replacement for his hand by Aaron, he presumes that he is entering into a contract defined by reciprocal exchange: 'Lend me thy hand and I will give thee mine' (III.i.188). One part of his body is imagined to 'redeem'

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Antonio De Guevara, *Archontorologion, or The diall of Princes*, trans. Thomas North (London: Bernard Alsop, 1619), p. 320.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Several critics have explored the thematic function of hand imagery in *Titus Andronicus*. See Katherine A. Rowe, 'Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 46 (1994), 279-303; Michael Neill, "Amphitheatres in the body": Playing with hands on the Shakespearean stage', *Shakespeare Survey*, 48 (1996), 23-50.

(III.i.181) the lives of his sons, who are under threat of execution, thus helping to secure the safety of his dynastic line. However, the transaction is horribly perverted by Aaron, who provides him with their severed heads. Before this moment, Titus has mused on the impossibility of entering into a self-enclosed compact in which 'service' is related to bodily, and by extension political, health: 'Now all the service I require of them / Is that the one will help to cut the other' (III.i.78-79). Reciprocity has been replaced by a form of exchange in which the human body is required to hack itself apart, severing by extension the twin ideals of bodily and political cohesion espoused by Marcus in the opening act. It is particularly interesting that the hand serves such a privileged role in orthodox customs of oath-taking; the severance of Titus' hand could therefore be read as the destruction of a mode of obligation in which reciprocity is extended right across the state, from the emperor down to the citizens of Rome.

This is the point when Titus and the remaining members of his family make a communal vow to take revenge on the people who have wronged them. The gathered Andronici are evocative of Peele's original tableaux of their return from battle, although the gathered body parts – two heads, a hand and Lavinia's desecrated body – are a grotesque parody of familial solidarity and dynastic health. If Titus has been compelled to swear to 'raise an army' (III.i.286), then it is not too hard to empathise with his desperate choice. However, there are elements at work which encourage the audience to subtly question the import and ethical complexion of the language that accompanies the vow. Titus imagines that he is being spurred on by his dead sons, who 'do seem to speak to [him]' (III.i.272), even though as bodily remains they are evidently incapable of doing so. Similarly, Lavinia's consent is taken as a given, although her lack of a tongue prevents her from vocally participating in the oath, or

even absenting herself from it. What appears to be a communal vow emerges on closer inspection as slightly more a crafted vision of family solidarity that relies to some extent on the ventriloquism of its junior members; the vocal consent is imagined rather than actualised. This does not make the vow wholly unethical, although it does draw attention to some of the coercive aspects which Titus employs in order to facilitate an act which licenses Lucius to leave Rome and return at the head of an invading army.

Titus gathers the remaining Andronici in a circle and makes the vow on stage in a stylised act that is replete with symbolism and ceremonial dignity:

> You heavy people, circle me about, That I may turn me to each one of you And swear unto my soul to right your wrongs. [They make a vow.] The vow is made. Come, brother, take a head, And in this hand the other I will bear. And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed: Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth. III.i.277-283

The image of the dismembered Andronici forming a circle around Titus is an attempt to reconstruct their severed dynasty through the stabilising ritual of a vow.<sup>37</sup> The stage movement conveys a shared purpose at the level of visual spectacle; each member of the family is united in their desire for revenge, so the ritual props which accompany communal swearing are used to reinforce their sense of solidarity.

However, if the circle image suggests the contractual nature of the promissory

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> D.J Palmer observes that the play is defined by the ceremonial actions because 'ritual is the ultimate means by which man seeks to order and control his precarious and unstable world.' The ritualised action of vowing is therefore a means through which the Andronici can recoup a form of order whilst drawing on one of the most respected frameworks in Roman culture ('The unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable: Language and Action in Titus Andronicus', Critical Quarterly, 14 (1972), 320-339 (p. 322)).

undertaking, for instance the binding properties of the ring in a spousal, then the coercive strategies we have previously witnessed make it slightly less comforting than intended. The actual language of Titus' vow exists in something of a lacuna outside of his dialogue; the only clue we have is the retrospective statement 'The vow is made', situating the actual moment of pledging in a semantic space which is inaccessible for the audience. As such, there is no clear sense of what has exactly been agreed upon, other than a general commitment to exact revenge. Shakespeare uses this strategy in *Hamlet* when the prince is compelled by the Ghost to avenge his murder: 'Now to my word. / It is "Adieu, adieu, remember me." / I have sworn't' (I.v.110-112). Although it would be tempting to regard the interpolated phrase as something approaching a sacred entity, Hamlet's pledge actually occurs somewhere between his lines in a space that is presumably internal. At such moments, Shakespeare is evidently interested in testing the limits of rhetorical swearing and its ability to correlate with an inner commitment, particularly as this formation eschews the scrutiny of a witness and the verbal constrictions of a clearly defined contract. Their culpability should the oath be broken, therefore is not certain or even assured, as no-one apart from the swearers is clear about the conditions of the oath. This may be an instance of the creation of interiority on stage, but it could also use the custom of swearing to provide a legitimate impetus for an unusually wide range of responses in relation to unpredictable events, without a clear sense of redress.

By constructing a vow with the central terms left out, Titus enables the Andronici to retroactively fill in the gap once their revenge has been completed. Their communal oath is not only fundamentally contingent but temporally distorted, in that the promissory action anticipates its own need to be justified based on whatever circumstances are eventually settled upon in the Roman state. If an oath is

traditionally designed to establish a set pattern of anticipated future behaviour, then the group oath practised by the Andronici is a corruption of the accepted nature of the custom, albeit one which is politically savvy considering their circumstances. Interestingly, Henry Savile's translation of Tacitus in 1591 exhibits an interest in the practice of linguistically evasive oaths; in order to defy Vespasian, for example, the senate proceeds by 'pronouncing roundly the rest of their oath, and at the name of Vespasian either stopping, or tripping it lightly over, or skipping it quite.'<sup>38</sup> In his depiction of swearing in this manner, Shakespeare may well be participating in the recent trend of Tacitean historical inquiry, which is defined by Warren Chernaik as 'a pervasive cynicism about the way people behave, an emphasis on disguise, dissimulation, and self-interest, and on arcana imperii, secrets of state'. 39 The type of swearing practised by the Andronici is not too dissimilar from this more sceptical view of political culture, particularly as it employs the kind of rhetorical evasion that Henry Savile recounts in his own influential translation. 40 Through circumventing the unquestioning fealty to the emperor so skilfully depicted by Peele in the opening act, Titus is able to position his own family into a more secure role by absorbing the custom into their own familial structure. As such, the Andronici are in a stronger position to claim their action is designed to secure Roman stability by retroactively defining the vow as such once their power has been secured.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Tacitus, *The ende of Nero and beginning of Galba*, trans. Henry Savile (Oxford: Richard Wright, 1591), p. 192.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Warren Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Savile has a sustained interest in drawing attention to the slippery verbal properties of swearing that recur throughout Tacitus. For instance, he observes that the Senate 'conceived a forme of oath, which all the magistrates sware [...] mincing the oath, and diversely wresting and changing the wordes'. As part of a movement in which Tacitean historiography was used to debate realpolitik, it is interesting, and perhaps underexplored, how verbal evasiveness is a device by which traditional concepts of power can be eschewed. Tacitus, p. 200.

<sup>41</sup> For a further exploration on the reception of Tacitus in the late Elizabethan period, see David

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> For a further exploration on the reception of Tacitus in the late Elizabethan period, see David Womersley, 'Sir Henry Savile's Translation of Tacitus and the Political Interpretation of Elizabethan texts', *Review of English Studies*, 42 (1991), 313-342; Paulina Kewes, 'Henry Savile's Tacitus and

The slippery nature of the communal oath sworn by the Andronici is emphasised when it is compared to a similar moment in Julius Caesar. 42 In both plays, a group of disaffected aristocrats form a splinter group which engages in civil conflict after leaving the Roman state. However, whereas the Andronici bolster this structural movement with an oath, Brutus states that 'honesty to honesty engaged' (II.i.126) is enough of a bond to unify the group. Brutus is sceptical of the custom of swearing because he regards it as a tool of tyrannical government, in which fidelity is honoured until 'Till each man drop by lottery' (II.i.118) on the whim of the ruler. Instead he argues that the conspirators need no other 'bond' than their 'own cause' and 'word' (II.i.122-125). The familiar concept of blood as a sacred entity is reworked by Brutus to substitute the concept of dynastic inheritance for a model which tests the merit of the individual through the performance of their fidelity in action, rather than utterance. His assertion that the 'drop of blood / That every Roman bears' is 'guilty of a several bastardy' (II.i.135-137) if a promise is broken sublimates the rhetoric of aristocratic inheritance into a diatribe that explicitly rejects the concept of swearing as a means of obligation. In Shakespeare's thinking, then, the decision of the Andronici to enter into a communal pact is possibly more complex than it first appears. Whilst it provides a sense of solidarity in the face of persecution, it also prioritises a form of interaction which is slightly more concerned with bolstering the high rank of the participants than it first appears. As such, the earlier association of the Andronici with the 'common voice' (I.i.24) is complicated by a later rejection of the custom in *Julius Caesar* for compromising the manifestation of Roman merit, regardless of the social status of the participant.

the Politics of Roman History in Late Elizabethan England', Huntingdon Library Quarterly, 74 (2011), 515-551.

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. by David Daniell (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1998).

After Lavinia reveals that she was raped by Chiron and Demetrius Shakespeare dramatises a second group oath by Marcus and the assembled Andronici. This is prompted in part by Titus' appeal to the gods for a reason why their crimes have gone unpunished for so long: 'Magni dominator poli, / Tam lentus audis scelera, tam lentus vides?' (IV.i.81-82).<sup>43</sup> The oath is thus figured as a spur or reminder to the divine authority that was sworn upon in the earlier oath, if the gods were indeed the intended recipient; as Shakespeare omitted the sacred entity from Titus' rhetoric, the audience have no secure grasp on who or what was sworn on. However, the Senecan appeal also allows the Andronici to take over the providential aspect of the role of the gods in directing events on stage, particularly with regard to justice or 'scelus'. If they are blind to the horror being suffered, the Andronici imply, their only recourse is to secure a form of stage-managed retribution for themselves:

My lord, kneel down with me; Lavinia, kneel;
And kneel, sweet boy, the Roman Hector's hope,

[They kneel.]
And swear with me – as, with the woeful fere
And father of that chaste dishonoured dame,
Lord Junius Brutus swore for Lucrece' rape –
That we will prosecute by good advice
Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths,
And see their blood, or die with this reproach.

[They rise.]

IV.i.87-94

At first glance it is quite puzzling to consider why Shakespeare felt the need to dramatise a second vow. Not only is it staged in a similar manner to the one preceding it, involving the ritualised action of the remaining Andronici, but there are no significant new terms introduced into its rhetoric. However, the very fact that we

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Jonathan Bate translates the lines as follows: 'Ruler of the great heavens, are you so slow to hear crimes, so slow to see?'. Bate, p. 216.

have two communal vows suggests a sustained Shakespearean interest in the deep connection between factional behaviour and group swearing. Whereas one vow would serve quite feasibly as a spur to action or a motor which places the will of a character within a recognisable custom, thus legitimising their behaviour to an extent, the double oath questions this assumption through the introduction of a model of comparative scrutiny, in which the two oaths can be directly contrasted. In Marcus' language, the lacuna left open by Titus is subtly filled in, as the Andronici are explicitly swearing to take 'Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths.'; indeed, the word 'traitorous' establishes their revenge in political terms which are deeply complicated by the reliance of the Andronici on the Goth army to overtake the Roman state, and their own legal status as traitors at this point in the plot. The slipperiness of Marcus' language is crafted by Shakespeare to suggest the loosening of secure referents in a custom which is defined by its ability to secure a pattern of promissory action. Yet Marcus and the Andronici are also engaged in a process of redefinition, in which a word such as 'traitorous' can establish certain actions as orthodox and others as seditious in relation to a state oath. The language of swearing is not simply reverent or sacred, but charged with ideological contention; as such, it enables the Andronici to shape the rhetoric that is regarded as sacrosanct in Roman culture to posit Saturninus' own rule as treasonous. The communal oath, invoking ideas of solidarity and even republican egalitarianism, is used to counter a form of singular rule which is thus positioned as fundamentally un-Roman.

This may help to explain the complex depiction of the rape of Lucrece which Marcus uses to bolster the second communal vow. The inclusion of the founding myth of Rome as a simile establishes a direct analogy between the sexual tyranny of unchecked monarchical power and the mistreatment of the Andronici by Saturninus.

We might have expected Marcus to insert the narrative as a sacred telos with which to swear by, considering the reverence with which the story was held in Roman political culture. Instead, the use of a simile creates a sense of similitude between the two familial situations in which the success of one in shaping the future of Rome is imagined to prefigure the accomplishment of the other; rather than looking backwards to the founding myth in an attempt to uncover a lost political ideal, the Andronici look forward to their own analogous triumph. However, the introduction of a historical source at this point encourages the audience to scrutinise the nature of the parallel being established. Not only does the story of Lucrece emerge as an unusually malleable topic in this context, given what we have already witnessed of the swearing strategies practised by Titus, but it also implies that the founding myth of Rome is an emotive trope rather than a stable, sacred entity. As such, its citation in the group oath enables the Andronici to establish a connection between election by the 'common voice' (I.i.24) and the communal solidarity that was a perquisite source of legitimacy for the establishment of the republic.

For Shakespeare, the coercive parallels at the moment of swearing may not have been confined to later Roman politicians who exist in the shadow of Lucrece; indeed, such strategies are present in the original founding myth itself. The long poem *The Rape of Lucrece* contains two stanzas which depict the communal vow used by Brutus to punish the Tarquins by expelling them from the state.<sup>45</sup> When Lucrece is describing her rape, the narrator observes that 'She puts the period often

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Colin Burrow observes that the use of sources 'do not turn "the classics" into unassailable objects of cultural authority; they rather make them objects of contention'; not only do we see this concepts at work in Shakespeare's use of Livy, but perhaps the Andronici themselves are aware of the supple properties to which cultural sources can be put ('Shakespeare and Humanistic Culture', in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. by Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 9-27 (p. 19)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> William Shakespeare, 'The Rape of Lucrece', in *Shakespeare's Poems*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007), pp. 231-383.

from his place, / And midst the sentence so her accent breaks, / That twice she doth begin ere once she speaks' (565-567). The faltering voice could be explained by the emotional distress at having to recount the recent attack by Tarquin. However, the use of rhetorical lexis – 'period', 'accent' – draws attention to the oratorical aspects of Lucrece's speech, particularly the trope of aposiopesis, which George Puttenham defines as 'the figure of silence, or of interruption', designed to add emotional impetus by breaking of the flow of speech. He force the vow has even been made, Shakespeare associates the description of the rape with careful rhetorical crafting, designed to influence the response of an implied listener. When Brutus makes his important communal vow which results in the establishment of the republic, we see a similar number of coercive strategies at work:

Now by the CAPITOL that we adore, And by this chaste blood so unjustly stained, By heaven's fair sun that breeds the fat earth's store, By all our country rights in ROME maintained, And by chaste LUCRECE' soul that late complained Her wrongs to us, and by this bloody knife, We will revenge the death of this true wife.

1835-1841

The listing device of sacred entities to swear by is a skilful demonstration of the dominant political institutions that will define the new republican state. The 'chaste blood' of Lucrece is placed alongside the 'CAPITOL' and the 'country rights' of each Roman citizen to focalise the ideological contention that is a mark of Shakespeare's depiction of Roman swearing, particularly as it replaces the notion of hereditary blood succession with a form of government defined by resistance to imperial monarchy; as such, the most sacred aspect of Roman culture is the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> George Puttenham, *The arte of English poesie* (London: Richard Field, 1589), p. 139.

purification of ethical and political decay by communal action, rather than submission to the worst excesses of an absolutist tyrant. However, when Brutus extends the oath to his fellow citizens, Shakespeare includes several strategies of persuasion which slightly undercut the posture of communality which is a central aspect of his rhetoric. For example, the oath is accompanied by the kissing of the knife which Lucrece used to commit suicide alongside the ritualistic bending of the knees, which the other men are compelled or pressured to mimic after Brutus 'repeat[s]' (1848) the vow for a second time. Alongside the stage-managed ritual action is the use of plural pronouns throughout the earlier utterance as opposed to words which suggest his private grief, implying that its construction is artfully designed to pressure the swearers to vocally replicate his pact when it is publicly repeated. When taken in conjunction with the use of the Lucrece myth by the Andronici, Shakespeare appears to associate communal swearing with coercive rhetorical techniques, designed to expose group solidarity as manipulated or shaped by dominant individuals, particularly when the country is in a state of flux.

It is interesting to note that these strategies are not overtly present in the source material from Book I of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*. It is Lucrece herself who initiates the communal pact, asking the gathered Romans to present her with their 'right hands, and make faithfull promise that the adulterer shall not escape unpunished'. Although this is not an explicit oath, it does situate Lucrece as the source of the binding process which results in the creation of the republic. Shakespeare's focus on the explicit rhetorical manipulation of Lucrece's account of her rape draws out the artful nature of the bond which is only slightly suggested by the ritualised touching of hands in Livy. When Brutus makes his vow, he utilises the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Livy, *The Romane historie written by T. Livius of Padua*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: Agam Islip, 1600), p. 41.

concept of a sacred blood and is made before the object of the knife, but the pronouns are distinctly singular: 'Now I swear (quoth he) by this bloud, by this most chast and pure bloud'. 48 There is more of a sense that the oath is a spontaneous outburst of passion than the crafted piece of oratory designed to coerce his fellow swearers that we find in Shakespeare; in fact, they are so shocked by Brutus' oath that they regard it as a 'strange occurrence' which is evidently out of character. <sup>49</sup> At this stage, Brutus appears to be more concerned with vanquishing the line of Tarquin and 'the whole brood of his children' than dissolving the office of monarch, particularly as an explicit association between communal swearing and republican ideology is not articulated until Book II, when the Roman populace are compelled to 'swear' not to put another king in place: 'And a wonder it was to see, how much good this did to the concord of the cittie, and to the knitting of the hearts of Nobles and Commons together'. <sup>50</sup> Shakespeare's alternation to the source not only stresses the similarities between conciliar government and the practice of communal vowing, but also its use as a highly crafted tool. In both *The Rape of Lucrece* and to a lesser extent Titus Andronicus, the practice is not presented as an innate or 'natural' aspect of Roman culture; rather, it is shaped by individuals or factions who are able to further their own ambitions during a period of instability.<sup>51</sup>

Before Lucius enters Rome at the head of the Goth army, he encounters

Aaron and engages in a debate over the efficacy of oath-taking, particularly when the sacred object sworn upon is not regarded with the same amount of reverence by the different participants. In response to Lucius' assertion there is little point in entering

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Livy, p. 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Livy, p. 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Livy, p. 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> For a further exploration of critical attitudes towards the influence of classical and historical material on the composition of Renaissance drama, see Charles Martindale and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1990); Paulina Kewes, ed. *The Uses of History in Early Modern England* (San Marino: Huntingdon Library Press, 2006).

a binding pact because he 'believest no God' (V.i.71), Aaron offers an interesting solution: 'An idiot holds his bauble for a god, / And keeps the oath which by that god he swears. / To that I'll urge him' (V.i.79-81). The two enemies are still able to use the custom as a means of ensuring trust because the pact is a fundamentally internal commitment which ties the swearer to a sense of jeopardy regardless of socially dominant forms of belief. However, this also promotes a view of public oath-taking as a linguistic act which has no reliable affective abilities outside of the utterance. It is possible to read Aaron's view as part of his function as a politically savvy stage Machiavel, similar to other marginalised characters that expose the machinations of statecraft such as Barabas in The Jew of Malta. However, it also serves to emphasise the swearing strategies which have provided Lucius with the impetus to leave Rome and return at the head of an invading army. As he is about to re-enter the city, there is the subtle implication that the concept of the state as sacred is as insubstantial as Aaron's 'bauble', as it unleashes the type of behaviour which destroys the very thing that is regarded as inviolable. The Andronici may use the custom of swearing to depict their actions as a civic duty rather than treason, but at least one marginalised outsider perceives this to be a politically questionable act, right before the scene where the connection between communal swearing and participatory government is articulated most forcefully.

Andrew Hadfield characterises the final return of Lucius a 'coup', suggesting that 'the same political errors will be repeated by the Andronici, who will inevitably degenerate into tyrants'. <sup>52</sup> Hadfield's notion of a cyclical return is bolstered by Shakespeare's stagecraft, which cleverly reworks not only Peele's spatial tableaux of the Andronici in the upper playing space, but also the rhetorical association of body

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Hadfield, p. 165.

parts with conciliar politics.<sup>53</sup> Once again, Marcus pleads to the crowd to accept a form of government based on the 'common voice' (I.i.24): 'O let me teach you how to knit again [...] These broken limbs again into one body' (V.iii.69-71). The imagery of body parts being re-unified into a healthy whole is redolent of the spectacle made by the Andronici when they pledged their vow over the two severed heads of Titus' sons and Lavinia's dismembered body. As such, there is a linguistic and visual association between the binding custom which facilitated the exile of the Andronici from Rome as traitors, and their return in a position of political dominance. The unification of the state is analogous to the re-unification of the despoiled family dynasty, as Marcus interprets the return to dynastic health as a cleansing of the rottenness of Saturninus' hereditary rule:

Have we done aught amiss, show us wherein, And from the place where you behold us pleading, The poor remainder of the Andronici Will hand in hand all headlong hurl ourselves And on the ragged stones beat forth our souls And make a mutual closure of our house.

V.iii.128-133

The image of the Andronici falling 'hand in hand' is an allusion to the ritual actions that accompanied their 'mutual' oaths, such as the motion of rising and the bodies circled around Titus. In his study of swearing in the play, Thomas P. Anderson argues 'Each promise has within its utterance its own potentially bloody violation that not only associates violence with the vow but, more importantly, reveals how

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> For further exploration of the use of playing space in the play, see Bridget Escolme, 'Living Monuments: The Spatial Politics of Shakespeare's Rome on the Contemporary Stage', *Shakespeare Survey*, 60 (2007), 184-195; Helga L. Duncan, "Sumptuously Re-edified": The Reformation of Sacred Space in *Titus Andronicus'*, *Comparative Drama*, 43 (2009), 425-453.

obligatory language fails in the end to legitimate desire and guarantee intention'. <sup>54</sup> This is not strictly true in relation to the communal oath-taking of the Andronici. Not only has their particular form of promising enabled them to 'legitimate' a political ambition evident in Peele's opening act, but it has been bolstered through a custom which replicates the sense of communality implied by conciliar government. In a piece of subtle oratory, Marcus imagines that the only solution to their political failure would be a group suicide pact which extinguishes the entire Andronici line, as it would be analogous to the death of the Roman state as defined in terms of popular election.

As the play ends with the unquestioning dominance of the Andronici, it is possible to argue that Shakespeare associates communal swearing with the potential to both facilitate and effect a tangible change in government from one system to another. The debate between hereditary monarchy, restricted election and military merit with the consent of the 'common voice' (I.i.24) in the opening act appears to be decisively settled on in favour of the third choice; indeed, Shakespeare uses this exact phrase again when Emilius asserts that 'The common voice do cry it shall be so' (V.iii.139). Would it be possible to conclude, therefore, that Shakespeare has radical sympathies, particularly in terms of proto-republican forms of rule? It is certainly not possible to consider the scenes of oath-taking in *Titus Andronicus* as simple rhetorical ornamentation, designed to foster a sense of solidarity in moments of extreme grief. However, if communal swearing is placed in the context of the 1580s and early 1590s, then it seems that Shakespeare is exploring a possible solution to the succession crisis which dominated the political landscape: the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Thomas P. Anderson, "What is Written Shall Be Executed": "Nude Contracts" and "Lively Warrants" in *Titus Andronicus*, *Criticism*, 45 (2003), 301-321 (p. 305).

temporary rule of an inter-regnum by Cecil and the Privy Council. Scholarship has not always been quick to engage with this particular scenario as one of the likely outcomes of the death of Elizabeth. Indeed, Shakespeare is only half-committed himself, considering that Lucius becomes an emperor with sole authority in the Roman state. Yet, through using the 'common voice' (I.i.24, V.iii.139) to legitimise his assumption of power, Shakespeare shows that popular consent is strong enough to secure a solid power-base, alongside other successful concepts such as hereditary right or election based on blood proximity. Rome does not end up with a ruling council at the end of the play, or even a proto-democratic form of popular sovereignty. However, it does conclude with a monarch whose power originates in a version of popular consent in which the custom of communal swearing is used to bolster a sense of solidarity. As one possible course of action upon the death of Elizabeth, Shakespeare shows that this would have the ability to establish a workable basis for power, if not change the fabric of England from a monarchy to a more populist form of government.

## Catiline

When the audience first encounters Catiline, his conspiratorial plotting is capped off with a boast: 'Nor shall thy fate, O Rome, / Resist my vow' (I.i.73-74). As his rebellion is initiated with a binding pledge, it is likely that Jonson absorbed the structural uses of oath-taking in Roman drama. His familiarity with *Titus Andronicus* is exhibited in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, in which the Scrivener mocks the lazy theatre-goer who 'will swear *Jeronimo* or *Andronicus* are

the best plays yet' (Ind.79-80). <sup>55</sup> The play's appearance as part of a binding contract between audience and writer, which is itself used to frame and initiate the plot, not only suggests an interest in the use of swearing as an entry point into a dramatic narrative but creates an explicit connection between *Titus Andronicus* and oathtaking; as such, there is likely to be a deeper influence between this aspect of Shakespeare's drama involving factionalism in the state and his own attempt to explore the arguments used to justify conspiratorial politics. In both plays, the 'vow' enables the subsequent act of exile and invasion to be regarded as licit, or not treasonous in the most obvious sense of the word. However, Jonson differs from Shakespeare with regard to the ethical import of this political telos. Whereas the dominance of the Andronici is ambiguous, with a focus on the potential of communal swearing to facilitate a change in regime, Catiline's vows are depicted throughout as fundamentally harmful to the state.

Jonson adopts the imagery of familial bloodlines prevalent in Shakespearean drama to depict the central concepts which define Roman identity. However, in order to convey Catiline's inherent malaise, the language is grotesquely inverted. Rome is a 'step-dame' (I.i.495) rather than a mother, suggesting that Catiline has a public relationship which is contractually binding rather than natural or innate; as such, his political ties are simultaneously highlighted and undermined, as they are entered into through the legal trope of marriage rather than emitting from his status as a true born Roman. Catiline's imagery further stresses the antagonistic relationship between himself and the state: 'Dig me a seat where I will live again / The labour of her womb, and be a burden' (I.i.94-95). The teleological association between a natural

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. by John Creaser, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), IV, pp. 253-428.

growth from childhood to adulthood under the auspices of the parent-state is inverted, as Catiline imagines that he will bury himself back into the womb like a parasite and cause Rome to endure a horrific 'labour'. This immediately establishes an antagonistic relationship between Catiline and the state, and shapes our response to the later vows which license his subsequent course of behaviour. Any attempt to swear by Rome as a sacred entity in justification for his conspiracy is revealed as a rhetorical posture from the very first scene; as such, Jonson encourages the audience to regard his further use of communal vowing not only as an illicit act, but one which expels the circle of corruption outwards, including more Roman citizens within its compass.<sup>56</sup>

The notion of community in relation to group vowing is also more complex in *Catiline* than *Titus Andronicus*, as the fellow swearers are not bound by ties of blood; rather, they are characterised as disaffected aristocrats whose inherited privileges are being steadily encroached upon by a low-born 'inmate' (II.i.116) such as Cicero. Catiline binds the swearers with a shared cup of hot blood, slaked from the body of a murdered 'slave' (I.i.307) The blood is used to suggest or even recoup a lost ideal of similitude in the face of an increasingly stratified state, in which public service is defined by merit rather than birth. <sup>57</sup> However, the blood of a slave insists by its very nature on the inequalities that define the sociological make-up of Roman society, particularly when the liquid is consumed by a group who use it to delineate

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> For a further exploration of realpolitik in Stuart drama through the medium of classical culture, see Malcolm Smuts, 'Court-Centred Politics and the Uses of Roman Historians, 1590-1630', in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, ed. by Kevin Sharp and Peter Lake (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 21-43; Paulina Kewes, 'Julius Caesar and Jacobean England', *The Seventeenth Century*, 17 (2002), 155-186.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Catiline announces to his fellow aristocratic conspirators that they are 'herded in with the vulgar' (I.i.355) in an image which characterises social commingling based on merit with a blurred distinction between human and animal. For Jonson, Catiline's rhetoric is designed to exploit the fear of encroachment on the ancient privileges of high rank that is a perceived consequence of meritocratic excellence.

their aristocratic status in relation to a submissive social opposite. The ghostly presence of Sulla in the opening scene adds further texture to the symbolic properties of slave blood by invoking the class-based struggles between the *optimates* and the *populares* that led to the civil war prior to the events of the plot. Not only does the cup of slave blood draw attention to the Roman state as fundamentally unequal as opposed to egalitarian, but the decision to promote it as the very opposite – a rite which binds the swearers in an equal group – exposes the custom as propaganda designed to further Catiline's private ambitions.

The language used by Catiline to accompany the first communal oath adopts the familiar trope of blood as a sacred metaphoric entity as well as a substance which is literalised:

Be firm, my hand, not shed a drop, but pour Fierceness into me with it, and fell thirst Of more and more, till Rome be left as bloodless As ever her fears made her, or the sword. And, when I leave to wish this to thee, stepdame, Or stop to effect it, with my powers fainting, So may my blood be drawn, and so drunk up, As is this slave's.

I.i.491-498

Catiline crafts a parasitic relationship between himself and the state, in which the blood that constitutes Roman identity is leeched out and transfused into his own body. If he fails in his promise, then the blood is imagined to be 'drawn' and 'drunk up' again, leaving him drained and 'fainting'. There is no sense of cohesion between Catiline as a subject and a Roman concept of statehood defined by participatory circulation; rather, the two exist in an antagonistic dynamic where one triumphs at the expense of the other. Jonson's use of medicinal imagery is a response of sorts to

the association between bodily health and conciliar politics in *Titus Andronicus*. Whereas Marcus used this as a rhetorical posture to inculcate the Andronici into a position of power, Catiline is exposed as a machiavel who has no intention of reconciling his own ambitions with the well-being of the state. Blair Worden observes that for Jonson 'Blood [...] can and should be an aid to virtue. It cannot be a substitute for it. If those who possess it lose their sense of social responsibility, blood will become an enemy to virtue'. See Catiline's perversion of the deep association between blood imagery and public identity is particularly focalised during the ritual of pledging, as it is a custom which insists on and creates a binding obligation. The communal vow promotes a vision of solidarity which is not only unsound, considering that the blood of a 'slave' is used as a ritual element, but is in itself a ruse to foster Catiline's ambition; in the first act, he states that the conspirators will be 'thrown by' (I.i.183), revealing his intention to betray them as soon as it is convenient to do so.

The supping of the blood of a 'slave' conveys a cannibalistic view of Roman community, in which a figure of low status is quite literally consumed by citizens of higher rank. This may be a Jonsonian interpolation into the source material to focalise the insincerity of Catiline's association of group swearing with the idea of solidarity. In Thomas Heywood's 1607 translation of Sallust, Catiline begins a 'carouse of wine brewed with humane blood' in order to bolster a sense of equality in which the conspirators will 'persevere the more constant each confederate to other'. <sup>59</sup> For Heywood there is no mention of the 'slave', so the communion blood is less politicised by its lack of a specific social status; the act is still unorthodox but

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Blair Worden, 'Politics in *Catiline*: Jonson and his Sources', in *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance*, ed. by Martin Butler (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 152-173 (p. 155). <sup>59</sup> Sallust, *The two most worthy and noble histories which remaine unmained to posterity*, trans. by Thomas Heywood (London: William Jaggard, 1609), p. 21.

the equality of the swearers is not ritually stressed by the consumption of the blood of a social inferior. As the disclosure of Catiline's intention to break the oath is not included, it seems that for Heywood the blood has an ability to foster a genuine sense of cohesion, regardless of the immoral nature of its origin. An earlier translation of Sallust by Thomas Paynell in 1557 may have provided a slightly more pervasive source, as the blood is characterised as 'the fastinge of the flesshe of a certayne man, that Catiline had slayne'. 60 There is no indication that the figure is a 'slave', but the fact that he has been killed by Catiline implies that it is the result of an act of violence, and therefore is an unethical substance with which to ratify an oath. Paynell makes this explicit when he later asserts that 'And they say, he dyd it for this consideracion, that throughe suche a cruell deede they shulde be the more faythfull one to an other'. 61 Jonson's depiction of Catilinian swearing as anti-communal is part of a much richer tradition of contention regarding the precise nature of the blood which is used in the ritual. Bruce Boehrer, for example, points out that Sallust dismissed the story of the wine as a piece of heightened propaganda that would moderate any reprieve against Cicero by painting the conspirators in a brutal and vulgar light. 62 The slight tweaking of the source material suggests a nuanced interjection in an already contentious debate. For Jonson, the politicisation of the 'slave' blood questions the fitness of communal swearing to facilitate a change in the governance of the state, particularly when the wellbeing of all of its members is considered. Rather, it emerges as a sinister act which aims to undo the sense of cohesion which the stage image of group solidarity would suggest; as Catiline says in the opening scene, he aims to 'reach thy head, thy head, proud city' (I.i.78) in an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Sallust, *The conspiracie of Catiline*, trans. by Thomas Paynell (London: John Waley, 1557), sig.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Paynell, sig. D2r

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Bruce Boehrer, 'Jonson's Catiline and Anti-Sallustrian Trends in Renaissance Humanist Historiography', *Studies in Philology*, 94 (1997), 84-10 (p. 90).

image of destruction which is the polar opposite of Marcus' intention to 'set a head on headless Rome' in *Titus Andronicus*. <sup>63</sup>

Catiline's oath is described as a 'sacrament', which had implicitly religious connotations for an early modern audience. The image of a group of conspirators drinking a cup of blood evokes the popular association of sedition with Catholic ritual, most recently exhibited in the horror of the Gunpowder Plot. Peter Lake states that 'The parallels between the perfectly inverted anti-religion animating Catiline's conspiracy and the popery that lay behind the powder plot could not but have struck Jonson's audience and readership'64; as such, the Eucharistic elements of the blood oath take on a more nuanced political inflection which draws on the association between religious solidarity and treason. Jonson's relationship to the Catholic faith was particularly complex when it came to the ritual of the Eucharist. In 1612 he attended a debate in Paris to ascertain whether 'Christ himself was literally, rather than just symbolically, present in the wine and wafer of the mass' suggesting an intellectual interest in the cultural and ritualistic properties associated with the sacrament. 65 Catiline's circulation of a cup of blood amongst the group would appear to exploit anti-Catholic hysteria, in which the covenant of the Eucharist is not only set up in opposition to the state fealty emblematised by the Protestant monarch, but is actually working to supplant it. Indeed, the Oath of Allegiance demanded by James I in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot was carefully designed to test the loyalty of his Catholic subjects. Ian Donaldson argues that 'it is almost certain that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> For a detailed exploration of the reception of Sallust in Early Modern literary culture, see Patricia J. Osmond, 'Princepts Historiae Romanae: Sallust in Renaissance Political Thought', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 40 (1995), 101-143.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Peter Lake, 'Ben Jonson and the Politics of "Conversion": Catiline and the Relocation of Roman (Catholic) Virtue, *Ben Jonson Journal*, 19 (2012), 163-189 (p. 170-171).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 299.

