Acts of Terror:
Representations of Terrorism on the Early Modern Stage

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Abstract

This thesis offers an exploration of early modern terrorism, discussing the ideas behind it, how it was practised and how it was represented on stage. Even though the word ‘terrorism’ didn’t appear in early modern discourse, it was a recognisable practice employed by state and sub-state actors alike. Furthermore, playwrights frequently engaged with questions and concerns about terrorism in their work. Consequently, terrorism offers a meaningful angle from which to explore early modern drama.

In the introduction, I discuss the term ‘terrorism’ and propose a characterisation that’s relevant to the early modern period as well as today. In chapter two, I explore early modern ideas about terror and show it’s presented as an ambivalent force in The Life and Death of Jack Straw and A Larum for London. In chapter three, I consider how terrorism was employed and legitimised by the state, and how anxieties about state terrorism are reflected in Sejanus, Sir Thomas More, Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt and Two Lamentable Tragedies. In chapter four, I focus on what I call ‘resistance terrorism’, exploring how various forms of violent resistance functioned as terrorism: tyrannicide in Julius Caesar, martyrdom in The Virgin Martyr, and rioting in 2 Henry VI. In the conclusion, I discuss how twenty-first-century theatremakers use early modern plays to engage with modern-day terrorism, demonstrating that the fundamental concerns the early moderns had about terrorism are surprisingly similar to ours.

Overall, this thesis shows that there was a widespread discourse around terror and terrorism in the early modern period, and that these preoccupations found expression not only in the political and religious writings of the period, but also in the mass entertainment of the popular theatre. The period provided fertile ground for the use of terrorism and the questioning thereof, in real life and on stage.
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Note on spelling and editions

Unless quoting from a modern critical edition, I have retained the original spelling, punctuation and italicisation in quotations from early modern texts; when italicisation is not original, I have noted this. Titles of early modern works are also in their original spelling, except for plays, which I refer to by their modern titles for ease. Quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are taken from the 1997 Norton edition, except for those from Sir Thomas More, which are from the 2005 Oxford edition. Quotations from Sejanus His Fall, The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt and The Virgin Martyr are taken from modern critical editions; all other quotations from early modern plays are taken from Early English Books Online (EEBO).
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INTRODUCTION: ‘SO FULL OF DISMAL TERROR WAS THE TIME’

About 400 years ago, two playwrights walked into a bar. They ordered some drinks, sat down at a table and started plotting how to murder the king. ‘Plotting’ is the operative word here – Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher were busy devising the storyline for a new play. But their public location was perhaps not the most advisable one: Fletcher, who had floated the idea to kill off their stage king, was accused of high treason by a fellow customer who had been eavesdropping on their conversation and got the wrong end of the stick. It easily could have all ended in tears (or a gruesome double execution), but fortunately for our imprudent playwrights, it did not. As soon as it appeared ‘that the plot was onely against a Drammatick and Scenical King’, the whole case ‘all wound off in merriment’, according to Thomas Fuller’s amusing anecdote in *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662, sig. 3O1v).¹

In 1996, a similar situation wound off in a less merry manner, when a group of London-based Kurdish actors were arrested in the middle of their rehearsal of Harold Pinter’s *Mountain Language*. The play depicts the capture and torture of Kurds at the hands of the Turkish government, and when a neighbour of the Kurdistan Workers’ Association community centre saw a group of armed men dressed in combat gear, he called the police, who immediately swooped in and laid siege to the building. The eleven actors – including a twelve-year-old boy – were held for five hours before being released, despite having informed local police a week previously that they had rented plastic weapons from the National Theatre for their rehearsals. After a lawsuit, the Metropolitan Police agreed to pay £55,000 in damages, although it’s hard to imagine this did much to alleviate the distress caused to the actors, all of whom were refugees who had fled government oppression, wrongful imprisonment and, in some cases, torture (Hartley-Brewer, 2000).

These two instances, four centuries apart, reveal two things. The first is that terrorism – although in different forms – is enough of a recognisable, relevant concern that theatremakers in both periods want to engage with it on stage. The second is that, in both periods, terrorism is such a recognisable, relevant concern that ordinary passers-by ‘perceive’ it in their otherwise everyday surroundings and feel obliged to intervene. That this is the case in late-twentieth-century London will probably not come as a surprise, even before the 9/11 and 7/7 terror attacks; that it should be so in early-

¹ The story may be apocryphal: Fuller wrote *Worthies* shortly before his death in 1661, while the play referred to is probably *The Maid’s Tragedy* (c. 1608-1611), so there is some historical distance. Even if it is merely an anecdote, however, its existence still shows this was an entirely conceivable scenario both at the time of the supposed event and of Fuller’s writing. At either point – a few years after the Gunpowder Plot and during the Restoration respectively – one ‘could hardly be unaware either of the reality of regicide or of the direct relationship between politics and theater’ (McMullan, 1994, p. 87).
seventeenth-century London might, however, be less obvious. To paraphrase the unfortunate Clarence in William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, both times had their share of ‘dismal terror’ (1.4.7).

Although the word ‘terrorism’ was only coined in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the phenomenon has been around much longer. Indeed, in the words of Robert Friedlander, ‘terrorism has always existed in one form or another. Terrorism will continue to exist in one form or another. This is the lesson of history and the reality of life’ (1983, p. 135). In this thesis, I argue that even though the word ‘terrorism’ did not yet appear in early modern discourse, it was a recognisable practice⁡ employed by state and sub-state actors alike to further their ideological goals. I also propose that early modern playwrights engaged with questions about the legitimacy and the efficacy of state and sub-state terrorism (which I will refer to as ‘resistance terrorism’) in their plays, and that terrorism can thus be a useful lens through which to look at the drama of the period. My aims in this research project are therefore threefold: to demonstrate there was a discourse around terrorism in the early modern period; to establish how certain types of political violence that were familiar in the period, such as execution, rioting and assassination, worked as terrorism; and to explore how terrorism was represented and interrogated on stage. As Robert Appelbaum suggests, ‘the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided legacies of political thought, history, and fiction that became models for any number of succeeding generations, rivaling the influences of antiquity. Fear – political fear – was no doubt one of those legacies’ (2018a, p. 49). For this reason, I believe the study of early modern terrorism can be meaningful and illuminating.

### 1.1 THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING TERRORISM

Any study of terrorism, of course, first requires the researcher to attempt to pin down what terrorism is, exactly. This is a recurring and much-debated problem in contemporary terrorism studies. The word ‘terrorism’ derives from the French ‘terrorisme’ and was first used in reference to the Jacobin government which ruled France during a period now commonly known as the ‘Reign of Terror’. Between the late eighteenth century and today, however, the term has been applied to a wide variety of violent events that academics still struggle to capture in one neat definition. A frequently-cited survey by Alex Schmid (1983) found 109 different definitions used in publications between 1936 and 1980; a later study by the same author identified more than 250 academic,

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⁡ A useful comparison here is to suicide – people had taken their own lives long before the words ‘suicide’ (1643), ‘self-murder’ (1570) and ‘self-slaughter’ (1533) entered the English language (*OED*). In fact, Thomas Browne’s coining of the term ‘suicide’ resulted from the early-seventeenth-century debate about how suicide should be understood (Langley, 2009, p. 203), clearly showing this was a recognisable and concerning phenomenon.
governmental and intergovernmental definitions (2011, p. 39). Some experts on the subject have suggested it might be better not to define the term at all. In the words of Walter Laqueur,

people reasonably familiar with the terrorist phenomenon will agree 90 percent of the time about what terrorism is, just as they will agree on democracy or nationalism or other concepts. In fact, it is an unmistakable phenomenon, even if the search for a scientific, all-comprehensive definition is a futile exercise (2003, p. 238).

Simply letting the court of public opinion decide what terrorism entails is not a solution either, however. To call someone a terrorist is, after all, more often an accusation than a neutral description. Still, to talk about terrorism productively, we do need some sort of characterisation of the phenomenon, taking into account the political and moral implications the word has in everyday usage. In other words, we need a compromise between a ‘scientific’ definition and common usage.

A useful way of managing this difficulty is to approach terrorism as a product of discourse. The concept of ‘discourse’ was developed by Michel Foucault (1972), but it is perhaps summarised most clearly by Stuart Hall, who defines discourse as

a group of statements which provide a language for talking about — i.e. a way of representing — a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed (1992, p. 291).

Discourse also has a disciplinary function, since it ‘influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others’ (Hall, 1997, p. 44). The discourses we subscribe to — whether consciously or unconsciously — shape how we view the world in politicised ways. Discourses are not neutral representations, but interpretations that influence what’s considered normal, acceptable or common sense; what qualifies as legitimate knowledge and what is ‘fake news’; who is listened to and who is ignored. Power is therefore an inherent part of discourse and has a role in shaping the production of knowledge. Discourses can legitimise or delegitimise — and as we will see throughout this thesis, the struggle for legitimacy is a key aspect of early modern politics in general and of terrorism in particular. Applying this notion of discourse to political violence, it becomes clear that

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3 Since I only use discourse as a way into the debate about the definition of terrorism, rather than employing any type of discourse analysis as methodology, my engagement with discourse is necessarily brief. There are insightful studies that have used Foucauldian and/or critical discourse analysis to explore (counter)terrorism, however. See, among others, Perezalonso (2009), Talbot (2008) and Gold-Biss (1994).

4 ‘Discourses [...] can be so ingrained that subjects are unaware of their presence’ (Dryzek, 2008, p. 46).

5 See, for example, Braddick on the role of ‘legitimating languages’ and how ‘the process of legitimation [...] moulded the development of state forms’ (2000, p. 88).
how we define, describe and make sense of these events is shaped by the discourses we subscribe to. In the words of Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson,

what it means to be a robber or a terrorist is determined according to a set of contextually specific norms that give regularity to and thus determine the meaning of the words. Terms like terrorist or robber, in other words, do not refer to a natural kind that exists in the world independently of human thought and practice. Rather, their meaning is conventional and determined by their use within discursive formations (2018, p. 5, emphasis original).

A discourse that includes notions like ‘Islamic extremism’ and ‘War on Terror’ will readily define the 9/11 attacks as ‘terrorism’, whereas a discourse that works with terms such as ‘Western imperialism’ and ‘martyrdom’ is more likely to classify these attacks as the work of ‘freedom fighters’. Since different discourses exist alongside one another, it’s often easy enough to see that other discourses to talk about such events are available. However, our embeddedness in our own particular discourse(s) often makes it hard to view these other interpretations as legitimate. Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass are therefore right to register their concern over

the reality-making power of the discourse [of terrorism] itself […] – its capacity to blend the media’s sensational stories, old mythical stereotypes, and a burning sense of moral wrath. Once something that is called ‘terrorism’ – no matter how loosely it is defined – becomes established in the public mind, ‘counterterrorism’ is seemingly the only prudent course of action (1996, p. ix).

Viewing terrorism as a product of discourse also helps to explain why it’s such an unstable term. As Zulaika and Douglass point out, ‘terrorism has become such a shifty category that yesterday’s terrorists are today’s Nobel Peace Prize winners’ (1996, p. x). In the context of discourse, this makes perfect sense, however; since discourses are context-specific, they change across time and place, and so do the objects and phenomena they define. This means that even though the word ‘terrorism’ stays the same, it’s used by different people, in different times and different places to signify different things. I suggest, therefore, that rather than trying to come to a ‘neutral’ definition of terrorism in spite of the inescapable non-neutrality of the term in everyday usage, we should look at terrorism as necessarily characterised by this polemical friction – I will come back to this later in this section.

For this research, I have not attempted to come up with a highly specific definition of terrorism tailored to work across two very distinct time periods – this would have been impossible. Instead, my aim is to arrive at a broad characterisation of terrorism which incorporates a number of enduring features that are relevant to the early modern period as well as today. Such a conceptual basis allows us to talk about terrorism in a variety of settings, albeit on the condition that individual
features are adjusted for their particular context. For example, when we talk about political violence in the early modern period, we need to acknowledge that what qualifies as ‘political’ or ‘violent’ is not necessarily the same now as it was then. To come to this characterisation, I will give an overview of the current state of the terrorism debate, looking at the most commonly agreed-upon features as well as some of the major controversies dividing the experts.

