

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-52743-9 - Shakespeare and Violence
R. A. Foakes
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Introduction: 'Exterminate all the brutes'

Our world is deeply troubled by the problem of violence, as manifested, for instance, in violent crime, in terrorism, in war, in prolonged feuds between neighbouring groups (as in Northern Ireland), and in territorial battles such as those between street-gangs in inner cities. The horrific acts of terrorism on 11 September 2001 that demolished the World Trade Center in New York provoked, understandably, an instant response in the American bombing of Afghanistan, with calls for the extirpation of terrorism throughout the world. The aim is laudable, but history suggests that it is also impracticable. Human beings, especially males, have been addicted to violence since myths and legends first circulated and recorded history began. Terrorism has long been practised in many forms, and often in the name of a religious cause. It is hard to understand why 'bad things are done by people who otherwise appear to be good – in cases of religious terrorism, by pious people dedicated to a moral vision of the world',¹ unless violence is natural to men. A morality that categorizes forms of behaviour as good or evil may be seen as one means by which societies attempt to exert pressure on their members to conform, but no moral vision has yet had much effect in controlling violence. What Americans wanted instantly in the wake of the destruction in New York was retaliation, countering violence with more violence. Here may be glimpsed the basic problem of violence – it appears that we have instinctual drives that prompt us to defend ourselves when attacked, to use violence if necessary to protect family, tribe, or nation, as well as to maintain or improve status.

If violence is natural to human beings, then we need to come to terms with this issue, and seek understanding from the stories and enduring works of literature that have dealt with it. My particular concern is with Shakespeare, who must have been aware of the most spectacular act of terrorism in his time, the Gunpowder Plot, the attempt by a group of Catholics to blow up the House of Lords and King James I in 1605. His

plays may be seen as following a trajectory that begins with a delight in representing violence for entertainment, continues in a series of plays that explore various aspects of the problem of violence, and ends with a searching study of human aggression in relation to self-control in *The Tempest*. Although Shakespeare's world was very different from that of the present day, and advances in technology have made available weapons he could not imagine, the basic issues remain the same.

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, the narrator, tells a story about taking a rickety steamboat up a river through jungles in Africa to find and collect the ivory gathered by Mr Kurtz, the most spectacularly successful trader of the company that has hired him. Mr Kurtz had written a report for the 'International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs' which strikes Marlow as splendid: 'It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence.'²² But when Marlow reaches the decaying house where Mr Kurtz lives, he notices it is surrounded by posts with what look like ornamental carvings at the top; only on a nearer view does he discover that they are not carvings, but human heads with their faces turned towards the house of Kurtz. Mr Kurtz, it turns out, had found the natives treated him as a supernatural being, and he had come to accept and use that ascendancy ruthlessly in controlling the natives and in acquiring ivory. The heads, Marlow is told, are the 'heads of rebels' (75), and to Marlow it seems as if Mr Kurtz invaded the wilderness, and the wilderness has taken a terrible vengeance on him by invading him. But that is Marlow's reading. The novel goes further in taking us not only into the heart of darkness and violence in the depths of the jungle, but also into the darkness and violent propensities of the human heart. Mr Kurtz had added a postscript to the fine sentiments of his report, 'scrawled evidently much later' (66): 'Exterminate all the brutes.' Both impulses, the desire to exert benevolence, and the desire to exterminate, are prompted by that heart of darkness, and can exist in the same person.

Conrad's powerful novel focuses in this way on an issue that has repeatedly troubled societies and their writers and artists through the centuries in western culture. It is the problem of how to deal with the human propensity, especially among males, to violence. Its recurrence in various forms from ancient epic and the Bible to the modern novel supports the view that there is such a thing as human nature, giving us instincts and modes of behaviour that are still affected by the deep-rooted urges to claim territory, defend the tribe, protect women and children, and use violence to fight for and maintain possessions. This view has been