Jonson would have subscribed to the Oath<sup>66</sup>, suggesting a clear ability to differentiate secular obedience from the spiritual ties of faith. However, the blood oath is not used to define group solidarity, but is a posture to mask Catiline's individual agenda; any Catholic reading is therefore complicated by its use as a seductive trope rather than a ritual with a genuine ability to bind the participants as a group.

Martin Butler argues that a sustained engagement with Catholicism is crucial to understand the complex relationship between religious and state obedience, as 'the figure of the Catholic' is the 'motor driving the period's ideological conflicts'.<sup>68</sup> This is particularly charged in relation to the rhetorical depiction of swearing in Stuart political culture. In the preface to Thomas Campion's masque to celebrate the marriage of James Hay (later Earl of Carlisle) to Honoria Denny on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1607, the imagery of blood sacrament is adopted to overtly politicise the union in relation to wider concepts of royal consolidation:

The disunited Scithians when they sought
To gather strength by parties, and combine
That perfect league of freends which once beeing wrought
No turne of time, or fortune could untwine,
This rite they held: a massie bowle was brought,
And ev'ry right arme shot his severall blood
Into the mazar till 'twas fully fraught,
Then having stird it to an equall floud
They quaft to th'union, which till death should last,
In spite of private foe, or forraine feare,

<sup>68</sup> Martin Butler, 'Ben Jonson's Catholicism', *Ben Jonson Journal*, 19 (2012), 190-216 (p. 195).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Donaldson, p. 258.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> James VI and I uses the trope of blood to demonise his Catholic subjects in his apology for the Oath, characterising the tenets of spiritual fealty as 'bloody *Maximes*' and bewailing the 'evill blood in the Pope's head and his cleargie'. As this is an image used by the king, it is possible to perceive a more nuanced dialogue at work, in which blood imagery is directly supportive of James' own brand of Protestant monarchy based on the claim of his birth, rather than the endorsement of the Pope (*An apologie for the oath of allegiance* (London: Robert Barker, 1609), p. 10).

And this blood sacrament being knowne thave past Their names grew dreadfull to all far, and neere. <sup>69</sup>

Campion uses an image which is strikingly similar to the depiction of the communal oath in Catiline. Rather than signify a Catholicised form of sedition, however, the 'blood sacrament' promotes an alliance of 'disunited' Scithian factions into a stronger political body. The 'perfect league' is bolstered by a ritual act in which each member of the tribe pours his own blood into a 'massie bowl', which is then drunk by everyone in the group. This is notably different to Catiline's oath, which relies on the death of a vulnerable slave to provide the blood and is therefore not as egalitarian – and binding – as the act depicted by Campion. It is possible that Jonson heard this preface first hand, or had some knowledge of its existence. The previous high profile masque at court was his own work Hymenaei, which celebrated the 1606 marriage between Robert Devereux Earl of Essex and Frances Howard and included James Hay as a participant. Campion's preface develops the image of the blood rite by comparing it not only to the deep bond of marriage, but the 'high, and everliving Union / Tweene Scots, and English'. To If Catiline's blood oath is placed in a courtly context, it is not so much a Catholic ritual as a corruption of one of the central topoi with which the concept of political union is articulated; as such, he is more explicitly engaged in promoting an opposite concept of fragmentation, and thus sowing the seeds for his own political ascent, rather than fostering a sense of explicitly Catholic subversion. This is not to deny the obvious Eucharistic implications of the circulation of a cup of blood. Rather, they are situated alongside another rhetorical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Thomas Campion, *The discription of a maske, presented before the Kinges Majestie at White-Hall, on Twelfth Night last in honour of the Lord Hayes, and his bride* (London: John Brown, 1607), sig. A2r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Campion, sig. A2v.

strain which is more overtly engaged with James' project of union, making it possible to interpret Catiline as a mischievous courtier in more contemporary political and secular terms.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare uses a second communal oath to not only reaffirm the initial pledge, but establish a dialogue between the different conditions of each custom. Jonson adopts a similar model by dramatising another pledge by the conspirators once the attack upon Rome has been agreed:

Behold this silver eagle:
'Twas Marius' standard in the Cimbrian war,
Fatal to Rome, and, as our augurs tell me,
Shall still be so; for which one ominous cause
I have kept it safe and done it sacred rites
As to a godhead, in a chapel built
Of purpose to it. Pledge then all your hands
To follow it, with vows of death and ruin
Struck silently and home.

III.iii.74-82

In contemporary images, the Roman eagle is typically depicted with two heads looking in opposite directions, visually emphasising at the relentless scrutiny which Rome exerts on her enemies and her own citizens.<sup>71</sup> The object upon which Catiline's second oath is made is evocative therefore not only of heightened policing in the state, but a form of doubleness regarding the cultural symbols which define Roman identity. It appears that Catiline's use of this symbol is an attempt to wrest

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> In his book of emblems, published a year before *Catiline* in 1610, Edmond Bolton refers at length to the symbolic properties of the 'Hieroglyphick' eagle, interpreting it as 'looking to the two opposite coasts of the Romane world.'; as such, it is subtly associated with ideas of political security. The description is placed alongside an engraving which depicts the eagle with two heads looking in different directions. Although this may not have been one of the most visible images in Early Modern culture, it does provide us with a glimpse of the symbolic properties of the silver eagle which may have influenced Jonson's depiction of the entity that is sworn on by Catiline in the second communal vow (*The elements of armouries* (London: George Eld, 1610), pp. 146-147.

control of the state away from the senate at the semiotic level, as this would not only endow the conspiracy with prestige but offset the more threatening aspects of surveillance which the two-headed eagle is designed to encourage. However, Catiline's rhetoric betrays an uneven grasp of the object, particularly when he describes it as 'fatal'. The primary suggestion of fate and providence is not only undercut by the secondary connotation of death, but also draws attention to its lack of success in overseeing the success of Marius in the wider political conflict with Sulla. 72 It is therefore an unstable entity with which to guarantee a conspiratorial action designed to wrest control of the state and its dominant cultural topoi. The use of a silver eagle intimately associated with the recent past is a more notably public entity than the private communion of human blood, and is presumably designed to position the conspirators as public figures with a deep connection to Roman political history. Yet the slipperiness of Catiline's language, particularly in relation to the earlier vow, suggests that his project may not be as water-tight as previously imaged, particularly when it utilises the tropes of culture and history to posit itself as operating in the best interests of the state.

For Jonson, the success of a public figure is often measured by his watchfulness, especially in relation to factional plotting. In his 'Epigram on William, Lord Burl[eigh], Lo[rd] High Treasurer of England' from *Underwood*, the subject of the poem is lauded as 'The only faithful watchman of the realm' whose service is defined by his ability to detect the stirrings of treason. Catiline's failure to grasp the civic benefits endowed in the double-headed eagle is another indication of his lack of public responsibility. This is in marked contrast to his political enemy Cicero, who is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Ben Jonson, 'An Epigram on William, Lord Burl[eigh]', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by George Parfitt (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 168.

repeatedly defined by his ability to perceive the subtle workings of seditious behaviour. When he discovers the threat posed to Rome, Cicero warns Catiline that 'The commonwealth hath eyes that wake as sharply / Over her life as yours do for her ruin' (III.v.23-24) to remind him of his unrelenting scrutiny of threats to the state. The idea of the 'commonwealth' looking to her own interests while surveying an outer threat could be a subtle evocation of the two-headed eagle which surveys the threats to Rome in order to guarantee its safety. If so, Cicero is exhibiting a more nuanced grasp of the cultural entity which Catiline uses to swear by, as his interrogation in the senate literalises the metaphor through the actual exposure of Catiline's treason; in other words, Catiline talks, Cicero acts. Catiline's use of the sacred 'silver eagle' is explicitly lambasted by Cicero, who hopes that it 'shall prove to thee as baneful / As thou conceiv'st it to the commonwealth' (IV.ii.326-327). Because Catiline uses a historical object the second communal vow, it is liable to be subject to a sustained battle of interpretation by his political rivals. The deft articulation of its symbolic properties by Cicero, particularly those connected with the public exposure of dissent, is far more nuanced than Catiline's garbled conception; as such, it presages the success of the former at the expense of the latter in relation to the political future of Rome.

Catiline's worship of the eagle is also indicative of the rites of Catholic worship, particularly the veneration of images which provoked such ire in the early modern state. Jonson's use of contentious language is expressly designed to stoke the fires of anti-Catholic anger, particularly as the object is delicately placed in a 'chapel' and regarded as a 'god-head', or extension of the divine host. If the eagle is regarded as sacred, then it is a form of veneration which flirts with outright sacrilege, particularly as such a practice was regarded as ungodly and therefore blasphemous.

Yet once again, Jonson evokes the association between Catholic sedition and communal swearing only to complicate it in subtle ways. At no point does Catiline imply that the eagle is used as part of group worship, or circulated amongst a select coterie of spiritual devotees. Rather, it is locked away in a private 'chapel' which presumably is for his own personal use. The OED records a semantic association between the word 'chapel' and secrecy, in which the word is defined as 'A room or building for private worship in or attached to a palace, nobleman's house, castle, garrison, embassy, prison, monastery, college, school, or other institution'. 73 It would be possible for a shrewd audience member to read the silver eagle not as a Catholic idol but as a private object associated with high rank; as such, it emerges as yet another tool with which Catiline can shape the conspirators for his own ends. In the context of Catiline's isolation, the invocation of a custom understood to be Catholic in nature could be interpreted as a carefully managed ritual intended to exploit the binding power of shared spiritual worship, rather than reinforce it. In a similar manner to the earlier communal vow, Jonson invokes a popular association between Catholicism and treason only to expose it as a malleable tool to facilitate the ambition of a shrewd courtier. However, Catiline's shakier grasp of rhetoric in the second oath implies that this is a less successful strategy when the ritual object is a public entity with a rich political history, as opposed to the private circulation of a cup of blood. Such objects have a greater power to defy the schemes of an individual citizen as they are shared across the state, and therefore more contentious as objects of veneration.

Jonson depicts the two moments of Catilinian swearing as rhetorically supple entities which prevent an easy identification with a set reading. One the one hand the

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<sup>73 &</sup>quot;chapel, n. 2a.". OED online. July 2014. Oxford University Press.

popular association between group pledging and Catholic subterfuge is exploited; on the other, Catiline is established as a lone courtier who uses the inflammatory aspects of the custom for his own private gain at the expense of the community. There is an implication that what is being pledged is a perversion of an idealised Roman obligation between the individual and a vision of public service. The figure of Cicero is contrasted with Catiline to tease out the differences in their regard for the welfare of the state. Cicero is characterised as an 'inmate here in Rome' (II.i.116) by the aristocratic plotter Sempronia, who berates him for his lack of 'house' and 'ensigns' (II.i.120-121). In response to Fulvia's acknowledgment of his virtue, Sempronia retorts 'Hang virtue! Where there is no blood, 'tis vice' (II.i.122). The cup of blood that was used by Catiline to bind the conspirators is once again associated with the disaffected nobility when confronted with a gifted orator of low birth. However, Cicero turns this particular argument on its head when he persuades Curius to betray the conspirators and join his own cause: 'would you, I say, / A person both of blood and honour, stocked / In a long race of virtuous ancestors / Embark yourself for such a hellish action / With parricides and traitors?' (III.ii.94-98). Cicero argues that aristocratic heritage is truly manifested when the bonds of state are balanced with 'private friendship' (III.ii.69), as the two are synonymous; traitor and parricide are interchangeable terms, as the destruction of one is the destruction of the other. Cicero's shrewd assessment of Catiline's personal ambition reveals a dissatisfaction with the use of blood as a sacred entity, as it perverts this neat association, which in turn jeopardises the civic institutions which facilitate the rise of meritocrats such as himself.

Katherine Eisaman Maus argues that Jonson's notion of public duty is deeply influenced by classical notions of 'disinterested generosity issuing from the

perception of likeness'. 74 This was obviously most acute in familial structures, particularly the dynasties who had secured a role in Roman history through distinguished service to the state. However, a secure grasp of public obligations were not inherited; rather, they were refined through the cultivation of 'alliance[s] founded upon spiritual similarity'. 75 Aristocrats such as the conspirators therefore fail to grasp a deeper political bond in which the virtue attached to 'blood' is modulated by the example of good citizens such as Cicero, as opposed to being cannibalised as part of a conspiratorial ritual. Jonson explores this notion in a number of his poems, particularly 'XIV Ode. To Sir William Sidney, on His Birthday' from *The Forest*: 'Nor can a little of the common store, / Of nobles' virtue, show in you; / Your blood / So good / And great, must seek for new, / And study more' (31-36). Sidney's inherited potential must be seasoned with study and observation if it is to manifest the same standard of public service exhibited by other members of the Sidney family. There is the implication that a concept of aristocratic identity which does not 'seek for new' is even worse than the inaction of the low born, as it has a greater risk of corrupting the social structure on which its very identity depends. As such, Cicero's appeal to Curius reveals a shrewd grasp of the wider programme of civic decay imagined by Catiline, as his corruption of the aristocratic conspirators will jeopardise the cultural formation which facilitates their own rank. Cicero has a better understanding of communal obligation in relation not only to 'inmates' (II.i.116) such as himself but all citizens of Rome, even his social enemies; he therefore exhibits a greater degree of disinterested virtue in service of the state.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 116.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Maus, p. 116.

As noted earlier, Catiline's communal oaths are peppered with inflammatory references to Catholic ritual. In contrast, Jonson associates Cicero's public actions with reformed doctrine, particularly at the level of rhetoric. The blood ritual is described as a 'horrid sacrament / In human blood' (III.ii.49-50) to differentiate it from more orthodox forms of communal bonding; as the 'horrid sacrament' is explicitly associated with the consumption of 'human blood', it can be inferred that Cicero rejects a pact which is redolent of the controversy over the presence of the host in the mass, and is therefore characterised as Catholic in nature. From Cicero's rhetorical view, Jonson focalises the perception of the conspiracy as culturally contentious, particularly in relation to the paranoia over religiously-motivated treason. This would appear to exploit the association between Catholic subterfuge and communal swearing which was a notable feature of popular literary responses to the Gunpowder Plot. In Francis Herring's 1610 poem *Popish pietie*, the plotters are depicted 'hand in hand' and they 'sweare' an 'oath', depicting the deep bond that was imagined to tie the Catholic community together in defiance of their fealty to the Protestant King James. <sup>76</sup> Just before they 'undermine at last the royall throne', the conspirators swear a second 'oath, both joynt and severall' to explicitly associate their act with an attempt to subvert the established political order centred around reformed monarchy; the throne is 'undermine[d]' physically by the tunnel under parliament, but also metaphorically through the supplanting of a public oath to the state for a private spiritual pact. Cicero's use of similar rhetoric to characterise the plot could be a stock attempt by Jonson to satiate this particular cultural fear during the first decade of the seventeenth century. Yet, it appears as part of a crafted

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Francis Herring, *Popish pietie*, or The first part of the historie of that horrible and barbarous conspiracie, commonly called the powder-treason nefariously plotted against James King of great Britaine, trans. by A.P., (London: William Jones, 1610), sig. A4v, sig. B4r.

rhetorical response by a gifted 'tongue-man' whose oratorical skills are repeatedly praised, even by his enemies. As such, the anti-Catholic implications are not objective but suspect, as they are used to characterise the conspirators in contemporary language that communicates their sedition in the most persuasive way possible.

In contrast to Cicero's skilful use of inflammatory rhetoric, Jonson is at pains to associate him with language evocative of reformed doctrine. When Fulvia reveals the conspiracy, she twice praises Cicero for his 'saving council' (III.ii.137, III.ii.172). The repeated use of this phrase not only stresses the wisdom of Cicero's advice to Curius to prioritise his public duty, but characterises him as a 'saver' of the state. This particular word was redolent with Protestant conceptions of preserving a soul from damnation, or offering redemption from sin. 77 Not only is Cicero adept at using Catholic rhetoric to characterise his enemies, he is also associated with the language of its more orthodox theological opposite. Later in the text he implores Catulus to 'repent' (III.v.29) in a word deeply associated with popular theatrical treatments of reformed doctrine, and laments that the conspirators are 'lost' (III.v.32).<sup>78</sup> Cicero's form of public virtue is crafted in opposition to Catholic group binding to emphasise his grasp of a conception of obligation which the early modern audience would have considered to be a social aim. In place of secret swearing, he depicts himself, and is depicted by his allies, as a citizen whose loyalty is filtered through the rhetoric of Protestantism; an early modern audience would be likely to ally him with the particular brand of monarchical fealty demanded by James. Cicero

<sup>77 &</sup>quot;saving, v. 1a.". OED online. July 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> For critical explorations of the concept of repentance in Renaissance drama, see Adrian Streete, *Protestantism and Drama in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 80-100; Heather Hirschfeld, *The End of Satisfaction: The Drama of Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

emerges as a more conventionally licit public figure than the conspirators, who have been duped by a corrupt politician out for his own ends.

The word 'saving' and its cognates 'save' and 'saved' may have had a deeper classical association for Jonson, particularly in relation to state oaths. In his depiction of the life of Julius Caesar, Suetonius explains in detail a new type of sacred object which emerged during the transition from republic to imperial government:

After this they erected in the Forum a solide Columne of over 20 foote high of Numidian marble: with this title graven thereupon: PARENTI PATRIAE. *To the father of his Countrie*. At which piller for a long time they used still to sacrifice, to make vowes and prayers, to determine and end certaine controversies interposing alwaies their oth by the name of CAESAR.<sup>79</sup>

The column serves as a dominant, singular object on which Roman subjects can take their 'vowes'. Its sacredness derives from a view of political absolutism in which Caesar, and the engraved text which shapes him as a public father, can act as a guarantee of security in moments of uncertainty, particularly in relation to social affairs. Jonson may have been thinking of this particular form of public swearing when he composed a poem in praise of William, Lord Mounteagle for foiling the Gunpowder Plot. <sup>80</sup> The poet laments that his 'country' should have 'raised / An obelisk, or column, to thy name', with his public identity 'writ' upon it 'in brass or marble'. The links are strengthened in the final couplet, when the poet declares 'My country's parents I have many known; / But saver of my country, thee alone'. Jonson had a working knowledge of Suetonius, as he is mentioned in the marginalia to

<sup>79</sup> Suetonius, *The historie of twelve Caesars, emperours of Rome*, trans. by Philemon Holland (London: Matthew Lownes, 1606), p. 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Ben Jonson, 'To William, Lord Mounteagle', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by George Parfitt, p. 52.

Discoveries and his work is used as a significant source for Sejanus. 81 The wishful construction of an engraved 'column' to a distinguished patriot such as Mounteagle draws on the Suetonian sacred entity to both reinforce his exemplary commitment to his public obligations and suggest that his actions are themselves sacred enough to swear by. It therefore stands for Jonson as an emblem of public service at its most impressive. The context of the Gunpowder plot and the use of the word 'saver' establish a more nuanced relationship between this perspective of state service and the treatment of similar concepts in Catiline. A conventional tracing across Jonson's oeuvre would suggest that Cicero is a similar figure to Mounteagle, who saves his country from conspiratorial sedition. Yet Mounteagle was famously noted as a vacillator who was implicated in the plot but changed sides at the last minute in order to save his own skin. 82 As such, the image of him as a secure pillar comparable to Caesar is possibly an ironic parody of court politicians who change their allegiance when circumstances suddenly change. The cluster of associations can still be read as commendable, but there is also the possibility that Cicero's role as a 'saver' of the state is slightly less secure than it first appears, particularly when similar rhetoric is applied by Jonson to public figures who were not noted for their unquestioning fidelity to the state.

Early modern theatregoers with a classical education would have known that one of the most eloquent commentators on the custom of swearing in classical culture was Cicero. 83 *De Officiis*, his treatise on the duties of public life, was taught

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by George Parfitt, pp. 373-458, line 2445; For a discussion of Suetonius as a source for *Sejanus*, see Freyja Cox Jensen, *Reading the Roman Republic in Early Modern England* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012), pp. 196-197.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Gunpowder Plot: Terror and Faith in 1605* (London: Random House, 1996), pp. 150-157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Andrew Hadfield observes that 'Cicero was regarded as the philosopher of advice, the founder of the *speculum principis* tradition which engaged in dialogue with the state'; as such, he was explicitly read in conjunction with theories of obligation between the individual and the wider polity ('Tacitus

as part of a typical grammar school education, and would have communicated some of the central civic obligations which defined public identity in England.<sup>84</sup> In Book III, Cicero offers a clear definition of the kind of oath which is best suited to guarantee the success of social transactions:

But in an otheraking, not what the feare, but what the vertue of it is, ought to bee considered. For an othe is a religious assuring of any thing. And whatso assuredly you have promised, as taking god to witnesse: it ought to bee observed. For y othe now respectes not the wrathe of the godds, which is none at all: but justice, and faithfulness.85

The invocation of a supreme deity is imagined to be unnecessary, as 'justice' and 'faithfulness' are sufficient qualities to ensure that the terms of an oath will be kept. Katherine Eisaman Maus' concept of Roman likeness is in evidence here, as Cicero imagines that the shrewd citizen who prides himself on the ability to assess the similarity between himself and his peers will not engage in a contract with someone who is dissimilar and therefore untrustworthy; if he is duped, it is his own fault. Jonson's deep knowledge of classical culture would mean that he was almost certainly familiar with Cicero's secular conception of swearing based on replicated trust. Yet this is not the type of behaviour practised by his fictional version of the man. When Cicero accepts the consulship in act three, he proudly asserts that '[I] vow to owe it to no title else / Except the gods, that Cicero is your consul' (III.i.12-13). Yet this is the exact opposite of his political conceptualisation of swearing, in which the 'gods' are not 'respect[ed]' by the custom due to the introduction of

and the Reform of Ireland in the 1590's', in Early Modern Civil Discourses, ed. by Jennifer Richards (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2003), pp. 115-130 (p. 115)).

Ian Green, Humanism and Protestantism in Early Modern English Education (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 262.

<sup>85</sup> Cicero, Marcus Tullius Ciceroes thre bokes of duties to Marcus his sonne, trans. Nicholas Grimalde (London: Richard Tottel, 1556), p. 150.

punishment and coercion in the place of civic trust. A theatre-goer with a basic grammar school education would have grasped that something was amiss in Cicero's espousal of a 'vow' to the 'gods'. What emerges is a failure to practise what he preaches at the very moment when his public obligations are being ratified by his acceptance of the consulship. Jonson does not intend the audience to distrust Cicero, or perceive his swearing to be as debased as the communal oaths made by the conspirators. However, he does emerge as a shrewd operator who appeals to emotive forms of rhetoric in order to situate himself as an orthodox Roman citizen observant of stratified chains of authority.

Jonson develops this sceptical attitude to Ciceronian swearing near the end of the play, when Cicero commands the Allobroges to hand over a letter made by the conspirators under 'oath' (V.iii.63). The pact is not simply disregarded by Cicero, but is deliberately planted as a device used to lull Catiline and his followers into a false sense of security. Here, Cicero appears to be betraying his own civic concept of swearing based on the assessment of similitude between two partners in a pact. It could be argued that the failure of the conspirators to ascertain where the true loyalties of the Allobroges lie is suggestive of their own lack of shrewdness, particularly in relation to Roman identity. Yet the willingness with which Cicero abuses his own precepts in the name of social security is surely meant to question the relationship between an idealised form of swearing, and its fitness for ensuring the wellbeing of the state when it is under threat, particularly from its own citizens. At one point Cicero states that 'There was a virtue once in Rome when good men / Would with more sharp coercion have restrained / A wicked citizen than the deadliest foe' (IV.ii.138-140), situating 'virtue' as quite separate from the reciprocal swearing which is another manifestation of suitable public behaviour.

At the end of the play, the estimation of Cicero's success is defined in opposition to Catiline's perceived failure. Whereas Cicero is described by Cato as 'the only father of his country' (V.iii.228) in a manner not too dissimilar to Suetonius' image of Caesar's sacred column, Catiline is dismissed as 'ambitious of great fame' (V.v.250) and is punished accordingly. In his last stand on the battlefield, the audience hear that Catiline was 'plucking down lives about him, / Till he had circled in himself with death' (V.v.255-256). Petronius caricatures him as a bringer of death to his fellow Roman citizens, rather than a paternal nurturer who offers them protection. However, Jonson's use of the word 'circled' also invokes the stage image of the conspiratorial oaths which licensed his actions in the first place. Instead of providing Catiline with political power, they have detached him not only from his fellow conspirators, but also from the community into which he was born; as such, the only outcome is 'death'. However, the polarisation between Cicero and Catiline is a propagandistic image which is not wholly endorsed by Jonson throughout the play, particularly in relation to oath-taking. Both of the main protagonists manipulate the custom in order to promote their own vision of civic government and inculcate themselves with their fellow peers. Yet in abusing a form of swearing which evokes a cultural memory of republican solidarity, Catiline is ultimately unsuccessful because it traverses a deeper level of sacredness than Cicero's misuse of mutual trust. It is possible to argue that, for Jonson, the biggest political crime is not what form of swearing is able to facilitate private ambition, but which one corrupts the values held most dear by the state. Evidently communal oathtaking is in need of greater protection from figures such as Catiline, as it represents a type of egalitarianism which is almost idealistic in its insistence on the equal status of the swearers.

## CHAPTER THREE

## OATHS OF FEALTY

## The Coronation Oath

In early modern political culture, the coronation oath was regarded as one of the most primary compacts in the state. It was the moment at which the new king or queen promised before a select group of nobles and peers to safeguard several key institutions throughout their reign, centring on religion and law. However, the status of this oath was heavily contested during the sixteenth century, primarily as a result of the doctrinal shifts that were occasioned by the break with Rome and the subsequent enlargement of the scope of royal power. The oath sworn by Henry VIII in 1501 was very similar to that sworn by Edward II almost two hundred years earlier, suggesting the continuation of a medieval form of kingship which regarded the monarch as dependent on the acknowledgement of the peerage to legitimise their rule. In Alice Hunt's meticulous recreation of Henry's coronation, she observes that the oath was spoken before the anointing which conferred the divine substance of kingship on the body of the individual; as such, 'Henry was placed, by his wording,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Richard Crompton asserts that 'in the day of their Coronation [monarchs] take a solemne Oath upon the holy booke of God to indevor themselves, that the same lawes shall be observed and executed to all indifferently' (*The mansion of magnanimitie* (London: Richard Field, 1599), sig. C2v). For a definition of the 'Oath of the King', see John Cowell, *The interpreter; or Booke containing the signification of words* (London: John Legate, 1607), sig. ZZv.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> David Martin Jones argues that 'The period after 1530 witnessed the transformation of the medieval king with his high court of parliament into a single, but mixed sovereign body of king-in-parliament' (*Conscience and Allegiance in Seventeenth Century England* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1999), p. 24).

below Parliament and its law-making capacities'. At the start of the century, the coronation oath was designed to promote a form of mixed constitution in which the king was granted conditional power, subject to the endorsement of parliament and the acknowledgement of the ecclesiastical community present at the moment of swearing.

During his coronation, Henry agreed to observe the legal and religious customs which had been established by previous monarchs:

[You will] graunte and kepe to the people of England the lawes and the Custumes to theym as of olde tyme rightfull and devoute kings graunted, and the same ratefye and confine by your othe, and the sprituall lawes Custumes and libertees graunted to the Clergye & people by your noble predecessors and glorious Kyng Seint Edward.<sup>4</sup>

The heavy emphasis on law and religion stresses the equivalent status of the temporal and spiritual powers of the king. He will 'kepe' the 'Custumes' established in the past by both God and 'devoute kings' to ensure the stability of the state with regard to the existing legal rights of English subjects, and the ecclesiastical prerogatives of the clergy as mediated by the Pope in Rome. Although this is the moment in which political fealty is initiated, there is the unmistakable sense of promissory obligation, particularly in the comparison established between the current swearer and Edward the Confessor, whose characterisation as 'Seint' and 'King' emphasises his unification of religion and law. In order to cultivate a form of kingship similar to that of Edward, Henry is compelled to exercise power within the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Alice Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Hunt, cited on p. 27.

parameters of his coronation promise and not encroach upon the political limits established by previous monarchs. As this is one of the key moments during the ceremony, the oath places the assumption of power within prescribed rhetorical boundaries, initiating Henry into an office and commitment defined by the task of protecting the existing fabric of the state. At no point in this medieval formation of the coronation oath is kingship regarded as absolute or total; rather, it is conditional upon the fulfilment of a public political pledge.

However, there was much contention in early modern culture regarding the precise moment at which the monarch assumed their office. The swearing of an oath implies a definite initiation into power, but other aspects of the coronation ceremony, such as the anointing or the public acknowledgement of the peers, suggest a range of competing rituals. The case becomes slightly more complex if the death of the previous monarch is regarded as the precise instant at which kingship is transferred, as it denotes that the oath is not a transformative act but rather the repeated endorsement of a pre-existing state. Conal Condren argues that the location of the succession is a crucial indicator as to the type of fealty that is enabled or permitted by the coronation oath, as accession on death nullifies the idea of a binding pact whereas the moment of swearing initiates an obligation: 'If the oath were merely assertory, consent dwindled into acknowledgement, but if it was taken to be directly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In his pamphlet *The regiment of the Church*, Thomas Bell argues that the monarch assumes his or her office the very second that the previous king or queen dies: 'Kings by succession and discent in blood royall, are Kings *Ipso facto*, so soone as their auncestors and deceased, even before the act of their annointing and Coronation, as also before the oathe.'; however, the telling phrase 'blood royall' implies that is view is contingent upon an orthodox form of succession based on male-preference primogeniture and the existence of an heir apparent. The conditional nature of Bell's view is indicative of some of the intricacies surrounding the exact nature of the transference of power in early seventeenth century political thought (*The regiment of the Church* (London: William Welby, 1606), p. 4).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Alice Hunt perceptively observes that 'England hovered between the earlier medieval theory that kingship was bestowed at the moment of ritual anointing, and the later medieval theory that kingship was transmitted directly to the heir on the predecessors death'. Hunt, p. 6.

enactment amounting to a culmination of considered choice'. Transference of kingship at the moment of death relegates the oath to a public spectacle in which it acts as a remnant of an earlier elective model; conversely, it could be situated as the locus of a genuine pact, witnessed by God and initiating a binding relationship between monarch and subject. It might be more useful to regard the oath, however, as a carefully supple instrument whose most useful feature 'was the facility with which governments manipulated them to suit changing political exigencies'. 8

The political and religious situation in England changed radically during the sixteenth-century, when Henry assumed the spiritual and ecclesiastical powers previously accorded to the Pope as part of the break with Catholicism. As such, the religious element of his coronation oath, in which he promised to guarantee the 'sprituall lawes Custumes and libertees graunted to the Clergye', was not as applicable as it was at the start of his reign; indeed, the new oath was in some respects contrary to what he had earlier promised before God. If the oath was regarded as a contract, then his subjects, particularly those associated with the Catholic community such as the clergy, were under no obligation to obey his religious reforms. As such, a different model of royal authority was promoted almost by default, in which the king acknowledged certain duties or obligations which he was under no compulsion to adhere to, as he derived his power directly from God. 9

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England: The Presupposition of Oaths and Offices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 256.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Jones, p. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> David Martin Jones observes that 'Negating the element of popular consent in the coronation oath would convey to subjects that the monarch owed his appointment directly to God and that he exercised an authority for which he was accountable to God alone'; Jones' view directly connects the modification to the coronation ceremony with the wider, more conceptual revisions to the notions of kingship which Henry aimed to promulgate through the latter part of his reign from the 1530s onwards. Jones, p. 26.

Hunt draws attention to several re-inscriptions and additions which Henry made to the text of his coronation oath to bolster this revised form of kingship, one of which is the introduction of the word 'indevore' to the assertion that he shall 'kepe the peax of the holie churche and of the clergie and of the people'. 10 Although the insertion certainly 'articulates[s] a personal supremacy' as Hunt suggests, the choice of 'indevore' also introduces a slight modification to the type of obligation which is demanded of the monarch. 11 The word endeavour in its sixteenth-century manifestation derives from the French term 'devoir', meaning 'That which one ought to do, or has to do; (one's) duty'. 12 Henry opens up a semantic space in which a form of obligation can be glimpsed before it is subsumed into the will of the king, beyond the censure of any subject in the state. The king can 'indevore hymselfe to kepe unite in hys clergye and temporell subjects', but he is under no direct or binding obligation to do so, as all spiritual authority resides in his office; to constrain the monarch on spiritual matters would be to encroach upon the concept of kingship as authorised by God, risking death and damnation as a result. 13 Henry uses the rhetoric of contract, but no external power is recognised as having the authority to compel the monarch to act in a certain manner.

A word such as 'indevore' is interesting as it gives us an insight into the precise textual modifications that royal swearing underwent throughout the sixteenth century. By replicating the contractual nature of kingship but placing it beyond the realms of political censure, Henry and the adherents of absolutist monarchy re-write the terms of obligation to create a more nuanced association between the coronation oath and religion. The role of the monarch in the state is beyond any form of human

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Hunt, cited on p. 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Hunt, cited on p. 48.

<sup>12 &</sup>quot;endeavour, v. Etymology". OED Online. January 2014. Oxford University Press.
13 Hunt, cited on p. 48.

censure or redress as he is accountable to God alone should any promise be broken. This position is roughly analogous to that of the individual subject when he or she swears an oath before God; indeed, one of the most striking consequences of Henry's modification of the coronation oath is the initiation of a parallel between the custom of swearing as commonly understood, and the model of fealty or obedience that is a direct consequence of divine right kingship. In orthodox swearing, the individual promises to adhere to an established compact before an object or entity representing God's majesty, the failure of which will result in spiritual damnation. In absolutist fealty, the individual also swears to adhere to a promissory act of obedience before a figure representing God's authority with a similar risk of temporal punishment should the terms of the pact be broken. The act of swearing and the new conception of reformed spiritual loyalty are strikingly similar because of the shared position which God and king inhabit in the state. If both of these figures are roughly conflated, then swearing to God is similar to swearing to the king, as the latter is beyond redress and endowed with the authority of the supreme being who is invoked at the moment of pledging.