**Terror as an emotion**

First, however, I briefly want to discuss terror as an emotion. Based on his interviews with terror survivors, Charles Webel has identified six common elements in the modern experience of terror:

- The victim feels overwhelmed and helpless.
- The victim experiences a loss of autonomy and feels they can’t control the situation.
- The victim feels the outcome of the event is unknowable and unpredictable, but will possibly lead to death or serious injury.
- The victim experiences anxiety, sometimes panic, and feels disorientated.
- The victim feels frozen, sometimes paralysed.
- The intensity of the terror is such that the victim is often unable to speak at the time and struggles to describe their experience later (2004, pp. 87–88).

Taking all this into account, it seems likely that while terror can be caused by violence, this is not necessarily always the case; terror might also come as a response to dangerous natural phenomena like earthquakes or fires, or to a life-threatening medical emergency like a heart attack. What is nevertheless striking about this contemporary conception of terror is that it is caused by sudden events. As the next chapter will show, this contrasts with terror in the early modern period, which can also relate to a more general state of being, for example when one is confronted with the overwhelming power of the monarch or of God.

Here it is perhaps the underlying threat of violence, the implicit knowledge the other person is capable of hurting you, rather than any actual violence which causes the terror. In both periods, however, a sense of not being in control clearly plays a significant role in the experience.

There is much more to say about terror in the early modern period, and I will return to this topic in chapter two. For now, though, I want to note that terror in both periods is a powerful emotion, one politicians and philosophers alike have observed can be used as a political tool. The most famous of these is probably Maximilian Robespierre, who argued in a 1794 speech that ‘if the mainspring of

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6 This is not to say no one could experience terror in this manner today, but it’s not an integral part of how we understand terror, whereas it very much was for the early moderns.
popular government in peacetime is virtue, amid revolution it is at the same time [both] virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is nothing but, prompt, severe, inflexible justice’ (in Bienvenu, 1968, p. 38, emphasis original). A century and a half before Robespierre, Thomas Hobbes had already argued that the terror of a sovereign power allows that power to govern its people in a political community, rather than those people reverting to their ‘natural’ state of anarchy, a notion which owes a debt to Jean Bodin’s earlier work on sovereignty and absolute power. It’s an idea that has stood the test of time remarkably well. ‘Terror and civilisation are inseparable’, agree Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer; ‘One cannot abolish terror and retain civilisation. Even to relax the former means the beginning of disintegration’ (1973, p. 180). (As the next chapter will show, however, the notion of terror as direct opposite of civilisation is just as enduring.)

From terror to terrorism: characterising terrorism

It is not enough to simply observe a link between terror and politics, however. The evolution from ‘terror’ into ‘terrorism’ happens when terror is used to achieve a specific goal. Adding the ‘ism’ signals we are talking about a system or practice – a systematic use of terror. As Paul Wilkinson states, ‘terrorism is not a philosophy or movement: it is a method of struggle’ (in Wilkinson and Stewart, 1987, p. xiv). By and large, experts also agree such systematic use of terror needs to serve an ideological goal in order for it to be called terrorism, although terrorism is only ideological in the sense that it is used on behalf of the various ideological ‘isms’ (nationalism, communism, Catholicism, etcetera) rather than being inherently ideological in itself (Law, 2009, p. 2). In this very basic description, I would argue, we have already hit on three characteristics of terrorism: it is an instrumental use of terror in service of an ideological goal.

One might think this characterisation is so elementary it could be considered a given, but this is not the case. Remarkably, some experts do not believe terrorism necessarily involves inspiring terror in people. In his study on early modern terrorism, Appelbaum claims that ‘fear is not a sine qua non of terrorist violence’, while hate groups and gangsters use fear despite not being terrorists (2015a, p. 12). Indeed, Schmid’s original survey of definitions shows 49% of respondents did not consider ‘fear,
terror emphasised’ a key element of terrorism at all (1983, pp. 76–77). However, I agree with Martha Crenshaw’s assessment that terror is an essential component of terrorism, because terror is what creates ‘its [terrorism’s] ultimate shock value. Thus although not all victims of terrorism experience terror, the fact that some do is significant for others’ (1978, pp. 24–25). Indeed, terrorist acts are often calculated to inspire terror not just in the people who are directly threatened or attacked, but beyond – they are ‘meant to cause a wider psychological effect’ (Crenshaw, 1978, p. 21). (I go deeper into this ‘emotional contagion’ in the theoretical framework section below.)

Interestingly, Schmid’s survey reveals a similar disagreement about violence: not everyone considers this an essential part of terrorism, although the vast majority of respondents did see violence or the threat thereof as one of its key characteristics. Occurring in 83.5% of definitions surveyed, it was the most commonly mentioned element (Schmid, 1983, pp. 76–77). Louise Richardson states that ‘if the act does not involve violence or the threat of violence it is not terrorism’ (2006, p. 20), and most experts seem to agree. I too concur with her analysis that treating various forms of intimidation or disruption not involving violence, such as cybercrime, as terrorism is less than helpful. We can therefore add a fourth element and say that terrorism involves violence or the threat thereof.

If academics can’t even agree on basics like the presence of fear or violence in terrorism, are there other ways to discuss terrorism productively? Some researchers have opted to look at what terrorism does, rather than what it is. Thornton’s study identifies two typologies: enforcement and agitational terror. Enforcement terror is used by those in power ‘as an extreme means of enforcing their authority’, whereas agitational terror is employed by those wishing to upset the status quo, ‘those aspiring to power’ (Thornton, 1964, p. 72). Crenshaw expands on Thornton’s work in identifying another function of terrorism: ‘bidding for sympathy or ideological endorsement’ (1978, p. 40). She pairs this with Thornton’s enforcement terror, since both are constructive functions of terrorism aiming to create support for the cause, either by coercion or by inspiration. Richardson takes a different approach, distinguishing between terrorists’ goals by categorising them as either ‘temporal’ or ‘transformational’. A temporal goal is one ‘that can be met within the current socio-political configuration’, such as political independence of a region. This is unlike a transformational goal, whose ‘satisfaction would require the complete destruction of the regional state system’ that the terrorists oppose (Richardson, 2006, p. 30). I don’t propose to adopt any of these specific models, but I am interested in the consistency between them: in all these different conceptions, terrorism aims to effect change in its targets. Indeed, Charles Townshend states that ‘while the exact processes of modern terrorism may often be obscure, their core principle is the modern assumption

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8 Those are his terms; I would have called them enforcement and agitational terrorism.
that society can be changed by human agency’ (2018, p. 98). This chimes with Elaine Scarry’s observation that violence is often employed to forcibly bring into being a ‘better’ version of society that does not (yet) exist (1985, pp. 131–132). Although Townshend considers such belief in human intervention to be a modern phenomenon, I will show in this thesis that human agency and its limits were very much early modern concerns too, which influenced when and how violence was used. The Gunpowder Plotters died for a version of England – ideally Catholic, but tolerant of Catholics at the very least – that did not exist, but that they were attempting to realise through killing and dying. Meanwhile, the early modern state executed people to substantiate a version of England where the sovereignty of the monarch and their right to use violence were unchallenged – more on this in chapter three. I therefore want to posit this as a fifth characteristic of terrorism: it is motivated by the belief that human intervention is needed to ‘better’ society in some way, whether by effecting change in an imperfect system or by defending a good system that is under threat.

Finally, I would like to circle back to discourse and the challenges it poses when trying to define terrorism. Rather than trying to get around these issues, however, I suggest we could view this polemical friction as a final characteristic of terrorism. Although ‘terrorism’ started life as a descriptive term, for most of its history it has also been an ideological one. The connotations of the term ‘terrorist’, unlike those of ‘rebel’ or ‘guerrilla’, are now universally bad. Describing someone as a terrorist is therefore inherently ‘othering’. As Joseph Tuman argues, in this context, to define is to create an implicit contrast and comparison between what is normal, acceptable, and desirable and what is abnormal, unacceptable, and undesirable. [...] The act of defining terrorism, if considered in this light, provides an opportunity for a contrast between us and our enemies, or enemy: the outsider, the other. In many respects, the drawing of this contrast is more important than the definition of terrorism itself (2003, pp. 41–42).

Zulaika and Douglass go further, arguing that in the discourse of terrorism ‘any interaction with the terrorist “Other” is violation of a taboo. Terrorists are kooks, crazies, demented, or at best misguided. Contact with them is polluting; dialogue is pointless since terrorists are, by definition, outside the pale of reason’ (1996, p. x). This view is at least partly due to terrorism’s ‘statist bias’ (Tickell, 2013, p. 12). Governments have adopted the term to describe sub-state groups who engage

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9 Milton makes a strikingly similar observation about the use of the word ‘heretic’ in De Doctrina Christiana, complaining that some people ‘condemn anything they consider inconsistent with conventional beliefs and give it an invidious title – “heretic” or “heresy” – without consulting the evidence of the Bible upon the point. To their way of thinking, by branding anyone out of hand with this hateful name, they silence him with one word and indeed take no further trouble’ (quoted in Loewenstein, 2006, p. 207). Throughout this thesis, we will see the same happening with other discursive objects that troubled the early modern imagination, such as ‘the rebel’, ‘the tyrant’, ‘the traitor’, ‘the witch’ and ‘the martyr’.
in hostile action against the state, while simultaneously filing similar violent actions they engage in themselves under more palatable labels such as ‘warfare’ or, ironically, ‘counter-terrorism’ (Townshend, 2018, pp. 4–5). With the rhetoric around terrorism being so ideologically charged, unsurprisingly, no one likes to be called a terrorist.\textsuperscript{10} While the Jacobins used the term self-reflexively, contemporary organisations like Islamic State or the Real IRA do not classify themselves as terrorists. Instead, they opt for more legitimate-sounding terms which do indeed befit a state or an army, while simultaneously applying the ‘terrorist’ label to their opponents to discredit them (Tuman, 2003, pp. 9–10). Those who are ‘officially designated’ as terrorists are often just as happy to use the negative connotations of the word ‘terrorism’ to their advantage as the ‘counter-terrorists’ are. As studies such as those by Tuman (2003) and Appelbaum (2015a) make clear, terrorism is a form of communication. This communication involves a polemical struggle alongside the actual violence; in this war of words, the terrorist (in the descriptive sense) opposes themselves to a discursive object such as ‘the tyrant’, ‘the traitor’, or, of course, ‘the terrorist’. Terrorism as a strategy thus involves legitimising one’s own violence by pointing out that it’s directed at an enemy who is worse. This polemical aspect makes it practically impossible to come to a ‘neutral’ definition of terrorism that would find broad acceptance, but at the same time it’s also very characteristic of the way terrorism works and is talked about. Therefore, I suggest we might constructively think about terrorism by including this final aspect in its basic characterisation: \textit{terrorism legitimises itself by its opposition to a polemically constructed ‘enemy’}.

\textbf{Debates and controversies}

With this conceptual basis in place, I would briefly like to touch on two important points of disagreement amongst experts which have contributed to the unsettled status of ‘terrorism’ as a concept. There are many more that could be considered, but these specific ones are particularly relevant when looking at the early modern period. The first issue is that of state terrorism. As discussed above, the ideological charge of the term ‘terrorism’ means that states do not describe their own violent actions as ‘terrorist’. That doesn’t mean this is taken as truth in the academic debate. But while many scholars argue that terrorism is a tactic that can be employed by states and sub-state groups or individuals alike, others prefer not to label actions committed by states, either against other states or against their own people, as ‘terrorism’, usually in an attempt to add clarity to the debate. Richardson, for example, gives a common argument for excluding state violence from her definition of terrorism, saying she is not claiming

\textsuperscript{10} Although the term is sometimes used self-descriptively in an ironic sense, for example by the feminist protest group W.I.T.C.H. – the Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell.
that states do not use terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy. We know they do. [...] Nor do I wish to argue that states refrain from action that is the moral equivalent of terrorism. We know they don’t. [...] Nevertheless, it is a central tenet of this book that if we want to contain terrorism we must first understand it. Therefore if we want to have any analytical clarity in understanding the behaviour of terrorist groups, we must understand them as sub-state actors rather than states (2006, pp. 21–22).