dismissed as reactionary by cultural materialists, who assert that the 'subject' or individual is a construction, and who reject the 'belief that in its essence the subject does not change, that liberal humanism itself expresses a human nature which, despite its diversity, is always at the most basic, the most intimate level, the same'.³ Such categorical formulations, which stress terms such as 'essence' and 'always', are rhetorically suspect, and have deservedly been criticized, and the notion that 'Man's nature' should be seen simply 'as the product of forces external to him' is being questioned by literary theorists.⁴ The matter has been much debated by anthropologists and psychologists, some of whom take the evolutionary view that aggression is instinctive in males especially, or programmed into human DNA.⁵ Others, who may be anxious to ensure that those who commit violent acts are held responsible, claim that aggression is socially constructed and depends on the values of a specific society at a given time.⁶ A third group avoids such dogmatism by allowing for the influence of both nature and nurture, while recognizing the extent to which theorists 'have displaced and complicated the origin of constitutive violence from male agency to patriarchal structures of economic and ideological domination'.⁷ This last seems to me the best view to take, since the origins of human behaviour are inevitably speculative. The history of human violence, I think, shows that males have always had to cope with an urge to violence in a variety of circumstances, and that western societies have always been concerned with ways of channelling or controlling that urge. The proneness to violence, to lash out, is both a part of what constitutes the nature of human beings, especially men, and is also culturally constructed. Hence it can erupt in different ways at any time, and the problem continues to haunt our own age as much as it did that of Homer, or of Shakespeare, the principal concern of this book.

At the present time most people in Britain and America appear to regard violence as a major problem in society, specifically in relation to violent crime and violence in the media. We cling to the notion, fostered by the Romantics, that children are innocent creatures who enter the world 'trailing clouds of glory' in Wordsworth's words, and that human beings are basically good, or ought to be. Thus a great many people who see themselves as representative of a norm regard violence as a deviation from that norm, and believe it should be punished with severity. Governments, reflecting popular voting patterns, have responded to widespread concerns about violent crime by increasing police forces and building more prisons, moves which appear to give satisfaction to a majority who believe that violence may be controlled and distanced

by such means. In 1993 Michael Howard, Home Secretary in Britain at that time, claimed in a government White Paper that what he called ‘the war against crime’ could be won. There is, in fact, little evidence that what the police do has ‘much more than a very marginal impact on crime levels’, according to research done in Britain.⁸ Many state legislatures in America have introduced or brought back the death penalty in recent times, seemingly in a belief that it will give potential killers pause; and more than two million people are incarcerated in the United States. But though the amount of violent crime fluctuates year by year, it does not decrease in proportion to these measures, which may please voters, but which have little effect on criminal violence.

One reason people can continue to take unfounded assumptions for granted and follow policies that fly in the face of the evidence is that we are still to some extent conditioned by the belief, given wide currency in the nineteenth century, in what Wordsworth called ‘a progress in the species towards unattainable perfection’.⁹ Coleridge’s vision of the ‘progressive amelioration of mankind’ and of continued ‘advances in civilization’ has effectively narrowed in modern times into the concept of economic ‘progress’ as measured by the gross national product. Terms such as ‘progress’ and ‘development’ are comforting, and fit the image of winning the war on crime. At the same time, paradoxically, the desire for more police and prisons is driven by fear, fear of violence, which might seem more in tune with the Hobbesian idea of men as preserved from mutual destruction only by a power that keeps them in awe. It is also paradoxical that putting criminals in prison does not serve to change them or deter others from violence. Michel Foucault argued that shutting a criminal away in prison has the effect of making him seem ‘a villain, a monster, a madman, perhaps, a sick and before long “abnormal” individual’, so encouraging the idea that criminal violence is a deviation from the norm.¹⁰ There is evidence, in fact, that punishment by incarceration ‘does not lower the rate or frequency of acts of violence. Punishment stimulates violence; punishment causes it.’¹¹

The most debated and publicized form of violence in western society now is associated with crime, but there are various other kinds. Social historians and evolutionary psychologists suggest an alternative origin for violence in the tendency of alpha-males to seek dominance, form hierarchies, and regard those outside their group as inferior. A desire for status operates at all levels, and among the street-gangs of large cities a teenager may be driven to violence, even to kill, if he feels he has been ‘dissed’, or treated with disrespect; his standing may depend

upon establishing a credible threat of violence. So violence may have a subsidiary origin in social conditions; where poverty, lack of education, and other conditions that deny people status exist, violence may provide a way to achieve some kind of prestige.¹² Prosperous societies seek to preserve their structures and the safety of the better-off by means of police and the use of institutionalized violence through the law, often while neglecting welfare for the deprived. One form of safety-valve is to channel hostility against those outside the frontiers. Enormous sums are spent on defence budgets to provide for a military establishment that can protect a country's interests elsewhere in the world. In this way the use of terrible forms of violence in making war against demonized others, as in Vietnam, Iraq or Chechnya, is tolerated, even applauded. Violence that would not be permitted within a society is regarded as legitimate when practised against other countries, especially if it can be presented, in the words of John Keegan, as a form of 'civilized warfare'.¹³