This model is promoted in orthodox expressions of kingship throughout the sixteenth-century. The *Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* asserts that 'it is most evident, that Kinges, Queenes, & other princes (for he speaketh of aucthoritee & power be it in men or women) are ordayned of God, are to be obeyed and honoured of their subjectes that such subjects as are disobedient or rebellious agaynst their princes, disobey God, and procure their owne damnation'. <sup>14</sup> The risk of disloyalty to the crown is analogous to the punishment of breaking an oath, as the swearer will procure damnation of both body and soul, temporal and spiritual

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Anon., An homilie against disobedience and wylfull rebellion (London: R. Jugge, 1570), sig. A3v.

punishment combined, if they rebel against the monarch. The similarity between the custom of swearing and the precise relationship between subject and king is one of the major tenets of James VI and I's treatise on royal power, *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*. At the start he establishes a correlation between the monarchy and God by describing it as a 'forme of government' which 'as resembling the Divinite, approachth nearest to perfection'. The king and God have a rarefied and subtle relationship, as he has been placed as a lieutenant or minister with the task of ensuring that the reformed church is promoted throughout the realm. No subject is able to challenge the authority of the king, as to do so would be to challenge the omnipotence of God: 'since he, that hath the only power to make him, hath the only power to unmake him; and ye only to obey'. To norder to bolster the interpretation of his kingship as derived from God alone and subject to no earthly censure, James invokes the rhetoric of swearing an oath to promote a model of kingship that is explicitly shielded by the omnipotent power of God, as evinced at the moment a pledge is made:

by the oath in the coronation, God is made judge and revenger of the breakers. For in his presence, as only judge of oaths, all oaths ought to bee made. Then since God is the only judge betwixt the two parties contractors, the cognition & revenge must onely appertaine to him. <sup>18</sup>

As God is the only entity powerful and immutable enough act as a witness, he is the 'Judge' by which all oath-breakers and rebels will be condemned. In James'

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> James VI and I, *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (London: Thomas Creede, 1603).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> True Law, sig. A5r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> True Law, sig. B4r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> True Law, sig. D6v.

formation of kingship, to rebel against the monarch is a direct rebellion against the Lord, as the coronation oath is a complex bond in which the king swears privately to God, but the subjects swear to both God and the monarch simultaneously. As such, the only redress available against an incompetent or even tyrannical king is his damnation after death. When orthodox conceptions of swearing are combined with the conception of the king as a direct representation or emblem of God himself, therefore, both entities occupy a roughly analogous position in the state; God as 'Judge' in substance, king as 'Judge' in temporal and spiritual matters. <sup>19</sup>

However, this model is replete with subtle difficulties. The association between monarchy and swearing is robust and even logical when kingship is understood to correlate with a Henrician notion of spiritual absolutism. However, there are two problems in particular with establishing a correlation between fealty and pledging. The first is the question of whether the monarch has any reciprocal duties or obligations to their subjects; the second is the exact nature or substance of the fealty that is demanded. In the model espoused by James VI and I, there is no reciprocity that the subject can demand because the binding pact is between God and king. However, this begs the question as to what function the coronation oath is serving in the first place. In particular, the promise to 'procure the weal of both souls and bodies' invites the subject to consider the extent to which the promissory task has been accomplished, and what kind of redress should be available if the results

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> John Heyward argues that 'a Prince is bound to performe his promise; because (as the Maister of the sentences saith) God himself will stand obliged to his word: yet is not the authoritie, but the person of the Prince hereby affected; the person is both tyed and touched in honour, the authoritie ceaseth not, if performances do faile'. Heyward draws a distinction between the personal honour attaching to the person of the 'Prince', and the substance of their rule. Although they are bound to obey their pledges due to a social custom, the nature of their power is infallible, much like the potency of God when He is invoked as a witness at the moment of swearing (*An answer to the first part of a certaine conference, concerning succession* (London: James Roberts, 1603), sig. M2r).

are found to be unsatisfactory.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the type of duty demanded of the subject appears to be two-fold, both a substantive duty to provide taxation and military service, for example, and a negative command not to rebel. Promising not to do something is slightly more opaque than pledging to adhere to a clearly defined course of future action, resulting in a space where the exact nature of obedience can be questioned. We see this in the play *Edmund Ironside* when the Archbishop of Canterbury says to Canutus 'I would with lance approve his title naught / and plead your coronation with my sword' (42-43);<sup>21</sup> obeying the king and rebelling against him can be almost simultaneous acts, particularly when the conception of fealty is militaristic, such as raising a sword.<sup>22</sup> The two problems with the analogy between swearing and fealty – the reciprocal duties of the monarch, and the exact nature of the obedience demanded by the subject – are arguably the most vexed and complex areas of debate in resistance literature throughout the sixteenth century, particularly when the scope of royal power in relation to religious promising is taken into account.

Even in divine right conceptions of kingship there are limits placed on the authority of the monarch. Charles Merbury, an exponent of absolutism, states that 'our Prince is subject unto lawes both civill, and common, to customes, privileges, covenantes, and all kinde of promises, So farre forth as they are agreable unto the lawe of God'. The king cannot be questioned or manoeuvred into negotiation, but he is subject to a higher power that emanates from God, as this is the source from

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> True Law, sig. B4r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Anon., *Edmund Ironside*, ed. by Eric Sams (Aldershot: Fourth Estate, 1986).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Heyward uses the example of Trajan, 'who in delivering the sword to his governors, would say: *If I raign justly, then use it for me; if otherwise, then use it against me.*' Obeying the king's wishes and rebelling against him through military action are blurred in this response, which suggests that aggressive intervention is a wise and sometimes necessary political act; rebellion and obedience are coexistent. Heyward, sig. M2r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Charles Merbury, *A Brief Discourse of Royal Monarchy* (London: Thomas Vautrollier, 1581), p. 44.

which he derives his own authority. The ultimate power of God, therefore, must be honoured in order to legitimise the type of total rule which is demanded by divine right kingship; the analogy will not work otherwise. This is acknowledged by James when he states that the subject is compelled to '[obey] his commands in all things, except directly against God'. 24 However, the exact nature of God's divine will was one of the most contentious doctrinal issues in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. If the power of the king is subject to the dictates of holy scripture, then it can logically be debated as to whether God's word or command is being adequately protected. If not, the obedience of the subject could be repositioned away from the monarch and back directly to God, or another group who are able to safeguard His intentions in a more secure manner. Indeed, this acknowledged limit on divine right theory is one of the main tenets upon which resistance theory is based. In the writings of Marian exiles such as John Ponet and Christopher Goodman and Catholic pamphleteers like Robert Persons, we see a sustained engagement with the scope of royal power in relation to the promise made during the coronation oath to ensure that 'true' religion is protected; concomitant to this is a consideration of the appropriate response of the subject should the reciprocal duty of the king be unfulfilled or perverted, with rebellion as one possible course of action.

John Ponet and Christopher Goodman were part of a group of Protestant theologians exiled during the reign of Mary I. Part of their activities on the continent involved debating the limits of royal power in relation to the Henrician innovations in kingship and doctrine. Henry VIII's expansion of the office of monarch to encompass spiritual as well as temporal power endowed the newly Protestant royal office the task of purging the church of Romish doctrine, which was regarded as a

<sup>24</sup> True Law. sig. D2r.

sinful aberration of God's true intentions. In this framework, it is possible to imagine that the king has a very specific promissory role to fulfil in ensuring that Christian faith is kept untarnished; as Goodman says, 'kings [...] firste were ordayned in Realmes to stande in defence of trewe religion'. <sup>25</sup> Through having a specific duty, the power that is transmitted to the king at the moment of swearing the coronation oath is conditional, as it depends on the sufficient execution of a precise action. In this formation, Ponet and Goodman are going slightly beyond the form of kingship envisioned by Henry to locate the ultimate sovereign power in God rather than the anointed ruler. <sup>26</sup> This is a response to the encroachment on reformed doctrine by the return to Rome in the 1550s, but it also opens up a space in which Henrician absolutism can be modified slightly. We see a two-fold strategy emerge, in which the return to Catholicism initiated by Mary can be doctrinally resisted, whilst a form of obedience that reintroduces the more medieval aspects of the promissory nature of the coronation oath, as seen in Henry's pledge, can be articulated.

In his pamphlet *A Short Treatise of Political Power*, Ponet argues that if power is acknowledged to reside with God alone, then it cannot be located within one individual as this would be tantamount to a form of Romish idolatry:

God is the highest power, yea the power of powers, fro him is derived all power. All people be his servantes made to serve and glorifie him. All other powers are but his ministers, set to oversee that every one behave him selfe, as he ought towarde God.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Christopher Goodman, *How superior powers oght to be obeyd of their subjects* (Geneva: John Crispin, 1558), p. 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Edward Vallance argues that 'The Marian exiles [...] had offered a resistance theory based on the notion that England was a covenanted nation, and that allegiance was first and foremost owed to God, not the monarch'. Vallance, p. 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> John Ponet, A shorte treatise of politike power (Strasbourg: W. Kopfel, 1556), sig. D2v.

As God is the highest power, it follows that all of his 'servautes' occupy a similar position of deference; no-one is prioritised above another. The faith of the individual is accorded an unusual amount of prominence in ensuring that God's glory is maintained by dutifully observing an inner form of worship.<sup>28</sup> The stratified roval deference promoted by Henry and his councillors in the 1530s is reworked to promote an alternative system in which the primary compact is between man and God; as such, it is the obligation of his 'minister' not to command authority in God's name, but to ensure or 'oversee' that the private faith of his subjects is maintained. Ponet's argument is complex in relation to royal swearing because it imagines a revised relationship of obligation between monarch and subject, in which the coronation oath is a pledge to ensure that the deeper Protestant oath is adhered to.<sup>29</sup> Goodman states that 'God must be obeyed before man [...] thou hast also promised no lesse to him in thy baptisme'. 30 In contrast to the enlarged scope of reformed kingship as imagined by Henry, the deepest bond in the early modern state exists inside the self as a private spiritual compact; as such, the promissory intent of the coronation oath is able to be measured by the individual, because the monarch is expressly charged with caring for their souls. Should this task be revoked, ignored or insufficiently accomplished, therefore, Ponet suggests that the subject is permitted to question the extent to which the established political concept of unquestioning obedience is capable of guaranteeing that fealty is maintained.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Donald R. Kelley observes that 'For Ponet [...] "politicke power" was the product not merely of reason and natural law but of the Almighty himself, who, after the fall, authorised it for the good of "the people" ('Elizabethan Political Thought', in *The Varieties of British Political Thought*, ed. by J.G.A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 47-79 (p. 59)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Barbara Peardon argues that 'Civil power, including that of the king, had originally been established by the people, and so had to be applied in a way which best served the people's welfare.'; as such, Ponet and Goodman reverse the obedience demanded by the coronation oath to stress the reciprocal obligations which the subjects can expect from the king, based on their conception of power as emanating from the populace rather than the monarch ('The Politics of Polemic: John Ponet's Short Treatise of Politic Power and Contemporary Circumstance, 1553-1556', *Journal of British Studies*, 22 (1982), 35-49 (p. 45)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Goodman, p. 170.

Immediately in the writings of Ponet and Goodman we can see the emergence of an alternative theory in which royal authority is regarded as conditional rather than inviolable. The coronation oath is the main tenet through which the scope of power can be debated because it is conceived as a means of disseminating God's will, rather than a replication of omnipotence on earth. One reason for this is an association made by Ponet between false swearing and political tyranny: 'he promiseth and breaketh promyse, he sweareth and forsweareth [...] Suche an evil governour proprely men call a Tiranne'. 32 As man is mutable, he is unable to guarantee the fidelity of his promises, so he requires the security of an oath in which God is called upon to act as a witness. It makes little sense, therefore, to situate the oath as the primary means in which political authority can be located and legitimised in the state. Not only can an oath be insufficiently maintained through incompetence, it can also be wilfully broken by the sinful intentions of the tyrannous monarch; this is why 'painted and smothe wordes, faire promises and othes' are unsuitable entities through which to articulate a form of fealty which all subjects are compelled to obey.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to a divine right model which derives the power of the king from the potency of God, Ponet's view stresses the immutability of the monarch as a potential consequence of his or her own fallen humanity. To suggest an equivalence between the two would not only be blasphemous, it would imply that God has created a situation in which the soul of the individual can be jeopardised with no hope of redress, calling his benevolence into question. These tensions are resolved, however, if the coronation oath is regarded as a device to ensure that the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Robert M. Kingdon points out that, according to Protestant resistance doctrine, 'the granting of power in an election is conditional and can be revoked if that power is misused' ('Calvinism and resistance theory, 1550-1580', in The Cambridge History of Political Thought, ed. by J.H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 193-218 (p. 195)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Ponet, sig. G3r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Ponet, sig. J4r.

more private pledge between God and man initiated during the sacrament of the baptism is adhered to in line with reformed doctrine. The consequence of this is highly charged, as it allows the subject to release themselves from the concept of fealty with a clear conscience if the task is not accomplished.

Should the subject meekly submit to the actions of a tyrannous and blasphemous king, however, then God's wrath will be unleashed on the entire state, causing political collapse and devastation.<sup>34</sup> Because God's anger at the failure of the monarch to promote reformed faith is a collective punishment directed to everyone, Ponet and Goodman suggest that a form of rebellion is not only permissible but also necessary in order to realign the state with God's true intentions. <sup>35</sup> This, of course, is not regarded as rebellion; rather, it is a corrective to a contract between king and God which has been broken or left unfulfilled. Ponet lambasts the errant monarch for 'pullig eternal condemnacion [...] upon the hole realme' through breaking their oath, necessitating the act of rebellion in order to fully adhere to God's command that inner faith be observed at all times.<sup>36</sup> The twin objections to a form of divine kingship associated with swearing – reciprocal royal duty, and the quality of the obedience demanded of the subject – are rendered synonymous. If the king or queen fails to honour their commitment by ensuring that reformed religion is practised, then obedience is no longer doctrinally required. As such, the act of rebellion is indistinguishable in the mindset of resistance from the act of fealty. This blurring of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Robert M. Kingdon argues that the resistance theorists believed that 'The vengeance of God upon an idolatrous community will fall upon the entire community. It is therefore the responsibility of all to avert the calamity which the pollution of idolatry will otherwise bring upon the community'. Kingdon, p. 197.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Barbara Peardon notes that 'The *Short Treatise* rejected the accepted view that a tyrant was the instrument of God, sent to move a nation to repentance for their sins.', suggesting a conscious rejection of the established view that 'if the people find themselves with an idolatrous or tyrannical ruler, this can only mean they made a mistake in selecting him', to quote Quentin Skinner. Peardon, p. 46. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), II, p. 229).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Ponet, sig. J2r.

boundaries is recognised by Goodman, who states that 'we maye hereof justlie conclude, that to obeye man in anie thinge contrary to God, or his precepts thoghe he be in hiest auctoritie [...] is no obedience at all, but disobedience'. <sup>37</sup> If the subject disobeys the king, then he is honouring God; conversely, if he suffers the tyrannical oppression or perversion of the true faith, he is rebelling against the Lord and jeopardising his soul. The sly elision between rebellion and obedience is recognised by John Cheke, who argues that 'ye [...] have slayne of the kynges true subjectes many thynkyng they murdre to be youre defens'. <sup>38</sup> Resistance is permissible when the true binding power in the state is taken away from the king and resituated in the spiritual realm. As such, the only form of rebellion imaginable is the paradoxical obedience to the monarch when religion is being suppressed.

When Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1559, the situation changed once again as a result of the policy of religious mediation which culminated in the establishment of the English church. Catholicism was now marginalised in favour of an ecclesiastical settlement which reached an accommodation between extreme reformed doctrine and Catholic ritual. As a consequence, a group of disaffected theologians, including William Allen and Robert Persons, fled England and established a religious community on the continent in a manner that resembled the exiled Protestants a generation earlier. The reversed political situation helped to create another culture of resistance to orthodox monarchical rule, although the arguments were tailored to a different theological context in which the Pope was regarded as the primary spiritual authority in the state as opposed to a Henrician

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Goodman, pp. 42-43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> John Cheke, *The hurt of sedicion howe greveous it is to a commune welth* (London: John Day, 1549), sig. C4v.

absolutist monarch.<sup>39</sup> In his treatise *A Conference about the next succession to the crown of England*, Persons offered a justification for the resistance of oppressed Catholics in a manner that deliberately echoed some of the arguments expressed in the treatises of Ponet and Goodman. However, his task was made more complex by the paranoia that followed Pope Pius V's decision to issue the bull Regnans in Excelsis in 1570, which effectively licensed the regicide of Elizabeth by releasing Catholic subjects from their oath of allegiance. In the minds of the Protestant majority, Catholicism was associated with treasonous subversion and the dark implication that fealty to the monarch was impossible to reconcile with deference to the Pope. Persons's ultimate political intentions may indeed have justified some of the paranoia around Catholic disloyalty to the Protestant government and rule of Elizabeth. However, his views in the *Conference* were strikingly familiar to readers with knowledge of the main arguments in favour of resisting the rule of a monarch to be found in the work of the Marian pamphleteers.

Persons adopts a similar position to that of Ponet and Goodman by suggesting the existence of a deeper spiritual oath which has been abrogated by the enlarged powers of reformed kingship. <sup>40</sup> However, rather than situating it within the sacrament of baptism and the individual soul, Persons acknowledges the Pope as the highest spiritual authority on Earth. <sup>41</sup> As such, his arguments are more focussed on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Donald R. Kelly observes that 'Catholic resistance ideas were affected by – if not actually drawn from – the arguments of Marian exiles, but with significant differences, most notably in dependence upon papal power'. Kelly, p. 60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> With regard to Persons, Ronald Corthell argues that 'His reading of the historical sources reveals that the Commonwealth has traditionally conferred this authority on the monarch through the coronation oath' which is conceived of as 'a kind of social contract' not too dissimilar to the private inner compact imagined to exist in the Protestant political mindset of the 1550s ('Robert Persons and the Writer's Mission', in *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern English Texts*, ed. by Arthur F. Marotti (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 35-62 (p. 47)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> J.H.M. Salmon notes that 'all temporal authority was subject to the vicar of Christ, and that, whereas priests held jurisdiction directly from God, the office of the ruler was derived from the people' ('Catholic Resistance Theory, Ultramonism, and the royalist response, 1580-1620', in *The* 

the wider state rather than inner judgement or obligation. Orthodox Catholic theology recognised a separation between spiritual and temporal realms, in which the former had precedence over the latter. Whereas the Pope's office was regarded as sacrosanct and divine, the various monarchies and governments which he oversaw were unstable and liable to sudden alteration. Persons alludes to this idea when he states that 'the common wealth hath power to chuse their owne fassion of government, as also to change the same uppon resonable causes'. 42 The oath sworn by a monarch at their coronation is only one form of binding contract among many, as each of the Catholic political states cannot each claim exclusively to represent God's ideal form of government. Not only is it unable to claim spiritual authority as part of the swearing ceremony as practised by Elizabeth and her heretic council, it is also a mutable custom and therefore can be changed to establish altered reciprocal duties and commitments. This argument is different from that expressed by Ponet and Goodman, as it regards the office of monarch as less privileged than that of Pope, although in each case the ends are the same: the justified loosening of the oath of fealty if 'true' religion is not safeguarded, be it via the abrogation of Papal authority or the refusal to maintain the deeper sacramental compact with God.

Once the temporal realm has been separated from the spiritual and characterised as potentially alterable, Persons outlines a more detailed form of resistance. His point of departure is the well-being of the nation and the civic benefits that ensue when the state is brought under the umbrella of Papal protection. The ideal commonwealth is one that is stable, as it is in a better position to reflect the cohesiveness that is an intrinsic part of God's majesty: 'But nature taught man a far

Cambridge History of Political Thought, ed. by J.H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 219-253 (p. 241)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Robert Persons, A conference about the next succession to the crowne of Ingland (Antwerp: A Conincx, 1595), p. 12.

higher and more excellent ende in his common wealth, which was not only to provide for thos bodily benefits that are common also to creatures without reason, but much more for those of the mynd, and above al for the serving of that high and supreme God, that is the beginning & end of al the rest. <sup>43</sup> The stable commonwealth is associated with the Catholic church as it is only through recognition of the division between temporal and spiritual realms that the former can be remoulded to comply with the latter; this is untenable in reformed doctrine, as church and state are doubly embodied in the figure of the monarch. 44 By acknowledging the spiritual power of the Pope, the state can be refined in light of his judgement to ensure that it is better able to protect and serve its subjects. It is therefore the duty of each Catholic to defer to Papal authority regarding the constitution of the individual state, as it is understood to work in the direct interests of God. According to Persons 'Gods glory and the publique wealth' are intrinsically connected, so adhering to the Pope's command is an act of worship; if that act involves the possible regicide of Elizabeth, then the potential assassin will be bringing his or her soul in line with a form of worship outlined and endorsed by the authoritative spiritual judgement of the Pope. 45

As part of his argument, Persons depicts the English coronation oath as a moment of election in which the crowning of the king is dependent on episcopal endorsement in order for its binding power to be legitimised:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Persons, pp. 205-206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Peter Holmes argues that 'Because of its inferiority to spiritual authority in the commonwealth, political power is subordinate to it, directed by it, and can be altered by it if this is necessary for the good of the Church and for the salvation of souls' (*Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 154).

<sup>45</sup> Persons, p. 200.

the Archbishop of Canterbury (who was the same Thomas Arundel of whom we spake before) did read unto them what this new king was bound by oth unto, and then he tooke the ring, wherwith he was to wed hym to the common wealth. 46

Persons focuses on the ring rather than the crown or any other piece of coronation regalia to stress the contractual nature of royal power when it is placed under episcopal, and therefore Papal, control. <sup>47</sup> The monarch enters into a complex contract in which the 'common wealth' is protected through the recognition of the primary authority of the ecclesiastical community in spiritual matters, as emblematised by the Archbishop of Canterbury. If he fails in his task, then his subjects are no longer required to obey him, as his inability to promote the Catholic faith will result in a fractured state in need of redress. By articulating this point, Persons is participating in a long tradition throughout the sixteenth century in which the limits of fealty are vigorously debated. The focus on the coronation oath is a recurring feature of resistance theory, as it is the most visible moment in early modern political commentary when the specific duties and obligations of the monarch are both located and articulated. The exact nature of the power of the monarch and the type of fealty they can expect from their subjects is dependent on the doctrinal position of the individual pamphleteer. However, all commentators seem to agree that if 'true' religion is not sufficiently promoted, be it from a Catholic or a reformed perspective, then the subject is no longer required to uphold a position of fealty. Rather, it is his or her religious duty to revoke their side of a contract that has been broken by the spiritually errant king or queen.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Persons, p. 117.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Peter Holmes argues that 'Papal power was said to derive from God directly – hence the Pope had power over kings who were chosen merely by their people. As for the coronation oath, that was a religious oath, under papal jurisdiction, and administered as part of a solemn religious ceremony by a member of the priesthood'. Holmes, pp. 152-153.

In Early Modern culture, the scope of royal power is often debated in relation to the coronation oath. The existence of multiple scenes of royal swearing throughout Edward II would suggest that Marlowe has a particular interest in this aspect of contemporary political theory. <sup>48</sup> Edward's transition from monarch to subject is defined to an extent by the transference of fealty to his successor, in which the innate loyalty commanded by the king is re-directed to his son, also called Edward. As previously discussed, early modern theorists tend to discuss the coronation oath in abstract terms, focussing on the contractual properties of monarchy and the figure or entity to which the oath is made. However, Marlowe diverges from the standard model of debate by locating the binding power of the oath in the language that is spoken by the king and his subjects, rather than over-arching theories of rule. Throughout the play, royal power is defined by the ability of the king to both assert his authority and insist upon the concomitant submission of his subjects. Edward's failure to do this results in a confused syntax which increasingly blurs the relationship between the two, thus steadily loosening his grip on power. In the political landscape of *Edward II* loyalty is guaranteed not through God-given right, but a solid grasp of the language used to craft an authoritative discourse of royal supremacy.

Various characters in *Edward II* voice a rhetorical link between rebellion and social disorder, usually to further their own political agenda. Lancaster's threat to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, ed. by Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey (London: New Mermaid, 1997).

Edward that he can 'look to see the throne where you should sit / To float in blood.' (I.130-131) is countered by the warning that 'in lakes of gore / Your headless trunks, your bodies will I trail, / That you may drink your fill and quaff in blood' (XI.135-137). The widespread use of blood imagery by the competing factions at court is a form of political posturing, rather than the expression of a real or inevitable consequence of rebellion. As such, a subtle discrepancy is initiated between the language used to delineate obedience and its orthodox manifestation in texts such as sermons and the homilies, relocating the sense of disturbance to language itself rather than the state. Throughout *Edward II*, Marlowe adopts this strategy to explore the crucial role played by rhetoric in expressing the type of obedience which the king wishes to promote, and its troubling potential to facilitate a change of ruler and alternate forms of government. However, the introduction of syntactical or grammatical slippage when a character expresses their fealty to the king does not tend to result in the expected chaos; rather, Marlowe uses it to show how it can be used to encourage the necessary shift in allegiance that is the consequence of a form of succession which bypasses the custom of accession on the death of the previous king. 49 Robert Knowles' observation that the 'divisive ideas of election and deposition' are 'subordinated' by the successful accession of Edward III is complicated by the rhetorical conception of allegiance, which facilitates something of an over-lap and encourages the audience to question a mode of fealty which exists between the subject and a single monarchical figure. When the concept is rendered fluid, the coronation oath emerges as a contingent device somewhat at odds with the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Robert A. Logan has persuasively argued for a more aesthetically based turn in Marlovian scholarship which is sensitive to his rhetorical and technical innovations: 'Since ambiguity has been generally acknowledged as a major artistic device [...] is it not time to attempt a revised version of a close reading of the texts, one that takes more into account Marlowe the professional strategist well aware of the effects of dramaturgical and poetic techniques?' ('Marlowe Scholarship and Criticism: The Current Scene', in *Christopher Marlowe the Craftsman*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 15-22 (p. 21)).

more sacral custom promoted by political commentators such as Charles Merbury, and later James VI and L.50

In the opening scene of the play, a confused sense of royal identity is created by the conflation of Edward's language with that of Gaveston: "My father is deceased; come, Gaveston, / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend." (I.1-2). As the king's written command is uttered by Gaveston, there is a sense of slippage between monarch and subject, particularly in relation to the mimetic depiction of royal rhetoric. The word 'share' locates the compromised power of the king at the level of language, as Gaveston slips into the semantic space opened up by the authorial command of the king, sharing it with Edward in terms of utterance in a theatricalised space and, it is implied, the political sphere due to the influence he exerts on the king. Edward's decision to recall Gaveston is an inflammatory act which reverses the decree of his father, potentially signalling that his own royal commands can also be revised to suit the contingent demands of changing political circumstances. The blurred relationship between monarch and subject is developed through Marlowe's stage directions when the two characters meet:

What, Gaveston! Welcome! Kiss not my hand; Embrace me, Gaveston, as I do thee! Why shouldst thou kneel; knowest thou not who I am? Thy friend, thy self, another Gaveston!

I.139-142

At Edward's arrival on stage, Gaveston enacts a posture of submission based on the ritual act of kneeling before the king and kissing his hand in homage. This is a standard political tableau in the historical drama of the 1590s; in *Edward III*, for

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Knowles, p. 117.

example, the Countess of Warwick greets Edward with the phrase 'In duetie lower then the ground I kneele, [...] To witnes my obedience to your highness' conveying her deference to the audience with a physical act which replicates the difference in status between subject and monarch.<sup>51</sup> However, Edward revises this established ritual pose by raising Gaveston to his feet and engaging in a mutual embrace. In doing so, the act of submission before the king is substituted for a reciprocal hug and the implied kissing of lips, replacing hierarchical fealty for amatory mutuality which is associated with the ambiguous political status between the two men. 52 Kelly Quinn notes that the relationship between Edward and Gaveston is characterised by 'images of mirroring and twinning', in which the status imbalance between monarch and subject is compromised through the repeated metaphorical insistence on their equality.<sup>53</sup> In the rejection of a submissive form of fealty for one which promotes a spectacle of erotic likeness, Edward unwittingly implies that obedience is not something unquestioning or innate, but is dependent upon the personal inclinations of the king. As such, Gaveston is not merely a device used to bolster the political opposition to Edward's rule, but the means through which the basis of that rule is compromised, as it offers a vision of fealty which is not deferent but reciprocal, at least in terms of physical pleasure. This not only introduces a form of mutuality into the previously stratified relationship between monarch and subject, but also suggests

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Anon., The raigne of King Edward the Third as it hath bin sundrie times plaied about the citie of London (London: T. Scarlet, 1596), sig. B3r.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> In his discussion of Marlowe's use of theatrical ritual, Alan C. Desson notes that Marlowe 'does not preach to his audience but rather dispenses with heavy-handed didacticism while still retaining residual elements of symbolic-allegorical technique'; as such, his depiction of the ritual of fealty has echoes or connotations of postured deference whilst eschewing the more formal linguistic properties of submission which traditionally accompany such a pose ('Edward II and Residual Allegory' in *Marlowe the Craftsman*, ed. by Sarah K. Scott and M.L. Stapleton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 63-77 (p. 77)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Kelly Quinn, 'Mastering Complaint: Michael Drayton's *Pierce Gaveston* and the Royal Mistress Complaints', *English Literary Renaissance*, 38 (2008), 439-460 (p. 453).

that, for Edward, the rites of fealty are malleable structures which are able to be revised at his will.

Edward's indifference to received custom is politically short sighted, as it encourages his subjects to question why Gaveston has been chosen to 'share' his kingship by revising a model of identity which relies on the deference of social inferiors. The response of the nobles to this consequence of Edward and Gaveston's relationship is to invoke a previous oath sworn to the deceased king Edward I, in which he compelled his subjects to ensure that Gaveston remained in permanent exile:

Mine uncle here, this earl, and I myself Were sworn to your father at his death, That he should ne'er return into the realm; And know, my lord, ere I will break my oath, This sword of mine that should offend your foes, Shall sleep within the scabbard at thy need.

I.81-86

The deference of the subject to the will of the monarch is confused when the dictates of a new king directly countermand those of their predecessor. This is a notable problem in the system of early modern political obedience, as it presents the individual with a choice as to which type of allegiance they should regard as binding. At this moment in the play, the nobles appear to be acting in an orthodox manner, as their decision to protect Edward from the influence of Gaveston is an implied corrective to his foolish desire to 'share' his kingship, which in turn is imagined to compromise the security of the state. However, the political thinking regarding the issue in early modern culture is slightly more complex, as the king is not necessarily

required to disregard the decrees of the previous monarch without question. For instance, Bodin argues that he or she is compelled by honour to observe the laws of their predecessor if they directly bear on their policies or conduct; if they do not, they are no longer bound to observe them:

But if a soveraigne prince promise oath to keep the lawes which he or his predecessours have made, he is bound to keepe them, if the prince unto whome hee hath so given his word have therein any intrest; yea although he have not sworne at al: But if the prince to whom the promise was made have therin no intrest, neither the promise nor the oath can bind him that made the promise.<sup>54</sup>

The overlap between different monarchical commands is a recurring feature of historical drama in the 1590s. In Thomas Dekker's *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, the nobles try to coerce Mary on the issue of Catholicism by reminding her of the oath she swore to Henry VIII when still a subject: 'Your sacred Highnesse will no doubt be mindefull / Of the late Oath you tooke at Framingham' (III.i.22-23). Mary's ultimate lack of success by the end of the play is both an endorsement of Henry's potency as king, particularly in terms of his Protestantism, and a subtle indication of the contingency of political swearing in establishing the conditions for the eventual succession of Elizabeth. Edward's case is more complex, as it is uncertain as to whether the enforced exile of Gaveston is of 'interest' to the recently deceased Edward I. If Gaveston is regarded as a malign political influence, then his removal is an act which would indeed be regarded as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Jean Bodin, *The six bookes of a common-weale*, trans. by Richard Knollys (London: Adam Islip, 1606), p. 92.

Thomas Dekker, *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, volume I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 397-459.

binding. However, from Edward's perspective he is simply a favoured courtier, entitling him as king to revoke the order of his father as itself harmful to the wellbeing of the state. From the absolutist framework espoused by Bodin, it is ambiguous whether Edward is bound to observe his father's oath, so the decision of the nobles to defer to the old king is an act which is possibly rebellious. In this context, Marlowe suggests that the concept of ritual fealty can actually be a means through which obedience to the king can be curbed to further the factional interests of the nobility. As such, the perceived encroachment by Gaveston on the prerogative of the king via the spectacle of mutuality is countered by a communal oath in which the decree of the previous monarch is prioritised over the current incumbent. Both instances are significant revisions of a stable concept of fealty between the king and his subjects, suggesting that, for Marlowe, the coronation oath can be used to subvert the type of fealty which it is designed to protect; one revision provides a precedent for the existence of alternative models, which can then be used to question the extent to which the subject is required to submit to the king.

Marlowe's grasp of the complexity of royal swearing is something which he does not always find in his sources. According to the material available to him, there is no clear consensus as to whether Edward I's command is an oath at all, or even who was the recipient of the binding pact. Holinshed casts doubt on whether the conversation even happened, or if it is simply an unsubstantiated rumour:

Some write that king Edward the first upon his death-bed, charged the earles of Lincolne, Warwike, and Penbroke, to foresée that the foresaid Peers returned not againe into England, least by his evill example he might induce his sonne the prince to lewdnesse, as before he had alreadie doone.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Raphael Holinshed, *The Third volume of Chronicles* (London: Henry Denham, 1587), p. 320.

This is how the nobles choose to represent the oath to Edward; a solemn promise made under oath to keep Gaveston out of the realm, least he corrupt the king to 'lewdnesse'. However, in Holinshed it is represented as something which exists in the hinterland of historical speculation. Even if the oath is true, he suggests, it is private rather than public and not witnessed by any objective body who can attest to the veracity of the royal command, least of all its binding nature as an oath. Marlowe may well have been influenced by Holinshed's ambiguous representation of this moment to imply that the behaviour of the nobles is similarly vague and unorthodox, defined by self-interest rather than duty. However, other sources available to Marlowe complicate the picture. Stow argues that Edward I wished that his son would observe the oath he made to keep Gaveston in exile, else the nobles will rebel 'as against a perjured Prince'. 57 Here the agreement is essentially a bond between father and son in the *mirror for princes* tradition of council, although Stow observes that the nobles are explicitly tasked with ensuring that its terms are upheld.<sup>58</sup> Even though Holinshed and Stow present different versions of the decree, they are both evasive as to whether it is a formally binding oath, thus rendering the insistence of the nobles that the pact be regarded as such with suspicion. Its characterisation in this way is not ratified by any other character on stage, reinforcing the idea that the group oath is not an unavoidable recourse but a device used to countermand the decree of Edward in favour of Gaveston.<sup>59</sup> As such, the custom of fealty has been debased from an expression of loyalty to a space in which that loyalty can be tested,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> John Stow, *Chronicles of England from Brute vnto this present yeare of Christ* (London: Ralph Newberie, 1580), p. 329.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Stow states that 'The king [i.e. Edward I] also called unto him Henrie Lacy Earle of Lincolne, Guy Earle of Warwicke, Aymer de Valence Earle of Pembroke, and Robert Clifford Baron, desiring them to be good to his sonne, and that they should not suffer Pierce of Gavaston to come again into England, to set his son in riot...'. Although this provides a basis for the nobles' concern, it is not depicted by Holinshed as a formal oath; this is the only interpretation of the command in Marlowe's text. Stow. p. 324.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Simon Shepherd has identified a 'montage' effect in Marlowe's structural technique, in which 'each meaning is made provisionally and is always refined; no fixed or unitary truth is transparently

turning the very device which reinforces Edward's kingship against him. It is hard to avoid the connection between Edward's failure to delineate the ritual expression of his own kingship through the custom of homage and its revision by the nobles to justify their own rebellion.