John Horgan and Michael Boyle, on the other hand, do use the term ‘state terrorism’. In their view, terrorism is best understood as a subset of political violence, used by a range of actors to attack other actors, but with the intention of spreading fear beyond its immediate target. If state actions fall in that remit, it can (and should) be classified as terrorism; if not, labelling it as another type of political violence, such as repression, subversion, or ethnic cleansing, may be more appropriate (2008, p. 57).

And we have already seen Thornton’s definition of ‘enforcement terror’, which can be used by any group in power, including governments, to enforce their dominance. Whether or not the state can perpetrate terrorism seems to come down to semantics, then. It is generally agreed states use tactics equivalent to those used by recognised terrorist groups, but the question is whether labelling them with the same word is helpful. Realistically, whichever approach one favours, there will always be scenarios that cause confusion. But in the early modern period, inspiring terror was widely considered to be a prerogative of the monarch; therefore, speaking of ‘state terrorism’ makes sense in the context of my research.

Another point of contention is terrorism’s relation to warfare. Terrorism is often characterised as the opposite of regulated, ‘normal’ warfare states engage in; indeed, David Rapoport describes terrorism as ‘extraordinary violence’ (1983, p. 660, emphasis added), while Schmid proposed to legally define terrorism as ‘the peacetime equivalent of a war crime’ (2004, p. 203). Appelbaum follows Laqueur (2003) and Bruce Hoffman (1992) in arguing terrorism can only occur in ‘low-intensity’ situations in which ‘latent conflicts have been, for the moment, made terribly manifest’ by the terrorist attack (2015a, p. 14, emphasis added). The oppositional relationship between warfare and terrorism is also often claimed by those who consider the hitting of ‘soft targets’ a key feature of terrorist attacks. Richardson argues that targeting civilians ‘sets terrorism apart from other forms of political violence […]. Terrorists have elevated practices that are normally seen as the excesses of warfare to routine practice, striking non-combatants not as an unintended side effect but as deliberate strategy’ (2006, p. 22). There are many, subtly different terms for such ‘soft targets’: civilians, unarmed people, non-combatants, people who bear ‘no direct responsibility for the conflict that gave rise to acts of terrorism’ (Schmid, 2011, p. 86). Whichever word is used, the underlying assumption is that terrorism mainly targets ‘the innocent’ (Townshend, 2018, p. 7). However, both
these arguments obfuscate the fact that terrorism can be, and often is, part of military strategy. Although we often like to think of warfare as a regulated practice engaged in by states – the classical example of inter-state warfare, preferably adhering to all the demands of just war theory – this is a distortion of reality. As Andrew Heywood remarks,

inter-state war has become significantly less common in recent years, most modern wars being civil wars, featuring the involvement of non-state actors such as guerrilla groups, resistance movements and terrorist organisations. [...] It involves more irregular fighters who are loosely organised and may refuse to ‘fight by the rules’, developments that tend to blur the distinction between ‘military’ and ‘civilian’ life (2017, p. 333).

More importantly, this is by no means a new phenomenon: ‘the image of “old” wars as “gentlemanly” affairs, based on rules and respect for the enemy, is largely a myth. Massacres, rape and indiscriminate slaughter have been features of warfare throughout the ages’ (Heywood, 2017, p. 337). And as Julius Ruff observes, ‘the very nature of the [early modern] age’s warfare [...] meant that armies inflicted much violence even on friendly and passive civilians’ (2001, p. 44). (This is reflected in many plays of the period; while Patricia Cahill notes, for example, that Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine ‘relentlessly foregrounds the language of technical expertise in its representation of war’ (2008, p. 51), this ‘scientific’ approach to warfare also includes the equally calculated slaughter of civilians, sacking of cities and humiliation of defeated enemies.) In other words, the dichotomy between warfare and terrorism is a false one, both in the early modern period and today. As my research will show, to the early moderns, terrorism was conceivable as a strategy in ‘low-intensity’ situations as well as in war, and I therefore do not treat terrorism and warfare as mutually exclusive.

**Terrorism summed up**

Rather than coming to a specific definition, in this section I have attempted to outline the dominant issues and debates that anyone trying to establish an effective definition of terrorism faces today. In this overview, several characteristics have surfaced, which I propose to use as the conceptual basis for my discussion of terrorism in the early modern period. According to these characteristics, terrorism

- inspires terror in people, usually beyond those under direct attack.
- involves violence or the threat thereof.
- employs terror in an instrumental, deliberate manner.
- serves an ideological goal.
operates under the assumption that human intervention is needed for the betterment of society, whether by effecting change or defending the status quo.

- legitimises itself by its opposition to a polemically constructed ‘enemy’.

I prefer to think of this as a characterisation, rather than a definition of terrorism. Moreover, I have focused on establishing characteristics that are relevant to this particular research, rather than attempting a complete overview of the terrorism phenomenon. I would certainly not go so far as to claim this list is exhaustive or, alternatively, that specific events should not be characterised as terrorism because they don’t exhibit one of the features on this list. Many academics have indeed argued it ultimately might be best to consider each case individually, rather than trying to stick too rigorously to definitions and categories. For example, Erlenbusch-Anderson remarks on the 2015 San Bernardino attack\(^\text{11}\) that

> it is unhelpful to insist that because the incident fails to meet even some minimal conventionally accepted criteria of terrorism (such as intimidation or coercion of a civilian population or government), the proposition that it is an act of terrorism is false. What is important is that the shooting triggered a variety of sanctions, discourses, practices, beliefs and judgements that suggest that it was terrorism in the relevant context (2018, p. 6).

It is essential to look at each event in its own context and to descend into the particulars. But, although I agree with Erlenbusch-Anderson that identifying terrorism should not be a box-ticking exercise, we should also be wary of the equally unhelpful modern tendency – particularly in politics and the media – to eagerly apply the ‘terrorism’ label to almost any form of sub-state resistance. I therefore believe the characteristics I have identified above can provide useful guidelines, especially when exploring the ‘pre-history’ of terrorism. With that, it’s time to look at some of the particulars of terrorism in the early modern period.

**Early modern terrorism: some considerations**

Terrorism studies is a relatively young discipline which grew exponentially in the latter part of the twentieth century and after the events of 9/11. As the previous overview shows, the vast majority of research has focused on the various incarnations of terrorism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and not so much on historical terrorism. Going back to before the French Revolution adds the challenge that the word ‘terrorism’ didn’t yet exist,\(^\text{12}\) which means there are no instances of

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\(^{11}\) A mass shooting and attempted bombing at training event for San Bernardino health department employees. One of the attackers worked for the health department himself. Sixteen people were killed (including the two attackers, who were shot by police) and twenty-four were injured.

\(^{12}\) Although it could have been available: H.M. Höpfl notes that ‘the linguistic habit of using the -ism suffix to denote doctrines or the complex of a doctrine and its partisans’ originated in the early 1500s and was ‘not infrequently employed’ from the middle of the sixteenth century (1983, pp. 3, 1).
violence being described in these terms to indicate how the early moderns would have thought about it. Nevertheless, if we consider terrorism to be a particular form of political violence with certain characteristics, we can look back at the early modern period and recognise it in action.

According to Robert Young, ‘the strategies [of terrorism] have remained remarkably consistent through the centuries’ (2009, p. 309); we already saw Friedlander’s statement that ‘terrorism has always existed in one form or another’ (1983, p. 135). Although I agree with these assessments, this does not mean contemporary notions of terrorism should unquestioningly be applied to the early modern period. Among other things, the early moderns had very different ideas about power, the state and the legitimate use of violence, which all factor into our understanding of how terrorism works, how we engage with it and how we represent it. Sensitivity to such differences is necessary in order to avoid working anachronistically. At the same time, early modern ideas about the uses and dangers of terror and terrorism were by no means unified or straightforward. The debate about terrorism was just as open to internal complexities and contradictions in the early modern period as it is currently. Furthermore, many of the questions the early moderns asked about terrorism – about its legitimacy and its effectiveness – are equally relevant to us today. Even though there are differences, then, the nature of the debate is surprisingly similar. Although much recent scholarship on the early modern period rightly emphasises how different it was from our own, it’s equally important not to lose sight of the overlaps that do exist.

There are a couple of important factors that impact how we might think about terrorism in the early modern period. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, terror is a different experience today than it was for the early moderns. As chapter two will show in greater detail, we fear different things than the early moderns did, and we have a different relationship to fear in general. Western societies today are very risk-managed, and possibly because of that, also more risk-averse; we are used to being in control to a much greater extent than the early moderns were. As Townshend remarks on contemporary terrorism, it operates precisely by playing on the deep-seated public need for, and anxiety about, security of life and property. As a threat to the safety of the state, terrorism is implausible if not absurd; but as a challenge to the state’s monopoly of force and the broader sense of public security, it is acutely effective. It is no coincidence that terrorism has flourished most spectacularly in a modern Western world which since the 19th century had achieved an unprecedented level of public security, together with dependence on an extremely complex infrastructure (2018, p. 116).

People in the early modern period had less ‘security of life and property’ and often knew all too well what losing their possessions or their lives could entail, since these were at risk with some frequency
from threats including (civil) warfare, rebellion, violent crime, natural disasters and disease (Naphy and Roberts, 1997, pp. 2–4). They valued order and stability highly, and they could fear terrorism and violence in general as threats to that order and stability, just as we do. Overall, however, the early moderns probably had a much more concrete picture of what such a loss of security would mean to them personally than people do today, when most of us are simply not exposed to such risks. Our experience of fear can thus be very different from that of the early moderns, even when we fear similar things.13

Furthermore, how terror can be used instrumentally depends partly on the structure of society. Both state and resistance terrorism, therefore, have to work differently in a modern liberal democracy than in an early modern (absolute) monarchy. Contemporary terrorists often aim to effect change by keeping up a constant stream of attacks in the assumption that the violence will eventually reach a tipping point. The IRA, for example, used this strategy in the hope the British people would pressure their government into withdrawing their troops. Democratic governments need to represent their people, so if the majority of citizens makes a demand, the government should (at least theoretically) act accordingly if it wants to retain its legitimacy. This was not the case in pre-democratic England. While it would be wrong to suggest the early moderns had no political agency whatsoever, theirs was considerably more limited than that of their twenty-first-century counterparts. A terrorist would be better off trying to coerce those in power directly, rather than attempt to have citizens do the coercing for them by applying pressure on their government. That said, public pressure is an occasionally observable force in early modern society; there are examples of both strategies in the chapter on resistance terrorism.

It should also be taken into account that, unlike a contemporary liberal democracy, the early modern state was to some extent repressive by policy. How this should translate into an appropriate consideration of state terrorism in the early modern period is subject to debate. Appelbaum argues we should only speak of ‘state terrorism’ when there is ‘a body of government agents engaging in

13 This is where the concept of ‘mentalities’ is useful – much like discourse, mentalities shape how people interpret the world around them. A difference in mentality means people work with ‘different assumptions, different perceptions, and a different “logic” – at least in the philosophically loose sense of different criteria for justifying assertions – reason, authority, experience and so on’ (Burke, 1997, p. 165). The mentalities approach is more ‘disinterested’ than discourse, however, because it considers belief systems to be ‘relatively innocent and autonomous’ rather than explicitly shaped by power and interests (Burke, 1997, p. 173). Although Burke notes that it ‘is not easy to combine what might be described as the “innocent” and the “cynical” views of thought’ (1997, p. 176) – i.e., discourse and mentalities both have something to offer in the discussion around terrorism. Since terrorism is explicitly concerned with political and ideological views, I have opted to approach it first and foremost from the ‘interested’ angle of discourse. However, mentalities undoubtedly also play a role in how terrorism is shaped and was shaped historically – emotional experience and the experience of terror, as my section on the affective turn will show, are shaped by mentalities.
terrorist violence in special circumstances for the sake of a symbolic political gain’ (2015a, p. 16), which is different from the repressive legal violence many governments of the period employed as a matter of policy and/or custom. Townshend, on the other hand, sees a different distinction: ‘running through any account of state terror is the tension between “terror” as a semi-random by-product of massive repressive violence, and terrorism as a deliberately focused product of demonstrative violence’ (2018, p. 52, emphasis original). Although he is talking about contemporary terrorism here, this is certainly a consideration worth bearing in mind when thinking about early modern state terrorism. At the same time, it’s not entirely clear at which point ‘demonstrative violence’, which counts as terrorism, scales up to ‘massive repressive violence’, which merely causes terror.