The self-contradictory beliefs of those who think violence is what others do, not themselves, and yet vote for the death penalty or punishment by institutionalized violence, and the equally conflicted views of those of us who are appalled by violence at home, in our streets or country, but applaud the use of military violence against other countries, become understandable if violence originates in instinctual urges to defend the self and the tribe, or in the construction of masculinity in a society that fosters the desire for status and respect. Aggressiveness is associated with achievement, and can help people compete for positions of authority. In prosperous societies physical violence has been to some extent replaced by other kinds, most obviously verbal violence, as used to humiliate others, to put people down, as we say. Aggression is thus now acceptable if it contributes to the functioning of a competitive society, and to dealing with enemies outside the borders, but it is unacceptable and regarded as criminal when practised by those demonized by laws designed to protect possessors of property and wealth. The contradictions built into common attitudes to violence may help to explain why viewers in America and Britain are fascinated by news reports of criminal or accidental violence, by crime fiction, and by films and TV series about murders, especially serial killings. Wendy Lesser has argued persuasively that in films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* we identify with both the detective and the murderer: she claims, 'the detective is in some way the murderer. Not only must one imagine oneself to be the murderer in order to find him . . . one must also admit to the existence in one's own core of unknown and generally inaccessible violence.'¹⁴ There is something of Mr Kurtz in all of us.

There are politicians and commentators who like to blame the media, especially the Hollywood movie industry, for exploiting violence, and producing ‘nightmares of depravity’ that encourage antisocial behaviour ‘with devastating consequences for our civilization’ resulting from its ‘addiction to graphic violence’.¹⁵ If watching violence or reading about it in the media encouraged people to be violent themselves, millions would be on a killing spree every day. Our fascination with violence has much more to do with the beast in each of us,¹⁶ with deep-seated fears about the animal instincts we strive to control. If all humans are capable of violence, of striking out to protect, defend, or retaliate against an attacker or someone who has given offence, then one reason we are fascinated by violence on TV or movie screens may be because watching and identifying with it harmlessly releases impulses everyone has and normally represses. Anthropological theories about human origins and evolution have lent support to the idea that impulses to violence are natural to human beings, especially males, and originate in the genes we share with the primates.¹⁷ This idea in turn has led to the development of theories about the origin of religious practices. Religion may have arisen as a ‘device for aiding social cohesion’ in the face of enemies or wild beasts by stimulating group confidence through forms of play and ritual. Add a felt need to propitiate the mysterious forces of nature that cannot be controlled by humans, and which bring earthquakes, floods, plagues, fire, dearth, etc., and a plausible explanation can be found for the origins of the widespread practice of sacrifice. So René Girard identified violence with the sacred, arguing that in sacrifice violence is deflected away from the members who seek protection and on to a victim or scapegoat. The sacrificial victim can then be ‘exposed to violence without fear of reprisal’. Religious rites, Girard claims, preceded any formation of a judicial system as a way of preventing the eruption of conflict and the ‘recurrence of reciprocal violence’¹⁸ provoked by the urge to retaliate. In a post-Darwinian world an anthropological perspective on the origins of violence, religion, and sacrifice is commonplace, so that it seems appropriate that the section on the story of creation in Genesis 1–11 in *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* (1997) should be headed, ‘The Nature and Functions of Myth’, and begin, ‘The origin stories of the ancient Near East helped societies of those times to cope with the difficult and puzzling world in which they had to live.’¹⁹