It is therefore possible to regard that the nobles' interpretation of Edward I's dismissal of Gaveston as an 'oath' is a means of exerting pressure on the king. Once it is asserted that the removal of Edward's favourite is not only an act of good council but the adherence to a royal command, the promissory action agreed upon can be regarded as licit, at least within the factional group:

Lancaster: On that condition Lancaster will grant.

Pembroke: And so will Pembroke.

Warwick: And I. Mortimer Snr: And I

Mortimer Jnr: In this I count me highly gratified,

And Mortimer will rest at your command. IV.292-297

As if to bolster the point, Marlowe chooses to depict the decision to remove Gaveston as a promissory oath. However, the swearers themselves are aware that it could be interpreted as an act of rebellion or treason; indeed, the Bishop of Carlisle expressly warns the nobles to 'lift not your swords against the King' (II.61), and Mortimer Jnr acknowledges that 'Tis treason to be up against the king' (IV.281). The sense of sedition surrounding the factional oath is not wholly present in Stow, who

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expressed, especially since some of the elements of the montage may oppose or contradict one another.' The explicit contradistinction between different modes of swearing establishes something akin to a politicised version of Shepherd's interesting concept, in which the supposedly efficacious nature of swearing is rendered contingent by being placed in such close proximity to alternative forms (*Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 55).

gestures to the assent of parliament in securing Gaveston's banishment: 'Moreover hée charged hym on hys cursse, that he shoulde not presume to call home Pierce of

Gavaston, by comon decrée banished, without common favour'. 60 As such, the

nobles justify their revolt by reasoning that they are able to 'lawfully revolt' (II.73)

as Gaveston's banishment is confirmed 'with a general consent' (II.70). As they

begin to loosen their fealty to Edward, Marlowe presents the nobles as first invoking

a previous oath to the deceased king, then interpreting that oath in contractual terms;

as such, Edward's repeal of Gaveston is positioned as the breaking of an agreement

between the monarch and the people of England, rather than an issue which provides

an excuse to challenge the king's attitude to his non-aristocratic favourites. The

suppleness with which the coronation oath is regarded by the nobles is used to

capitalise on the malleability occasioned by the revised terms of fealty between

Edward and Gaveston; not only has the move opened up a space in which the most

powerful subjects in the land can imagine themselves occupying a similar position in

relation to the throne, but the entire custom of royal swearing is re-shaped to

consolidate the power of the faction whose loyalty is in question. Edward's mistake

is not simply to allow a low born subject to share his power, but severing the clear

distinction between subject and king in relation to the oath of fealty.

In order to develop the association between factional politics and the revised

custom of swearing, Marlowe dramatises a second group oath which licences the

structural movement towards rebellion:

Lancaster:

Cousin, it is no dealing with him now.

He means to make us stoop by force of arms,

<sup>60</sup> Stow, pp. 323-324.

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And therefore let us jointly here protest

To prosecute that Gaveston to the death.

Mortimer Jnr: By heaven, the abject villain shall not live.

I'll have his blood or die in seeking it. Warwick:

The like oath Pembroke takes. Pembroke:

Lancaster: And so doth Lancaster.

Now send our heralds to defy the King

And make the people swear to put him down.

VI.101-109

The ambiguous rhetoric of the earlier scene has been replaced by a definite pledge in which the nobles 'jointly' swear an 'oath' to remove Gaveston from the king's presence. Lancaster's fear that the king will make them 'stoop by force of arms' recalls the earlier moment when Gaveston was raised from his kneeling position, equating the rebellion with the ceremonial perversion of submission practised by both Edward and Gaveston. In order to rectify the imagined threat to social order, the nobles declare a promissory intention to forcibly reverse the troubling image of their embrace; not only will Gaveston 'stoop', but the people will 'put him down' in images which insist upon his spatial and symbolic deference. However, this is once again a significant departure from the source material, as the oath is sworn in relation to the Spencers, not Gaveston. 61 Holinshed regards it as a fundamentally unlawful pact, as it is defined by coercion and intimidation; for instance, the bishops manipulate the commons 'through feare' to 'take an oth to ioine with them in their purpose', whilst the nobles 'raised the people, and constreined them to sweare to be of their accord'. 62 Other history plays regard such behaviour as a marker of bad government; in Edward III, for example, the King of France allows a subject to honour a previous oath to release an English prisoner by arguing that 'The breach of faith dwels in the soules consent, / Which if thy selfe without consent doo breake, /

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Holinshed, p. 327. <sup>62</sup> Holinshed, p. 327.

Thou art not charged with the breach of faith'. 63 In contrast, Marlowe alters his source material to curb some of the more seditious elements of the nobles' behaviour in order to present their actions as ambiguous, at least in terms of the type of royal conduct which is imagined to secure the fealty of the people. There is still the sense that the custom of swearing is malleable, but the excision of coercion in the source material adds impetus to the rebellion by implying that the arguments of the aristocrats are shared, or at least compelling; indeed, Isabella's assertion that she will 'subscribe' (XXI.20) to the deposition suggests the acknowledgement of widespread consent from a political body, however illusory this is in reality. Instead of committing to a single political view, Marlowe measures the success of fealty in terms of the shrewdest or most effective articulation of what kind of loyalty is best suited to the needs of the state. The ascension of Edward's son would suggest that the nobles are not committed to advancing the concept of 'general consent' (II.70), at least in terms of royal succession. However, their ability to revoke the obedience demanded by the king and transfer it to another ruler is an indication of the success of their own brand of swearing; just as Edward's embrace of Gaveston compromised his own form of sacred kingship, the conciliar nature of the nobles' oath, as a group pledge and as one situated in the concept of consent, is best suited to mobilise the populace into rejecting the king.

The most intricate method of demonstrating the looseness of the fealty owed to Edward is through the manipulation of syntax at the moment of pledging. Debra Belt's observation that Marlowe encourages the audience to regard the 'rhetorical struggle as struggle and to see what the action of the play says about that contest as it unfolds' is a useful insight in relation to the depiction of swearing, as it is situated as

63 Edward III. sig. I1r.

a battleground in which the articulation of loyalty is repeatedly contested by those on stage. 64 In many cases Marlowe exploits the sense of social erosion outlined by orthodox polemicists in early modern texts such as the homilies, at the level of language. However, rather than presaging the wholesale destruction of the polity, the images of slippage can actually facilitate smooth transitions in power which result in surprisingly stable forms of government. We see this when Edward clashes with the nobles over whether Gaveston should be removed from his presence:

Edward:

Lay hands on that traitor Mortimer!

Mortimer Jnr: Lay hands on that traitor Gaveston!

IV.20-21

Marlowe employs the rhetorical trope of parison to establish a degree of equivalence between the language of Edward and his subject Mortimer Junior. The mimicry of a royal assertion exposes the rhetoric of kingship as a textual artefact which can be replicated with no obvious causal link between imperative command and affective response.<sup>65</sup> However, it also recalls the shared language between Edward and Gaveston at the start of the play to throw the slippage between king and subject back in his face, particularly in relation to the concept of treason. Mortimer's oath to the nobles has blurred what constitutes a treasonous act in the state, as Edward's behaviour is at risk of jeopardising its safety; as such, he can legitimately assume the language of authority to demand the arrest of Gaveston, as he is recouping a form of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Debra Belt, 'Anti-theatricalism and Rhetoric in Marlowe's Edward II', *English Literary* Renaissance, 21 (1991), 134-160 (p. 140).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Timothy D. Crowley argues that 'Compound imitation fuels theatrical parody both affectively and, to some degree, ideologically.' We certainly see an ideological function in this type of mimicry or 'imitation', particularly in its potential to chafe at the supposedly sacrosanct relationship between a divinely ordained monarch and his ability to command his subjects to behave in a required manner ('Arms and the Boy: Marlowe's Aeneas and the Parody of Imitation in Dido, Queen of Carthage', English Literary Renaissance, 38 (2008), 408-438 (p. 411)).

lost similitude imagined to exist between monarch and subject. As we can see, Marlowe uses this device to construct a far less stable, and more ambiguous, version of the relationship between monarch and subject, in which the latter can encroach upon the language of the former to undermine his inviolable authority at the level of language. Not only is the deep link between Edward and his authority severed through mimetic replication, but the notion of fealty is likewise compromised by Mortimer's choice to redirect the pronouncement of the king to his own political enemy. By sharing his office with Gaveston at the textual level, Edward has opened up his kingship in ways which are actively detrimental to his rule

Later in the play, Marlowe adds more complexity to this strategy by encouraging a heightened degree of confusion over who represents the figure of the king when the textual referent is rendered opaque:

Kent: Madam, without offence, if I may ask,

How will you deal with Edward in his fall?

P. Edward: Tell me, good uncle, what Edward do you mean?

Kent: Nephew, your father; I dare not call him King. XVIII.39-42

Kent's polysemic reply could feasibly refer to both father and son, as both occupy a dangerously uncertain position during the transition from deposition to coronation. The liminal status of the two proto-monarchs is communicated by Marlowe through the blurred referents at the level of address, which has the consequence of calling the whole concept of monarchical fealty into question. That Edward suspects Kent is referring to himself is a sign that he does not fully believe he is in a position to command the loyalty of his subjects, particularly with regard to the safety of his

person. Kent's fear of addressing the deposed Edward as 'King' also betrays a confused sense of loyalty to a man who until very recently was his liege lord ordained by God. Marlowe has an interest in exploring the political function of loyalty when it is not clear to whom it should be directed. Near the end of the play, Spencer Senior's assertion that 'Rebel is he that fights against his prince; / So fought not they that fought in Edward's right' (XVIII.80-81) could refer to either the loyalists or the rebels, as both interpretations make perfect sense from the perspective of the competing factions. The language used by one of Edward's key supporters to delineate his unquestioning fealty to the king has the troubling potential to undo itself by referring to his political opponent. That both men are called the same name is a clever exploitation of the discrepancy between neat and continuous royal succession, and the inevitable blurring of textual boundaries when their reigns overlap. In such a context, the expression of fealty becomes almost impossible as the referents are shared; a consequence, once again, of Edward's disastrous decision to open up the rhetoric and ceremonial properties of his kingship to his low-born favourite.

Marlowe's attitude to fealty is defined by the language used to articulate and reinforce the relationship between king and subject. Poor government is associated with a shaky grasp of the rhetoric of command, as it reveals a lack of understanding over the power of rhetoric to hold different social groups in place. Loyalty is not an innate aspect of rule, but something which depends upon a successful articulation of rulership. Marlowe's most triumphant politician Tamburlaine understands this perfectly, particularly when he seizes the crown of Persia from the effete king Mycetes: 'So now it is more surer on my head, / Than if the gods had held a

parliament' (II.vii.65-66). In contrast to the traditional expressions of fealty which invoke a form of consent, Tamburlaine relies on a combination of military strength and an eloquent revision of royal swearing to reinforce his own power; the entity he swears on after he has assumed the throne is the 'sword that conquered Persia' (III.iii.82) as opposed to the 'royal seat [...] embossed with silk' (I.i.97-99) used by Mycetes. 67 The success of Tamburlaine can be directly contrasted with the failure of Edward, as both figures reveal a different understanding of the way in which loyalty in generated and upheld. For Edward, it is a condition of kingship; for Tamburlaine, it is something which can be shaped to consolidate his rule. The structural transition from one king to another at the end of Edward II is made permissible through the failure of Edward to secure the grammatical control of his own authority, allowing the language of homage to be subtly directed towards his successor, thus channelling the expression of loyalty in his direction. Although a form of order is established by the young king at the end of the play, Marlowe has opened up a space in which the entire notion of monarchical fealty is rendered ambiguous through the lack of a singular monarch to which it can be directed. This does not result in the destruction imagined by the Tudor polemicists, but it does encourage the audience to regard loyalty as something which is originated through language, rather than a natural or given aspect of statehood. When the expression of fealty is rendered opaque or evasive, then it is not only the monarch in question who is at risk of losing his office, but a royal conception of government which relies on the unquestioning obedience of its subjects.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, ed. by J.W. Harper (London: New Mermaid, 1971).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> For a detailed exploration of swearing in Tamburlaine, see Chloe Preedy, *Marlowe's Literary Scepticism: Politic Religion and Post-Reformation Polemic* (London: Arden, 2012), pp. 42-60.

## Richard II

In Edward II, Marlowe uses the language of fealty to explore the shift in allegiance which is a crucial aspect in securing a change of political regime. Shakespeare's play *Richard II* is also a work that explores the nature and substance of power in relation to the coronation oath and the concept of obedience. <sup>68</sup> However, Shakespeare's representation of swearing is slightly different in emphasis. 69 Instead of using it as a means to facilitate the smooth transition from one king to another, manipulating the slipperiness of referents to tweak the language of allegiance, Shakespeare regards such language as a site in which different modes of kingship can be articulated and debated. It is not so much a tool of state which is able to replace one monarch with another under the veneer of a traditional model of submission; rather, the rhetoric of obedience is a means through which the claims of the submission can be tested and expressed in increasingly subtler terms. Throughout Richard II, Shakespeare is more interested than Marlowe in who or what body has the power to dissolve and substantiate different systems which command the allegiance of all members of the state. Whereas Marlowe is intrigued by the slipperiness of rhetorical language as a tool of power, Shakespeare is concerned with using the custom of swearing to debate the political qualities of different types of fealty, from an unquestioning absolutist model of kingship to a more contractual form of parliamentary rule. <sup>70</sup> There is a shared dramatic structure in the two plays,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Charles R. Forker (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> For further exploration of the relationship between the two plays, see Meredith Skura, 'Marlowe's Edward II: Penetrating Language in Shakespeare's Richard II', *Shakespeare Survey*, 50 (1997), 41-55; Robert A. Logan, *Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Jeffrey S. Doty observes that '*Richard II* has an instructive purpose with respect to the people and politics: it invites the audience to think in a rational-critical way about their own individual and

which both begin with one king who commands obedience and end with another, but very different linguistic techniques are adopted as a means of facilitating that shift.

One small moment in Marlowe's interpretation of his source material may have piqued Shakespeare's interest in developing the more intricate political debates that are afforded by the practice of swearing allegiance. In the opening scene, Mowbray defends his personal honour from attack by cryptically alluding to an oath sworn between himself and the king: 'For Gloucester's death, / I slew him not, but to my own disgrace / Neglected my sworn duty in that case' (I.i.132-134). This is a puzzling line, as it does not articulate in detail what the nature and substance of Mowbray's 'sworn duty' is, although Shakespeare hints that it was intended by the king to be regarded as a binding oath legitimised by his allegiance to the crown. Charles R. Forker glosses the line by suggesting that Mowbray 'cannot honourably defend himself unless the king restores his dignity by admitting his own role in the death of his uncle'. 71 As such, the reference to 'sworn duty' is a coded allusion to the culpability of the king and a reciprocal plea for Richard to protect Mowbray's honour in a similar manner. The oath of fealty is not used as a guarantor of transparency in Shakespeare's representation of a state defined by the king as an absolutist monarchy in which power is derived from God; rather, swearing does the opposite of what it is supposed to do, clouding assertory speech and legitimising actions which run counter to the law. The nature of Mowbray's 'sworn duty' which Shakespeare would have encountered in Holinshed is more precise: 'the king conceived no small displeasure, and sware that it should cost the earle his life if he quickly obeied not his commandement. The earle thus as it séemed in maner

collective political subjectivities', a point which is certainly emphasised through Shakespeare's complex depiction of the rhetoric of fealty ('Shakespeare's Richard II, 'popularity', and the Early Modern public sphere', Shakespeare Quarterly, 61 (2010), 183-205 (p. 203)).

inforced'. <sup>72</sup> Mowbray appears to be 'inforced' to dispatch Gloucester under the threat of death, which would make Richard an ineffectual king who abuses the fealty of his subjects. When Shakespeare was adapting this scene, it was almost certainly filtered through his recollection of Edward II, as during the murder Mowbray 'caused his servants to cast featherbeds upon [Gloucester]'. <sup>73</sup> However, whereas Marlowe is more concerned with exploring the ambiguity inherent in the language available to express political allegiance, Shakespeare stresses the debate that such language can encourage, particularly with regard to the nature of the obligation demanded by the subject. In transferring the oath from Richard to Mowbray, Shakespeare makes the tyrannical aspect of Richard's kingship more obscure whilst pointing out some of the frustrations that absolutist kingship can bring out in his subjects, particularly their ability to question the ethical consequences of the type of

The plot of *Richard II* is initiated by the observance of an ancient oath. Gaunt is compelled by the king to bring Bolingbroke to a court of law, where accusations against Mowbray can be heard in public:

Richard:

fealty that is demanded of them.

Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster, Hast thou according to thy oath and band Brought hither Henry Hereford, thy bold son, Here to make good the boist'rous late appeal – Which then our leisure would not let us hear – Against the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray?

Li.1-6

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Holinshed, p. 489.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Holinshed, p. 489.

The 'oath and band' is a means through which Richard is able to exercise his power as king and regulate the behaviour of his more problematic subjects. The obedience of Gaunt to his command associates the 'oath' with a form of deference which is orthodox and unquestioning; once the king recalls the binding pact between monarch and subject, the request is obeyed. However, its properties are slightly more subtle than this initial reading because Richard appears to be subject to its authority himself. His assertion that the trial has been postponed from a previous occasion because of his 'leisure' introduces a degree of potency to the custom which belies the apparent power of the king, as it is only deferred, not cancelled or dissolved. In his opening lines, Shakespeare associates the 'oath and band' with monarchical rule, but also the power of a father over his son and a corresponding sense of aristocratic succession. The titles of 'Lancaster' and 'Hereford' are carefully placed in corresponding order in a manner which stresses the patrilineal titles that are of crucial importance in justifying the rebellion of Bolingbroke later in the play. This is no coincidence when Holinshed's indifference to titular identity is considered: 'the duke of Hereford or Lancaster, whether ye list to call him'. The 'oath and band' is a dominant custom from the beginning of the play, but it is not immediately associated with the type of unquestioning fealty which will later be demanded of his subjects by Richard. Rather, Shakespeare presents the audience with a more nuanced and complex form of cultural and social swearing, in which aristocratic inheritance appears to be its defining lexical property.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Holinshed, p. 499.

The speech of the characters in the subsequent trial is rendered slightly oblique in the presence of the king. Mowbray asserts that 'fair reverence of your highness curbs me / From giving reigns and spurs to my free speech' (I.i.54-55), implying a bridled form of discourse which is a consequence of 'reverence' or obedience. This is a subtle extension or dramatisation of the obscure nature of the oath that licenses Mowbray's murder of Gloucester, as it perverts the notion of swearing as a guarantor of truthful, plain speaking. When Richard crafts the language of oath-taking himself, it is used to promote a divine right model of monarchy, in which the king is placed in the state by God to act as his 'deputy elect' (IV.i.127); as such, his actions are regarded as beyond the redress or censure of his subjects. 75 According to the absolutist model promoted by Charles Merbury and James VI and I, the king and God are analogous, so when Richard invokes God during the moment of swearing he is to an extent verifying his own identity as king. The objects or symbols inserted by Richard into the privileged textual space are redolent of this political concept, such as when he swears 'by my seats right royal majesty' (II.i.120), for example, or 'by my sceptre's awe' (I.i.118). According to the type of kingship which Richard wishes to cultivate, the props of monarchy are the most sacred entities to be imagined in language because they are directly correlated with God himself, who is traditionally called on as a witness during the moment a pact is undertaken. Not only is he able to associate his own royal office with divine omnipotence, but it is crucially disseminated through the textual practice of swearing an oath of fealty.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> In his 1599 pamphlet *Wits theatre of the little world*, Robert Albott asserts that 'The authority of Kings hath ever been accounted a thing divine; for Homer and Isocrates write, that hee who governeth alone, representeth a divine majestie.' We can certainly see this type of thinking promoted by Richard himself in his own brand of rhetoric (*Wits theatre of the little world* (London: Nicholas Ling, 1599), p. 163).

However, Shakespeare has already seeded the idea that other forms of social or cultural values can be associated with oath-taking, one of which is the concept of succession. This is evidently connected with orthodox kingship, but it shifts the emphasis away from the office of the monarch itself to the origin of his or her authority. As such, the source from which power can be derived exists alongside Richard's form of sacred swearing, which focuses solely on the ceremonial props of monarchy and can therefore only be sworn by him. During the trial scene, Bolingbroke crafts a slightly alternative oath when he swears 'by the glorious worth of my descent' (I.i.107). This is still regarded as an orthodox formation, but it subtly positions Bolingbroke as a character who is more concerned with regarding his own lineage as inviolable rather than the figure of the king. There appear to be two forms of constructing a sacred oath of fealty, each with a different emphasis on what is regarded as sacrosanct; Richard's model, in which the props of kingship emanate a godlike power because they are endorsed by God and are symbolic of his magnitude, and Bolingbroke's, which acknowledges the bloodline to be the most widely respected concept in the state. Andrew Hadfield is undoubtedly correct when he asserts that 'Shakespeare makes it clear that rulers depend either on popular support or on the goodwill of their mighty subjects, rather than on inherited titles for their survival in office'. However, Bolingbroke's use of dynastic imagery implies that the source of the royal claim is still a shrewd strategy in ensuring that the support of the populace is maintained. <sup>76</sup> To reinforce this point, Shakespeare highlights some of the inherent flaws in the type of swearing practised by Richard:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (London: Arden, 2004), p. 73.

Richard: Now, by my sceptre's awe, I make a vow

Such neighbour nearness to our sacred blood Should nothing privilege him nor partialize The unstooping firmness of my upright soul. He is our subject, Mowbray; so art thou. Free speech and fearless I to thee allow.

I.i.118-123

The kind of obedience or fealty that is a correlative to Richard's insistence on his divinely ordained majesty is actually incapable of ensuring that assertory swearing performs its own function. Although he is permitting 'Free speech', Richard is in fact inhibiting it, as evidenced by Mowbray's earlier acknowledgement that he is unable to speak freely when in the presence of the king. Not only does Shakespeare align the 'sceptre's awe' with a form of botched swearing, he also implies that it is a rhetorical symbol through which Richard is able to exercise his rule as opposed to a genuinely sacred object with divine resonance. Richard does indeed proceed to 'partialize' Bolingbroke when he takes several years of his banishment away, simply because his father has a 'sad aspect' (I.iii.209). Already Shakespeare suggests that there are subtle flaws associated with the type of government Richard wishes to disseminate because of the minute glitches in his particular brand of oath-taking.

By offering the audience an insight into the type of kingship which is endorsed by Richard through the practice of swearing, Shakespeare is actually taking part in a more robust tradition on the popular stage. Both of the anonymous playwrights of *Thomas of Woodstock* and *Jack Straw* also use the textual properties of swearing to give a sense of the political framework within which Richard

operates.<sup>77</sup> The version of Richard in *Thomas of Woodstock* is far more similar to the

character of Bolingbroke as he is depicted in Shakespeare's play, with an express

focus on his royal bloodline and lineage when he makes an oath:

Richard: But by my grandsire Edward's kingly bones,

My princely father's tomb, King Richard swears

We see a more subtle form of swearing here, in which Richard focuses on his royal

origins before he indulges in behaviour with his cronies which could be regarded as

tyrannous. In order to offset the criticism aimed against him by his uncle Thomas,

Richard skilfully stresses his better title to the crown as the son of the eldest son, off-

setting any alternative claim that can be made by his older relatives. The association

between swearing 'on' the bloodline and political skill is something which intrigues

Shakespeare, but in his play it is transferred to Bolingbroke to establish a complex

alternative to the problematic divine right model espoused by the king. As such, he is

able to use to custom of swearing to establish a more robust sense of political debate

than is found in *Thomas of Woodstock*. We see a different form of monarchy again in

the type of lexical swearing given to Richard in *Jack Straw*:

King: For as I am your true succeeding Prince,

I sweare by all the Honour of my Crowne,

You shall have liberty and pardon all, As God hath given it and your lawfull King.

sig. D2r

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<sup>77</sup> Anon., *Thomas of Woodstock*, ed. by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Anon., *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, ed. by Kenneth Muir (Oxford: Males Series, 1057)

Malone Society, 1957).

Richard also draws attention to his royal claim in his self-description as a 'true succeeding Prince', although it is followed by the insertion of the 'Crowne' as a sacred object with which to swear by. However, Richard uses this as an opportunity to offer clemency to the rebels in accordance with the wishes of both God and the concept of kingship as established in law and ratified by parliament, as opposed to an articulation of his divine unassailability. As such, the 'Crowne' is not defined as sacred by its own intrinsic 'awe' or 'majesty', but because it operates within a complex political system that acknowledges the frameworks which mediate and curb royal authority. This is bolstered by several other descriptions of monarchy throughout the play; for example, when Richard acknowledges that his policies are ratified 'By generall consent of either house', or when the Mayor asserts his actions are 'but my dutie done, / First unto God, next to my lawfull King'. 78 In contrast to Richard II and Thomas of Woodstock, the anonymous playwright of Jack Straw uses elements of Richard's swearing to promote a more contractual form of monarchy in which the king acknowledges the influence of parliament when exercising power. From this comparison, we can see that Shakespeare is taking part in a rich trend on the popular stage of representing Richard's monarchical views through the medium of his oaths, but that he is at pains to create a more complex version in which absolutism is regarded as one form of government among different variants, rather than something inherent or inevitable.

During the resolution of the combat scene, Richard breaks his pledge by refusing to treat Mowbray and Bolingbroke impartially. He makes them promise to adhere to their uneven terms of exile by swearing a promissory oath over a sword that has been turned upside down to a cross:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> *Jack Straw*, sig. B1v, sig. F2v.

Richard: Return again, and take an oath with thee.

[To Bolingbroke and Mowbray]

Lay on our royal sword your banished hands. [They place their hands on King Richard's sword.]

Swear by the duty that you owe to God – Our part therein we banish with yourselves –

To keep the oath that we administer. I.iii.178-182

In the source material, the oath is presented with slightly less subtlety. Holinshed says that 'When these judgements were once read, the king called before him both the parties, and made them to sweare that the one should never come in place where the other was'. 79 Here, Richard is more concerned with preventing the creation of a joint aristocratic conspiracy, such as the one which Marlowe dramatised so successfully in Edward II. There is less focus on the ability of his language to bind Bolingbroke and Mowbray and more on the political threat that it is designed to mitigate. In contrast, Shakespeare uses this moment to develop a more nuanced critique of some of the flaws in the type of fealty demanded by divine right kingship. Richard reminds the two combatants of their duty to God in banishment which can never alter, even though his own authority is 'banished' with them once they leave England. However, in previous oaths Richard has aligned his own kingship with God's power. This suggests that the very fabric of the oath which is being sworn is inconsistent, as it tears apart its own precepts by creating a dual concept of God-andking, before acknowledging one of them is ineffectual. The repetition of the word 'banish' has the aural effect of stressing that the particular type of obedience being invoked is also being cast aside in the very moment the oath is uttered. Rebecca Lemon's observation that Shakespeare cultivates an 'anatomy of resistance' in which the primary means of defiance are 'located in the tongue rather than the sword' is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Holinshed, p. 495.

pertinent here, as the potency of the 'breath of kings' (I.iii.215) which Bolingbroke has acknowledged is not as secure when it is placed within an absolutist framework of swearing. <sup>80</sup> From Richard's perspective, this moment is an attempt to secure a form of fidelity in exile, but the language he uses is unstable, particularly when compared to Bolingbroke's more subtle emphasis on the root cause of power.

Only a few scenes later, Bolingbroke returns from exile having broken his oath. 81 It could be argued that this is one aspect of a structural pattern defined by fractured political pledges, beginning with Richard's small reversal of his own oath regarding the impartial treatment of his cousin and Mowbray. The speed of Bolingbroke's return bolsters the notion that Richard's own form of swearing has less ability to coerce the individual subject than one that is more carefully worded. Once he arrives, Bolingbroke immediately begins to justify his return by his severed ducal inheritance and the unlawful seizure of his goods by the king: 'Attorneys are denied me, / And therefore personally I lay claim / To my inheritance of free descent' (II.iii.134-136). The word 'free' takes on an unusually complex resonance in the context of swearing, as it defines the total obedience demanded by Richard as coercive and restrictive, which is the opposite of the traditional rights enjoyed by the English subject that are protected by the coronation oath. In the context of his grievance, it also invokes the sacred aspects of monarchy which are used in the formation of swearing in Richard's oaths to suggest that it is less holy than the inheritance model favoured by Bolingbroke. The two dominant conceptions of statehood, represented by the two men, exert an equal pull on York's allegiance

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Rebecca Lemon, *Treason by Words: Literature, Law and Rebellion in Shakespeare's* England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Dermot Cavanagh perceptively observes that 'Rather than expressing either a singular or an antithetical conception of treason, *Richard II* is characterised by a relational or, more accurately, dialectical approach, in which treason is viewed as dependent on modulations in authority' ('The language of treason in *Richard II'*, *Shakespeare Studies*, 27 (1999), 134-160 (p. 136)).

when he states that 'Th'one is my sovereign, whom both my oath / And duty bids defend' (II.ii.112-113), and the other is his 'kindred' (II.ii.115). In line with the succession-based claims of Bolingbroke, a factional group oath emerges in which several nobles swear an oath to support the Lancastrian grievance:

Northumb: The noble Duke hath sworn his coming is

But for his own; and for the right of that We all have strongly sworn to give him aid.

And let him never see joy that breaks that oath! II.iii.148-151

Once again, Shakespeare crafts an oath in opposition to the absolutist model cultivated by the king and defined by legal inheritance. Northumberland creates what Conal Condren defines as a diurnal oath, designed to support a wider or more dominant obligation with stronger binding qualities. At this moment, Shakespeare solidifies Bolingbroke's focus on inheritance as a sacred entity by having it replicated amongst the wider aristocracy. As such, it is endorsed as a potent ideal which is able to bind people together around a communally recognised entity. York persists in promulgating the ritual form of deference demanded by Richard, although it appears increasingly impotent when compared to the new forms of oath-taking that are promoted by the Lancastrian faction: 'If I could, by Him that gave me life, / I would attach you all and make you stoop / Unto the sovereign mercy of the King' (II.iii.155-157). The familiar posture of stooping is invoked, only to be

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Condren, p. 239.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> John Kerrigan observes that 'The lure of power has proved stronger than the power of language to bind, but the audience is uneasily aware that it is hard to determine quite when and how that happened.' Perhaps one moment is during the clash between different conceptions of politicised swearing, in which Bolingbroke asserts his own form in defiance of Richard's more absolutist formation ('Oaths, Threats and Henry V', *The Review of English Studies*, 63 (2012), 551-571 (p. 558)).

acknowledged as ineffectual. The figure of the king is also replaced by God, bypassing Richard's association of the two together. It is telling that these moments are largely the invention of Shakespeare. In Holinshed this is not an oath at all; rather, Bolingbroke returns from exile with the nobles 'promising him all their aid, power and assistance', but significantly not swearing under oath. In contrast, Richard is able to guarantee the support of his subjects, who approach him 'promising with an oth to stand with him against the duke'. R4 This is the exact opposite of what happens in Shakespeare's version of the plot. He alters the source material to stress that the Lancastrian rebels are explicitly acting under an oath that is characterised by succession and lineage, which in turn creates a stronger, more robust sense of debate between alternative forms of kingship and the different types of deference that they are able to generate. Whereas Richard's is characterised by impotent 'stooping', Bolingbroke promotes an idea of communality and shared experience defined by the right of every individual to secure their family lineage.

When Richard and Bolingbroke meet each other, their different forms of swearing are used to establish a direct confrontation over alternative concepts of kingship and fidelity, defined by absolutism on one hand and legitimacy on the other. As such, Richard defends his crown against the rebels by characterising their action as unambiguous treason: 'The breath of wordly men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord' (III.ii.56-57). From a divine right perspective, Richard

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Holinshed, p. 499.

Samuel Daniel Gollows Holinshed more closely here, as Bolingbroke is expressly characterised as a perjur'd rebel (Book II:72:10) who has broken the oath that he 'didst sweare / Upon th'Evangelists' (Book I:95:3). The contrast serves to emphasise Shakespeare's interest in the politically ambiguous consequences of breaking an oath sworn before the king (*The Civil Wars*, ed. by Laurence Michel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> John Heyward states that 'for they that have equall dignitie of birth and bloud, can hardly stoope in termes of soveraigntie, but upon every offer of occasion wil aspire to indure.' This is an unusually accurate description of the theatrical strategies used by Shakespeare to communicate a form of political tension centred on notions of fealty in *Richard II (The first part of the life and raigne of King Henrie the IIII* (London: Edward Alleyne, 1599), p. 2).

acknowledges that a form of deposition is permissible in the state, but only through the direct intervention of God. This is a rhetorical flourish designed to suggest that only death is able to dethrone him, but it opens up the possibility that the end of his rule is an imaginable concept. Shakespeare also situates the site of deposition in the 'breath' of men, or the language that they use to formulate any political system that exists in contrast to the one which solidifies Richard's form of monarchy. Emma Smith's observation that 'The transition at this point in the play is not a formal one marked by the physical props of office as in act 4, but rather a political conversion signalled linguistically' is a useful insight into the textual modulations which chart the move from Richard's rule to that of Henry. 87 As the inheritance-based model espoused by Bolingbroke involves a different form of swearing, it could be argued that Richard has in mind the 'breath' that is exhaled once an oath is sworn that runs counter to the type of binding language that conforms with his own type of pledging. Richard then asks a complex rhetorical question: 'Revolt our subjects? That we cannot mend. / They break their faith to God as well as us' (III.ii.100-101). Shakespeare introduces a telling gap between God and 'us', whereas in previous formations the two were regarded as occupying a shared position of deference. In the very act of asserting his absolutist version of kingship, Richard acknowledges both an alternative way of thinking about the crown and some of the flaws in his own conception. The 'faith' of the subject is now regarded as a private pact between the individual and God in line with the thinking of the Marian exiles such as Ponet and Goodman, rather than a direct oath to the king.