Appelbaum’s idea of judging an action by its (il)legality doesn’t necessarily clarify things either – public executions were certainly legal, but, I would argue, were also intended to function as a form of terrorism. Clearly, legal violence can still exhibit all six characteristics of terrorism set out above.

Identifying state terrorism in the early modern period is a process that requires careful consideration on a case-by-case basis. Following my characterisation of terrorism, however, I believe it is appropriate to consider most forms of public, violent punishment that were used by the early modern state as state terrorism – I will go into this topic in more detail in chapter three.

Another difference between contemporary and early modern experiences of terrorism lies in our differing attitudes to violence, and how much we expect to encounter or be protected from it. A liberal democracy derives its legitimacy not only from its accurate representation of the wishes of its people, but also from its success in protecting its citizens from violence (Khilnani, 1993, p. 357). The idea that this is one of the basic duties of the state is not a modern one, as is made clear by comments from a variety of early modern political thinkers on the sovereign’s responsibility to their citizens – the early modern state too was expected to do this to some extent. I say ‘to some extent’, however, because the early modern period was a transitional one in terms of its attitude to legitimate violence. The idea of the state as an entity with duties towards its citizens was still new, as was the notion that the state should have a monopoly on legitimate violence (Thorup, 2012, pp. 39–40; Ruff, 2001, pp. 44–45). As such, violence was much more a normal part of everyday life for the early moderns; being subjected to violent punishment, taking revenge for injustice done to family members, protecting property from thieves or being pressed into military service were not

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14 The difference being that demonstrative violence is primarily about the message, whereas repressive violence is primarily instrumental, although it, of course, also communicates.

15 The sources I have drawn on include Hobbes’s Leviathan (1651, written c.1642-1651); Lipsius’s Politicorum Sive Civilis Doctrinae Libri Sex, published in English as Six Bookes of Politicks (1594, written in 1589); and Bodin’s Les Six Livres de la République, published in English as The Six Bookes of a Commonweale (1606, written in 1576).
uncommon experiences, and early modern men in particular were liable to both commit and be the victim of violence. In the twenty-first century, we have a much narrower range of scenarios where violence is considered acceptable, and on a day-to-day basis many of us do not expect to encounter it. Violent situations which would have been quite unremarkable to the early moderns, such as a disobedient child being beaten by a schoolteacher, are typically considered to be much more traumatic today. What counts as terror-violence, therefore, has to be different between the early modern period and now. Furthermore, being more insulated against violence as people generally are today, the inability of the state to prevent its citizens from falling victim to violence is a much greater blow to its legitimacy. This is especially so with unprovoked violence, which is how terrorism is often experienced by its victims. In the early modern period, on the other hand, citizens would not necessarily expect this protection from the state to the same extent. In fact, as plays like A Larum for London and Two Lamentable Tragedies make clear, people were considered to have a certain responsibility themselves in making sure they did not become victims of (terrorist) violence.

A final factor to consider is that in the early modern period religion and politics were so closely interwoven that political violence was necessarily also religious, and vice versa. Considering the prevalence of secular states today, contemporary terrorism – even religiously-inspired contemporary terrorism – operates in a very different ideological landscape. I suggested earlier that terrorism works on the basis of a belief in human intervention in society, but this was certainly not a notion everyone subscribed to in the early modern period. Divine will and divine agency were invoked regularly to justify or condemn violence. The legitimacy of human intervention often only went as far as it was considered to be ‘divinely inspired’ and this was, of course, difficult to determine. Whereas most people today consider it self-evident that we can and should attempt to change the world for the better, for the early moderns this was certainly not a given. Acts of terrorism could be delegitimised purely on the basis that they constituted human intervention in the ‘divine plan’. This also meant early modern terrorism could be understood to literally come from God – God working through a Jesuit assassin to destroy Protestantism, or God working through a Protestant to bring down the Catholic church, for example. The devil was considered equally capable of inspiring people to undertake violent action. So, whereas in today’s more secular

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16 For quantitative data, see Eisner (2003) on violent crime in general – especially pp. 109-112 on female participation and pp. 118-119 on female victimisation – and Roth (2001) on homicide. It should be noted that there are some methodological challenges to the quantitative approach, however (Eisner, 2003, pp. 86–87).
17 See also Thomas Beard’s interpretations of a wide range of violent events in The Theatre of Gods judgements. Beard considered Christopher Marlowe’s death to be ‘just desert’ for his supposed atheism and a sign of divine providence: ‘The manner of his death being so terrible [...] that it was not only a manifest signe of Gods judgement, but also an horrible and fearefull terrour to all that beheld him’ (Chassanion and Beard, 1597, sigs. K5r–K5v). In other words, Marlowe’s death was a manifestation of God’s exemplary terrorism.
societies we are scared of the terrorists themselves, the early moderns also feared the forces operating ‘through’ the terrorist. A successful terrorist attack could be interpreted by those on its receiving end as a battle won by Satan in the eternal fight between good and evil, but also as a punishment from God. A strike against a state, such as the assassination of a monarch, could even mean the state was delegitimised, since God was not on its side.\(^\text{18}\) On the other hand, the spectacular public execution of a traitor or heretic could be seen as a sign of God’s favour towards the state or church.\(^\text{19}\) The concept of divine providence – which envisioned God as ‘an assiduous, energetic deity who constantly intervened in human affairs’ and whose ‘finger could be discerned behind every inexplicable occurrence’ – played an essential role in this, providing the early moderns with an ‘invisible prism which helped them to focus the refractory meanings of both petty and perplexing events’ (Walsham, 1999, pp. 2–3). Fear could therefore not only be inspired by the violence itself, but also by what it ‘meant’. It was essential to correctly interpret violent events as signs – and what the ‘correct interpretation’ was depended heavily on one’s religious persuasion. Of course, not every act of violence was considered to result from divine or satanic intervention, but it certainly lay within the realm of possibility.

With all these caveats in place, however, it is still apparent all six characteristics of terrorism I have mentioned are reflected in events such as the Gunpowder Plot or the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, both of which I would argue were instances of early modern terrorism. And we will see these characteristics pop up time and time again in the events and plays discussed in this thesis. Some forms of terrorism have a stronger focus on certain aspects than others; I will argue, for example, that rioting employed terror in a very specific way to make it successful, whereas martyrologists relied heavily on polemical warfare, and state terrorism made use of exemplary violence. But alongside these differences, there are enough similarities to argue that terrorism is not just a credible but also a useful angle from which to approach early modern political violence.

\(^{18}\) See Le Mauff (2021) for a discussion on how the concepts of miracles and providence fed into the doctrine of resistance theory and could be used to legitimise tyrannicide.

\(^{19}\) This notion is probably most strikingly dramatised in Cyril Tourneur’s The Atheist’s Tragedy (published in 1611), which ends with the eponymous atheist villain D’Amville accidentally axing himself in the head on the scaffold while preparing to execute the virtuous Castabella and Charlemont.
1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I will set out some of the theoretical underpinnings of my thesis. I focus on two key topics: the relation of my research to the work of Michel Foucault and new historicism; and the basics of affective theory as it relates to the early modern period. In the first section, I will situate my research in the wider field of early modern studies and introduce the concept of ‘the spectacle of the scaffold’, which is crucial to our understanding of early modern terrorism. The second section provides the necessary setup for the next chapter, in which I explore the early modern experience of terror; to understand early modern terrorism we need to understand early modern terror, and to understand early modern terror we need to be aware of how the early moderns conceived of emotional experiences more generally.

Foucault and new historicism

Firstly, my research owes a lot to the work of Michel Foucault. Earlier in this chapter, I already talked about discourse and how it influences the way we conceive of terrorism. My thesis is also influenced by Foucault’s notion of ‘the spectacle of the scaffold’ as described in Discipline and Punish, which is particularly relevant to my chapters on state and resistance terrorism. Public punishment in the early modern period was ‘a political ritual’, one of ‘the ceremonies by which power is manifested’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 47). This manifestation of the sovereign’s power was necessary because it had been injured by the crime, which ‘attacks him [the sovereign] personally, since the law represents the will of the sovereign; it attacks him physically, since the force of the law is the force of the prince’ (1977, p. 47). One of the purposes of the punishment was therefore to repair the monarch’s wounded sovereignty, ‘manifesting it at its most spectacular’ (1977, p. 48) at the scaffold. Foucault speaks of

the physical strength of the sovereign beating down upon the body of his adversary and mastering it: by breaking the law, the offender has touched the very person of the prince; and it is the prince – or at least those to whom he has delegated his force – who seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken. The ceremony of punishment, then, is an exercise of ‘terror’ (1977, p. 49).

In other words, the terror generated by public, violent punishment played an instrumental role in the functioning of the early modern political system. As I will argue throughout, the notion of terror as a legitimate weapon of the sovereign was very important to the practice and justification of early modern terrorism. It not only legitimised the state’s use of terrorism on its subjects, but also heavily influenced the operation of resistance terrorism, since this often appropriated certain aspects of the system of state terrorism to legitimise itself.
Despite the influence of Foucauldian theory on this thesis, my research does not only draw on new historicist work by scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt (2018, 1988, 1980) and Richard Helgerson (1992). Research into early modern power structures and the ways their operation can be read in the drama of the period has obviously been influential in this project, particularly in my analysis of state terrorism. However, the new historicist approach leaves little room for the exploration of resistance to the state, which is just as important if we are to get a balanced overview of the workings of terrorism in the early modern period. The increased interest in the lives of ordinary early modern men and women, and the valuable archival work of social historians such as James Sharpe (1995, 1984) and Andy Wood (2015, 2002, 2001), have revealed how commoners resisted the intrusions of state and church. I therefore also draw on their research, as well as on the work of literary scholars such as Chris Fitter (2011) and Ronda Arab (2011) who are interested in the representation of commoners and their politics on the early modern stage. Older criticism often reads staged depictions of violent resistance to the state as mocking or condemning, and suggests many early modern playwrights heartily disapproved of radical and popular politics. Recent analyses, however, have allowed more complex interpretations of violent rebellion and other forms of resistance on stage.

Furthermore, the general ‘turning away’ from new historicism and toward ‘aspects of “the spiritual”’ (Barry, 2017, p. 306) have contributed to greater interest in the emotional and spiritual lives of the early moderns, leading to a significant revaluation of our understanding of the early modern period. The religious and affective ‘turns’ have prompted research on topics such as the role of religious terror (Stachniewski, 1991); the construction of martyrdom (Monta, 2014, 2005; Dillon, 2003); the experience of religious executions (Anderson, 2016); early modern conceptions of fear (Appelbaum, 2018b; Naphy and Roberts, 1997); and the role of fear on the early modern stage (Mullaney, 2015; Hobgood, 2014). Because this project approaches terrorism not only from the perspective of political theory, but also from this more ‘experiential’ side, all this research has been invaluable.

The affective turn

Since the experience of terror is a key element in my characterisation of early modern terrorism, understanding how the early moderns thought about such emotional experiences is crucial. Scholarship that has emerged from the affective turn shows there are significant differences between modern and early modern conceptions of how emotions work. As Steven Mullaney notes, emotions are ‘culturally inflected’; ‘they are unlocked, learnt, calibrated, developed, and modified in specific times, places, and spaces’ (2015, p. 17). Furthermore, the early modern mentality towards emotion was very different from our own, so early modern ideas about how the emotions worked can easily seem incomprehensible or illogical to us (Burke, 1997, pp. 167–168). These differences
mean that understanding how an emotion like terror was thought about and experienced by the early moderns is challenging, but also vital to this research. I will go deeper into the specific experience of terror in the next chapter; here, I briefly want to set out the basics of early modern ideas about emotion, which are essential to comprehending the early modern relationship with terror, and explain their relevance to the theatre of the period.