Anthropology has offered explanations of the origins of humanity and of religion inconceivable to a pre-Darwinian Christian society which relied on Genesis for an account of the beginning of the world and of human beings. Thus it would seem at first sight that current anxieties about violence emerge from conditions radically different from those prevailing

in Shakespeare's age. Technology has developed a range of killing weapons, unimaginable in past centuries, in guns, missiles, bombs, and gas-chambers. The media can now provide immediate photographic records of acts of violence throughout much of the world. In spite of these enormous changes, the fundamental questions why civilized humans are prone to violence and how we can deal with this problem have remained a powerful concern in major literature from Homer to the present day. Just as now many people maintain paradoxical or self-contradictory attitudes to human violence, so in earlier ages there have always been conflicting views, if only because values we prize in some circumstances may seem appalling in other ways; what is good on the battlefield may be outrageous in peacetime. Underlying all considerations of violence is the issue that has troubled many great writers, namely how it is that an individual, usually a man since violence has always been primarily associated with males, can for no adequate reason commit terrible acts of violence. Such acts can have enormous consequences for a society, especially where the individual holds power of some kind. It is, I think, an issue that concerned Shakespeare, whose plays explore it in ever greater depth as his career developed. In the chapters that follow, I consider Shakespeare's treatment of violence in his history plays, tragedies, and late romances. The most substantial sections are on *Hamlet*, where I take the centre-point to be not Hamlet's revenge, but his sudden act of violence in killing Polonius, and on *The Tempest*, a play in which the uneasy suppression by Prospero of his own impulses to violence and of murderous attempts by others leads to an ambivalent ending that leaves open the prospect of a renewal of violence in Milan and Naples.

I do not deal with the comedies, which typically involve threats of violence if not violent acts, such as Orlando's overthrow of Charles the wrestler in *As You Like It*, but find a means to release the audience from the threat in such a way as to enhance the harmony of the marriages with which they conclude. Even those in which violence is most prominent achieve this escape, if at some cost. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare added a whole act after the final exit of Shylock from the stage in order to help the audience dismiss him temporarily from their minds and attend to the byplay with wedding rings. The ending of *Measure for Measure* also seems difficult after the explosion of Angelo's sexual violence, and the threat of a death sentence on Claudio, for its action is deeply involved with issues of justice and mercy. However, Shakespeare seems to have developed ways of exploiting violence in these and other comedies in order to enrich our sense of the fragility of happiness, as notably in *Twelfth Night*, in which Sir Toby with his bloody coxcomb, Malvolio crying

revenge, and the wistfully melancholy final song of Feste, all contribute a counterpoint to an ending that celebrates a 'golden time' that marks the unions of Orsino and Viola, Sebastian and Olivia, as well as Sir Toby and Maria. The use of violence here is much more complex than in early farces such as *The Comedy of Errors*, in which the two Dromios are beaten time and again for no fault of their own without any sign that they are ever hurt; such apparent violence, typical of farce, is fun for an audience, apparently as a vicarious release of impulses they have repressed.

The uses of violence in comedy deserve attention, especially in relation to Nicholas Brooke's claim that 'horrid laughter' in Jacobean tragedy is essential to tragic form, and that 'the tradition of English tragedy, then, springs from violent farce', as a spin-off from morality plays. Tragedy, he argues, deals with 'extreme emotions' which, because they are extreme, 'are *liable* to turn over into laughter'.²⁰ If this is true, nevertheless some important distinctions need to be made. He discusses six non-Shakespearean tragedies in which laughter is indeed exploited in various ways. In some the controlling perspective is that of a savage satirist, such as Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy*; in others, such as *The Changeling*, the laughter is confined to the subplot. Brooke does not consider the purpose of laughter in these plays, which may be to distance and qualify an action that would otherwise evoke horror, or more narrowly, to provide a temporary release from emotional tension, a kind of breathing-space or safety-valve, which I take to be a function of the Porter in *Macbeth*. In Shakespeare's tragedies, comic interventions generally serve this limited purpose. Only in his earliest history plays and in *Titus Andronicus* are there moments when violent action topples, perhaps, into farce.