The confrontation between Richard and Bolingbroke is a conflict defined by the obligations inherent in the two forms of swearing that exist in the text. At several

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Emma Smith, 'Richard II's Yorkist Editors', Shakespeare Survey, 63 (2010), 37-48 (p. 41).

moments in act three, the action of kneeling or stooping is invoked only to be inverted or defied. When Richard enters the stage, he kneels on the ground and promises to 'do thee favours with my royal hands' (III.ii.11) in a reversal of the deference insisted upon earlier to suggest a similar reversal of fealty to himself. When they begin a discussion, Bolingbroke's 'stooping duty' (III.iii.48) is used in effect to 'signify' (III.iii.49) a contract, in which his ducal lands are to be returned in exchange for lack of military retaliation by the Lancastrian sympathisers. What Bolingbroke does here is substitute Richard's concept of unquestioning obedience for one based on compromise and negotiation, which is ultimately successful as his demands are 'accomplished without contradiction' (III.iii.124). This amounts to an effective reinscription of the oath of fealty as understood and promulgated by the king, rendering the concept upon which his form of rule is based to be untenable. Northumberland states that Bolingbroke 'swears' by the 'royalties of both your bloods – / Currents that spring from one most gracious head' (III.iii.105-108) to insist on equivalence and succession rather than the office or ceremonial props of kingship. Once this is achieved, and Richard accepts the oath, Bolingbroke is able to swear 'as he is a prince' (III.iii.119). At the level of language, a transference in power has occurred in which Bolingbroke effectively changes states from a subject to a monarch; he has been royalized. A mere three thirteen lines later, Richard agrees to 'submit' (III.iii.143). Bolingbroke attempts to kneel before him as was accepted in the earlier scenes, but Richard recognises that the gesture is now hollow and politically redundant; 'up cousin, up' (III.iii.194), he tells him, before they leave the stage together in an ambiguous state of political flux.

The deposition is complex in terms of swearing because the assent required from the king amounts to a binding pact. As this is the case, there is the complex

insinuation that only an anointed monarch has the authority to divest themselves of power. It seems that the absolutist model that has been defined in opposition to Bolingbroke's more conciliar form of kingship is asserted in its purest form at the very moment it is being vanquished. Shakespeare explores some of these intricacies in the verbal occlusions of Richard's acknowledgement of the deposition:

Bolingbroke: Are you contented to resign the crown?

Richard:

Ay, no. No, ay; for I must nothing be. Therefore, no 'no', for I resign to thee.

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There are several ways of reading Richard's assent. The phrase 'Yes, no. No, yes', gives no answer, as both responses are equivalent due to Richard's status of being 'nothing', so the choice itself is futile and meaningless. 'I, no. No "I" offers a 'no' by default, as there is no 'I' (or me) who is able to answer. 'I know no "yes" suggests that even though he resigns, Richard does not acknowledge the legality or even the possibility of undoing his own kingship. 'Ay, "no". No "yes" implies that 'yes' is only offered under duress, as there is no 'yes' to be said in this strange political context. And 'I know no I', in which Richard does not even know himself any more in a reflective observation that is not concerned with the initial demand. The large number of variants are explicable in terms of what he is being asked to do, which is authorise his own deposition. His formal acknowledgement is so slippery and evasive because royal rhetoric has become unstable in a context where a command is being simultaneously coerced and obeyed. 88 What is interesting, though,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> With regard to the excised version of these lines in the early quarto texts, Cyndia Clegg argues that 'although the scene was not censored because of its representation of misguided kingship, rebellion or deposition, it may have provoked suppression through its representation of Parliament.' Richard's

is the mastery with which Richard evades the request. The clumsy absolutist swearing at the start of the play has been replaced by an assent which is almost Lancastrian in its effusiveness. Richard becomes eloquent or politically skilful in his use of binding language when he occupies a more liminal space as both king-andsubject.

It is not surprising that Shakespeare chooses to formalise the deposition through the rhetorical description of a reverse coronation:

Richard: With mine own tears I wash away my balm,

> With mine own hands I give away my crown, With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,

With mine own breath release all duteous oaths. IV.i.207-210

The trope of parison used by Marlowe in *Edward II* is adopted by Shakespeare to suggest a transference in power between monarchs when one is still alive. However, here it adds a sense of grammatical form to a formless and uncertain state of being. The use of 'mine' instead of 'my' adds a more robust sense of possessiveness to the objects that Richard is being compelled to renounce, whilst the reference to the 'tongue' and to 'breath' is an acknowledgement that language, primarily the custom of swearing and observing a 'duteous oath', is the primary means through which kingship is both sustained and authorised. In the sources it is not entirely certain that this is the case. Holinshed tells the reader that Richard is compelled to read out or publicly 'rehearse' a statement that is ratified 'by the authoritie of the lords spirituall

intricate obfuscation of the parliamentary attempt to coerce a promise from him, however, suggests that the relationship between the two is more nuanced than a threateningly powerful body demolishing a weak king ("By the choice and inuitation of al the realme": Richard II and Elizabethan

press censorship', Shakespeare Quarterly, 48 (1997), 432-448 (p. 437)).

and temporall of this present parlement, and commons of the same'. 89 It appears that swearing is a more contingent political experience which depends on the acknowledgement of parliament for the new form of obedience to be lawful. In contrast, Shakespeare creates a more crucial and ambiguous role for the actual moment of swearing an oath in facilitating such a process. Although the figure to whom the oath is sworn is dependent on current circumstances, there is still the faint suggestion that only the original king, one who is God's 'deputy elect', may have the authority to release his subjects from their duty.

Once Richard is divorced from his office, the image of absolutist kingship which he represents is able to be shaped by his political opponents. When York describes the public humiliation of Richard as he rides into London, he asserts that 'No man cried God save him!' (V.ii.28) to draw attention to his debased status as a subject. Indeed, this could be a necessary tactic used to reinforce Bolingbroke's role as king; as York admits, 'we are sworn subjects now' (V.ii.39), so the need to declare his fealty is a matter of urgency. However, the transference in allegiance is not as neat as the old duke would like to believe, as he unwittingly describes Richard as 'sacred' (V.ii.30). The word not only has connotations of the absolutist model of kingship which defined Richard's conception of monarchy, but also exerts a textual pull on York's loyalty long after he has been deposed. The type of obedience demanded by Richard is not extinguished when he ceases to be the king, although this does not necessarily imply that his claim on York's allegiance is stronger, and therefore more authoritative; rather, it undercuts the Lancastrian attempt to facilitate a wholesale shift in government towards a model which acknowledges the merit of the individual in determining who is most suited to the crown. Whereas the model of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Holinshed, p. 503.

swearing practised by Bolingbroke had the ability to chip away at Richard's linguistic assertion of his own sacred status, the opposite happens once the relationship between the two men is reversed. Much like the two buckets which rise and fall in relation to changing circumstances, the standard model of fealty has now become the locus of opposition to the new regime, providing an alternative conception of submission to the one demanded by Bolingbroke.

However, unlike Richard the Lancastrian monarchs are aware of the ability of swearing to provide a covert forum in which opposing conceptions of government can be articulated. Throughout the second tetralogy, there is a sustained attempt to prevent the use of Richard's sacredness becoming a focus of dissent by characterising him as a bad ruler who neglected his duties; in *Henry IV Part One*, for instance, Bolingbroke describes him as a 'skipping King' who 'Mingled his royalty with cap'ring fools' (III.ii.60-63). However, the image of looseness promoted by the new king is directly at odds with what we have witnessed of Richard's conception of his office, particularly in his use of sacral rhetoric. As a consequence, this approach is disregarded in favour of a depiction of the king which confronts the alternative model of submission encouraged by his status as a divinely ordained ruler. Richard is aware of the potential of his deposition to provide his supporters with a means of defying the allegiance demanded by Bolingbroke, particularly when he stresses the spiritual pact between the individual and God: 'God pardon all oaths that are broke to me; / God keep all vows unbroke are made to thee' (IV.i.214-215). The loyalty of the people is determined not by reason or political expediency, but by scripture and the holy will; as such, Richard's wish that 'God keep all vows unbroken' to Bolingbroke is tautological, as a form of kingship based on religious

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part One*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2002).

endowment will inevitably regard those vows as sinful. Indeed, Richard's insistence on the existence of a deeper theological bond which undercuts the ties of governmental policy is not too dissimilar to the theories of Ponet and Goodman, which prioritise the inner commitment to God over the more secular ties of state.

Richard's assertion that his subjects have 'torn their souls by turning them from us' (III.iii.83) is therefore dangerous, as it provides a precedent for legitimately cancelling out the oaths demanded by Bolingbroke. Throughout the second tetralogy, the rivals of the Lancastrian regime invoke this very concept in order to subvert their grip on power. When the Bishop of York defies Bolingbroke, he is described as having 'scraped from Pomfret stones' the 'blood / Of fair King Richard' (I.i.204-205) in a visual rite which constructs him as a political martyr. 91 The blood is not only potent in terms of its assertion of dynastic disruption, but it also aligns Richard directly with Christ, whose blood was shed for the remission of sin; as such, the Bishop is able to 'Derive from heaven his quarrel and his cause' (I.i.206) because Richard's death is interpreted as a perversion of God's providential design and a possible attack on God himself through his substitute. To offset the potential rejection of his kingship on these grounds, Bolingbroke revises his initial image of Richard as a vacillator by portraying him as a councillor warning against factional ambition 'with his eye brimful of tears' (III.i.66). Not only is Richard imagined to be tacitly supportive of Bolingbroke's rule, but he chastises the nobility for reneging on the oath they have sworn in support for the new regime. Such a move does not provide a sound enough base to discourage the imminent rebellion, although it does attest to the seriousness with which Richard's conception of theological fealty is regarded by his political opponents.

<sup>91</sup> William Shakespeare, Henry IV Part Two, ed. by René Weis (Oxford: Oxford World Classics,

It is unsurprising in this context that one of the concluding passages of *Henry* V depicts the symbolic and literal burial of Richard's corpse. As part of his consolidation of power in England after his triumph in the foreign wars, the young king Henry decides to tackle the potential fomentation of an alternative form of royal fealty: 'I Richard's body have interred new, / And on it have bestowed more contrite tears / Than from it issued forced drops of blood' (IV.i.292-294). The troubling blood of the dead king is exchanged for Henry's tears in an image which attempts to reconcile the two factions through a reciprocal act of recognition. The depiction of the drops as 'forced' from Richard's body is a muted acknowledgement of the culpability of his father in facilitating the deposition, which in turn allows him to inhabit the role of chief mourner. As the eldest son, Henry has a claim to the throne which derives from a model of primogeniture, as well as the Lancastrian basis in right by conquer; as such, he is able to distance himself from his father's actions through the source of royal power which he shares with Richard. The adherence to a model of fealty defined by spiritual endorsement is slightly harder to maintain as a subject under Henry, as it could be used to justify the success of his own rule, particularly from the perspective of providential design. Henry's attempt to synthesise the competing forms of loyalty is evidence of political skill, as it provides him with a better chance of securing the goodwill of a large number of the populace, regardless of their personal inclinations. Such a coercive strategy is far removed from a view of royal swearing as sacrosanct or divine. However, it does regard the custom as one of the most powerful means of cultivating an oppositional form of fealty to that demanded by the king. Offsetting such a possibility is perhaps the most suitable type of swearing in a monarchical state, as it provides a clear form of

obedience without opening up a space for the origin or source of royal power to be debated.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

## **MARRIAGE VOWS**

## The Rhetoric of the Marriage Vow

In his treatise exploring the different formations of a nuptial contract, Henry Swinburne considers the philological origins of the word 'spousal': 'The Verb Spondeo (by the Opinion of Varro and others), is as much as Sponte do, that is, to give freely or without constraint'. At its deepest level, the amatory contract which binds man and wife is a free choice, mutually offered as a pledge of love. However, it is possible to regard this insight as slightly tautological, as any declaration of love which is truly 'without constraint' would not need to recourse to the binding strictures of an oath. Rather, the spousal is a verbal utterance which enters the swearer into a union which compromises the free assent that is required in order for a marriage to be regarded as binding; evidently the relation between the two is more nuanced than a simple agreement. Such tensions are a defining feature of early modern contracts, which employ a beguilingly large number of amatory oaths in order to delineate the temporal stages of wedlock. The recitation of the marriage vows in the Book of Common Prayer, so familiar to readers today, is only one of a number of linguistic formulae which could be interpreted as binding, particularly if the utterance is comprised of various tense structures and accompanied by certain

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Henry Swinburne, A treatise of spousals, or matrimonial contracts (London: S. Roycroft, 1686), p. 4.

recognisable gestures observed by a witness. Conversely, a reciprocal exchange of oaths outside of an established ceremonial framework may well be discarded as illicit should it be felt that certain conditions are not met. Although the verb 'Spondeo' may be associated with a free utterance of consent at its deepest level, the practice as understood by early modern culture, and its representation on stage, is replete with linguistic coercions.

Marriage was commonly regarded as an institution which was representative of social order. In a wedding sermon preached in Derbyshire in 1608, Robert Abbott glorified wedlock as 'the bond and preservation of spirituall amitie and conjunction betwixt GOD and man: of corporall marriage betwixt man and woman, and of neighborly sacietie betwixt man and man'. Not only does marriage stabilise the often volatile relationship between God and the soul, but it also confers a degree of order on wider relations through the provision of a sanctified framework within which the individual can live and procreate in a manner endorsed by scripture. Abbott's assertion is an allusion to the definition of matrimony in the *Book of* Common Prayer, which regards marriage as being 'for the mutuall societie, helpe, and coumfort, that the one oughte to have of the other, both in prosperitie and adversitie'. As an institution which brings people together into a cohesive relationship, wedlock is able to foster a sense of 'mutuall societie' to better withstand misfortune; indeed, the reference to 'prosperitie' would suggest that the ideal marriage is more stable than 'societie' itself, which is defined by unpredictable economic fluctuation. David Cressy draws attention to the wider implications of matrimony in early modern culture, noting that it 'served to promote commensality

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Robert Abbott, *A wedding sermon preached at Bentley in Derbyshire* (London: Roger Jackson, 1608), sig. A4r-v.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559 and 1662*, ed. by Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 64.

and conviviality, and helped to bond the couple into the support system of neighbours and kin'. Perhaps the social function of marriage was heightened by its demotion as a sacrament during the Reformation, heightening the civic aspects of the private and public reciprocity emblematised by the union alongside its more traditional religious elements. As such, it arguably represents the most visible iteration of the association between swearing and social regulation in early modern culture; when the two lovers take their vows, they are not simply entering into a covenant with God but reinforcing the companionability which is a fundamental aspect of stable relations throughout the state.

There were a number of contracts available in early modern culture to delineate the different stages of courtship, from an early spousal agreement to the binding exchange of vows before the altar of the church. The initial step would be the creation of a *verba de futurio* bond, in which the two individuals agreed to pledge their formal oaths to each other at a later date. This was followed by the utterance of a *verba de praesenti* vow, where the recitation of set formulae in an established ritual rendered the union binding and indissoluble. The different contracts are defined by Swinburne as follows:

Spousals de *futuro* are a mutual Promise of Covenant of Marriage to be had *afterwards*: As when the Man saith to the Woman, [*I will take thee to my Wife*] and she then answereth, [*I will take thee to my Husband*]. Spousals *de praesenti* are a mutual Promise or Contract of *present* Matrimony; as when

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> David Cressy, *Birth*, *Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 270.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For a detailed account of this process, see B.J. Sokol Mary Sokol, *Shakespeare, Law and Marriage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 74-81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For an exploration of the context of verba de futurio and verba de praesenti oaths, see Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 291-317.

the man doth say to the Woman [*I do take thee to my Wife*] and she then answereth [*I do take thee to my Husband*].<sup>7</sup>

Swinburne's definition relies on a difference in tense structure in order to communicate the distinction between the two oaths. Whereas the *futurio* uses the future tense to signal an incipient contract or engagement, the *praesenti* enacts it as a performative utterance which alters the lawful situation of the swearer. The *futurio* is therefore not as forceful as its later counterpart; rather, it initiates or prefigures the actual bond through an assertion which, though binding, is slightly less secure in its power to coerce. The disparity in substance between the two is designed to offer a degree of leeway should the match be less smooth than anticipated during courtship, or any legal impediments are discovered. The former can be dissolved if the agreement is mutual between the two parties; conversely, any sexual activity during the spousal immediately coverts it into a binding union regardless of a formal marriage ceremony or the recitation of a specified verbal formula. The two vows therefore work in co-operation to guard against the dangers of rendering the union indissoluble and impossible of reversion. However, the contractual process of matrimony also endows the custom of amatory swearing with gradations of commitment which compromise, or at least draw attention to, the ability of a praesenti utterance to actually obligate the swearer. Although the futurio is designed to bolster and reinforce the bond, it also provides a means of interpreting the praesenti utterance in retrospect as a less binding statement, or pushing back into the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Swinburne, p. 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Norman Jones states that 'A true marriage consisted of three things: consent, exchange of gifts, and consummation'; however, the power of sex to shift the terms of the entire *futurio* would suggest that it is possibly regarded as more binding that the utterance of the vow (*The Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560s* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 102).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For a detailed list of the possible impediments that can be identified in a pre-marital contract, see Ann Jennalie Cook, *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and his Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 185-223.

past to discover a flaw in the original vow. Quite often the spousal contract serves to actually negate the actual contract it prefigures, especially by parties who are adverse to the marriage or wish to seek its dissolution.<sup>10</sup>

Webster explores some of these legal and linguistic uncertainties in *The* Duchess of Malfi when the Duchess and Antonio conduct what they perceive to be a verba de praesenti marriage. 11 The staging utilises the rituals of an early modern wedding, involving the exchanging of a ring and the stylised movement of kneeling and rising. The action and utterance is so close to amatory convention that the Duchess interprets is as a binding union: 'I have heard lawyers say a contract in a chamber / Per verba presenti is absolute marriage' (I.ii.385-386). However, the language used by the two characters in pledging their love is not quite so clear; perhaps the Duchess gestures to this ambiguity in her acknowledgement that it is something she has heard, almost like a half-substantiated legal myth. Swinburne defines a praesenti utterance as following: 'We must neither forget the two former Distinctions, viz. That of words used in contracting Spousals; some are of the present time, some of the future time. And Secondly, That some words have relation to the entrance or beginning, and some to the end or execution of Marriage'. 12 There is a notable lack of discourse in the present tense when the Duchess and Antonio are pledging their love, suggesting that the interpretation of the union as binding is not as lawfully sound as the Duchess suggests. Antonio offers an elaborate simile in which the two lovers 'may imitate the loving palms, / Best emblem of a peaceful marriage' (I.ii.392-393), although the playful metaphoric nature of the assertion – a representation of an object which is itself an emblem – is far removed from a clear

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For a discussion of contractual wrangling in the period, see Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 189-218.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by Leah S. Marcus (London: Arden, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Swinburne, p. 74.

binding statement. The closest formation of a *praesenti* formula is the following speech by the Duchess: 'You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of' (I.ii.340-341). The verb 'make', in the present tense, could be operating as a performative function which 'makes' the marriage valid as soon as it is spoken, an interpretation which would be slightly reinforced, or perhaps complicated, by the sexual or erotic wordplay encouraged by the Duchess. A 'mine' has a secondary meaning in Renaissance literature as a vagina or an orifice with highly sexualised over-tones; in Donne's poem 'Mummy (Love's Alchemy)', the speaker's complaint about other men who have 'deeper digged Love's mine than I' is a vulgar allusion to sexual competition.<sup>13</sup> When she uses this image, the Duchess appears to be conflating the material wealth of her social rank with the pleasure that Antonio can expect at the consummation of the wedding ceremony. According to Swinburne the sexual act is something which completes the process of amatory bonding, or transfers it to a praesenti on action; as the Duchess refers to it as a future act, the exchange could therefore be regarded as a spousal rather than a marriage, particularly if the verb 'make' as a recognisable binding agent is scrutinised. Although the two lovers regard themselves as married, as indeed does every character on stage, the actual language is not quite as secure as expected, particularly from a hard-line legal perspective. The staging of *futurio* and *praesenti* bonds evidently requires the skill of careful reading and interpretation from the audience, in order to test whether the scene presented may be as lawful as the characters believe; this could explain the relevance of such scenes to the development of narratological strategies of courtship in Renaissance dramatic art.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> John Donne, 'Mummy (Love's Alchemy)', in *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. by Robin Robbins (London: Longman, 2008), pp. 222-223.

The central binding vow in early modern culture is, of course, the reciprocal declaration of love as outlined in the *Book of Common Prayer*. It was arguably one of the most recognisable utterances of the era; Shakespeare directly echoes it when Prospero tells Ferdinand 'Then as my gift and thine own acquisition / Worthily purchased, take my daughter' (IV.i.13-14). The high instance of marriage in the Renaissance meant that it was spoken at some point by over two thirds of the population, rendering it both highly quotable as well as a shared discourse with personal and public meaning. 15 The communality of the marriage vow is part of a wider project to foster a sense of national identity based on Reformed theological principles which place language at the centre of worship. Timothy Rosendale argues for the centrality of the *Book of Common Prayer* to this endeavour when he states that 'Scripture and service both depend on "easy" or "plain" comprehensibility – a logic utterly antithetical to the experience of contemporary Catholicism – to accomplish their common goal of individual spiritual enlightenment and through direct and edifying contact with the divine Word'. As a set formula for sanctifying the union between man and wife, the marriage vow in particular is an instance where the language of devotion can be fused with a form of sociability which is particularly English in character, as it requires the swearers to participate in Reformed worship as they pledge their love. When the vow is alluded to on stage, the playwright inevitably invokes a type of discourse which represents a cultural ideal that places language at the very heart of public and private life. Not only does it convey an amatory bond, but also a mindset in which all iterations of commitment are a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> For an account of marriage trends in the period, see Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England*, 1500-1800 (London: Harper and Rowe, 1977), pp. 30-41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Timothy Rosendale, *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 85.

refraction of a form of worship which associates grammar, particularly the discourses which have the power to bind, with spiritual, social and national order.

However, like all language in the *Book of Common Prayer*, the marriage vow is a tightly constructed rhetorical artefact, replete with its own stylistic effects. These are arguably necessary in order to integrate the oath into the minds of the population. However, like all rhetoric there is the subtle implication of ambiguity and constructedness which exists at a tangent to plain speaking. This is not to say that the marriage vow is fundamentally insincere; rather, it gestures to these anxieties in order to make the terms as effective as possible, even as the particular choice of syntactic formation draws attention to the tensions encompassed in the pledge. Before the wedding ceremony begins, the *Book of Common Prayer* directs the officiating priest to read out a sermon detailing the three purposes of marriage. We have already discussed the benefit of 'mutual societie'; marriage also ensures that children are raised in a Christian household, and it guards against the sin of fornication. <sup>17</sup> In order to communicate the resonance of this ideal to the congregation, the priest reminds them that it is an 'honourable estate instituted of God in paradise, in the time of mannes innocencie, signifying unto us the misticall union that is betwixte Christe and his Churche'. 18 In contrast to the efficacy imagined to be inherent in the actual bond, the priest is instructed to emphasise the metaphoric nature of wedlock, which functions as a symbolic representation of Christ's relationship with the church alongside its legal properties. Which of these two opposing interpretations is the congregation expected to endorse? There is evidently a desire to root the literal state of marriage in scripture in order to amplify the divine origin of the institution. However, there is also the latent sense that the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 64-65. <sup>18</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, p. 64.

allegorical properties of marriage – as well as the metaphoric or artificial features of its attendant vow – are able to displace, or at least encroach upon, the crucial literalness of the language which transforms the union into a binding state; this is, after all, one of the most indissoluble contracts in early modern culture.

We might therefore think that the marriage vow in the *Book of Common*Prayer would be as clear and prosaic as possible, in order to offset some of these fears. However, as noted earlier the actual language is an intricate rhetorical artefact which utilises several recognisable tropes. Daniel Swift is particularly astute when he observes that the moment is a 'curious kind of drama, one deliberately unlearned; each says the words in turn, but they apply to only one. Sincerity rubs against insincerity. The first expression is duplicated, and in being so, made true'. The paradoxical nature of a repeated citation bringing a state of truth into being is something which the compilers of the oath are evidently aware of, as they use a series of techniques to reinforce its efficacy:

With thys ring I thee wed: Thys golde and silver I thee geve: with my body I thee wurship: and withal my wordly Goodes I thee endowe.<sup>20</sup>

This moment occurs at a crucial place in the marriage ceremony. In order to communicate the sense of renewed or emergent solidarity at the level of syntax, the compilers adopted the trope of anastrophe, which involves the re-arrangement of traditional word-order for effect.<sup>21</sup> The repeated phrase 'I thee' followed by a verb (in this case 'wed', 'geve', 'wurship' and 'endow') is a distortion of a clearer unit of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Daniel Swift, *Shakespeare's Common Prayer: The Book of Common Prayer in the Elizabethan Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 88.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, p. 66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Henry Peacham, *The garden of eloquence* (London: H. Jackson, 1577), sig. F3r.

grammar, which might read 'I do give thee', or 'I do worship thee'. The auxiliary verb 'do' is excised, and the verb is placed at the end of the phrase to emphasise the connection between the two swearers and establish them as a deeply unified entity. This is a skilful rendering of anastrophe, as it deflects some of the anxieties over the duplication of the vow by establishing a semantic space in which the two lovers communicate directly – 'I thee' – with minimal dependence on the established verb structures. In his translation of Heinrich Bullinger, Miles Coverdale observes that 'I understande not only an outwarde dwellynge togyther, but also an uniforme agremen of mynd, & a common participacion of bodye and goodes, for asmuch as the Lord sayth playnely: And they two, shall be into one flesh'; we may interpret the use of anastrophe at the moment of pledging as an attempt to imitate this scriptural imperative at the level of grammar, in which the 'I thee' formation enacts the 'one flesh' of idealised marital identity.<sup>22</sup>

However, this choice also excises perhaps the most primal performative verb in the language: 'do'. As an auxiliary, many verb forms invoke the word whilst quietly eliding it in speech to provide a clearer form of expression; indeed, the word is tacitly present in the formation 'I thee wed', even if it is not expressly spoken. However, this is quite significant in terms of the performative function of the marriage vow, as it is arguably what transforms the utterance into a binding state; as Swinburne says, 'it is in effect as if he had said [*I do take thee to my Wife*,] and so importeth Spousals *de praesenti*, being in truth and substance indissoluble Matrimony'. <sup>23</sup> Instead, this is substituted by a subject-object formation which expresses the synergy of the swearers as referents without including the clearest

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *The golde[n] boke of cristen matrimonye*, trans. Miles Coverdale (London: John Mayler, 1543), p. vi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Swinburne, p. 57.

verbal formation to make this state an undisputed fact, particularly for the gathered witnesses. The vow is obviously regarded as binding, else it would have been modified and reformed in the various movements which altered the *Book of Common Prayer* in light of doctrinal developments. <sup>24</sup> However, it illustrates the choices made at the level of rhetoric in order to emphasise certain aspects of the pledge at the expense of others; the two main reasons, as I have previously suggested, are a desire to offset the iterability of a public vow by a deeper sense of collective identity at the level of grammar, and the syntactic representation of the 'one flesh' scriptural concept. Yet still, the excision of the performative opens up a space in which the actual linguistic bond is implicit, rather than explicitly stated. This reading can be reinforced by the use of the rhetorical trope hendiadys in the well-known section of the ceremony where the priest 'pronounces' the couple 'man and wife':

So these persons may surely perfourme and kepe the vowe and covenaunt betwixt them made, wherof this ring geven, and received, is a token and pledge.<sup>25</sup>

Hendiadys is a rhetorical trope which uses a two noun structure as opposed to a noun-modifier. We can see the repeated use of the strategy in the above formation: 'perfourme and kepe', 'vowe and covenaunt', 'geven, and received', 'token and pledge.' As the officiator of the vow, the priest acknowledges the reciprocity of the mutual exchange which has taken place in order to stress the relational dynamic into which the lovers have entered. However, it also reinforces a possible ambiguity in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> There is minimal modification in the language of the marriage ceremony, save for the quiet excision of the phrase 'gevyng and receyvyng golde and sylver'; perhaps it was felt that the focus on material exchange at the moment of pledging encroached upon the sacred aspects of the ceremony. *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 67, 159-160.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, p. 66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Peacham, sig. H4r.

the formation of the vow itself, as the hendiadic structure insists by its very nature on the isolation of different grammatical parts. Although the language sworn by husband and wife uses a subject-object formation to place them into close proximity, the alternative binding vow spoken just minutes later by the priest adopts the opposite structure, in which their separate contributions – giving and receiving, for instance – are underscored. This is not to suggest that the language spoken is fundamentally loose, although it does allow room for alternate interpretations of the rhetoric used to at the very least be considered, even if they are mentally shut down or evaded. David Cressy's assertion that the wedding 'involved a composite series of actions and utterances whereby the couple proceeded to their new and irrevocable condition' is reflected in the multiple and possibly discordant tropes in evidence, even though the strategies deployed at the moment of composition seek to offer the most effective vow possible.

It is interesting to observe that the sacral properties of the amatory vow were not so sanctified that they were beyond parody on the Renaissance stage; B.J and Mary Sokol observe that 'When Shakespeare echoes the language of the Prayer Book marriage ceremony, the results are usually satiric or parodic<sup>27</sup>. This insight is equally applicable to Shakespeare's contemporaries, especially Thomas Middleton who explicitly skews the rhetoric of the marriage vow in A Trick to Catch the Old One when the covetous Hoard thinks he has married a rich widow who is, in fact, a prostitute:

<sup>27</sup> Sokol. p.87.

Lamprey: Join hearts, join hands in wedlock's bands,

Never to part till death cleave your heart.

[To Hoard] To shall forsake all other women,

[To Jane] Your lords, knights, gentlemen, and yeomen.

What my tongue slips, make up with your lips.<sup>28</sup>

IV.i.1-5

Middleton stages the moment in the early modern ceremony when the priest pronounces the marriage to be binding; interestingly, one of the performative verbs is 'make' in line four, using the same word as Webster's Duchess to stress the crafting of a new set of amatory circumstances. However, the sexual imagery and stress on violence is far removed from the official formulae, and emphasises the suspect ethics of both bride and groom in relation to what is fundamentally a solemn and binding act. The use of internal rhymes – 'part / 'heart', 'slips' – evokes the equilibrium of shared vowing whilst revealing the textual experience of amatory commitment to be a sentimental trick; the lips are yoked to a sense of slippage rather than sincere disclosure, the heart is parted rather than rendered complete. The vow also alludes to the inevitable promiscuity of each partner, particularly the bride whose potential male partners comically decrease in rank from 'lords' to lowly 'yeomen'; inevitably her male paramours will be less prestigious as she ages throughout the marriage. Middleton's language derives its satiric energy from the insufficiency of the vow to guarantee or even envisage the fidelity of the ill-matched lovers. As a de facto priest, the worst acknowledgement Lamprey can make at this moment is that his language 'slips' from its function. The fact that the marriage is regarded as binding by the rest of the characters is therefore more complex than it appears, as it suggest that, to an extent, the obligatory properties of wedlock are not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Thomas Middleton, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, ed. by Valerie Wayne, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 373-413.

wholly dependent on the vowing process. Hoard's exclamation that he will not disclose Jane's true profession as 'Concealed disgrace prevents a public name' (V.ii.155) implies on some level that the fear of ridicule compels him to keep his oath, particularly as the so-called priest even acknowledged that his swearing is faulty.

The staging of matrimonial pledging provides an opportunity for playwrights to explore in detail its ability to hold amatory commitments in place. Subha Mukherji has claimed that the fascination with the problematic aspects of swearing amounts to a 'virtual admission of the incapacity of words, in the context of marriage, to be stable signifiers'. <sup>29</sup> However, it might be profitable to regard its representation on stage as a more complex process which exhibits, at times, a respect for the efficacious aspects of the custom. In the moments of swearing discussed in Webster and Middleton, the respective marriages are commonly regarded as licit even when the original pledge is carefully rendered with suspicion; surely the point is to stress an adherence to the custom alongside or even outside of the precise formation of its language. There are moments where a vow is indeed too loose to bind in precisely the manner suggested by Mukherji, but the tendency appears to be situated alongside a range of responses, some of which regard it as a custom which should be honoured above all else. In Fletcher and Massinger's play *The Double* Marriage, Virolet is compelled to wed his captor Martia, even though he has a futurio agreement with Juliana. 30 The two individuals repeat the present-tense form 'I take you' (II.iv.171-172) in turn to signal an unambiguous praesenti union which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Subha Mukherji, *Law and Representation in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, *The Double Marriage*, ed. by Cyrus Hoy in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, 14 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), IX, pp. 95-220.

is acknowledged to be indissoluble, even though to defy the bond would benefit Virolet. However, Fletcher and Massinger ingeniously rework the tenets of amatory swearing when he refuses to 'yield up those chaste delights and pleasures / Which are not mine but my first vows' (III.iii.291-292), rendering it dependent on utterance alone. Consequently, Maria is driven to distraction by frustrated lust and cancels out the pledge that they both have sworn: 'Take back your love, your vow, I give it freely; / I pour scorn on it' (IV.iii.147-148). In Mukerji's estimation, this would be a perfect instance of the failure of amatory swearing to hold the union in place, particularly as it is discarded with seeming ease once sexual penetration, the true binding agent, is withheld. However, Virolet's purpose is to honour a deeper futurio vow to Juliana, which enables the two to take their own praesenti pledge. The breakdown of swearing is commensurate with a veneration of its terms; one is fractured whilst the other is honoured. In relation to vowing, Robert Cleaver observes that 'if one partie do say, I will promise to marrie thee; this is no promise indeede, but a promise of a promise, and consequently no Contract, but a promise of a Contract'. 31 The riddling nature of obligatory bonds, in which vows can entail their own miniature ties, is indicative of the complexity and possible breakdown of such an intricate system. However, the multiple oaths that characterise courtship do not always undo each other on the early modern stage; rather, they reiterate the primary importance of a custom which honours the verbal expression of an amatory commitment, even when the terms are ambiguous.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Robert Cleaver, A godly forme of houshold government (London: R. Field, 1621), sig. H1v-H2r.