Contemporary academics have advanced multiple theories of how the early moderns thought about their emotions. A dominant model was the Galenic interpretation of the four ‘humours’ – blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm – which were understood to influence a person’s emotional state. Ideally, the humours would be balanced; an overabundance of black bile, for example, would cause melancholy, while an excess of yellow bile made someone choleric. Such imbalances might be temporary, resulting in moods, but they could also occur naturally, resulting in an irregular emotional baseline or ‘temperament’. The passions were another important factor in early modern discourse about emotion, but they are less easily defined than the humours. Although there is some disagreement amongst academics today about how we should envision the passions, the consensus is they existed in and influenced both the mind and the body. Unlike the humours, which were distinctly physical, the passions ‘occupied an uneasy borderland between the mental and the bodily, the rational and the physiological, the intellectual and the appetitive’ (Cummings, 1999, p. 26). The experience of emotion was therefore always ‘simultaneously a kind of thinking and a physical event’ (James, 1997, p. 86); together, the humours and the passions shaped how a person was feeling and what their desires or appetites were, thereby influencing how they interacted with the world around them.

Experiencing passions was an unavoidable part of being human, but that didn’t mean the early moderns liked having them. Passions were generally considered to be violent feelings like desire or rage, which could seize upon a person and make them do inadvisable things (Schmitter, 2016). They also posed a risk to one’s health. According to Francis Bacon, the healthy person should ‘Auoid Enuie; Anxious Feares; Anger fretting inwards; Subtill and knottie Inquisitions; loves, and Exhilarations in Excesse; Sadnesse not Communicated’ (1625, p. 188). All this knowledge of how people’s emotions worked (on them) therefore came with the understanding that it was advisable to strive for emotional self-control, even though it was impossible to suppress one’s passions entirely.

Of course, the emotional experience of their audiences was of particular interest to those working in the early modern theatre – and key to this research. This is the point at which our engagement with the passions becomes slightly more complicated. As Bridget Escolme observes, although much of what was written about emotions in the early modern period was negative, audiences still flocked to
the theatres to be entertained by characters indulging in the most dangerous emotional excesses (2014, p. xvi). But theatregoers didn’t come merely to see others experiencing such emotions – they also came to have emotional experiences themselves. Research by scholars like Mullaney (2015), Allison Hobgood (2014) and Gail Kern Paster (2010) suggests the early moderns viewed the passions as a two-way street, ‘an ecological transaction between body and world’ (Hobgood, 2014, p. 13). The relationship between the emotion and the person having that emotion was therefore active rather than passive; a person was not simply ‘seized’ by anger or fear but could to some extent influence if and how they received it. It could then also be passed on to others, either intentionally or accidentally. The passions were ‘catching’ – a phenomenon that early modern playwrights and actors deliberately made use of (Hobgood, 2014, pp. 2, 14) and, as chapter three will show, that exerted influence at the scaffold too.

In his essay on Cato the Younger, Montaigne gives a vivid illustration of this phenomenon when he describes how the playwright, ‘stirred vp […] with a kinde of agitation vnto choler, vnto griefe, vnto hatred, yea and beyond himselfe’, allows his emotion to spread: this agitation ‘doth also by the Poet strike and enter into the Actor, and consecutively by the Actor, a whole auditorie or multitude’ (1603, sig. L4r). Indeed, the concept of affective contagion was an obvious one ‘in a society in which literal fears of infection from plague often shut down the theatres’ (Tribble, 2017, p. 195). Dramatists and actors could employ what Mullaney has termed ‘affective technology’ (2015, p. 23) to their advantage – the next chapter, for example, will discuss how the playwright of A Larum for London facilitates emotional contagion between characters on stage and theatregoers. Evelyn Tribble argues that

the skilled use of gesture could channel passions from the playwright’s words through the actor’s body to the surrounding audience, pushing and pulling spectators through the playworld. Further, this work was done, in the public amphitheatres at least, with the spectators in full view of the stage and, even more importantly, of each other, thus amplifying […] the potential for successful social coordination of the audience in shared intensity (2017, p. 203).

The success of a play was therefore to some extent dependent on theatregoers’ ‘willingness to cede themselves to affective engagement with the stage’ and to risk ‘experiencing a certain amount of involuntary susceptibility to performed passions’ (Hobgood, 2014, p. 93). Even though giving in to emotion could be dangerous, theatregoers still seemed to be prepared to do so. As chapter two will show, the opportunity to have intense emotional experiences was, in fact, one of the things that drew people to the theatre.
On the other hand, playwrights themselves also took risks by making their audiences experience these passions. One of the reasons anti-theatricalists like Stephen Gosson objected to the theatre was that plays ‘with gunshotte of affection gaule the minde, where reason and virtue should rule the roste’ (1579, sig. B7r). Such emotional contagion was considered highly undesirable by the anti-theatricalists (and many others). In large crowds the transmission of a volatile emotion such as anger or fear might lead to dangerous unrest; William Prynne worried plays would ‘enrage the Hearts, and Minds, of Actors, and Spectators; yea, oft times animate, and excite them to Anger, Malice, Duels, Murthers, Revenge, and more then Barbarous crueltie’ (1633, sig. K4v). Commoners in particular were considered to be ‘prone to especially labile passions that overrule judgment’ (Rowe, 2004, p. 172). As Amy Rodgers rightly notes, even proponents of the theatre both celebrated and feared this affective power, since ‘the energies generated when spectators and drama met in the theater were not easily predicted or controlled’ (2018, p. 30). This phenomenon of emotional contagion, with its ability to inspire desirable as well as unwelcome behaviours, is essential to my research – theatre and terrorism both need it to function. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at how terror spreads and what the effects of that ‘infection’ can be; chapters three and four will show how emotional contagion works (or doesn’t) in state and resistance terrorism. And throughout the rest of this thesis, we will see playwrights dramatising the sometimes disastrous consequences of emotional contagion – even while deliberately employing it themselves.

Eric Dunnum has even argued (albeit not always convincingly, in my opinion) that dramatists tried to instruct theatregoers on how to ‘audience’, aiming to turn them into ‘stoic’ and ‘non-reactive’ audience members who ‘sat quietly’ (2019, p. 9) and did not get carried away to the point they would start a playhouse riot that could threaten playwrights’ lives and livelihoods. Dunnum does acknowledge that the potential success of this enterprise would probably have caused playwrights some anxiety: if audience members who acted on their emotions were dangerous, audience members who didn’t experience any emotion would likely not be inclined to return to the theatre (2019, p. 222). There seems to be compelling evidence against Dunnum’s theory – for example, the metatheatrical scenes in and audience reception of The Spanish Tragedy, which Dunnum barely mentions at all. Hobgood, on the other hand, offers a convincing reading of the play as being heavily reliant on active audience engagement (2014, pp. 64–96).
1.3 METHODOLOGIES

This section addresses two topics: why I have chosen to use terrorism as a lens through which to look at early modern drama, and why I have picked the specific plays included in this thesis.

Why terrorism?

Let’s start with the first: what does analysing drama from the angle of terrorism add to the field of early modern studies? As I have already shown earlier in this chapter, terrorism has been a prominent research topic for some time, but the debate about how to define it has, if anything, only become more complicated. Furthermore, relatively little research has been done on historical terrorism, and many studies that propose to discuss the history of terrorism only allocate a handful of chapters to its ‘pre-history’, which covers everything from biblical terrorism until the French Revolution. All this makes a foray into the study of early modern terrorism and its dramatic representations challenging; more so when taking into account that there’s even less existing scholarship on the portrayal of terrorism in literature. As Peter Herman remarks,

literary scholars [...] have been surprisingly reluctant to deal with the topic. [...] indeed, the first book in English devoted to terrorism and literature, came out as late as 1985: Barbara Melchiori’s Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel, and it is telling that the subject had to wait twenty-six years for another scholar to revisit it (2018, p. 4).

Although the events of 9/11 have led to increased interest in the representation of terrorism in literature, many of these studies are focused on contemporary work, so early modern drama rarely makes an appearance. Indeed, the debate sparked by one of the rare exceptions – John Carey’s article on Samson Agonistes, in which he alleges Milton’s Samson ‘is, in effect, a suicide bomber’ (2002, p. 15) – demonstrated the marked reluctance of many literary critics to consider terrorism as a valid or productive lens through which to look at early modern literature.22

In other words, both early modern terrorism and its depiction on stage are highly under-researched. And that needs to change, because ‘there is general agreement that something called terrorism (however variously defined) has long been a major shaping force in the world, and that terrorism today constitutes a major shaping force in both politics and culture’ (Herman, 2018, p. 3). If we only focus our attention on what terrorism looks like today or in the recent past, and on how it is

21 See, for example, Chaliand and Blin (2016), Law (2015, 2009) and Sinclair (2004).
22 See Lieb and Labriola (2006, pp. 203–264) for a number of these less-than-enthusiastic responses. Although I disagree with the authors’ tendency to downplay the relevance of terrorism to early modern literature, I do believe they are right in considering Carey’s argument rather reductive. I would argue Samson is not a suicide bomber because he is not a terrorist in the modern sense – but he may very well be one in the early modern sense.
represented now, we ignore a long history of ideas about the (ab)uses of terror and terrorism. Terrorism, after all, did not suddenly appear out of a vacuum during the French Revolution – it was a recognisable strategy that was already practised by state and sub-state actors alike, albeit under different names. Disregarding this ‘pre-history’ comes at a price, because, as Brad Gregory rightly argues, ‘we cannot understand the character of contemporary realities until and unless we see how they have been and are still being shaped by the distant past’ (2012, p. 15, emphasis original).

The first aim of this thesis is therefore to show a discourse around terrorism existed in the early modern period, which I will do by drawing on a wide range of texts. The works of political and religious thinkers in particular can offer insights into how terrorism was conceived of and employed. My second aim, then, is to establish how certain types of political violence that were common at the time – such as execution, rioting, and assassination – worked as terrorism. But terror itself was not a straightforward notion, nor were the legitimacy or the efficacy of its instrumental use uncontested. This is where drama comes in, since ‘dramatic literature [...] was one of the many generic modes in which political problems and ideas were being thought through in the sixteenth century’ (Majumder, 2019, p. 9). Playwrights recognised that both state and sub-state actors could make strategic use of terror and violence, and reflected on these practices by making them visible on stage. Furthermore, they also employed terror themselves to entertain and influence their audiences. Studying early modern drama from the terror(ism) angle can thus yield insights that, for example, a more general focus on violence would not offer. The final aim of this thesis is therefore to explore how terrorism is represented and interrogated on stage. To this end, I have employed a mixture of literary research, historical research, and textual analysis.

Of course, there is existing literature on violence in the early modern period, and on its representation on stage. Many of the various aspects and incarnations of terrorism I discuss in this thesis have been studied before – but not as forms of terrorism, and therefore also not in relation to one another. This broader approach enables me to explore how terrorism works in a variety of ‘formats’, and to consider how state and resistance terrorism play off one another. It also allows for a wider inclusion of plays and the exploration of different kinds of staged violence. This is particularly useful because different types of violence work differently in terms of their performativity, which naturally affects if and how they can be represented on stage – practicality and costs of staging, potential censoring, audience interest and ability to inspire terror are all elements that playwrights needed to take into consideration and that could vary greatly between, say, a state-mandated beheading, a riot and an assassination. Looking at a wider variety of violent events, and their staging, will ultimately give a more inclusive and nuanced picture of how the early moderns thought about
and engaged with terrorism, rather than concentrating on, for example, state terrorism or assassination only.