My concern is with the representations of violence in Shakespeare's histories, tragedies and romances, violence associated mostly with killings, humiliations or tortures that determine the shape of a play's action and the fate of its characters.²¹ These plays, considered here in rough chronological order, I believe show Shakespeare's exploration of issues linked to the propensity for violence that seems natural to human beings. The plays, indeed, reveal a continuing development in his treatment of violence from an early delight in sensational stage violence for its theatrical excitement to his late works in which violence is represented as an inescapable aspect of human experience that can only be comprehended in the long perspective of time. I pay special attention in what follows to what I call the primal scene of violence, the deed that seems spontaneous and to have no meaning until we build interpretations into it later, for it is violence of this kind, initiated in the murder of

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-52743-9 - Shakespeare and Violence
 R. A. Foakes
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

9

Abel by Cain, that especially troubled Shakespeare's imagination. He was not alone in being fascinated by acts of violence that seem to have no cause, to be unmotivated or inadequately motivated, and there are notable works by some of his contemporary dramatists that focus on such deeds, such as John Webster's variant of the Cain and Abel pattern in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In this play Ferdinand remorselessly persecutes, tortures, and arranges the murder of his twin sister the Duchess, and only after her death looks for a reason, when he says he must have been out of his mind ('distracted of my wits', 4.2.278), though it is ironically later on that he does indeed go mad. Shakespeare is a special case in that during a long career he dramatized changing perspectives on representations of violence that show a maturing of his thinking about this matter, culminating in the perspective of the late plays in which human violence is portrayed as analogous to violence in the natural world.

I began this introduction with a brief account of present-day attitudes to violence, and the first chapter offers a description of a different but analogous culture of violence in which Shakespeare came to maturity, one that raised many of the issues that remain current, in spite of a different frame of reference, in which, to put it crudely, the Bible and classical literature had the kind of importance now assigned to Darwin and Freud. I then comment on what I call the Rose spectaculars, the *Henry VI* plays and *Titus Andronicus*, plays that appear in Philip Henslowe's lists as performed at his theatre, and which show Shakespeare competing with the spectacular representations of violence in plays by other dramatists of the time, especially Marlowe. This is followed by a study of modern film versions of two early tragedies, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*, by directors who have shown how fundamentally the action of these popular plays relates to current anxieties about violence. The next chapter is concerned with Shakespeare's later English history plays mainly in terms of war, in a sequence that runs from *King John* (rather than from *Richard II*) to *Henry V*. After completing this section I came across Middleton Murry's perceptive observation, made in 1936, that Falstaff and Hotspur are 'the Bastard's direct descendants',²² meaning the Bastard Faulconbridge in *King John*; he did not, however, develop this idea, which is central to my reading of these plays.

Hamlet has a chapter to itself, as a play that marks a deepening of Shakespeare's exploration of violence, in war and in peace, revisiting the Cain and Abel story that framed his early histories in another play that involves brother killing brother, and subordinating revenge in the end to the unpremeditated slaying of Polonius. The next two chapters consider

the later tragedies and the Roman plays, paying particular attention to their concern with what it is to be a man, and with power. *Coriolanus* figures in both chapters as a play that contains Shakespeare's most incisive critique of the idea of the heroic and of manliness, and also his perception that human violence is inescapable in peace as well as in war. The last chapter is much concerned with the importance of natural violence as manifested in storms, shipwrecks, and the like, and its relation to human violence. *The Tempest* receives a more extended treatment, since it seems in many ways a kind of summing up, in dealing with so many aspects of violence: natural (the storm at sea), personal (Prospero's difficulty in controlling his own urges), and violence involved in struggles for power (the various attempts to gain power by murder). I see Shakespeare's use of costume as especially important for a full appreciation of what he was about in this play, and argue that the ending is deeply ambivalent in taking the characters back to the uncertain corridors of power in Italy.

Since my primary focus is on representations of violence in the plays, I am more concerned with action than with character and language. The complexity of Shakespeare's language and wordplay has proved inexhaustibly productive of meaning, and his major characters seem open to endless investigation, so that inevitably these have drawn most critical attention. Stage productions have to settle for one way of doing a play, and are ephemeral, so have had as yet relatively little impact on literary criticism. Attending not merely to the language, but to the action, to what the text tells us happens on stage, I hope redresses the balance somewhat. The viewpoint from which these chapters begin may seem strange, as in the case of *Hamlet*, for instance, where I have little to say about the prince's soliloquies, but am very interested in the significance of the presence on stage of the bleeding body of Polonius during Hamlet's scene with his mother. I think an investigation of the plays that focuses more on violence in action helps to account for important aspects of Shakespeare's growth as a dramatist. Violence has always been associated chiefly with masculinity, and although Shakespeare created some remarkably tough and violent female characters in his history plays and in *Lady Macbeth*, for example, I am inevitably much more concerned with his male figures.

NOTES

1. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 7.