## The Maid's Tragedy

In a commendatory poem at the front of the 1647 folio, Jasper Maine marvels at the working practises of Beaumont and Fletcher; they are the 'Great paire of Authors' who 'In Fame, as well as Writings' are 'both so knit, / That no man knowes where to divide your wit'. 32 Maine's depiction of their output and authorship as mutually 'knit' together is primarily drawn from the language of needlework to account for the delicacy with which the plays are crafted.<sup>33</sup> However, the word has a secondary meaning more evocative of a reciprocal form of creative engagement. The OED defines 'knit' as 'To make or constitute by joining (a covenant, agreement, or the like); to make fast or firm, to establish (a relation of union). <sup>34</sup> In order to write, Maine imagines the Beaumont and Fletcher enter into a bond in which their duties are mutually established, almost like a contract or even a vow. Once established, the compact is able to produce theatrical plays that are so well integrated it is impossible to tell which dramatist contributed their individual share; both their 'Writing' as well as their 'Fame', or public authorship, are indivisible. Maine's play on the obligatory connotation of the word 'knit' is an apt model to discuss some of the authorship strategies at work in *The Maid's Tragedy*, a play which dramatises the perversion of amatory bonds by the lustful King. 35 One response by the characters to this perceived act of tyranny is the construction of collaborative swearing structures which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Jasper Maine, 'On the Workes of *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, now at length printed', in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Comedies and Tragedies* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1647), sig.D1r. <sup>33</sup> The feminised properties of the word 'knit' could also be alluding to a perceived fascination with cross-dressed heroines and gender ambiguity; see Peter Berek, 'Cross-dressing, gender and absolutism in the Beaumont and Fletcher plays', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1800*, 44 (2004), <sup>250</sup> 277

<sup>34 &</sup>quot;knit, v. 8.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*, ed. by T.W. Craik (Manchester: Revels, 1988).

compensate for those which are debased. However, the careful depiction of vowing in the play, particularly the images and metaphors of shared authorship, reveal this to be a fraught strategy of protest which is not quite as efficacious as the swearers believe.

The Maid's Tragedy was performed at the wedding celebrations of Princess Elizabeth and Elector Frederick of the Palatine in 1613. Although T.W. Craik dates the play to 1610-1611, meaning that it would have first been played for a public audience a few years earlier, it was evidently felt to be suitable for a royal occasion which celebrated the virtues of amatory union. Kevin Curran has defined the cultural atmosphere of the wedding as focussed on the concept of political union with England's Protestant allies on the continent. Most court masques in the period had been subtly used to promote the more parochial union between the English and Scottish crowns, particularly when performed as part of a notable public wedding ceremony; however, the 'Palatinate marriage presented an opportunity for James's kingdom' to be 'Protestant, European, anti-Hapsburg, and hold a privileged position within that larger classification'. <sup>37</sup> In order to bolster the sense of Politico-religious union, it was imperative that the matrimonial duties of child-bearing were stressed to the young royal couple, as a successful pregnancy was the most secure means of protecting the new alliance. As such, the large poetic outpouring of epithalamia emphasise the familiar telos from the *Book of Common Prayer* which envisions that the birth of a child is the final culmination of a movement which is initiated when the vows are sworn. In his tribute *Great Brittaines generall joyes*, Anthony Nixon opines that 'if true Glory, or stabilitie, / In bodyes Politique, or Naturall, / Hath ere

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> T.W. Craik states that the play was 'acted by the King's Men at court during the celebrations of the Princess Elizabeth's wedding to the Elector Palatine.' Craik, 'Introduction', p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Kevin Curran, *Marriage*, *Performance and Politics at the Jacobean Court* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 126.

been gayned, it came from unitie'; the natural result of this public and private concord is 'a line of Kinges, / Which from their Princely stocke may grace both climes'. The birth of a legitimate heir, preferably a son, will cement the deep relationship between political stability in the state and the more private concord offered by amatory union. George Wither reinforces this idea when, in his poem *Epithalamia: or Nuptiall poems*, he states that 'out your blessed loynes, shall come' a son who is 'such a stout Achilles, as shall make' their enemies 'shake'. <sup>39</sup> Not only is a son necessary to complete the wider, long-term success of the marital alliance, but he is imagined to exist solely for the public benefit of the state, warding off their enemies like the celebrated hero of antiquity.

The images used by Beaumont and Fletcher to promote the desired outcome of amatory bonds in *The Maid's Tragedy* are perfectly commensurate with the cultural focus on child-rearing in the rhetoric of the Palatinate wedding; indeed, it may have been one of the reasons why it was felt suitable for performance two years after its debut. When he returns from a military campaign, Melantius greets Aspatia, the betrothed wife of his friend Amintor, in terms which anticipate her fruitfulness: 'Mayst thou bring a race / Unto Amintor that may fill the world / Successively with soldiers!' (I.i.61-63). The marriage is a process which initiates a culture of citizenship defined by military service; any reciprocal obligations between man and wife are subservient to the desired re-population of the state with 'soldiers'. Melantius' observation is something of a commonplace in Rhodes, the location of the play. When the King leaves Amintor before the consummation of the wedding, he tells him 'If thou be'st noble, youth, get me a boy / That may defend my

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Anthony Nixon, *Great Brittaines generall joyes* (London: Thomas Pavier, 1613), sig. A3r-A3v, sig. B2r

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> George Wither, *Epithalamia: or Nuptiall poems* (London: Edward Marchant, 1613), sig. B3r.

kingdoms from my foes' (I.ii.288-289); afterwards, he cockily asserts that 'We have ventured for a boy; when he is twelve / 'A shall command against the foes of Rhodes' (III.i.22-23). The assumption that the child will grow up to protect the state is notably similar to Wither's imagery in his epithalamion for the Palatine marriage, suggesting that such sentiments are reflective of the type of political amatory union promoted and favoured by the court. Indeed, in a speech to parliament regarding his dual kingship James famously asserted that 'I hope therefore that no man will be so unreasonable as to thinke that I that am a Christian King under the Gospel, should be a Polygamist and husband to two wives'. 40 In the dominant rhetoric of the period, political cohesion is synonymous with matrimonial union, hence the king's warning that his ambiguous 'marriage' may jeopardise the security of both his countries and the figurative 'children' who depend upon national stability for their own wellbeing. In utilising the complex association between politics, marriage and child-rearing in The Maid's Tragedy, Beaumont and Fletcher suggest the desired outcome of a child is the culmination of a telos which situates the perpetuation of the bloodline within wedlock as a primary aspect of early modern statehood, as the children produced can, in turn, contribute to the public health of the polity.

However, this recognisable ideal is rendered deeply ironic when it is revealed that the marriage between Amintor and Evadne is a screen to mask the lust of the King. Amintor has previously entered into a *futurio* pact with the young noblewoman Aspatia, although the bond is cancelled and refashioned on the express order of the monarch. No-one affected by the arrangement appears to have any legal or religious recourse to a higher power, suggesting that, in the state of Rhodes, the King's will is absolute. As Amintor tells Melantius, 'She [ie, Aspatia] had my

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> James VI and I, *The Political Works of James I*, ed. by Charles H. McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1918), p. 272.

promise, but the King forbade it, / And made me make this worthy change, thy sister' (I.i.138-139). Although the two men are now legally brothers, cementing their private bond in the world of public and familial amity, there is a lingering sense that the new contract with Evadne is suspect, particularly at the level of language. The odd verb construction 'made me make' is evocative of the performative verbs promoted by Swinburne to bring a new set of matrimonial circumstances into being, but the exact nature of Amintor's acquiescence is obfuscated. The present tense 'to make' is initiated by a previous imperative command which grammatically occurs in the past tense, not quite communicating the clear declaration of emotional consent; the making of the contract is itself fashioned in a way that exists at a tangent to the swearer. Beaumont and Fletcher's focus on the construction of rhetorical pledging is used to complicate the neat association between civic order and amatory vowing which is a dominant expression of orthodox politics, particularly in the court. In Rhodes, it is suggested, a coerced or ambiguous amatory bond may be indicative of unrest in the wider state.

According to Rebecca Bushnell, the King's use of a marriage to satiate his lust could be interpreted as an outright act of tyranny: 'the equation of the tyrant's sexual will with his political power represents his private desires as political acts affecting his subjects' rights to marry whom they choose, protect their family, and guard their own property'. <sup>41</sup> Through disrupting the association between marriage, child-rearing and public service, the King has not only compromised his own security but the state he is charged with defending. This is a politically disastrous choice which initiates a rather different structural telos from the one that is promoted

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Rebecca W. Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), (p. 167). For a detailed contextual engagement with the theories of tyranny, see Robert Miola, '*Julius Caesar* and the Tyrannicide Debate', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 38 (1985), 271-289.

by orthodox rhetoric, resulting in death rather than fertility and new life. When Amintor enters into wedlock with Evadne, before he has discovered the true nature of the marriage, he excitingly anticipates its sexual consummation: 'Come come, my love, / And let us lose ourselves to one another' (II.i.145-146). T.W. Craik's rendering of the word 'lose' reinforces the emotional (and fluvial) mingling of bodies as they enact their vows at the bodily level. However, the compositor of the first quarto edition spells the word as 'loose', opening up a slightly different meaning in which the self is not dissolved or lost, but is released from a previous binding state. 42 A deep association between looseness and amatory vowing is exhibited by Philip Massinger in *The Fatal Dowry*, particularly when Charalois discovers that, like Amintor, he has entered into a sham marriage to facilitate the sexual relationship between Beaumelle and her steward Novall Junior; she is characterised as 'Lady Looseness' (III.i.311) who possesses the 'the loosest tongue' (III.i.369) of a 'swearer' (III.i.358). 43 Evidently Massinger is exploiting the connection between the betrayal of amatory pledges and its ability to cast doubt on the veracity of the oaths of the deceiving partner. At the very moment when Amintor and Evadne are tied together, therefore, the bond is 'loosed' from its obligatory potential, presumably due to the interference of the king. This is only one small moment in the original text, but it offers an insight into the deeper connection between a wider looseness, particularly in terms of public male identity and the rhetoric upon which it rests, which ensues when an amatory vow is not respected.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The maides tragedy* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1619), sig.D1v.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Philip Massinger, *The Fatal Dowry*, in *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, ed. by Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), I, pp. 1-103.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> For further exploration of the absolutist properties in the play, see Ronald Broud, 'Divine Right and Divine Retribution in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy'*, in *Shakespeare and the Dramatic Tradition: Essays in Honour of S.F. Johnson*, ed. by W.R. Elton and William B. Long (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), pp. 246-263.

When Amintor learns the truth about his marriage to Evadne, he struggles to find an appropriate framework within which to place their new, ambiguous oaths. At first he assumes that she has been raped or sexually attacked, compromising her status as a virgin and possibly compelling him to raise a bastard as his own legal heir: 'Name the man, and by thyself I swear, / Thy yet unconquered self, I will avenge thee' (II.i.171-172). The only kind of sexual looseness Amintor can imagine is through coercion, hence the idealised reference to Evadne being 'unconquered'; indeed, the whole structure of his oath replicates a miniature telos in which Evadne herself can act as a sacred entity because she is 'yet' to be penetrated in turn by Amintor, as his lawful wife, even as her virginity is in doubt. In the place of a lover, Amintor becomes a proto-revenger who will rectify the stain on Evadne's honour through a murderous act. However, this hint of generic disturbance is modified when she refutes the suggestion, prompting Amintor to question whether she has 'sworn' to 'preserve [her] maidenhead a night' (II.i.191-193). The imagined rape is substituted for its opposite, a life of chastity in which the imagined consummation is endlessly deferred. Beaumont and Fletcher focus on the act of sex in relation to amatory swearing because, for Amintor, the projected movement from pledging to consummation to child-birth is called into doubt. As such, it results in the troubling generic indeterminacy, in which he can swing from the role of a revenger such as Hieronimo or Antonio to a bathetic husband in a citizen comedy, forever denied sexual satisfaction.

The association between amatory pledging and narrative structure is foregrounded when Evadne enacts a miniature ritual 'marriage' in which the revelation of her oath to the king is placed above the lawful words that she has uttered at the altar:

Do you invent the form, Let there be in it all the binding words Devils and conjurers can put together, And I will take it. I have sworn before, And here by all things holy do again, Never to be acquainted with thy bed.

II.i.234-239

To early modern audiences, the rhetoric used by Evadne would have recalled the formula of the *Book of Common Prayer*, particularly the phrase 'here by all things holy', which is similar to the opening statement 'we are gathered here in the syght of God', and description of matrimony as a 'holy estate'. 45 Evadne's invocation of the rhetorical structure of wedlock is designed to cancel out or overturn the binding qualities of the original. This may well have been considered shocking to a contemporary audience, as it has the potential to expose the custom as a process not too dissimilar to a piece of theatre, in which a script is uttered that has minimal or ambiguous power to obligate the speaker. Evadne's mocking injunction that Amintor 'invent the form' characterises swearing as a creative exercise, where self-willed oratory is as binding as the sacred utterance; similarly, her decision to swear 'by all things holy' is almost comic in its studied disregard of culturally specific sacred entities. Even more shocking, perhaps, is the suggestion that the oath is written in a dark collaborative partnership between 'devils' and 'conjurers'. Jeffrey Masten has outlined a method of exploring shared authorship based on qualitative or conceptual terms, in which attribution can exist alongside images or metaphors which explore the creative scope of collaboration. 46 As playwrights who not only engaged in shared

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 64-65.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Masten states that collaborative texts 'exhibit the different configurations of authorities constructing, re-forming, and controlling texts and (as we shall see) constraining their interpretation' (*Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 13). For other conceptual or qualitative explorations of collaborative authorship models, see Gordon McMullan, "Our whole life is a play": Collaboration and the problem of editing, *Textus*, 9 (1996), 437-460; Suzanne Gossett, 'Editing Collaborative Drama', *Shakespeare Survey*, 59 (2006), 213-224.

working patterns but were also publicly noted for their skill as a 'paire', to quote Jasper Maine again, it is likely that Beaumont and Fletcher have an interest in exploring the social possibilities of collaborative discourses such as vowing in early modern culture. The production of amatory bonds by a devilish partnership is primarily designed to convey Evadne's attitude as blasphemous and therefore unethical; however, it also characterises marriage as a custom which uses the threat of divine punishment to ensure sexual and emotional fidelity. If collaborative verbal patterns stress the reciprocity of matrimonial pledging, then, for Evadne, those ideals are exposed as a false standard which hides a more troubling situation, in which the autonomy of the female partner is compromised at the moment of pledging.

Once Evadne tells Amintor that her sexual oath to the King is regarded as binding, the expected telos of sexual consummation and child-rearing is irrevocably compromised. In its place, Amintor proposes that they simulate or perform the expected behaviour of married couples for the benefit of the court: 'Give me thy hand' (II.i.349) he states, in a hollow gesture of hand-fasting which reduces the marriage to a 'toy' (II.i.355). When asked why she has entered into wedlock, Evadne asserts that 'I must have one / To father children, and to bear the name / Of husband to me, that my sin may be / More honourable' (II.i.316-319). Sid Ray evinces a great degree of sympathy for Evadne's situation, arguing that 'she has been forced into marriage' and 'denotes the culture's readiness to focus on the containment of unruly female behaviour rather than censoring the abuse of monarchical power'. However, the above assertion from the text would suggest that Evadne willingly enters into wedlock in order to secure an established position for herself at court; this is later compounded when she informs the King that 'if your fortune / Should throw you

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Sid Ray, *Holy Estates: Marriage and Monarchy in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2004), p. 96.

from this height, I bade you trust / I would forsake you' (III.i.171-173), loosening their bond in order to inculcate herself with the new ruler. Rather than present a wholly condemnatory view of unruly women, it is possible to argue that Beaumont and Fletcher are more concerned with exploring the potential for social realignment when amatory bonds are loosened. This has evidently worked to Evadne's benefit in the short term, as she enjoys the material benefits that follow from a close relationship with the King. Conversely, it provokes a crisis for Amintor, who is unable to account for his place within a culture defined to a large extent by marital identity: 'What a strange thing am I!' (II.i.319). His situation is not too dissimilar to Mariana in *Measure for Measure*, who is 'neither maid, nor widow, nor wife' (V.i.177) as a result of the ambiguous status of the *futurio* 'vowed contract' (V.i.206) she has entered into with Angelo. 48 For Mariana, the bed-trick allows her to transform the engagement into a more binding *praesenti* at the moment of consummation, rendering Angelo's protestation that the 'promised proportions' have come 'short of composition' (V.i.217-218) null and void. However, this course of action is unavailable to Amintor, who has entered into a praesenti contract defined by sexual absence rather than subterfuge; as such, the impact upon his status as a child-producing citizen in the context of Rhodean culture is more severe, as he will be impeded from providing a son and thus fulfilling his role as the founder of his own familial line.

When Melantius learns of his sister's false marriage to Amintor, he reacts with predictable fury: 'The credit of our house is thrown away' (III.ii.188). For Melantius, the corruption of his 'house' through the perceived defilement of Evadne is an act so tyrannous that it necessitates the creation of a new bond. The audience

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. by Brian Gibbons (Cambridge: New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1991).

might expect this to have been initiated by Amintor rather than his brother-in-law, although his earlier refusal to harm the 'sacred name' (II.i.308) of the King suggests that he has a deep respect for absolutist politics; his compliance may also hint at why he was chosen as a dupe. <sup>49</sup> In order to bolster a factional movement, Melantius employs the rhetoric of solidarity to his brother Diphilus alongside his 'lawful' sibling Amintor: 'Then join with me (III.ii.227), 'Come, join thy hands to mine' (III.ii.270), prepare [...] what friends you can draw unto our side' (III.ii.279-280). Beaumont and Fletcher evidently intend for Melantius' response to be read as a rebuttal of the King's abrogation of the marriage vow, substituting a binding oath amongst his family for the one which has been corrupted; as such, his act of rebellion is justified by the King's failure to ensure the sanctity of a pledge which is, in turn, associated with familial concord and well-being. When he compels Diphius to 'swear a firmness to what project I / Shall lay before thee' (III.ii.271-272) the future impulse towards the continuation of the 'house' (III.ii.188) is replaced for one which projects an act of military aggression, rather than compliance within an ordered state. For Melantius, it is not so much the shame of Evadne's actions that provokes his ire, but the disrespect shown to 'all successions' (IV.i.159) that can be reasonably expected to follow from a lawful marriage.

For his rebellion to succeed, it is expedient that Melantius neutralises his sister, especially as her proximity to the King could provide him with a useful spy. When Evadne is confronted she is deliberately evasive, although her attitude changes when she is threatened with death: 'by the dear soul of thy sleeping father, / This

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Kristin M.S. Bezio offers the provocative point that 'In permitting the King's affair with Evadne, Amintor condones tyranny and endangers the other members of the Rhodian polity'; perhaps his complacency is one of the reasons why the King's abuse of civic bonds is able to occur ("Sudden Deaths": Regicide, Theatricality and Anti-Absolutism in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy'*, *Early Modern Studies Journal*, 5 (2013), 57-76 (p. 64)).

sword shall be thy lover' (IV.i.96-97). Melantius' situates the head of the family line as a sacred entity in order to signal that his loyalty is situated within the dynasty rather than the absolutist monarch, or any other abstract political concept; indeed, her real 'lover' is figured as a sword which will penetrate her body in an altogether more violent fashion than the King, who is both absent from the position of a sacred entity, and symbolically replaced by an object which hints at his own assassination. In order to fully coerce Evadne into shifting her loyalty, Melantius also threatens her with public shaming after death:

When I have killed thee
(As I have vowed to do if thou confess not)
Nak'd as thou hast left thine honour will I leave thee,
That on thy branded flesh the world may read
Thy black shame and my justice.

IV.i.105-109

Beaumont and Fletcher reintroduce the imagery of collaborative authorship to provide Melantius with an effective method of publishing his sister's perceived crime. His decision to situate the act within the binding structure of a vow suggests that, once again, Melantius' actions are subtly responsive to the King's corruption of the marriage oath. In the place of a false obligation, Melantius describes a collaboration between his sense of 'justice' and Evadne's 'black shame' in which Evadne's body is written or produced as a corrective text to be 'read'; the observer will learn the lesson than even members from within the familial structure are able to be punished when a corrupt amatory bond is placed above dynastic loyalty. When Evadne employed similar imagery as part of her burlesque of the marriage rite in act two, Beaumont and Fletcher implied that the participatory structures of swearing are coercive and illusory rather than truly efficacious. We see her satire unironically

corroborated here, as the shared authorial structures are used to defame Evadne, particularly with regard to her sexual agency; the fact that the text is written on her corpse is a further implication that the shaming strategies are collusive in nature, and are used to reassert a form of reciprocity which polices sexual behaviour rather than establish the support of 'mutual societie'.

The image of Evadne's carved body may have been influenced by the striking moment in Ben Jonson's play *Volpone* when Corvino threatens to hang his wife Celia out of a window, 'devising / Some monstrous crime, which I in capital letters / Will eat into thy flesh with aquafortis / And burning cor'sives, on this stubborn breast' (III.vii.103-105). Orvino's situation is very different to Amintor's, as he is attempting to force his wife to commit adultery with another man to boost his own finances, rather than the other way round. However, Jonson's sole authorship may have shaped the depiction of the image, which in turn encouraged Beaumont and Fletcher to consider some of the more collusive properties of mutual vowing. In a similar manner to Melantius, Corvino's imposition of text on the female body is designed to regulate and modify Celia's behaviour with the threat of social shaming, in which her 'crimes' will be read and condemned by a public audience. However, Beaumont and Fletcher rework the image not only by introducing a collaborative dimension in the partnership between 'black shame' and 'justice', but suggesting that the former is actually working directly against Evadne's own welfare. As such, her public identity is imagined to operate in a communal network over which she has no control, further emphasising the exclusive properties of a practice which derives its imagery from metaphors of shared authorship. Evadne

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. by Richard Dutton, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), III, pp. 1-191.

may have modified her marriage vows to provide herself with a degree of political mobility, but the vigorous reassertion of shared bonds are far removed from an idealistic vision of participatory exchange.

The play ends with an infamous scene in which the King is tied to a bed before sex and repeatedly stabbed. The moment has attracted an amount of notable feminist criticism, although the use of a bond on stage has not always been linked to cultures of oath-taking.<sup>51</sup> However, in Beaumont and Fletcher's source, the story 'Didaco and Violenta' from William Painter's volume *The Palace of Pleasure*, the act is a direct consequence of the perversion of amatory bonds, particularly when the wronged female Violenta cuts out the 'abhominable and perjured tongue' which made a 'breache' into her 'virginitie'. 52 The image of the King tied to his bed is a visual metaphor for the punishment that can be expected when amatory vows, and the civic order which they underpin, are disrupted by those in positions of authority; through tying the tyrant in a cord with connotations of an abstract bond, a politicised form of rebellion is imagined which is fundamentally conservative, in that the primacy of swearing as a reliable social discourse is protected. However, Beaumont and Fletcher's modification of the source material reveals a slightly more complex strategy. For Violenta, the public murder of the bigamous Didaco is a chance for her to offer a different perspective of her sexual shame: 'for like an mine honestie is stayned and published abrode, even so will I the revenge to be manifeste, craving that his bodie may be exponed to the viewe of all men'. 53 The image of the mutilated 'bodie' as a legible text is of evident dramatic interest to Beaumont and Fletcher.

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<sup>53</sup> Painter, p. 236.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> One exception is Sid Ray, who points out that Evadne 'literalizes the supposed reciprocal bond, or covenant, between King and subject' by tying him up. Ray, p. 101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> William Painter, 'Didaco and Violenta', in *The Palace of Pleasure*, ed. by Joseph Jacobs, 3 vols (London: Ballatyne Press, 1913), I, pp. 218-239 (p. 236).

However, the decision to use it to reinforce the veracity of amatory swearing, rather than as an expression of female protest, draws attention to the futility of the type of requital imagined by Violenta. Although her act of murder is an attempt to provide the public with a reason for her action, no such course is possible for Evadne; rather, it is Melantius's threat of turning her into an inscribed corpse which compels her to assassinate the King.

As a structural end-point defined by death, the conclusion of *The Maid's* Tragedy implies that the impediment to the perpetuation of a dynasty results in tragedy. Not only is the King murdered, but Evadne kills herself and Melantius appears to embark on a project of self-starvation. As marriage is a civic bond, the disruption of its sacred language has fractured the society of Rhodes. The image of a King trussed up and stabbed is indicative of the consequences that result from a wilfully impeded vow including the generic debasement of a rarefied discourse to one characterised by innuendo and bawdy; language and structure work in cohesion to substitute a generative form for an alternative one that is defined by death. Tellingly, no character is in a fit state to sire a child by the end of the play; either their bodies are stabbed in an awful perversion of copulative sex, or shrink away to nothing. As one of the official productions of the Palatine wedding, the play appears to offer a sober corrective, even a warning, to the young Elector. Marriage is not only a private amatory union, but a useful way of organising the polity. If the vows made at the altar are not honoured, then he could be liable to compromise his own political authority. No-one would envision the gruesome fate of the King as a real possibility; rather, it appears to offer a voyeuristic alternative to the more stylised depictions of erotic union in the other masques which were performed. However, it certainly establishes its own miniature telos between matrimonial vowing and the

production of a healthy state. If one is corrupted, then the security of the other is liable to be jeopardised.

## The Broken Heart

The name of the author is not advertised on the frontispiece of the 1633 text of *The Broken Heart*. 54 Rather, the reader is offered a cryptic anagram FIDE HONOR, which, with a little patience, can be rearranged to reveal the phrase IOHN FORDE. The occlusion of authorial identity in this manner is a statement of trust, as it implies that Ford's 'honour' is prioritised over a desire for public fame. In contrast to his theatrical rivals, there is no distinction between his reputation and his inner conduct; both are inherent in each other. However, the phrase may be slightly more complex than it appears. The well-known dictionary Dictionarium linguae Latinae et Anglicanae translates the word 'fides' as following: 'Faith and troth, beliefe, trust, credit, promise [...] stablenes and truth in promises'. 55 If the anagram is translated as 'honour [is achieved] by [my fidelity]', as by T.J.B. Spencer, then Ford appears to be offering his statement as a promise of intent, in which his public reputation will be achieved through a deep commitment to the creation of socially responsible art. Yet the riddling form in which this assertion is made, involving rhetorical ingenuity, is the opposite of 'stableness and truth', particularly in terms of language. Ford appears to conflate the expression of fidelity with textual evasion or slippage, even as he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> John Ford, *The Broken Heart*, ed. by T.J.B. Spencer (Manchester: Revels, 1980); for the quarto edition see John Ford, *The Broken Heart* (London: Hugh Beeston, 1633), frontispiece.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Thomas Thomas, *Dictionarium linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (London: Richard Boyle, 1587), sig.Z7r-v. For further detail about the use and proliferation of Latin dictionaries in the period, see John S. Pendergast, *Religion, Allegory and Literacy in Early Modern England, 1560-1640: The Control of the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 92-94.

attempts to pledge his 'troth' to the reader; perhaps there is a subtle joke in which he promises to honour his reputation as a writer of technical intricacy. This is a provocative framework with which to initiate the reading process of *The Broken Heart*, as many of the characters also find that their attempts at pledging are impeded by the heightened rhetoric which is used to communicate their inner commitments. For a couple such as Orgilus and Penthea, whose mutual pledge has been revoked before a lawful *praesenti* can occur, the desire to engage in a non-contractual form of amatory courtship results in a type of discourse not unlike Ford's anagram, in which 'fide' or 'troth' is frustratingly hard to articulate.

Glen H. Blayney is one of the earliest critics to draw attention to the relationship between the severing of matrimonial vows and Ford's use of tragic form. His assertion that the play depends for its 'structure' on 'the motives of betrothal and of marital enforcement in violation of a pre-contract of betrothal' argues that tragedy is produced when the conditions of comic regeneration, focussing on the bonds of marriage, are prematurely severed. <sup>56</sup> Blayney's insight is certainly commensurate with how Ford's earliest audiences appear to have responded to the play. When the former child actor Thomas Jordan pursued a literary career in the Restoration, his nostalgic ballad 'The Broken Contract' warns that 'broken vows make broken hearts', and in the final stanza states that 'For you may well discern by this, / A Contract broke, like murther is'. <sup>57</sup> As the ballad is a re-telling of *The Broken Heart*, we can see that Jordan retrospectively characterises the play as a narrative in which a broken spousal is the direct causal link between the tragic 'murther' of the central protagonists; indeed, it appears to be the play's defining generic feature.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Glen H. Blayney, 'Convention, Plot and Structure in *The Broken Heart*', *Modern Philology*, 56 (1958), 1-19 (p. 1).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Thomas Jordan, *A royal arbour of loyal poesie* (London: R. Wood, 1664), pp. 57, 59 (sig. DD4r-EE2r).

Although this may in fact reveal insights into the reception of *The Broken Heart* in the Restoration, Jordan's career as a child actor was primarily with the Queen's Men at the Red Bull, which was a rival playing company to the King's Men, who the quarto advertises as first performing the play. However, according to Andrew Gurr the impresario Christopher Beeston initiated a business model by 'opening the Cockpit and installing his Red Bull company in it', alongside his successful poaching of Ford.<sup>58</sup> It therefore may be possible that Jordan acted in the play, or had firsthand knowledge of its staging as well as its initial creative aims in the rehearsal room. From the earliest performances through to several decades of rumination, it appears that Jordan defined Ford's play by its innovative narrative logic which explored the tragic spaces opened up by a severed matrimonial pact.

Such a concept implies a teleological connection between conventional marriage and structural progress. Orgilus, whose contract to Penthea has been severed by her young brother Ithocles, expresses this in vegetative and fertile terms: 'A freedom of converse, an interchange / Of holy and chaste love, so fixed our souls / In a firm growth of union, that no time / Can eat into the pledge' (I.i.29-32). The ideal state of matrimony is akin to the growth of a plant, which strengthens slowly over time. The image is prefigured by the 'interchange' of 'converse', implying that the expected future is initiated or even produced by forms of reciprocal speech. It is likely that early modern audiences would have interpreted this phrase as referring to the marriage vow in the *Book of Common Prayer*, as the moment of pledging was followed by the recitation of 'Psalm 128', in which the priest would utter the memorable phrase 'Thy wife shalbee as the fruitful vine, upon the walles of thy

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Andrew Gurr, 'Singing Through the Chatter: Ford and Contemporary Theatrical Fashion', in *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. by Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 81-96 (p. 83).

house'.<sup>59</sup> Orgilus is evidently aware of the reciprocal ideal of publicly vowed love, as his depiction of the growth image is more mutual and co-dependent than the feminised 'vine' in scripture. As the reference to a verbal 'interchange' is followed quickly by an image of germination, Ford implies that Orgilus is evoking in miniature the rhetorical process of matrimonial bonding as understood by most theatre-goers. His melancholy reference to the 'sweets our vows expected' (I.i.33) is thus a perception of amatory swearing that is not only conventional but implicitly temporal, as it looks forward to or anticipates the fulfilment of an orderly and natural growth.

However, the image from 'Psalm 128' is slightly more contested than it first appears. According to Orgilus, their plant-like love is subject to the malice of antagonistic parties, who seek to 'eat' into the shoot and replace it with a 'poisonous stalk / Of aconite' (I.i.36-37). Although the image is endorsed by scripture, it is too vulnerable to act as a safe guarantee that the love between two individuals will be protected. Ford's creation of a duplicate 'stalk' which engrafts itself onto the 'vine' is a fairly recognisable rhetorical strategy used by early modern commentators on marriage. In a wedding sermon, for instance, Thomas Gataker argues that 'Man and Wife are as the stocke and sience, the one ingraffed into the other, and so fastned together, that they cannot againe be sundred'. <sup>60</sup> As a couple joined in a binding union, the image of the two being 'ingraffed' is part of a wider generative process which results in the birth of children, or 'branches shooting out of one stem'. <sup>61</sup> However, the language is evocative of artificial technique rather than a natural or innate potential; the OED defines the word 'engraft' as 'to incorporate (a thing) into

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 67. The psalm also mentions the phrase 'walk in his wayes', which further evokes the idea of a process or a forward movement in relation to the future after marriage.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Thomas Gataker, *The good wife Gods gift and, a wife indeed* (London: John Haviland, 1623), p. 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Gataker, p. 5.

a previously existing system or unity', suggesting a process of bonding which is shaped by craft and skill. 62 The original source for this image in 'Psalm 128' is reworked or modified by an allusion to Romans, in which the speaker announces to the imagined crowd that 'they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be graffed in: for God is able to graff them in again' (Rom.11.23). 63 The process of engrafting is here related to the troubling concept of 'unbelief', in which the doubt of the individual can be dissipated through a bonding process with a stronger entity.

Gataker's conception of marital growth is therefore influenced not only by the prominent use of the 'vine' image in the marriage ceremony, but also a model in which an inherent scepticism is expunged by a process of studied cultivation. Ford's use of fertile imagery to communicate Orgilus' pain at his severed contract is part of a much more complex exploration of the accepted telos of marriage defined by organic growth. Often, the future of marriage can be compromised by the inclusion of artificial properties which are similar to what is expected, yet different enough to invert the supposed binding qualities which render the process indissoluble.

Once it has been broken, Orgilus imagines his contract to operate as a replica obligation which is both parasitic and highly fashioned. This concept is heightened when it is by juxtaposed with a mutual spousal between Orgilus's sister Euphrania and Prophilius, the kinsman and friend of his rival Ithocles. In order to recompense himself for what is perceived to be an irrecoverable loss, Orgilus forces his sister to swear an oath that she will not contract herself to anyone who does not have his approval; he polices his injunction with the adoption of a disguise, in which he is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> "engraft, v. 2a.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> The King James Bible, Romans, 11.23. Interestingly the succeeding chapter 24 refers to engrafting in relation to an 'olive tree', further emphasising the connection with the *Book of Common Prayer*. For further information about psalm translation in the period, see Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

'metamorphised' (I.iii.33) and able to spy on the couple's betrothal rites. The audience may feel sympathy for Orgilus at this stage, as the scene he is forced to witness is one which he himself has been cruelly denied. However, the language of theatricality and dissemblance, coupled with the false identity, suggests that his response to it is, to an extent, unreal, or couched in performance. The two young lovers enact a hand-fasting which is defined by its reciprocity: 'On thy fair hand / I seal the like' (I.iii.89-90). They refuse to acknowledge a condition of obligation which requires that they be 'barred of mutual speech' (I.iii.151) and imagine that Hymen will smile 'on the growth of our desires' (I.iii.173). The reference to shared verbal discussion and images of growth is a subtle recollection of the rhetoric used by Orgilus to characterise his idea of the future enabled by amatory swearing. However, whereas Euphrania and Prophilius act it out for real, in a ceremony which would be regarded as the induction of a binding futurio contract, Orgilus is reduced to the utterance of imagery in which his own spousal is locked in empty recollection. The point is emphasised by Ford when Prophilius states 'Should I repeat old vows, or study new' he 'should but repeat a lesson / Oft conned without a prompter' (I.iii.53-57). The self-reflexive allusion to the book-holder in a theatre company establishes a gap between the shared ritual actions which are regarded as truly binding and those which are repeated and therefore artificial.<sup>64</sup> This not only heightens the affective nature of the pledging between Euphrania and Prophilius, but places Orgilus perilously close to his own image of a grafted parasite, who attempts to substitute a healthy growing union for something which is similar but false and damaging.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> The word 'prompter' is defined by the OED as 'A person in a theatre placed in a position next to the stage but out of sight of the audience, in order to be able to prompt the actors'; the disguise worn by Orgilus heightens the theatrical qualities of this word, particularly in the self-reflexive context of a performance on stage. "Prompter, v. 2a.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

The complex set of ideas, in which fertile images are redolent of genuine bonds and engrafted replicas are their unhealthy substitutes, associates the continued adherence to nullified contracts with artifice and dissemblance; in the place of a sacred act is a performance comprising of ritual movement which is not regarded as truly binding. When Orgilus and Penthea meet, their encounter is depicted as the simulation of a sacred rite, rather than a true spousal. Like Euphrania and Prophilius, they place their hands on each other and kiss them: 'Lend your hand. / With both of mine I clasp it thus. Thus kiss it' (II.iii.64-65); after the rite is completed, Penthea states that 'We may stand up' (II.iii.67). However, the miniature is ceremony is complicated by its structural position after Euphrania's spousal and its own odd status as a re-enactment of their earlier off-stage contract. The wider temporal logic associated with natural growth is therefore distorted through its placement in a more fluid narrative framework, in which the action is overshadowed by both an earlier, more binding yet dissolved version of the rite, and an uncomplicated spousal by two young lovers. Kathleen McLuskie defines Fordean structure as a model in which 'action is precisely a lack of action.'65 The spousal between Orgilus and Penthea would indeed suggest that a movement towards a commitment that is binding, and recognised as such by religious and lawful institutions, is endlessly deferred, rendering their pledge unattainable. In place of a projected futurity of orderly growth is an inert structure in which the past is repeated without hope of completion or consummation; Orgilus leaves Sparta 'to lose the memory of something / Her presence makes to live in me afresh'(I.i.81-82), figuring his memory of Penthea almost like a corpse who is endlessly revived. The inert temporal space habited by the two lovers is acknowledged by Ithocles, who renders himself culpable for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Kathleen McLuskie, "Language and Matter with a Fit of Mirth": Dramatic Construction in the Plays of John Ford', in *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. by Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 97-127 (p. 104).

breaking their contract in his youth: 'Now, uncle, now. This "now" is now too late' (IV.i.10). The only action that is imagined to be possible when there is no hope of an actual compact is the repetition of a spousal that is forever lost. Not only is this associated with artifice each time is it re-enacted, but also the disruption of time, which impedes the progress of amatory union through a circuitous staging of the past.