**Existing research and play selection**

There is some prior research into early modern terrorism that looks at the drama of the period. The only book-length study of the subject is Appelbaum’s *Terrorism Before the Letter* (2015a), which mainly focuses on exploring the rhetorical dimensions of early modern terrorism. Applying Kenneth Burke’s model of the ‘dramatistic pentad’, Appelbaum argues that terrorism is a form of communication that can only be understood by analysing its five rhetorical components: act, agent, scene, agency and purpose. The same author has also written several articles and book chapters on this topic (2018a; 2015b), as well as an insightful article on the various types of fear in Shakespeare’s work (2018b). The most popular topic within the very small field, however, is *Macbeth’s* engagement with the Gunpowder Plot – David Roberts (2021), Peter Herman (2014), and Graham Holderness and Brian Loughrey (2011) have all commented on this, although coming to very different conclusions: Holderness and Loughrey claim the play endorses Stuart absolutism, while Herman states *Macbeth* complicates the idea of legitimate versus illegitimate violence. Roberts, meanwhile, makes the intriguing suggestion the play places its audiences ‘in silent communion with the terrorist’ (2021, p. 178). Anthony Kubiak argues in *Stages of Terror* that theatre is part of the civilising process and that it uses terror on its audiences ‘as a means of sociopolitical conditioning’ (1991, p. 16) – in other words, that theatre functions as terrorism; his study includes short analyses of *Othello*, *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Daniel Gerould devotes a few pages to the representation of Tudor state terrorism in Marlowe and Shakespeare in his chapter of *Terrorism and Modern Drama* (1990). This is, as far as I’m aware, the extent of scholarship specifically aimed at exploring the representation of early modern terrorism in early modern drama; these works particularly informed my thinking in the early stages of my research and helped me determine the scope of my project.

Aside from these works, there is also some scholarship on the relation between contemporary terrorism and early modern drama. A notable recent example is Islam Issa’s *Shakespeare and Terrorism* (2021), which traces how terrorist leaders and regimes in recent history have either embraced or distanced themselves from Shakespeare’s work. Issa does also discuss terrorism in relation to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* more generally, but while his reading of *Hamlet* is not specifically contemporary, it’s not specifically early modern either; meanwhile, his short discussion of *Macbeth* mostly recaps the research mentioned above. Such work, although interesting, therefore contributes

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23 Other academics have also discussed the subject, but the works listed here are the only ones that explicitly treat the Gunpowder Plot as an act of terrorism and discuss how this manifests itself in the play.
little to our understanding of terrorism in the early modern period itself. Clearly, then, there is plenty of room for further research into the representation of early modern terrorism in the drama of the period, particularly since much of the existing work focuses on Shakespeare. I have therefore selected a variety of canonical and non-canonical plays for this study. My research includes some plays that are frequently studied for their representation of political violence, but not as terrorism – *Julius Caesar* is an example in this category. Other works, such as *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, draw critical attention for other features than their depictions of political violence. And I have also selected some plays, like *A Larum for London*, which are studied very rarely at all. After all, plays that fall outside the conventional canon can equally offer valuable insights into the preoccupations of playwrights and their audiences, and into theatrical culture more broadly.

I wanted to give a wide overview of ways in which ideas about terror and terrorism were discussed in and disseminated through early modern drama. Apart from looking at their canonical status, I have therefore also chosen plays that together present a more eclectic picture than a focus on, for example, a single (celebrity) playwright would yield. This study includes plays from Ben Jonson’s academically inclined *Sejanus* to the popular material of *Two Lamentable Tragedies* and *A Larum for London*. There are box office successes, like *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, as well as shows that were hissed off stage, like *Sejanus*. Some plays ran into difficulties with the Master of the Revels: *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* and possibly *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* were heavily censored, while *Sir Thomas More* perhaps never made it to the stage at all. Others, like *2 Henry VI*, seem to have experienced surprisingly smooth sailing.  

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24 The question of how theatrical censorship worked in Elizabethan and Jacobean England remains a topic of debate. Annabel Patterson has influentially argued that writing in the period was characterised by a ‘functional ambiguity’ (1984, p. 18); there was a tacit agreement between writers and the authorities that the censor would not intervene too harshly, as long as writers were appropriately circumspect about the language they used. The hot political topics of the day, although strictly speaking off limits, could then be addressed, provided ‘the fictional veiling was adequate’ (Dutton, 2018, p. 382). Indeed, according to Richard Dutton, the censor tended to be on the lookout for material that was ‘immediately provocative rather than potentially subversive’ (2018, p. 383 emphasis original). Whether this resulted in a theatre that was effectively politically powerless, actually quite powerful, or somewhere in between remains the subject of disagreement. With the limited archival evidence available today and the impossibility of assessing how much (or how little) plays were already self-censored by the time they got to the Master of the Revels, it is very difficult to say how much influence censorship had on the drama of the period. What is certain is that the nature and intensity of censorship was constantly shifting, influenced by ‘changes in religious, domestic, and foreign policy’ as well as by ‘the ascendency of particular factions at court’ (Clare, 2011, p. 290). While censorship practices in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign became increasingly repressive, they relaxed shortly after James’ accession, before becoming more restrictive once again after a number of theatrical scandals had occurred (Dutton, 2018, p. 384). Even though much of the ‘edgy’ early Jacobean drama was written for companies that were now under royal patronage, playwrights also had to appeal to audiences outside of court, and those audiences ‘evidently wanted plays which were satirically and politically audacious’ (Clare, 1999, p. 15); commercial interests and censorship requirements could therefore pull at the dramatist in opposite directions. Ultimately, it is clear that censorship impacted early modern drama in a variety of changing ways throughout the period, and that
Shakespeare and John Fletcher, who were first and foremost playwrights; by jobbing writers like Anthony Munday and Thomas Dekker; and by enthusiastic amateurs like Robert Yarington. Some of the plays are collaborative efforts, some are by an individual author. In other words, terror and terrorism were not ‘elite’ concerns that only worried those who wrote or read political treatises – these preoccupations also found expression elsewhere, including in the popular entertainment of the early modern theatre, where the discourse around terrorism was widespread.

What all these plays have in common is that they consider dilemmas and concerns about the instrumental use of terror, either by those acting on behalf of the monarch or those trying to undermine the state. Of course, as Escolme has argued, we need to tread carefully when we focus on the representation of social anxieties on stage; the commercial theatre existed to attract audiences who most likely did not attend plays ‘primarily to be made to feel anxious’ (2014, p. xxvi). That said, the frequency with which early modern plays engage with the major concerns of their time certainly seems to indicate an appetite among theatregoers to see such topics being tackled on stage. Furthermore, as this thesis will demonstrate, the experience of ‘negative’ emotions like fear and terror could have an attraction as well; the early moderns did perhaps not attend the theatre primarily to feel anxious or fearful, but it seems they didn’t hate it either.25 Commercially savvy playwrights, after all, did create ‘works that ratchet up emotional energies in what was evidently a carefully contrived effort to dismantle the composure of those who read, watched, or listened’ (Marshall, 2002, p. 2).

My selection of plays was informed firstly by topic, and secondly by my wish to present a broad overview of outputs, as explained above; I did not first decide on a specific period, and then pick plays within those dates. However, this way of selecting still rendered plays from quite a limited period: from the early 1590s (2 Henry VI) to 1620 (The Virgin Martyr). Furthermore, the fifty-something plays I considered overall produce a date range that’s not much wider, running from circa 1587 (The Spanish Tragedy) to 1626 (The Roman Actor). I don’t mean to imply terrorism wasn’t a

25 A cursory look at more recent theatre history reveals an equally complicated picture, with genres such as Grand Guignol and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty which deliberately attempt to discompose their audiences. Theatregoers today are also quite prepared to expose themselves to risk and negative emotional experiences. See, for example, Lucy Bailey’s 2006 and 2014 productions of Titus Andronicus at Shakespeare’s Globe, which became famous for causing so many audience members to faint or feel sick at every performance (Clark, 2014). Or the immersive productions created by Punchdrunk, where actors perform actions on randomly selected audience members that can include anything from kissing them or proposing to them, to locking them in cupboards or throttling them with walking sticks. When I attended Punchdrunk’s New York production of Sleep No More in 2016, I was ‘fortunate’ enough to watch Macbeth’s hanging at the end of the play while being choked (quite gently, it has to be said) by the actor playing Macduff.
concern either before or after this period, or that plays outside these dates do not engage with terrorism. However, it does seem clear that people in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were particularly preoccupied with the use of terrorism in its various early modern guises, and that this preoccupation frequently found expression in the theatre, which was very productive and very popular at this time. Between the insecurities about the Elizabethan succession, Jacobean absolutism, religious upheaval, and the general unrest of the 1590s, this particular period provided fertile ground for the use of terrorism and the questioning thereof, both in real life and on stage.
1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis consists of four more chapters. In the next chapter, chapter two, I focus on early modern ideas about terror. I analyse a range of early modern texts for their usage of the word ‘terror’ to establish what characterises the emotional experience of terror, and I explore how terror can work productively or disruptively on an individual as well as on a wider, societal level. I discuss how and why playwrights tried to inspire terror in their audiences. Finally, I analyse two plays – *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* and *A Larum for London* – to show how the double-sided nature of terror is represented on stage.

In chapter three we move on to the instrumental uses of terror – i.e., terrorism – by the early modern state. In this chapter, I show that two dominant theories in early modern political thought, reason of state and divine right, could both be used to legitimise the use of terrorism by the state. Neither of these strands of thought was uncontroversial, however, and some of the anxieties surrounding the use of terrorism as approved by reason of state and divine right theory are visible in the plays I explore in these sections: *Sejanus* and *Sir Thomas More*. This chapter also looks at the ways state terrorism was put into practice via the judicial system, particularly through public, violent punishment and execution. I explore its representation on stage in two further plays, *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* and *Two Lamentable Tragedies*.

Chapter four in many ways mirrors chapter three: it focuses on various types of violent resistance from below and explores how these, too, can work as terrorism. In the first section of this chapter, I look at resistance theory and its legitimisation of tyrannicide, and explore how the arguments for and against assassination are debated in *Julius Caesar*. Next, I argue that martyrdom – although ostensibly an entirely passive form of resistance – can also be seen as terrorism, a point of view that is present in *The Virgin Martyr*. The last section of this chapter looks at rioting and analyses its representation in *2 Henry VI*, where it becomes apparent that early modern riots could be surprisingly orderly and still work as terrorism.

Finally, in the conclusion I explore how several twenty-first-century reimaginings of early modern plays engage with modern-day terrorism. Although there are many differences between early modern and contemporary terrorism, the concerns the early moderns had about the use of terrorism are often surprisingly similar to ours. In the hands of twenty-first-century theatremakers, early modern drama can therefore still meaningfully contribute to the debate around terrorism today.
CHAPTER 2: ‘TERRORS, BOYLINGS, & CONUULSIONS’: THE FEELING AND FUNCTIONS OF EARLY MODERN TERROR

As I have argued in the introduction, terror is an integral part of terrorism; to understand how terrorism works, then, we first need to know more about terror. The early modern experience of terror is therefore the focus of this chapter. While the early moderns conceived of any intense emotional experience as potentially dangerous, terror came with its own particular challenges. I will first set out the qualities of this emotion in my characterisation of early modern terror. Next, I will discuss how terror could promote both order and disorder in early modern society, making it a particularly complex and precarious force. Playwrights, too, thought about the uses of terror: not only did they explore the instrumental use of terror by state and sub-state actors in their plays, but they also tried to inspire various kinds of terror in their audiences to educate and entertain. In other words, terror could be a dramatic function that enhanced their work as well as relevant and timely subject matter. The section on terror on the early modern stage will explore how terror functioned in the theatre, after which I will move on to analyses of The Life and Death of Jack Straw and A Larum for London. Both plays link terror to order and to disorder, thereby showing terror functioning as a multivalent force in society. As both works demonstrate, it can be very difficult to employ a volatile emotion like terror productively. The two playwrights engage with the topic differently: the playwright of Jack Straw seems somewhat sceptical of the usefulness of terror in maintaining order, while the writer of A Larum clearly feels there is such a thing as productive terror and even attempts to inspire it in his audiences himself. Nevertheless, both plays complicate the idea of terror as a reliable force for good in ways that reflect some of the period’s social anxieties and dilemmas around the instrumental use of terror.