Phoebe S. Spinrad makes the interesting point that Penthea's 'obstructionism' is to a large degree responsible for prolonging her own status as a martyr-wife: 'assuming that Spartan law can grant the same annulment that the Venetian judges grant Celia in Volpone, Penthea may even be reunited with Orgilus'. 66 Her insistence on recognising the legality of her oath to Bassanes, the rich older husband chosen by her brother, is certainly a decision which compromises the comic telos on which marriage is based. When she meets Orgilus, their language repeatedly uses images of counterfeits and artistic representations, as if to emphasise the simulated nature of their ambiguous status as mutually plighted lovers. Orgilus asserts that 'No horror should deface that precious figure / Sealed with the lively stamp of equal souls' (II.iii.40-41) and makes reference to the 'intercourse of trothcontracted loves' (II.iii.39); in the place of a verbal exchange is a 'lively stamp' bearing the pictorial representation of the lovers, substituting their spiritual or conceptual bond for a public sign which is suggestive of a contract, but not truly binding in itself. The sense of dislocation is further emphasised when Penthea acknowledges the endurance of her emotional commitment to Orgilus:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Phoebe S. Spinrad, 'Ceremonies of Compliment: The Symbolic Marriage in Ford's *The Broken Heart*', *Philological Quarterly*, 65 (1986), 23-37 (p. 27).

Yet I profess, By all the laws of ceremonious wedlock, I have not given admittance to one thought Of female change, since cruelty enforced Divorce betwixt my body and my heart.

II.iii.53-57

The sacred entity that Penthea chooses to swear by is the institution of matrimony itself, situating it as the most profound concept within her own personal discourse. However, this is rendered ironic by two facts: the fractured nature of her own marriage, whose existence renders her a 'spotted whore' (III.ii.70), and the impossibility of engaging in a form of wedlock which she perceives to be truly valid. For Penthea, almost by default, marriage has been reduced to a well-crafted object which she can insert in the sacred space of the vow; like Orgulus, whose images of amatory growth are rendered frustratingly real by Euphrania and Prophilius, the heightened articulation of marriage bonds is enabled by or even responsive to the odd status of existing within a fractured *futurio*. When protestations of love cannot bind in a performative or technical sense, then articulations of marriage are consciously displaced and artificial, taking the form of stamps on paper oaths or rarefied sacred entities, but never wholly synonymous with the circumstances of the speaker.

When a contract is prematurely disrupted, then, either through familial interference or death, it is replaced by a ritual enactment which is not binding, and is therefore inherently mimetic. As such, the new mode of interaction is subject to the same generic pressures which are attendant upon all forms of theatrical display. The move toward tragedy, which the child actor Thomas Jordan interpreted as a direct result of the broken contract, is in some sense a self-willed response to what is perceived to be an injury. When Penthea is articulating her loss, the use of meta-

theatrical imagery implies that she is shaping or producing the tragic turn in the form of the play, rather than reacting to it:

On the stage
Of my mortality, my youth hath acted
Some scenes of vanity, drawn out at length
By varied pleasures, sweetened in the mixture,
But tragical in issue.

III.v.15-19

Penthea's entire life is described as a 'stage' upon which her life is acted, presumably for the spectatorship of a public audience. Ford's choice to use the synonym 'mortality' to denote her existence is a subtle hint that Penthea's attitude, with regard to her own future and her possibility for action, is influenced by the generic tenets of theatrical tragedy. The 'scenes' are 'tragical in issue' because they perform a marriage which is not regarded as binding, at least not from an internal perspective, and similarly reduce her 'real' spousal to a simulation; the word 'issue' implies that it is a structural substitute for a child. Orgilus shares this language when he states to Ithocles 'I am what you will shape me' (III.v.94), drawing attention to the lack of control he has over his own spousal whilst subtly justifying revenge as the inevitable product of the severed contract. For the two lovers, it is not enough to state that a tragic plot is opened up by the disruption of a structure which, to quote Anne Barton, 'possesses obvious affiliates with that of comedy'; rather, it is a conscious response to a situation which is regarded as unjust and irredeemable.<sup>67</sup>

Ford takes this idea to the extreme in a conclusion which is deeply striking.

After Ithocles declares his love to the heir presumptive Calantha, she ambiguously

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Anne Barton, 'Oxymoron and the Structure of Ford's *The Broken Heart*', in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 261-281 (p. 263).

initiates a nuptial contract by throwing him a ring. Not only does he take up the 'little spark' (IV.i.23), but he does so on his knees, evoking once again a spousal rite in miniature (IV.i.32). The skill with which Orgilus and Penthea are able to reshape the genre of the play once their *futurio* has been broken is perhaps influenced by the ritual form of the spousal, which, as noted earlier, has its own gestural patterns; from this perspective, their attitude is perfectly commensurate with a culture that does not establish a clear distinction between the performance of binding language and the inner pledge which it facilitates. When faced with a second 'real' marriage, only this time by his enemy rather than his guiltless sister, Orgilus initiates a revenge structure which results in the murder of Ithocles in a trap chair. As such, his death enacts a form of grotesque similitude which parodies the reciprocity of amatory vowing; just as Orgilus was prevented from marrying, so too is Ithocles. This coincides with the ascension of Calantha, who loses both a father and a husband. Her first act as queen is to perform a rite which, according to Lisa Hopkins, 'becomes inextricably confused with that of her coronation, her own funeral, and the funeral of Ithocles' when she appears to marry the corpse of her lover:

> Bear witness all, I put my mother's wedding ring upon His finger. 'Twas my father's last bequest. Thus I new-marry him whose wife I am.

V.iii.63-66

I broadly agree with Hopkins' assertion that 'the only shaping patterns which can be imposed on human behaviour are the petrifying ceremonies of death'. However, Ford's attitude to the tonal veracity and ethical import of these impositions is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Lisa Hopkins, *John Ford's Political Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 164.

ambiguous; he certainly does not regard them as a means of providing order in place of a shattered social landscape. Calantha's use of her 'mother's wedding ring' not only draws attention to her own royal status, but feminises the corpse, as if to recall Penthea's self-willed construction of herself as a 'tragical' agent of death. Similarly, the odd temporal referents, in which Calantha re-marries a rotten body, evoke the disrupted linearity which characterised the repeated spousal rite between Orgilus and Penthea. This is not to argue that such features are an inevitable aspect of disrupted contracts on the early modern stage. Rather, their self-conscious theatricality suggests that they are liable to be re-shaped, as a performance with their own formal influences and resources, when the established future is in some way impeded. When a death is substituted for marriage, as is the case for Calantha, the ceremony takes the form of a generic hybrid which inserts a dead body into a comic structure defined by 'indissoluble bonding' and the 'promise of renewed life'. 69 As Calantha puts the ring on the finger, there is a definite sense that she is responsible for shaping its unusual mixture of tonal effects as a performing agent on stage.

Shanti Padhi was one of the earliest critics to observe that Middleton's play *The Lady's Tragedy* is a source for the dead wedding.<sup>70</sup> The scene in which the Tyrant digs up a corpse and engages in subversive amatory flirtation is certainly characterised in marital terms; when the Lady's body is first exhumed, he cries 'O, she's destroyed, married to death and silence, / Which nothing can divorce' (IV.ii.27-28), figuring the personified death as a love rival who has locked his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Lisa Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), p. 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Shanti Padhi, 'The Broken Heart and The Second Maiden's Tragedy: Ford's Main Source for the Corpse's Coronation', Notes and Queries, 229 (1984), 236-237 (p. 236).

beloved in an indissoluble union.<sup>71</sup> The image of Calantha in white by an altar is also present in *The Lady's Tragedy*, as she appears to Govianus after death 'standing before him all in white' in the location of a 'Cathedral' (IV.iii.40). <sup>72</sup> Evidently the eroticised image of a resurrected corpse in a religious setting is influential on Ford's depiction of an attempt to contrast the bond of wedlock with death. However, there is another theatrical influence, slightly over-looked in current criticism, which focalises some of the more meta-theatrical aspects of the scene. In Philip Massinger's *The* Duke of Milan, first performed in 1622, Sforza has an obsessive love for his wife Marcelia, and kills her when he mistakenly believes she has slept with Francisco.<sup>73</sup> To appease his grief, the court pretends that the corpse is still alive, and employs Francisco in disguise to make 'sencelesse trunke' appear as 'it had got a second being' (V.ii.142-143). Massinger's rendering of the scene is deeply aware of the generic ambiguity that accompanies the seeming resurrection of a corpse, particularly when Sforza demands 'O you powers, / That can convey our thoughts to one another / Without the aid of eies, or eares, assist me, / Let me behold her in a pleasing dreame, / Thus on my knees before her' (V.ii.105-109); the posture of courtship, even spousal contracting, is imagined to exist in a 'dreame' which is transplanted inside the head of the body without recourse to reciprocal exchange. These dramatic forbears provide a framework within which Ford expected his audience to receive and interpret the recognisable moment on stage when a corpse is placed in an amatory bond. For Calantha, the dead wedding is itself an aspect of contemporary tragic form, alongside the ceremonial properties of a conventional rite;

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Thomas Middleton, *The Lady's Tragedy*, ed. by Julia Briggs, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 833-906.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Stage direction, p. 890.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Philip Massinger, *The Duke of Milan*, in *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, ed. by Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), I, pp. 199-310.

not only is she enacting a familiar scene, but the imagery of dissemblance suggests that she is, to some extent, informed by the self-reflexive focus on art and 'composition' (V.iii.7) which she herself is enacting.

It is worth stressing that for all the characters who are asked to 'bear witness', Calantha's marriage is obviously not licit; rather, it exposes the custom as a desired terminus point which is frustratingly unable to be rendered binding. This is the result of a wider structural chain in which the severed contract between Orgilus and Penthea is applied to Ithocles and Calantha, even though the queen is herself not culpable. As such, the 'growth' imagined by Orgilus to be a standard expectation of amatory swearing in the earliest moments of the play has been replaced by a temporality defined by intervention, which is self-willed and therefore close to a form of theatricality. William D. Dyer argues that 'Characters often use words as substitutes for action rather than as a means for initiating human interaction'. <sup>74</sup> We can certainly see this in relation to the dramatisation of matrimonial contracts, particularly in the inert pledging of Orgilus and Penthea, which 'substitutes' for genuine performative oaths. However, the types of 'interaction' which have been promised – 'the sweets our vows expected' (I.i.33) to quote Orgilus again – are largely impeded beyond the character's control. It is their response to this frustration which generates a shift in tenor to the tragic form, rather than the depiction of an inevitable course of events. As such, Ford leaves the audience with a sense that comic marriage and tragic death are reworked or shaped by the characters when expected teleologies do not occur, either to enact revenge or provide them with a degree of recompense. There may be a subtle hint that the official telos, defined by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> William D. Dyer, 'Holding / Withholding Environments: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Ford's *The Broken Heart'*, *English Literary Renaissance*, 21 (1991), 401-424 (p. 402).

growth and endorsed by scripture, is similarly subject to the conditions of performance in order to rend itself binding.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

## THE FEMALE SWEARER

The 'False' Female in Early Modern Culture

In John Weever's 'Epigram 19', a young woman named Scylla is castigated for the slippery language which characterises her oaths:

By Lord nor Ladie *Scylla* will not sweare, By God nor goddesse nor so great a thing, Yet she commits a greater fault I feare, In swearing alwaies by her faire gold ring.<sup>1</sup>

sig. G2r

Scylla rejects the usual sacred entities in favour of the 'faire gold ring' of marriage; just as the placing of the ring on the fourth finger ties the husband and wife together in wedlock, so too does it endow her pledge with an unusual degree of prestige.

However, this neat assertion is complicated by a rather vulgar pun on the word 'ring' as a vagina, which introduces a reading quite at variance with its more rarefied connotation.<sup>2</sup> Swearing on such an object is liable to commit a technical penalty or 'fault', as the vow is compromised by an unfortunate slip into a semantic meaning which promotes or even facilitates the type of female promiscuity which it is

<sup>1</sup> John Weever, *Epigrammes in the oldest cut* (London: Thomas Bushell, 1599).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In Middleton's play *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, the Parson makes a lewd pun the ring as an orifice at the moment of wedlock: 'Place that ring upon her finger; / This the finger plays the part, / Whose master-vein shoots from the heart' (III.i.14-16). Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, ed. by Linda Woodbridge, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 907-958.

designed to prevent. Not only is the sacredness of the custom debased through the introduction of bawdy innuendo, but its ability to bind is rendered suspect by the picking apart of the internal coherence of the oath. Weever's speaker does not specify whether Scylla is aware of her pun, although the assertion that she 'will not sweare' in a conventional formula implies that her image of the 'faire gold ring' is a personal coinage; as such, she could even be playing a joke on the unsuspecting male recipient, promising him of her fidelity whilst alluding, in the very same word, to a degree of sexual availability that is not apparent on first hearing.

Weever's epigram engages with one of the most pertinent fears in Early Modern culture: the length to which a pledge of sexual commitment can be believed. One of the main devices used to ascertain the fidelity of a female partner was the practise of swearing, in which a higher authority was invoked to both demonstrate the truth of what was being asserted, and warn of the threat of punishment should it be broken or falsified.<sup>3</sup> The precedent for oaths of this nature is found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which argues that the institution of marriage is designed to ensure that man and wife 'might live chastlie in matrimonie, and kepe themselves undefiled membres of Christes bodye'.<sup>4</sup> When a female vows her fidelity or chasteness to her husband, she is reinforcing the pledge made before the altar to 'avoide fornicacion', hence the allusion to the wedding ring in Weever's epigram. However, the suspicion regarding whether such assertions can be trusted is one of the central features of amatory or sexual swearing in early modern culture. Scylla's pun at the very moment an oath is verified suggests that the practice is ill-equipped to guarantee the fidelity of the female, possibly due to its deep reliance on rhetorical display; yet, the same

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For a discussion of female swearing, see Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 50-51.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. by Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 64.

dependency also implies that it is suspect to fakery or outright dissemblance, which can be used to deceive the recipient. This is a deeply troubling fear, as it runs the risk of exposing the vow as a device which is over-reliant on a heightened respect for its sacral properties in order to function successfully. Such anxieties are often assuaged by a discourse which draws on the imagery of authoritative textual structures, such as graven language on statutes for instance, to stress the orthodox framework within swearing is placed. However, much like Scylla, the female swearers on the early modern stage often exhibit an unusual degree of resourcefulness when faced with the threat of punishment for sexual looseness. This chapter will explore the structural patterns which emerge when a central protagonist such as Alice in *The Vow Breaker* or the Duchess in *More Dissemblers Besides Women* encroach upon an earlier vow of sexual fidelity. Although their actions may be clamped down, the resourcefulness on display is a potent challenge to the cultivated swearing strategies which attempt to limit the sexual agency of the female.

The depiction of amatory swearing in literary culture often reveals a heightened degree of awareness over the production of an artificial feminine ideal which bears minimal awareness to the real world. This anxiety is manifested in the satirical representation of the woman as a performing object, or an entity associated with the stage, who utters the oath in acquiescence with social decorum. In 'Satyre VIII: Inamorato Curio', John Marston's speaker mocks the tendency in young men to 'Sweare, protest, vow pesant servitude / Unto a painted puppet' (97-98). The woman is caricatured as a simulacrum who offers a representation of femininity

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> John Marston, 'Satyre VIII: Inamorato Curio', in *The Poems of John Marston*, ed. by Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), pp. 150-157. Interestingly, the OED suggests that the word 'puppet' could be defined almost exclusively in relation to femininity: 'A person, esp. a woman, whose (esp. gaudy) dress or manner is thought to suggest a lack of substance or individuality'. "puppet, n. 3a.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

which is not wholly real, and guided by motions and responses which are not her own; indeed, it is unclear from the poem whether the female is even capable of committing to a reciprocal vow. Scott Cutler Shershow argues that the object of the puppet 'resembles the cultural image of Woman as, similarly, both natural and artificial, associated with the body in its binary opposition to the spirit and yet also with dress, cosmetics, and so-called dissimulation'. The use of the word 'painted' not only refers to the association between suspect female sexuality and make-up, but stresses the operability of a figure that is called upon to enact a pledge. As such, Marston's apparent misogyny is complicated by its placement in a verbal framework in which the female is a passive receptacle to the attentions of a self-absorbed young man, who is not alert to emotional reciprocity and does not consider the possibility of a mutual pact. Marston presents a more complex picture of amatory swearing, where gender relations are contorted by a model in which the female is not required to consider the veracity of the process, but merely consent like a 'puppet'. It is not hard to see why a figure such as Scylla is able to introduce a degree of lexical subtlety into her vows when the expectation of a cogent response is so low.

Ben Jonson explores some of these concerns in his depiction of the female as both an object to swear by, and an agent to swear to. In *Cynthia's Revels*, the fey Amorphous schools Asotus in the most effective way to court a young female:

Then if she be *guardant*, here [*Demonstrating*]; you are to come on and, laterally disposing yourself, swear "by her blushing and well-coloured cheek, the bright dye of her hair, her ivory teeth", or some such white and innocent oath to induce you.

III.v.61-65

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Scott Cutler Shershow, *Puppets and Popular Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 72.

The process of pledging is figured as a performance, in which a series of gestures can be memorised and deployed in order to seduce the acquiescent female. <sup>7</sup> The citational language of the vow, which Amorphous believes can be learnt like a script, is a parody of overly excessive displays of swearing, in which rhetorical ingenuity is understood to equate to depth of feeling. Not only is the vow sworn to the woman, but her constituent parts make up its sacral properties; in the place of the accepted divine entity is her 'well-coloured cheek', the 'bright dye of her hair' and her 'ivory teeth'. This is designed to satirise the self-enclosed nature of pledging, which assembles the female as an unreal figure almost like a poetic blazon, even as that figure is called upon the receive the vow. However, the objects depicted by Jonson are not only evocative of artificiality in the manner of Marston's 'painted puppet' but also draw attention to the boy actor underneath the costume; the female love object is a highly crafted entity who is not even a real woman in the biological sense of the term. Dympna Callaghan argues that 'Visible and audible sexual difference, that is, femininity, on the early modern stage comprised a sub-species of masculinity'. 8 The meta-theatrical properties of swearing in Cynthia's Revels would suggest that, for Jonson, the process of amatory swearing by a male coterie is dependent on the structures and resources of dissemblance, which in turn is used to produce the supposed fickleness of the female as a corrective to the more stable structures of male oaths. As a *de facto* male, the boy actor playing the heavily made-up woman is a recipient of vowing strategy which constructs the female as a rhetorical trope on

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ben Jonson, *Cynthia's Revels, or the Fountains of Self-Love*, quarto version (1600), ed. by Eric Rasmussen and Matthew Steggle, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), I, pp. 429-547.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Race and Gender on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 51.

several levels; at no point in Jonson's cleverly satiric vignette is she acknowledged as a fully-fledged recipient.

A recent trend in Renaissance scholarship has focussed attention on the complex ontological questions provoked by a literary and cultural engagement with automata. Justin Kolb has defined an automaton as a 'complex, quasi-human artefact that performs humanity'; as such, the methodology is able to explore the relationship between an object or entity and the social and political forces which are understood to provide it with a degree of animation. <sup>9</sup> Traditional areas of interest have included the relationship between prime movers and inert or semi-inert matter, with an attendant focus on the efficacy of immaterial substances in relation to being. 10 However, it might be useful to regard the animating structures as equally conceptual or abstract in nature, taking areas other than physically constructed automata into account. A prime area of investigation would be language itself, which can often be used to open up or envision the semantic frameworks within which meaning, and by extension movement or cognition, and the capacity for action, can be thought to occur. When Timon has exiled himself to the wilderness in Shakespeare and Middleton's *Timon of Athens*, he is approached by a group of prostitutes asking him for gold. 11 His response reveals a misogynistic view of feminine motion in the social sphere which elucidates the properties that are imagined to mobilise obligatory relationships:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Justin Kolb, "To me comes a creature": Recognition, Agency and the Properties of Character in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*', in *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Wendy Beth Hyman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 45-60 (p. 47).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For further discussion of scholarship which engages with the figure of the automaton, see Wendy Beth Hyman, ed. *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Kevin LaGrandeur, *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature: Artificial Slaves* (London: Routledge, 2013); Kara Reilly, *Automata and Mimesis on the Stage of Theatre History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp. 16-49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, ed. by Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton (London: Arden 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008).

Hold up, you sluts, Your aprons mountant; you are not oathable, Although I know you'll swear – terribly swear Into strong shudders and to heavenly agues – Th'immortal gods that hear you. Spare your oaths, I'll trust to your conditions.

IV.iii.134-139

The word 'oathable' is not only unique in the Shakespeare or Middleton canon, but in the English Language; the OED records it as occurring in this sole place until the nineteenth century. 12 As a highly rare coinage which connects the noun to a familiar suffix, we are obviously dealing with a word which carries an unusual amount of conceptual weight. The suffix '-able' is defined as 'Forming adjectives denoting the capacity for or capacity of being subjected to or (in some compounds) performing the action denoted or implied by the first element of the compound'. 13 As such, the word 'oathable' appears to promote a view of social interaction in which the obligated self is primarily animated when placed within the binding structures of a vow; conversely, this form of discourse is able to work upon the subject to fashion them into an entity capable of being rendered trustworthy. For Timon, he can only comprehend of a reciprocal agreement with a woman when she exists outside of this schema, as her nature is too slippery to be worked upon in order to be rendered honourable; she is not 'oathable'. In a wider sense, Timon's conception of that which is trustworthy promotes a view of social interaction which is idealised, in that all men are able to be shaped by obligatory structures, which in turn allows them to exert a degree of influence on their social peers through that very operability. The irony of Timon's statement, which he possibly does not realise, is that his own self-

 <sup>12 &</sup>quot;oathable, adj. 1.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.
 13 "-able, suffix. 1.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

exile is caused by the selfishness of his largely male coterie of friends, rendering his own conception of civic relations to be unworkable in a practical sense.

Jonathan Sawday, an early exponent of automatism, argues that 'If human beings could be understood in terms of the rational operation of machines, then human behaviour itself might be less unpredictable, more open to analysis and, even, control'. <sup>14</sup> The decision to exempt women from the animating structure of the oath is deeply limiting, as it posits an idea of female identity as too mutable and deceptive to be worthy of trust. However, the freedom from obligation also generates a sense of unpredictability, in that the actions associated with feminine movement are imagined to be incapable of secure regulation. The insistence on repeated swearing is an attempt to promote an intensified degree of coercion, but it also attests to an anxiety over the potential of oaths to apply to a gendered identity which is not able to be animated or rendered operable by the reliable practice of swearing. For Timon, it is the potential for true inner pledges to be simulated for self-gain which generates the greatest sense of unease. In his acerbic view, the prostitutes do such a convincing job of swearing that the gods themselves are reduced to 'strong shudders'; not only are the sacred entities entitled by the vows they are called upon to witness, but they also manifest so much sexual energy that it threatens to intercede into the swearing process itself, thus situating the female swearer as a stronger force than traditional binding structures. Evidently the resourcefulness and success of this alternative model of 'oathability' is imagined to guarantee a degree of social and economic success. The logic which underpins the assessment of female chastity through vowing is itself responsible for the heightened paranoia which accompanies it;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Jonathan Sawday, "'Forms Such as Never Were in Nature'': the Renaissance Cyborg', in *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy*, ed. by Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert and Susan Wiseman (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 171-195 (p. 191).

perhaps there is a tacit acknowledgement that rhetorical intricacy and dissimulation is a more nuanced tool than its more prestigious opposite.

## The Vow Breaker

William Sampson only appears to have written a small body of work.

Alongside a set of funerary poems and a collaborative tragedy on the subject of Herod with Gervais Markham, he produced *The Vow Breaker*, the dramatisation of a broken spousal influenced by a real-life source. The incident of the Bateman murder, in which a young lady named Anne broke her vows whilst her partner was away at war to marry a rich older man, was the subject of a chapbook as well as a number of ballads; in this sense it is similar to other domestic tragedies, such as *Arden of Faversham* and *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, which focus on the economic circumstances of matrimonial contract negotiation, particularly amongst the lower gentry. Although *The Vow Breaker* is not a complex piece of art, it does shed light on the dramaturgical properties which influence the depiction of false amatory swearing, particularly in a play which is deeply influenced by a range of styles and generic modes. The fact that it is titled after a woman who breaks her pledge suggests that a 'vow breaker' is a recognisable character type with enough

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> William Sampson, *The Vow Breaker; or, the Faire Maid of Clifton* (London: John Norton 1636). <sup>16</sup> Peter Berek observes a new thematic development in Jacobean domestic tragedy, where '(unlike the plays of the 1590s), now money figures anxiety about downward mobility among the gentry, not upward mobility among the middling or lower sorts'; Anne's marriage to German is decidedly advantageous, suggesting this distinction is not quite so neat throughout the period ("Follow the Money": Sex, Murder, Print and Domestic Tragedy', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 21 (2008), 170-188 (p. 179)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the Nottinghamshire context of the play, see Julie Sanders, *The Cultural Geography of Early Modern Drama*, *1620-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 116.

currency to signify its generic and structural content to an audience. In line with convention, *The Vow Breaker* concludes with the mysterious disappearance and likely death of Anne. However, her repeated questioning of the strictures of oath-keeping offers a corrective, however muted, to an accepted ethical framework in which loose amatory behaviour is severely punished.

When Bateman and Anne are entering into a spousal agreement, he is unusually keen to stress the disastrous consequences of breaking a vow. This reinforces the thematic subject matter for a Nottinghamshire audience not exposed to the generic and formal innovations that characterised the Caroline theatrical scene in London. 18 However, it also introduces a rhetorical mode in which the punishment of vow-breaking is emphasised alongside the contract itself. When Bateman is pledging his love, he warns Anne not to return his oath, as 'The booke of fate, as now may be unclasp'd / And record what thou speak'st' (sig. B1v). In tandem with the utterance of a vow is a more supernatural textual mode which transcribes every word which is spoken, the assumption being that the language can be recalled at a later date to punish the swearer should the oath be broken. Bateman's conception of vowing is not defined by love or reciprocity; rather, it is attendant to the methods through which a contractual obligation can be held in place. This may be wise in an economic context defined by uncertainty, but it establishes a context in which female swearing is policed before it even occurs. Bateman's insistence may have been prompted by an odd phrase in Alice's previous speech, where she promises not to be seduced by 'dissembling beauties' (sig. B1v). The use of the noun to refer to a male seducer is a form of gender disturbance which absorbs the feminised aspects of false

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the thematic and dramaturgical features of the popular aspects of Caroline theatre, see Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, *1632-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 181-206.

swearing, whilst subtly re-deploying them to define male pledging strategies. If the 'booke of fate' is recording Anne's language, her slippery wordplay would imply that very complex range of meanings be an attempt, however subtle, to elide its surveillance.

When Anne proffers her hand in support of the spousal oath, there may be a textual crux which is unusually consonant with the thematic content of the vow being uttered:

Now by this kisse, nay I will second that, When I this hand bequeath to any one But my sweete *Bateman*; then may I ever From heaven and goodnes rest a cast-away, If e're I give this hand, to any one But my sweete *Bateman*.

sig. B1v

According to the logic of the syntax, Anne signals her assent twice, firstly by the symbolic bequeathing of her hand before the conditional clause, and secondly by the imagined giving of it after the promissory vow has been uttered. Although the line makes sense in terms of Anne's insistence of her inner commitment, it seems likely that one of these phrases was marked for deletion in either the foul papers or the prompt book copy. The phrase 'nay I will second that' explicitly establishes a superlative contrast between the 'kisse' and the hand, suggesting that the last two lines were regarded as supplementary, and possibly bathetic; indeed, the move from a kiss to a hand places the vow in a rhetorical frame which emphasises the import of what is being pledged in a more excessive manner. However, the text on the printed page has the interesting effect of capturing a form of polysemic indeterminacy at the

moment Anne's vow is sworn. When exactly does she proffer her hand? The gesture has a large degree of weight as a public signal of assent, so surely it would be crucial to mark the exact moment for the audience, particularly as the broken vow will be referred back to as a point of structural initiation. Perhaps the compositor's decision to leave in the double hand-fast is an oversight, or maybe it could be a just representation of Sampson's syntax. However, it is possible that the two instances were kept in because the precise moment at which a bond is made is too delicate and important to distort. The fluidity with which Anne offers her pledge is able to further reinforce not only the fear of female duplicity, but also the subtlety with which the omniscient 'book of fate' is able to be circumvented, at least in the medium of print.

It is possible that Alice's use of the phrase 'dissembling beauties' is responsive to a perceived feminisation not only of male vowing strategies but also of Bateman's insistence on recorded speech, which is often used to characterise the dialogue of chaste female vow-keepers in other domestic tragedies. In George Wilkins's play *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, which dramatises the Calverley murders alongside *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, the young female Clare warns Scarborrow not to be too hasty in swearing a vow: 'Advise before you sweare, let me remember you, / Men never give their faith, and promise mariage, / But heaven records their oth: If they prove true, / Heaven smiles for joy, if not it weepes for you' (sig. B1v).<sup>19</sup> The image of a divine amanuensis taking notes is a feature of Bateman's dialogue, but here it is applied to a young male who offers his faith too rashly; perhaps Clare is using it to assert a form of masculine authority over the fickle Scarborrow, although its use implies that the image is responsive to a degree of complex gender ambiguity which Bateman does not appear to grasp in his own

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> George Wilkins, *The miseries of inforst mariage* (London: George Vincent, 1607).

assertion. Later in Wilkins's text, when Scarborrow discovers that he has been precontracted to another woman by his guardian, he claims 'Here she remembers me I am a man, / Black tore with perjury' (sig. C2r), conflating his identity as a male with a new perjured state. If Sampson has been influenced by other contemporaneous plays which explore the domestic process of spousal contracting, then he has surely absorbed the multiplicity with which the image is applied, regardless of the gender of the speaker. Bateman's insistence that Anne's oaths are being recorded is not only indicative of his paranoia, therefore, but a partial view of the image which is not vast enough to encompass its applicability to him, both as a man and a male stage swearer in a domestic tragedy.

In early modern culture, the choice of a partner was determined by economic considerations as well as personal affection. This was particularly true for members of the lower gentry, who could reshape their social rank and provide themselves with more financial security through a shrewd or advantageous marriage. The opportunities for women to cultivate a degree of agency in this respect are notable, although they come with dangers; as David Attwell observes in relation to Alice of Arden, she is in 'a social double bind: her marriage ascribes to her an inferior status, but without her marriage she is without social identity'. <sup>20</sup> In order to operate as a visible member of the community, the women of domestic tragedy are faced with the task of finding the most comfortable form of inferiority available to them, which often equates to a wealthy partner. This is the logic behind Anne's decision to break her pre-contract with Bateman and marry the older merchant German, who 'brings wealth' and 'promotion' (sig. C3r) As part of her original spousal ceremony, Anne was given a 'peece of gold' which acted as a material reminder of the 'jugall knot'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> David Attwell, 'Property, Status and the Subject in a Middle Class Tragedy: *Arden of Faversham*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 21 (1991), 328-348 (p. 339).

which she had tied with Bateman; if the bond is broken, he says, then 'Let us be made strange spectacles to the world' (sig. B4r). Anne's justification for reneging on the contract is not only practical, but subtly responsive to the scare tactics used in Bateman's rhetoric:

German is old, indebted much to age, Yet like ould Aeson, gold can make him young, Gold like a second nature can elixate, Make the deformed faire, the faire seeme fowle.

sig. C3r

In place of the imagined shift from a contracted wife to a 'strange spectacle', gold is able to initiate more advantageous forms of transformation. As an entity which can 'make the deformed faire', the type of gold offered by German is far more useful in terms of social mobility than the more spiritual bond envisioned by Bateman; not only can it override the physical defects of age, but it is able to turn the binding language of a previous oath into a new, more pliable utterance. Anne's clever use of imagery once again exposes the coercive structures that define the custom of swearing as malleable rather than fixed and therefore beyond redress. The ingenuity of her logic is dependent on Bateman's earlier language to provide her with a precedent for a new spousal, whilst demonstrating that the rhetoric of warning is more than capable of being reshaped to accommodate more practical social obligations.

When Bateman returns from the Scottish war and learns of the nullified contract, he reacts with predictable horror; her words are like a 'deadly bullet from a Gun' (sig. D3v) in an image which vocalises the latent inversion of gendered roles

which is imagined to accompany the breaking of a vow. Anne offers a reasonable, albeit cold solution to his anger which takes a wider view of her experiences than the telos of amatory swearing: 'If you will be wise, and live one yeere a batchelour tis ten to one thats odds, I bury my husband, e're I weare out my wedding Ring' (sig. D3v). The sacral properties of the oath are simultaneously honoured through a form of deferment, and debased by placing the marriage within a broader economic context which encompasses the possibility of multiple binding ceremonies. Viviana Comensoli has located the conceptual heart of domestic tragic form in the loosening of marital bonds afforded by changing social structures: 'The tragedies' interest in the contemporary crisis of order coextends with their scrutiny of the early modern concept of civility as a collective obligation which promises to ensure social cohesion and continuity'. <sup>21</sup> Anne's prioritisation of her own interests at the expense of a shared contract is indicative of a move away from a deeper form of communality to one defined by self-assertion; as she tells her friend Ursula, 'foolish lovers vowes / Like breath on steele, as soone are of, as on' (sig. C3r) in yet another inversion of Bateman's rhetorical use of durable language. Unsurprisingly, Bateman's response is to summon the potent textual structures which are imagined to prohibit her self-agency, particularly when he states that 'thy perjuries shall be writ / With pens of Diamonds upon Leaves of steele / And kept as statutes are to show the world' (sig. D4r). The material entities which produce the text are a subtle modification of the gold imagery which was commensurate with a lasting inner bond; not only do they imply a transference to an equally durable form of punishment, but they also threaten to publish Anne's so-called crime to a social

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Viviana Comensoli, 'Household Business': Domestic Plays of Early Modern England (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 66. Comensoli's argument may have been influenced by Catherine Belsey's observation of the complications that ensue when 'the exchange of contracts in a market economy supplants old loyalties, old obligations, old hierarchies' (*The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 133).

audience or readership. As a noted vow-breaker, Anne would not be able to move with as much freedom as German's widow, a social figure who, as we shall see in the next section, is granted far more license to conduct their own amatory arrangements. Instead, the existence of a pre-contract grants Bateman a notable amount of power to frustrate her intentions. A small hint of the kind of censure that Anne can expect is present in the earlier betrothal scene, where he compares her vow of fidelity to a table:

Thou now art like a pollishd ivory Table
In purenes without; or staine or blemish.
If thou shouldst soile this whitenes with blacke deedes
Thinke what a monster thou wouldst make thy selfe.

sig. B4r

In her work exploring the 'metaphorical connection' between domestic objects and 'different kinds of authority', Catherine Richardson draws attention to the table as a symbolic altar, whose 'presence within the house is morally binding'. <sup>22</sup> Bateman's use of this particular item of furniture emphasises the sacred nature of the bond that has been undertaken by figuring Anne's interiority as the most solemn item in the space of the home. However, the references to 'whitenes', 'blacke' marks and a 'staine' recalls another meaning of the word, in which it is denotative of 'A small portable tablet for writing upon, esp. for notes or memoranda; a writing tablet'. <sup>23</sup> As Bateman constructs Anne as a domestic simulation of an altar, he simultaneously writes her identity into existence, or uses an image which draws attention to the shaping forces at work in his own rhetoric. Although he imagines that Anne's broken

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 27, 49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> "table, n. 2a.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

vow will reflexively make her into a monster, it is not hard to see that his own language has produced this as an alternative way of conceptualising her betrayal. The notion of authorial text being corrupted by a wilful woman is present in *Arden of Faversham*, a play which exerts a notable influence on Sampson's depiction of amatory vowing. When Alice is pledging her adulterous commitment to Mosley, she tears the leaves from the 'prayer book' she is holding and offers to replace them with his 'sweet phrases' and 'letters' (VIII, 115, 120). If the book is understood to be a copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, then the audience could be watching a spectacle in which the scriptural vows themselves are ripped apart, to be traded for the suspect language of adulterous courtship. Bateman's anxiety is justified to an extent when compared to the circulation of such incidents in popular culture; indeed, the relationship with Mosley occurs in tandem with a disregard for the language of authority. From this perspective, it is understandable that Bateman would wish to reinforce its authorial properties, even as the actions of Alice dramatise the ease with which such discourse can be disregarded.

In a striking turn, Bateman's suicide by hanging moves the play into a stock revenge tragedy, in which his ghost returns to claim his contracted wife. Before his death, Bateman enters 'ins shirt, a halter about his necke' (sig. E1v), recalling the stock pose of Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*; however, whereas the earlier revenger rejected self-slaughter in order to enact revenge, Bateman succumbs to the shame of being supplanted by a more prosperous male. As explored in Chapter One, Hieronimo's lamentations are not only moving, but facilitate a shift into a different conceptual space defined by classical notions of vengeance. However, for Sampson,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Anon., *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*, ed. by M.L. White (Manchester: Revels, 1973). The play appears to have exerted an influence on Sampson's depiction of oath taking; the line *'Bateman* shall surely finde / Me master of my words, when his prove winde' (sig.E1r) is an echo of Alice's assertion 'Oaths are words, and words is wind, / And wind is mutable' (I.436-437).

a sense of loss is circumvented when the Ghost returns to ensure that the obligations of the pre-contracted are honoured, even from beyond the grave. Bateman's understanding of what can be expected after the wedding is unusually sexualised in its import; not does he inform Anne that 'Alive or dead thy promise thou shall keepe, / I must, and will enjoy thee' (sig. D4r), but his last line envisions death as an erotic space in which he 'shall be wed / As firme unto my grave, as to her bed' (sig. E2v). Although consummation is a crucial part of the nuptial contract, the insistent focus on sexual release is slightly discordant with the more exalted forms of amatory vowing which are used to shape Anne's behaviour. The earlier reference to the bond as a 'jugall knot' (sig. B4r) may contain a faint sexual pun, as the word 'jugall' was also a bone; this would imply that Bateman's conception of the vow as a fulfilment of desire was present at the earliest stages of courtship, which was characterised, of course, by the invocation of textual warnings against loose behaviour. <sup>25</sup> Also, the use of the word 'enjoy' is not only misogynistic, denoting an intent to 'have one's will of (a woman)', but replete with implications of force. This is apparently confirmed when the Ghost abducts Anne in order to fulfil her matrimonial requirements: 'make speede away / Thy broken contract, now thou goest to pay' (sig. H2v). The use of such ambiguous and intricate language to characterise the moment of fulfilment cannot be said to operate in the service of the male-centric view promoted by Bateman. Rather, it encourages the reader to consider the vow as something more than an exalted union. Anne's horrific cry as she is dragged off the stage – 'Oh helpe, succour: helpe!' (sig. H3r) – is surely designed to question the forces which compel women to adhere to a set of obligations which are not only coercive, but often menacingly sexual in their import.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> "jugall, n. 2.". OED online. May 2014. Oxford University Press.

Before Anne's ambiguous exit, she warns her friends and family to 'let my words be written / Within your minds, as in a manuscript' (sig. H1r) Alongside the graven imagery of Bateman exists another conception of textual reproduction which is more mobile in nature, drawing on the circulation of written language amongst a community of readers. As noted earlier, Sampson's play is the dramatisation of a real-life story which was retold in various different media, including a number of ballads and a popular chap-book. Although the story is broadly recounted in line with the events of the narrative, Sampson's awareness of the antecedents in Caroline popular culture enables him to draw on a richer heritage; as such, the severe linguistic censures which are invoked by Bateman to chastise Anne's looseness are only one part of a more complex treatment of her broken vow. In the anonymous ballad entitled 'Young BATEMANs Ghost', the narrator is ambiguous regarding the point at which the actual contract was reneged:

> But mark how Bateman dyd for love. And finishd his Life; That very day she marryd was, And made old Germans Wife<sup>26</sup>

It is tempting to draw a clear linear development from the evidence available, in which Bateman 'dyd' before or concurrent to the actual wedding ceremony. However, this is only an inference; the actual death could equally have occurred before the utterance of the vow, rendering Anne's marriage ethically complex but wholly lawful. The ballad, in other words, presents an alternative account of the process of swearing which is different to the condemnatory 'pens of Diamonds'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Anon., *Young BATEMAN'S Ghost.* ID 31498 [British Library Roxburgh 3.766-767]. May 2014.

which judge the act to be a sin. Sampson is aware of these different textual accounts of the plot, as the characters often refer to their own transformation into moral exemplars. At one point Ursula asks Anne 't'wood greive thee to have Ballads made on thee, to the tune of the inconstant Lover, and have thy perjuries pind on every Post?' (sig. C3v), winking at the popular subject matter available to contemporary audiences whilst acknowledging the transformative process which will offer an account, however partial, of her actions. Bruce R. Smith has observed that 'Ballads did not record performances; they perpetuated them. They enabled performances to happen again and again as new performers learned the words and took up the story'. 27 Smith's theory of reanimation relies on the affective properties of personal engagement, in which the performer or listener is compelled to consider the plight of all of the characters. This other form of literary reception, involving engagement rather than fear, is possibly what Anne is thinking of when she uses her own imagery of textual production. This is does not imply that Sampson is condemnatory of Bateman's treatment, or overly concerned for Anne's welfare; rather, it places the imagined linguistic responses to the broken vow in a more nuanced context, where the possibility of a better amatory match can be understood in more than accusatory terms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Bruce R. Smith, 'Shakespeare's Residuals: The Circulation of Ballads in Cultural Memory', in *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture*, ed. by Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (London: Arden, 2006), pp. 193-217 (pp. 194-195).

In one of the most chilling scenes in Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand tricks the Duchess into entering a pact of forgiveness by offering her a severed hand. 28 As the stage is dark, she takes it to be that of her brother; however, to her horror she realises that it is the hand to which she has 'vowed much love' during her wedding with Antonio, still wearing the binding 'ring' (IV.i.43) of her first husband. Ferdinand explains his action as a corrective to what he regards as dangerous and immoral looseness, advising her to 'bury the print of it in your heart' (IV.i.45); in the place of a mutually offered pledge is a new text to learn, in which the dangers of broaching a life of chastity are horribly reinforced. Webster's image is one of many which exert an influence on Thomas Middleton's More Dissemblers Besides Women, a play which also dramatises the sexual desire of a female ruler who has vowed never to replace her dead husband.<sup>29</sup> However, its mixture of theatricality and dissemblance, coupled with the application of a vow to a new, more intimidating context, is unusually pervasive in relation to other elements of the text, particularly as the Duchess's vow is obsessively scrutinised by almost all of the members of her court. Middleton and Webster had a robust working relationship during the early1620's; not only did the former contribute a dedicatory poem to the 1623 quarto edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, but the two wrote *Anything For A Quiet Life* together around 1621, in which an elderly man marries a young woman in spite of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by Leah S. Marcus (London: Arden, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Thomas Middleton, *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, ed. by John Jowett, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1034-1073.

his promise to be faithful to her recently deceased 'predecessor' (I.i.126).<sup>30</sup> Evidently the dramaturgical strategies Webster devised for exploring the actions that occur when a vow of chastity is broached were cleverly appropriated by his colleague.

The most influential councillor in the court of *More Dissemblers Besides* Women is the Lord Cardinal, a polemicist who ensures that the Duchess's vow of chastity is constantly observed. Although her unusual marital status is noted by the young courtiers, who refer to her as 'That strange great widow' (I.i.9), the Lord Cardinal is very skilled at using rhetoric to justify the situation, reminding the court how hard has she worked to 'make her oath / As uncorrupt as th'honour of a virgin', even unto 'the eternizing of her sex' (I.ii.23-24, 20). The analogy between vowing and virginity is something which is of interest to Middleton; in the play *The Patient* Man and The Honest Whore, co-written with Dekker in 1604, Hippolito throws out the prostitute Bellafront with the cry 'thou dost make me violate / The chastest and most sanctimonious vow / That e'er was entered in the court of heaven' (X.148-150).<sup>31</sup> The conception of a vow as an undefiled virgin body is designed to promote an image of female identity which aligns her biological purity with creditability. Evidently, its use as a simile encompasses the sense of risk involved in all obligatory structures by alluding to the supposed mutability of female affection, particularly when the vow in question is of a sexual nature. Francis Rous develops the analogy in a pamphlet from 1622 when he asserts that 'swearing' is the 'spiritual Adultery of the Tongue', as it places the individual in a heightened position of temptation which

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Thomas Middleton and John Webster, *Anything for a Quiet Life*, ed. by Leslie Thomson, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1593-1631. For Middleton's dedicatory poem to Webster's play, see Marcus, pp. 123-124.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Patient Man and The Honest Whore*, ed. by Paul Mulholland, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 280-327.

increases the chance of committing a sin.<sup>32</sup> However, the Lord Cardinal's comparison of the Duchess's vow of chastity to a virgin in this manner is problematic considering her status as a widow, as she has presumably engaged in conjugal relations in order to complete the spousal contract with her husband. This artfully draws attention to the disparity between rhetorical configurations of female chastity and the actual bodily status of the female which the vow is designed to regulate, which is not quite as clear as the language would suggest.

The Lord Cardinal has established a reputation as an author of works exclusively focussed on the Duchess's oath. Not only does he assert that 'Whole volumes have I writ in zealous praise / Of her eternal vow' (I.ii.6-7), but warns her directly that he has 'Writ volumes of your victories and virtues' (II.i.110) when she attempts to challenge his logic. As an author in print as well as a leading courtier, the Lord Cardinal's conception of the bond is not only political but creative, in that his construction of the vow as an abstract policing agent is circulated to Duchess's subjects through a mass readership. The castigation of remarriage is designed to promote a life of celibacy as a model to imitate, as it is practised by the figure at the apex of the state. Early modern audiences may well have read this stance as unduly extreme, as there was a high instance of second marriages in the period, particularly for women.<sup>33</sup> Middleton's widows often declare a refusal to look for a second husband, but find one anyway; the central character of *The Puritan Widow*, written in 1606, has 'vowed never to marry' (II.i.99), although she concludes the play perusing the 'men of estimation both in court and city' that have 'long wooed' her

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Francis Rous, *The diseases of the time, attended by their remedies* (London: William Stansby, 1622), p. 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> For a discussion of contemporary attitudes to remarriage, see Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 234-236.

(V.iv.87-88).<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Lord Cardinal's circulation of his pro-chastity tracts reveals a tacit awareness of the frequency with which vows of abstinence are broken, or at least compromised through marriage proposals. Jennifer Panek has outlined the social anxieties which circulated around the widow, who was constructed on stage as a 'creature driven by her sexual needs' to offset the 'anxiety aroused by the prospect of a man marrying a woman who was maritally experienced, wealthier, and often older than he was'.<sup>35</sup> Middleton's depiction of the Duchess, and the courtiers who attempt to confine her, is responsive to some of Panek's cultural observations. When the Duchess discusses her situation, her language replicates some of the images of the Lord Cardinal's distinctive conception of vowing, particularly the focus on the bond as an entity which is separate to her own private self:

If my vow Were yet to make, I would not sleep without it, Or make a faith as perfect to myself In resolution as a vow would come to.

I.iii.13-16

The Lord Cardinal's identification of a discrepancy between the Duchess and her oath – 'I dare trust that daughter with a world, / None but her vow and she' (I.ii.47-48) – is reflected in the assertion that she could 'make' another one if it were suddenly revoked. Yet there is a degree of instability in her conception which reveals some of the pressures of reconciling the latent desires of sexual attraction with a life

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Thomas Middleton, *The Puritan Widow*, ed. by Donna B. Hamilton, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp, 509-542.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Jenifer Panek, "My Naked Weapon": Male Anxiety and the Violent Courtship of the Jacobean Stage Widow', *Comparative Drama*, 34 (2000), 321-344, (pp. 330, 323). For other works of scholarship which explore the figure of the widow, see Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 13-45; Dorothy Kehler, *Shakespeare's Widows* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 17-42.

of total abstinence. The Duchess's image of sleeping with a new-made 'vow' is primarily suggestive of a bed-mate or chaperone, who would presumably guard her from an illicit sexual encounter. However, it is not too much of a stretch to interpret the vow in this context as a substitute husband or lover, evoking of a form of intimacy in the space of the bed which the metaphor is surely designed to discourage. The Duchess then imagines what a self-made bond would be like if the official 'vow' was lost. Her 'faith' is only 'as perfect' as a 'vow would come to', suggesting that her own efforts are inadequate to the task of controlling her libido. Although this may well support a view that women are incapable of structuring their desires unless a vow is imposed upon them, the notion of making or producing a 'faith' is redolent of a pregnancy, in which a baby is the expected consequence of marital intercourse. Again, the new 'faith' could substitute for a sexual existence, but the Duchess's rendition of the Lord Cardinal's rhetorical pose is rich with converse meaning endowing the restrictive forces with sexual energy. Not only is there a sense that the language she has internalised is inadequate, but the figuration of the bond as an entity in bed, followed by a little self-made commitment, is shaped a process of amatory fulfilment which the vow can barely repress.

In one of the fullest critical accounts of the play, Lila Geller has argued that the widow 'had a unique position with regard to the making of vows, an opportunity to speak with authority offered to few other women'. <sup>36</sup> However, Geller's assertion here is perhaps slightly broad, as the Duchess's vow of chastity is not only imposed on her by the Lord Cardinal and reinforced by the male members of the court, but internalised in a way that is evidently problematic; it also does not take into account

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Lila Geller, 'Widows Vows and *More Dissemblers Besides Women*', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 5 (1991), 287-308, p. 291. See also Jennifer Panek, 'Women's life stages: maid, wife, widow (whore)', in *Middleton in Context*, ed. by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 271-278.

the different social opportunities afforded by widows in a range of economic contexts. As a sovereign, the Duchess's remarriage would present dynastic as well as political problems, hence the cultivation of a strategy which is aimed to curb the type of autonomy identified by Geller, particularly in relation to the marriage contract. When the Duchess sees the young soldier Andrugio from her window, she immediately feels a strong sense of attraction which forces her to measure the suitability of her vow in an emotional context governed by sudden physical desire. She asks the Lord Cardinal to repeat the text of the pledge made to her husband on his death bed with the intention of reinforcing its impetus and reminding herself of her duties; however, the context of performance is indicative of the theatrical medium in which the pressures designed to keep her in check operate. The Lord Cardinal is not only required to inhabit the voice and identity of the Duke, suggesting that his role as a pledger can be performed like a character, but refer to himself in the third person. Similarly, the Duchess is compelled to rehearse her vow in the manner of a public utterance which reduces its previous sacral properties to a recitation. If there are any binding properties in this particular state, then Middleton appears to locate them within the space of dramatic display; perhaps we might infer a subtle reference to the title, in which the culture inhabited by the Duchess and the Lord Cardinal exploits a more nuanced concept of 'dissemblance' in order to keep amatory bonds – and, in this instance, civic and political ones – in place. However, there are only so many times a sacred vow can be repeated in performance; if it can be mimicked and imitated on demand, Middleton implies, then it has markedly less ability to obligate the speaker.

As noted earlier, Middleton turned to Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi* in order to shape his own narrative of a Duchess who contracts a second marriage with

a social subordinate. However, he appears to have read Webster's other work very carefully during the composition period, as there is a subtle antecedent for the scene of repeated vowing in *The White Devil*.<sup>37</sup> Before he can embark upon an affair with Vittoria, the Duke Brachiano attempts to initiate a divorce with his wife Isabella. Although the audience would not have regarded the dissolution as binding, Webster dramatises a scene in which a marriage can be seemingly ended by the shared utterance of a vow. Brachiano alludes to matrimonial pledging when he states 'This is the latest ceremony of my love; / Hence-forth I'le never lye with thee, by this / This wedding-ring' (II.i.192-194), an evocation which is reinforced when Isabella assents and is forced to repeat the formula: 'Sir, let me borrow of you but one kisse; / Hence-forth I'le never lye with you, by this / This wedding-ring' (II.i.252-254). As the divorce cannot untie the knot of marriage in a conceptual sense, the scene of shared pledging is primarily theatrical, in which the altered matrimonial circumstances of the couple are performed as a rehearsed utterance; once the courtiers have seen the 'play', then the bond can be imagined to no longer exist. Middleton's use of a similar rhetorical formula when the Duchess is repeating her vow to the Lord Cardinal creates a sense that the obligatory power bonds can be shaped through performance and repetition. However, he goes slightly further than Webster by exploring what happens when the performing agent goes off-script and steps beyond the confines of a memorised vow.<sup>38</sup> After several lines of speech the Duchess suddenly and dramatically breaks off, saying that she 'can go no further'

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> John Webster, *The White Devil*, in *The Works of John Webster*, ed. by David Gunby, David Carnegie and Antony Hammond, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), I, pp. 53-375.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Paul Yachnin notes a tendency of the other characters to try and 'read' or decipher the Duchess, arguing that 'women' are regarded as 'legible signs'. Perhaps this is a moment where the Duchess attempts define herself away from a preconceived interpretative structure (*Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Value* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 162).

(II.i.88). This is regarded as dangerous because the 'vow' that has been sworn, and the linguistic techniques which keep it at the forefront of her idiolect, is designed to suspend the Duchess's capacity for action in relation to the formation of matrimonial bonds, or entering into situations where this could become a possibility. In this sense, the court is defined by a culture of temporal stasis, in which the Duchess's potential to marry, and thus perpetuate the succession, is endlessly deferred. The decision to go off-script, however, suggests that any course of behaviour she will pursue is unprepared for, and imbues her with a heightened degree of agency in which her sexual reinvigoration is analogous to the possibility for new forms of action to occur.

Once the vow has been breached, the Duchess and the Lord Cardinal make contingency plans. When the Duchess lies to protect Andrugio by identifying his nephew Lactantio as her secret lover, the Lord Cardinal revises his initial rhetoric of containment, instead arguing that the 'rashness of one vow made desperate' (III.ii.239) will jeopardise the 'lost hopes of posterity' and 'succession' (III.ii.237-238). In order to inculcate his own bloodline into the ruling dynasty, the Lord Cardinal reinterprets the vow as a 'thing enforced' (III.ii.292); suddenly a generative female sovereign is more acceptable than a chase woman, as it provides a better opportunity for the Lord Cardinal to consolidate his power. The Duchess's bond is not as rigid as its conceptual properties would suggest, implying that its pliability is a dominant tool of statecraft, in which new developments in the state can be comfortably accommodated through the modification of its salient features.

Alongside this, the Duchess constructs a plot whereby she will feign Andrugio's love for her in a treasonous letter, thus affording her a chance to order his arrest and declare her true feelings. Lactantio's arrival enables her to use him as a scribe,

replaying the earlier scene of scripted rhetoric, but from the perspective of the Duchess; rather than repeat an earlier vow, she is now in a position to construct her own amatory language, albeit one which is cloaked in dissemblance for reasons of political security. The two movements of the Duchess and the Lord Cardinal once the vow has been breached are used to draw attention to its controlling properties, not only in terms of the human body but narrative action; when the restrictive oath is doffed, therefore, the play is charged with a sense of energy, in which other plots, defined and facilitated by alternative forms of language and discourse, can be created.

The use of a letter to facilitate or reveal the existence of a male love interest may have been prompted by the moment in *The Duchess of Malfi* where Bosola discovers the Duchess's pregnancy and sends a 'letter' to 'make her brother's galls / O'erflow their livers' (II.iii.74-75). Interestingly, the device is also used in James Shirley's 1641 play *The Cardinal*, which similarly explores the tragic consequences of a secret marriage between the Duchess and a steward named Antonio. <sup>39</sup> For Shirley, the letter is an artful plea to her contracted lover Columbo, designed to shame him into to resigning his interest and allowing her to choose her own husband. However, Columbo regards the letter as an insult which turn him into 'a post that's carved / I'th'common street' (II.i.105-106), and in a fit of anger murders Antonio on their wedding day. Evidently the letter is used to facilitate a disclosure which results in death, as it is the narrative device which pushes the characters towards a notably tragic conclusion. In Middleton's depiction of this popular trope, the Duchess does not face any horrific consequences, although the supposed autonomy it affords her is repeatedly undermined by Lactantio, who imbibes her language with innuendo and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> James Shirley, *The Cardinal*, ed. by E.M. Yearling (Manchester: Revels, 1986).

sexual subtext. For instance, when the Duchess dictates the line "And I know / Desires in both sexes have skill at that weapon" (III.ii.105-106), he responds with "Skill at that weapon" – a full prick there, "at that weapon" (III.ii.107); her scope of self-expression when placed outside of her vow is replete with assertion, but it is undermined by an insistence on vulgar subtext, as if all of her language is now responsive to her sexual appetite. The difficulties are reinforced when the Duchess meets Andrugio in person and compels him to read out the letter she has feigned in his voice: 'Pish, that's not so; it begins otherwise. / Pray look again, sir. How you'd slight your knowledge!' (IV.iii.155-156). The scene of the Duchess shaping her own wooing scene is potentially liberating, but the innuendo coupled with the stuttered utterance of Andrugio renders it bathetic, as well as redolent of the vow which she was forced to learn by rote; Andrugio is baffled by the situation, who responds with the assertion 'Here's a strange language!' (IV.iii.193). If the Duchess is capable of pursuing her own course of action outside of an obligatory structure, then her options appear to be curbed by the same factors which were used to prohibit her previous capacity for self-expression.

In an intriguing statement, Jonathan R. Hope observes that 'Middleton conceives of the world as independent from language: where Shakespeare allows metaphor (and therefore language) the potential to be constitutive of reality', Middleton posits a world where 'society can be described, and explained, but not altered by language'. <sup>40</sup> This is interesting in relation to the practise of swearing, as an oath is traditionally understood to alter the circumstances of the speaker, either in relation to future time or the other speaker. If Middleton has a view of language as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Jonathan R. Hope, 'Middletonian Stylistics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 247-263 (p. 258).

non-affective, as Hope suggests, then it appears that his approach to vowing is a strikingly clinical mode of thinking in which existing social relationships can be reflected but not altered by the bonds on which they draw. As previously discussed, the use of the Duchess's vow of chastity in the early part of the play is certainly commensurate with this view, as it is used to assert a fact of social and political existence which does not hold up to close scrutiny and collapses when circumstances change. However, the concluding scenes offer a revised view of swearing, in which binding rhetoric is able to constitute a new form of social conduct, albeit one which is notably conventional. When the Duchess realises that Andrugio is in love with Aurelia, she acknowledges their mutual attraction and revokes her interest whilst granting them permission to marry; in return, she will 'knit up [her] vow' (V.ii.204) and continue to live as a chaste ruler. This might seem like a disappointing affirmation of the Lord Cardinal's misogynistic theories; however, her decision is accompanied by a new, more authoritative form of self-expression, which conceives of the relationship between a vow and the person who adheres to its strictures as enhancing rather than limiting. When she is licensing the marriage, the Duchess states to Aurelia 'though your father / Be not in presence, we'll assure his voice' (V.ii.261-262); not only is this a subtle use of the slightly hackneyed device of the royal plural, in that it assumes a doubleness or plurality denied to her when she was placed within the vow of chastity, but she both animates the voice of a paternal figure and acts upon the powers attendant on that role. The Duchess's excursion into amatory play may not have resulted in sexual consummation, but it has provided her with a chance to develop her own conception of rule without recourse to a scripted performance. 41 Although it is ambiguous whether the vow has the ability to intersect

<sup>41</sup> Caroline Bicks observes that 'Truly good, chaste women keep their bodies enclosed, or at least

in the world in an affective sense, as Hope argues, Middleton's dramatisation of a ruler's acceptance of the necessary 'dissemblance' afforded by clever swearing, and a willingness to deploy it, is an intervention of sorts, at least into the political understanding of the audience. The knitting up of the vow is suggestive of the conclusion of the plot, but also the end of a particular conception of vowing, defined by restriction; perhaps the revised vow may be informed by the slippery political culture of the court, but it provides the Duchess with wider scope in which to assert her own rule as a lone female sovereign.

ensure that no future breach will occur'; The Duchess's insistence on her own enclosure is a

## **CONCLUSION**

In George Chapman's translation of book one of Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, there is a moment which would have resonated with any reader who had a cursory interest in the temporal and rhetorical properties of swearing. Agamemnon's refusal to return Chryses's daughter to him has famously incurred the wrath of Apollo, threatening to split apart the Greek cause before the action has begun. In order to end the deadlock, Achilles swears a 'great oath' to abandon the war unless the situation is rectified:

Thou subject-eating king,
Base spirits thou governst; or this wrong, had bene the last fowle
thing
Thou ever author'dst: yet I vow, and by a great oath sweare,
Even by this sceptre; that as this, never againe shall beare
Greene leaves, or branches, nor increase, with any growth, his sise;
Nor did, since first it left the hils, and has his faculties
And ornaments bereft, with iron; which to other end

Judges of Greece beare; and their lawes, receiv'd from Jove, defend.<sup>1</sup>

Achilles' assertion is a clever piece of oratory which compares his own refusal to fight with the object he is holding; just as the wooden staff will no longer shoot 'Greene leaves', neither will he commit to a future of promissory action in line with the king's aims. However, Homer's depiction of the oath is curiously reticent to initiate Achilles' promised action, particularly at such a crucial juncture in the plot. Instead, a space is opened up in which the transformed substance of the sacred entity itself is considered, with its own movement across time. Whereas once it was a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Homer, *The Iliads of Homer prince of poets*, trans. by George Chapman (London: Richard Field, 1611), p. 6.

branch in the 'hils', now it is a great civic mace bound in 'iron'; in place of a natural process defined by an the organic 'growth' in 'sise', it facilitates the mobilisation of troops in warfare, bringing about death and destruction. Although the staff can license an action of great public import, there is a deep sense of loss in the metamorphosis it has undertaken to become an object of veneration; as Achilles says, the piece of wood 'never again shall bare' its 'branches'. The finely wrought iron mace may arbitrate the obligatory forces which govern Greek society, but it does so at a cost. It may not be a stretch to argue that the actions unleashed are as artfully constructed, and subject to the same degree of patient crafting, as the object itself.

Achilles leaves the camp as promised, only to return after a deliberation with his mother Thetis. Not only does the staff facilitate a far shorter course of action than that which is anticipated at the moment of pledging, but it is unable to guarantee its long-term efficacy. There is a deep connection between the mutability of a sworn intention, particularly in a time of conflict, and the conceptual structures which are drawn on to keep a promise in place. The diversion into an account of a miniature process of change within the object itself is indicative of the larger anxieties which accompany the custom of a process not only designed to regulate time, but provide a model in which self-will can be endorsed by an outside agent. Perhaps the oath is rash, hence its inability to bind; after all, Achilles is exploiting the privileges attendant on the discourse to eschew his duties as a subject. Yet there is the lingering sense of insufficiency, particularly when the semantic heart of the custom is itself subject to the vicissitudes it aims to dispel. Is the oath empty of sacral force, or does it operate as a bargaining tool, able to facilitate short-term negotiations at the expense of longer commitments? What standing does it have in a culture which

relies on the linguistic performance of deeply respected bonds in order to function successfully?

Renaissance drama is deeply fascinated with the contradictions that shape Homer's 'great oath'. Although various media in early modern culture extol the orthodox properties of swearing, there is rarely an instance of an uncomplicated oath on the stage. This is partly due to the commercial pressures of the theatre industry; a simple, honoured bond is not likely to provide the spectators with the most exciting plot, particularly in an increasingly competitive market. However, it also offers an opportunity to explore the processes, both expected and actual, which are envisioned at the moment of swearing. If orthodox conceptions of punishment and reward are unquestioningly respected, then it is reasonable to assume that each character would regulate their behaviour in line with the conditions set out at the moment of pledging; not only would we have a mimetic culture in which all obligations were honoured without question, but dramatic art would have an automated, almost mechanistic relation to orderly civic conduct. A good question to pose is why the ethical telos of swearing was almost wholly rejected by the playwrights of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The institutions which vocally reiterated its coercive properties, such as sermons and pamphlets, might have taken greater steps to ensure that the requisite punishments for oath breaking were replicated on stage.

The structural models I have identified throughout this thesis do not always conform to such a neat schema; in fact, they rarely do. The revenger is able to license an oath of retribution which facilitates a structural denouement of bloodshed, usually against the most privileged rank in society; factional groups can authorise their personal ambitions with communal pacts which are capable of placing them in high

office; claimants can inhabit the rhetoric of fealty owed to the king, thus effecting a slow structural shift in power; figures who pervert the amity of marriage bonds find that death replaces the promised generation of new life; female vow breakers discover that their suspended existence inside of an oath of chastity is not as securely policed as expected. In all of these structures, there is an ambiguous sense of punishment meted out for a broken oath, or its correlative, the expected reward of an untarnished reputation for an honoured pact. Sometimes we can see a fairly conventional representation of what is understood to happen, but this evidently does not occur with the regularity espoused in the pamphlets of commentators such as Christopher White and Abraham Gibson. Instead, Renaissance drama appears to revel in characters that asseverate, prevaricate and slip out of their oaths; indeed, some of them defy the very strictures they promote almost at the point of utterance.

Rather than adhering to the expected terminus point of an oath, Renaissance playwrights are more concerned with dramatising the attempt of the individual to reconcile themselves to a practice which is frustratingly hard to apply in a consistent manner. Oath-taking in its strictest sense is incompatible with the negotiations and alterations that are a facet of social existence; they are simply impractical.

Interestingly, the shifts in early modern culture throughout the period necessitated the modification of accepted bonds in order to hold the new innovations in place.

This is most acute in terms of religion, where the doctrinal developments of the Reformation shifted focus away from communal worship to inner, more private mediations, but it can also be felt, for instance, in the economic move to a protocapitalist market, or the modulated political and national bonds attendant on the ascension of a Scottish king. It is true that all periods of culture are marked by sudden, often violent alterations in the fabric of society. However, the obligatory

structures which shaped early modern life in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries do seem to have been rewritten to an unusually large extent, from Henry VIII's revised coronation oath to the modifications to the marriage vow in 1549. When dramatised at the structural level, the oath is revealed as an unusually pliable entity which is able to facilitate a degree of self-agency in relation to a range of contextual areas, including justice, politics, kingship, marriage and female sexual conduct. This is not to suggest that all pledges are the opposite of devices able to hold a vision of future events in place; rather, the shared assumption that they are binding enables the shrewd swearer to conceptualise their actions as sacred and trustworthy. If any aspect of pledging is safeguarded, it is the perception that the phrase 'I swear', spoken alongside certain recognisable gestures, will endow the actions of the speaker with a special impetus.

Of interest to the playwrights I have discussed throughout this thesis, then, is the extent to which the custom of swearing is able to provide a degree of stability in circumstances defined by change, and the methods through which this can be achieved. Most often the strategies cultivated are oratorical, which rely on a gifted or intricate utterance at the moment of pledging to reconcile a desired aim with a respected public commitment. A gifted swearer is able to not only adhere to the coercive structure that they enter into, but use it to accomplish certain actions which would be otherwise prohibited. The intricate modulation of the images and tense structures of a vow, deployed with skill, can introduce a more subtle commentary or form of self-expression than conventional theories of swearing would suggest. It is therefore evident that one of the most salient features of a structural model defined by swearing is the ability to dramatise the shifts and undulations which are a crucial property of a discourse which is repeatedly defined as fixed. The notion of

channelling the self, and the actions through which the scope of self-expression is manifested, into a coercive vow may appear to limit the capacity for agency, making the choice almost paradoxical; however, the unusual prestige afforded to pledging enables a greater degree of movement to occur without the risk of chastisement or social censure. Mastering an oath is often akin to mastering the will in the volatile, unpredictable world of early modern society.

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