2.1 THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF TERROR

Although the affective turn in early modern studies has given rise to an impressive number of studies on people’s emotional lives in the period, curiously little attention has been paid to terror as an early modern emotion. While fear in general has garnered a fair bit of scholarly interest, the word ‘terror’ is often used in these studies simply as a (near) synonym for fear. Furthermore, much of the work that has been done so far on early modern fear is focused on objects of fear and mitigation strategies. Aside from Appelbaum’s discussion of concepts of fear (2018b), there is a useful essay by Stephanie Tarbin on productive and disruptive fears in the early modern household (2015); I have not discovered any other works attempting to explore the various types of fear the early moderns experienced, and how these can be defined or distinguished from one another. Many authors, despite their awareness of the difficulty of ‘translating’ emotion from one time to another, seem to
consider the meaning and experience of fear and terror to be self-evident. Works such as Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction (Broomhall, 2017) and Gothic Renaissance: A Reassessment (Bronfen and Neumeier, 2014) frequently talk about both fear and terror without defining or exploring them as distinct emotions. That said, some of the existing research into early modern fear has been very useful for this project; while fear and terror are not the same, they are undoubtedly related. This chapter builds on some of the findings of scholars such as Peter Marshall (1997), who has explored different types of religious fear. (In the rest of this chapter, ‘fear’ is therefore used when this was the term employed in the original research.)

Characterising early modern terror from a twenty-first-century vantage point is tricky; as is the case with other emotions, when we talk about terror today, it’s not necessarily the same thing the early moderns would have meant. In Appelbaum’s words,

our own common discourses of fear and similar phenomena have been affected by conditions unknown and unforeseeable by Shakespeare, ranging from the invention of nuclear weaponry to the development of cognitive science, not to mention the evolution of the English language. Our minds are attuned to fear in many new ways. We may or may not have more to fear today – after all, if we can fear nuclear war, terrorism, cybercrime, environmental catastrophe and the human immunodeficiency virus, early moderns could fear the Apocalypse. They could fear hell. They could fear hunger and invasion. They could fear military disasters. They could fear the plague and many other diseases for which there was no effective cure. But whether or not we have more to fear, we have many different objects of fear, and different ways of accounting for it (2018b, p. 1).

Out of the various concepts of fear Appelbaum addresses, terror is probably the one where the biggest interpretative gap has opened up between the early modern period and now. After the French Reign of Terror, the terrorist ‘waves’ of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the War on Terror and the threats of Islamist and far-right terrorism, the term ‘terror’ carries a heavy connotative load today. Still, as the characterisation I offer below shows, there are continuities as well as differences in the experience of terror over time.

**Characterising terror**

As discussed in the introduction, Webel identifies six characteristics of the modern experience of terror, which include feeling overwhelmed, experiencing anxiety and fearing for one’s life (2004, pp. 87–88). These qualities are not unique to the experience of terror in the twentieth or twenty-first century; a look through the texts that come up on EEBO after searching for the word ‘terror’ will

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1 See page 10, above, for the complete list.
quickly render examples of each of these characteristics. However, whereas today terror is overwhelmingly seen as a strictly negative experience – quite possibly because of its association with terrorism – in the early modern period it was a more complex, multivalent emotion. To the original audiences attending Marlowe’s *The Massacre at Paris*, the phrase ‘The terrour of this happy victory’ (1594, sig. C3v) would have made perfect sense, for example, but it seems unlikely a playwright today would use such a description. In the section below, I set out the key characteristics and associations of terror as an early modern emotion.

Contemporary dictionaries often define terror as a heightened state of fear: the *OED* speaks of ‘being terrified or extremely frightened’. A look at the uses of ‘fear’ versus ‘terror’ on *EEBO* suggests that in the early modern period too, ‘terror’ was often used to denote a more specific feeling than ‘fear’, which seems to have had a more general application. ‘Fear’ appears more than twice as often in texts published between 1590 and 1620; *EEBO* lists 4,016 mentions of ‘fear’, compared to 1,881 occurrences of ‘terror’. While both words predominantly occur in religious writing, ‘fear’ is used in a much greater variety of texts, including ‘lighter’ genres such as satire and songs. Plays also appear in the top ten for both words, but there are telling differences: ‘terror’ is used more often in tragedies than in comedies (23 and 13 respectively), whereas the opposite is true for ‘fear’ (which appears in 41 comedies versus 27 tragedies). When the two words are used together, it is often in an enumeration of fear-emotions. Mary Sidney’s translation of *Antonius*, for example, describes a city as ‘Opprest with terror, horror, seruile feare’ (Garnier, 1595, sig. B4r). But at other times, there appears to be an escalation from fear to terror. According to Robert Burton, terrors are dangerous because ‘of all feares they are most pernitious and violent’ (1621, sigs. N1v–N2r); in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola speaks of ‘all our feare, / (Nay all our terrour)’ of death (Webster, 1623, sig. D2r). In the early modern period, then, terror already suggested a more intense and specific experience than fear.

Etymologically speaking, terror is the kind of fear that makes you tremble (Cavarero, 2009, pp. 4–5). This association can be found in early modern writing, for example in Shakespeare’s *The Rape of...“

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2 Two texts, for example, mention people experiencing ‘terror and anxiety’; ten works describe people being ‘overwhelmed by terror’. These numbers, and all the others in this section, resulted from a search on 22 October 2021 for texts published between 1590 and 1620; the caveat is, of course, that not all works on *EEBO* are digitised and therefore searchable.

3 Especially because it’s not just the meaning of ‘terror’ that has shifted – ‘happy’ had different connotations at the time as well (*OED*).

4 ‘Fearful’ also occurs more frequently than ‘terrible’, but that is not an entirely fair comparison, since ‘fearful’ could mean both ‘frightened’ and ‘frightening’ in the early modern period (*OED*), whereas ‘terrible’ only meant the latter. In fact, ‘terrible’ appears almost as often as ‘terror’, which seems to confirm the early modern experience of terror was particularly bound up with who or what caused the feeling of terror – more on this below.
Lucrece, where Tarquin speaks of his ‘trembling terror’ (231). Both in the early modern period and today, the word terror is therefore often used to describe threats to one’s life and limb. The feeling of terror is caused by an external object, like a person or phenomenon, which can also be called ‘a terror’. It’s in this understanding early modern writers often employed the word (Appelbaum, 2018b, pp. 8–9). A search on EEBO results in a great number of texts describing people as terrors to their enemies, for example.

Here terror becomes connected to ‘awe’ (or sometimes ‘wonder’), words which in early modern writing are often linked with the overwhelming experience of being subjected to a great power. Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of ‘cosmic terror’ evokes the same combination: it is ‘the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful’, a fear ‘of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force’ (1965, p. 335). It is also often a double-sided feeling; in the words of Terry Eagleton, ‘terror begins as a religious idea, [...] and religion is all about deeply ambivalent powers which both enrapture and annihilate’ (2005, p. 2). This is the kind of terror Shakespeare associates with the crown when he has Hal promise in 2 Henry IV to ‘with awe and terror kneel to it’ (4.3.304); or that Bodin speaks of when he remarks that the use of ‘crueltie keepeth men in feare and awe, & bringeth a terrour [‘une terreur’] vpon the subiects’ (1606, sig. 2N4v). It is also the kind Dekker invokes with ‘the Terror, State, and Wonder’ of ‘Heauens Supreme Monarch’ (1620, sig. B3v).

*Shakespeare’s Words* defines terror as ‘the power to inspire dread’ and describes dread in turn both as something frightening and something ‘deeply honoured, held in awe’, as in the commonly used phrase ‘my dread Lord’ (Crystal and Crystal, 2004). Such terror can also be invoked to describe the powers of nature; an example is Bolingbroke’s declaration that

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King Richard and myself should meet
With no less terror than the elements
Of fire and water (3.3.53–55).
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5 Bradley Irish observes the word ‘dread’ is a so-called ‘Janus word’, since it ‘encompasses its own opposition’ (2019, p. 232). The same can be said for ‘terror’, which can also adhere to both the feared object and to the person experiencing the fear caused by this object.

6 Of the 1,881 works that use the word ‘terror’, 1,685 also mention ‘enemy’. While not all these texts contain a variation on the ‘terror to the enemy’ descriptor, the fact that the two words appear together so frequently is certainly suggestive.

7 Terror and awe are also combined in the idea of ‘the sublime’. Although mostly associated with Romanticism, recently some scholars have posited the concept is also relevant to the early modern period. See, for example, Corcoran and Di Carlo (2021), Hörnqvist (2021) and Cheney (2018).

8 Dread is the fear variant most comparable to terror; Appelbaum’s conceptualisations of dread and terror share many features (2018b, pp. 8–9), while Irish appears to consider them to be the same thing (2018, pp. 141–143).
Finally, in this context terror might also apply to the supernatural, as when Bussy D’Ambois notes that Monsieur’s glories make him ‘terrible, like enchaunted flames’ (Chapman, 1607, sig. F4r). Terror thus often combines fear and reverence for a great, overwhelming power that is monumental and magnificent, but also alarming and dangerous.

The experience of terror – both in the early modern period and today – often also involves a sense of fearful anticipation: one expects something terrible to happen (or happen again) at a future point.\(^9\) This aspect of terror can make terrorism particularly impactful; in Young’s words, the experience of terror is intimately entangled with a logic of an anticipated repetition, in which how it was will turn out to be repeated once more in the future. Terror looks forward, fueled by the explosion of history, its imagination grasping the future. The anticipation [...] of ominous things to come merges with the memory of the real from the past (2009, p. 309).

This feeling is present when Dekker speaks of the ‘terror and cruelty of the Plague’ (1630, sig. B3r), for example. But such anticipation can also apply to events one hasn’t experienced before. One of the most obvious and prominent among these, in the early modern period as well as today, is death. \textit{The Duchess of Malfi}’s Bosola expresses this fearful anticipation poignantly when he remarks that

\begin{quote}
Though we are eaten vp of lice, and wormes,  
And though continually we beare about vs  
A rotten and dead body, we delight  
To hide it in rich tissew all our feare,  
(Nay all our terrour) is, least our Phisition  
Should put vs in the ground, to be made sweete (Webster, 1623, sig. D2r).
\end{quote}

Another companion term that helps to characterise terror is panic. Cavarero argues that

\begin{quote}
if terror, as its etymology indicates, alludes to fear as a physical state, collective panic is an essential figure of it. You could even say that collective panic brings the physics of terror to complete fulfilment, inasmuch as it forces bodies to turn the very violence that, sweeping them along in the rush of flight, has transformed them into a killing machine against one another (2009, pp. 5–6).
\end{quote}

In his essay on fear, Montaigne makes the same association when he describes the ‘Panike terror’\(^10\) of soldiers fleeing the battlefield (1613, sig. D2v). A person experiences terror when they anticipate something bad might happen to them due to an external force or situation they cannot control;
people react often, although not always, with panic. Thomas Nashe invokes this aspect of terror when he explains that ‘Nothing confounds like to suddaine terror, it thrusts euerie sense out of office’ (1594a, sig. D2r). As Cavarero’s use of ‘collective’ indicates, emotional contagion plays an important role here. Early modern texts frequently illustrate how quickly terror spreads among crowds and armies, even to the extent that the mere sight of a person with a particularly fearsome reputation can set off waves of terror. Several vivid examples appear in Philemon Holland’s translation of Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*; the Roman consul Decius, for instance, is said to have carried ‘All terour and feare […] with him as he went’, the effect of which ‘first disordered the ensignes of the Latines in the edge & border of the battaillons, and afterwards entred within forth into the whole armie’ (1600, sig. 2B6r).

Finally, a major change to take into account when analysing usage of ‘terror’ or its adjective ‘terrible’ in early modern texts is that, while ‘terror’ still roughly expresses the same emotional intensity today, the same isn’t necessarily true of ‘terrible’. In early modern writing, ‘terrible’ suggests something frightening, whereas in contemporary English – following the *OED* – it often means ‘exceedingly incompetent’ or ‘very badly behaved’, especially when used to describe a person or group of people. An early modern writer might call an army that inspires terror and scares people ‘a terrible army’; nowadays, a terrible army would more likely mean a group of soldiers who are really bad at their jobs.

Overall, I agree with Appelbaum’s summary that, although terror may simply be an extreme form of fear, there are other important aspects to the experience. Early modern usage of the term often indicates either the ‘lawful terror’ of a great power or ‘a perception of a disturbance in the order of things, a disturbance which cannot be fought against, and probably cannot be fled from either – which is part of what is “terrible” about it’ (Appelbaum, 2018b, p. 9). Appelbaum here neglects to mention that the inability to flee from the object of terror will often not stop people from trying – hence, the panic aspect. As we will see later in this chapter, terror can certainly be paralysing as the definition above suggests, but it can also move people to attempt to avoid the dreaded outcome. Another striking feature that emerges from this overview is that terror can be elicited by ‘good’ powers as well as by ‘bad’ ones. God and the rightful monarch inspire terror, but so do witches, devils, tyrants, death and disease. As the next section will show, this is closely related to the idea that terror can be both productive and disruptive.
2.2 SOCIETAL FUNCTIONS OF TERROR

As discussed in the previous chapter, the passions were considered to be contagious; terror and fear were no exceptions to this rule. While any type of emotional contagion had its risks, ‘catching’ fear came with its own particular dangers since the early moderns believed extreme fear could lead to sickness, insanity and even death. According to Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, fear ‘causeth many times suddaine madnesse, and almost all manner of diseases’ (1621, sig. I3r). Terrors, caused by ‘the apprehension of some terrible object’ were particularly dangerous, since ‘of all feares they are most pernitious and violent, and so suddainely alter the whole temperature of the body, moue the soule and spirits, & strike such a deepe impression, that the parties can never bee recovered’ (Burton, 1621, sigs. N1v–N2r). Burton gives the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre as an example of such a dangerous terror: that event ‘was so terrible and fearfull, that many ran mad, some died, great-bellied women were brought to bed before their time, and generally all affrighted and agast’ (1621, sig. N2r). For the early moderns, therefore, ‘fear-induced diseases and possession were part of normal, comprehensible experience, a world where a fright could be implicitly linked to the onset of other symptoms’ (Gentilcore, 1997, p. 185).

One does not have to look far to find examples of people who literally died of fear. This could be fear in the shape of a sudden fright caused by an external factor: Montaigne talks about a siege in which fear ‘so did choake, seize upon, and freeze the hart of a gentleman, that having received no hurt at all, hee fell downe starke dead vpon the ground before the breach’ (1603, sig. D2r). But ‘death by fear’ could also be self-induced. That frightened anticipation inherent in terror could become so overwhelming that people were said to have terrified themselves to death by endlessly dwelling on harmful things that could befall them, such as catching a dangerous disease; ‘many times by Imagination they produce it’, Burton remarks (1621, sig. P7r). You could even die of terror by mulling over frightening near-misses. Nicolas Coeffeteau, while specifying the various effects of fear, tells the story of

a jew, who hauing by night past a bridge, whereas no man did passe by reason of the danger; who when hee came to thinke of the perill wherein hee had beene, was so surprized with *Feare* and horror as he died (1621, p. 452).

Fear could even prompt people to confess to crimes they had committed. Malcolm Gaskill relates an anecdote from the anonymous 1605 pamphlet *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, in which

a minister allegedly discovered a killer by watching his congregation’s reaction to a sermon on the heinousness of murder. The culprit – an apprentice who had killed his master – was conspicuous since ‘there appeared no such signe of guilt in any as in him, for he sate like one [who] had laine six daies in
a grave’. Finally he confessed, having ‘forced his own tongue by the terror which he pronounced was in Gods judgement to reveale the treason his hand did’ (2000, p. 219).

Even the representation of terror-inspiring events, rather than the actual thing itself, could thus powerfully affect people – an important phenomenon when considering the function of terror in the theatre. Furthermore, Gaskill’s anecdote demonstrates that the early moderns recognised the instrumental uses of terror; despite its disturbing consequences on the individual level, terror could be employed to further religious and political purposes, such as maintaining social order.\(^{11}\) In other words, there is a recognisable early modern discourse about terror and its deliberate uses in service of ideological goals – two of the key characteristics of terrorism. In the rest of this section, I will explore how this purposeful inspiration of terror worked at a societal level.

**Productive terror**

While terror could be dangerous as an individual emotional experience, on a broader level it might be employed productively, since it could promote order by encouraging (or bullying) people into appropriate behaviour. Fear and terror are therefore ambiguous concepts in early modern thought, since they can positively or negatively affect individuals as well as whole societies when they are employed as policy by state and religious authorities. Following Tarbin (2015), I therefore distinguish between productive and disruptive terror. As Shadia Drury observes, the role of terror has long since been a controversial topic in Western political thought, since it is considered to be both the direct opposite of civilisation and a necessary quality for civilisation to exist. In a dualistic worldview,

> the function of civilisation is to impose order on chaos, to conquer the bestial and barbaric, to civilise the savage races, to bring the wicked to their knees, and to smoke the terrorists out of their caves. On this simplistic view, terror and civilisation are deadly enemies that stand in stark opposition to one another (Drury, 2004, p. 131).

Other thinkers argue that terror is necessary for civilisation to exist in the first place, since human beings are so fundamentally flawed they need to be terrorised into good behaviour. Indeed, ‘without the imminent threat of violent death, social order would collapse into violence and chaos; terror keeps our animality at bay’ (Drury, 2004, p. 132). Both these views were influential in early modern thought, existing alongside and in opposition to one another.

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\(^{11}\) Thomas Heywood takes it up a further notch in his *Apology for Actors* (1612, sig. F3v): his argument that theatre can terrorise its audiences into appropriate, law-abiding behaviours is a strategic one, meant to counter the claims of the anti-theatricalists who presented theatre as a force for disorder. Heywood does not only recognise the notion of strategically inspired, productive terror, but also strategically employs this discourse himself.
Terror was often inspired by the confrontation with an overwhelming power in the face of which the individual experiencing the terror felt powerless. The two most obvious examples of entities who could evoke this feeling in the early modern period are the monarch and God. Terror of these superior powers is often depicted in early modern thought as entirely appropriate. The awareness of the superiority of God over his servants or of the monarch over his subjects, coupled with the knowledge that the higher power can punish any offence, encourages people to keep to the appropriate social order and to obey both temporal and religious rules. These two terrors could work separately or combined to preserve or restore order. In *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, for example, Thomas Wright considers terror to be among the forces that ‘further vs to goodnesse’ when we are tempted to disregard our religious or temporal duties:

> Will not the feare of Gods iudgement, whichourely we atten
d to watch and pray, lest we be taken at vnawares? [...] Howe many are withholden from wickednesse, onely thorow terror of temporall punishment, and shall not so many terrors countervaile a fickle and inconstant inclination? (1604, sig. Z1r).

This is what we might call productive terror.

Feeling terror was thus often conceived of as a necessary part of early modern religious and political life. Many scholars have argued terror is an intrinsic part of religion. It certainly features prominently in the Bible and early modern religious writing; Milton’s law-giving God in *Paradise Lost*, for instance, stops speaking directly to the Israelites because

> the voice of God
> To mortal ear is dreadful; they [the Israelites] beseech
> That Moses might report to them his will,
> And terror cease (12.235–238).

Terror is an appropriate emotion for ordinary people, like the Israelites, to feel when directly confronted with God. It plays a particularly important role in early modern Protestantism, where the experience of terror was frequently seen as a precondition of salvation. Luther

> saw despair prior to salvation, based on the recognition of impotence, to be the condition of the reception of grace. Only in this state of abject terror, which he called *Anfechtung*, could the gratuitousness of God’s gift be sincerely apprehended and so appropriated by faith alone (Stachniewski, 1991, p. 18).

And in *Actes and Monuments*, Foxe often focuses on his martyrs’ consciences, where ‘the very salvation of the soul is enacted in fear and trembling’ (Robinson, 2002, p. 58). According to Foxe, the more devout the person, the more uncertain the conscience; the godly therefore often find
themselves ‘terrified & perplexed with small matters, as though they were huge mountains’ and experience ‘terrors, boylings, & conuulsions’ that ‘turmoil’ in their ‘wofull brest’ (1583, sig. 4N4v). The monarch could also be the object of this reverent terror, due to their status as God’s representative and the temporal power they wield. Indeed, Machiavelli argues the mere presence of the ruler inspires powerful emotions that can easily affect even their enemies who have plotted to assassinate them: ‘So great are the majesty and the reverence that accompany the presence of a prince that it is an easy thing for them either to soften or to terrify an executor’ (Machiavelli, 1996, p. 228).

As an ‘instrument of social control’, terror thus played a critical role in early modern life – the fear of punishment after death ‘was essential to restrain the people from sin’ (Marshall, 1997, pp. 159, 154) while the fear of punishment in life deterred people from committing crimes. Besides, the demands made on the English subject by God and the monarch overlapped to a great extent for Church of England Protestants. Subscribers to divine right theory argued the monarch was God’s deputy on earth, so disobeying them also meant disobeying God – a topic I will explore in more detail in chapter three. Murder, theft, adultery and many other practices were crimes as well as sins. Most people ‘would have considered that religion was the law’s inseparable helpmate in the battle against disorder’ (Sharpe, 1984, p. 151). As Corey Robin argues, in the early modern era fear was generally thought of as being shaped by morality, so ‘the good person was one, in that famous Aristotelian formulation, who feared “the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, and at the right time”’ (2006, p. 7). It was the job of the religious and political authorities to make sure people feared the appropriate things, and that they acted upon these fears in the appropriate manner (Robin, 2006, p. 8). Civil war and disorder in general, for example, were to be feared, and the appropriate way of acting on this fear was to submit oneself to the authority of one’s superiors. Terror of God and terror of the monarch – religious terror of damnation and temporal terror of judicial punishment – thus often intermingled to prop up the established order.

As Robin’s quote suggests, however, not all fears were created equal – if you can fear the right way, you can also fear the wrong way. This is already apparent in the Bible itself, which includes many ‘striking monitions to accept and embrace fear’ while simultaneously teaching ‘that the spirit of God was not “a spirit of slavery, to govern you by fear”’ (Marshall, 1997, p. 160). Luther saw the experience of terror as essential to salvation; Calvin argued that too much of it got in the way of faith, leading to despair and damnation (Stachniewski, 1991, pp. 19–21; Bouwsma, 1988, pp. 44–
Writers attempted to reconcile such contradictory notions by distinguishing between various types of fear. These ‘taxonomies of fear’ were usually predicated on a basic distinction between ‘servile’ and ‘filial’ fear of the Lord, the former corresponding to the mere fear of being punished, such as a servant might feel towards his master, the latter approximating to the natural, reverential fear a child should have of displeasing its father (Marshall, 1997, p. 160).

Equally, the subject could feel both servile and filial fear for the monarch, who – much like God – could be depicted as both an awesome power terrifying people into submission and a kindly parent to their subjects. The anonymous author of *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, for example, argues that the ‘good King endeavours alwayes to keep peace amongst his subjects, as a father amongst his children, choakes the seeds of troubles, and quickly heals the scarre; the execution even of justice upon rebels, drawing teares from his compassionate eyes’ (1648, sig. O4v).

While reverential fear of one’s superiors was generally considered to be a ‘proper and indeed obligatory sentiment’ (Schutte, 2011, p. 145), the role of servile fear was more problematic. Although the debate around this topic is complex, there does seem to be a consensus that superiors should ideally inspire both love and fear – in which case the fear would be filial in nature – rather than fear alone – which might be equated with servile fear. This distinction is apparent in a wide range of texts on ideal governance, from ‘mirror for princes’ texts to guides on running a household. My discussion of the anti-Machiavellian thinkers in the next chapter will show they distinguished between the healthy fear the obedient citizen feels for a respected monarch and the oppressive kind the tyrant uses to subjugate his people, who hate him. As Tarbin remarks, ‘the linking of fear with love and awe implies that, in isolation, fear could produce problematic effects’; she later adds that ‘this is the negative face of fear: the unreasoning dread that led to greater wrongdoing’ (2015, pp. 107, 115). Fear or terror by itself could easily become disruptive, rather than productive. It was, therefore, not simply about fearing: one also had to fear correctly.

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12 William Bouwsma argues that what is perceived by Christian theology to be a desirable level and function of fear changes over time; it ‘fluctuated […] according to the way in which God’s mercy was believed to work’ (1988, p. 42). As God became an increasingly authoritarian figure in both Catholic and Reformed teachings – more absolute, more ineffable and more difficult to please – the role of fear also became more important and more complex. David Loewenstein suggests the significance of terror in English religious discourse, which depicted ‘God as an awesome power and fury whose terrible day is imminent’, was fuelled by the ‘turbulent religious politics of the age’ (2006, p. 222). Although he is speaking about the Civil War, much the same can be argued about the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

13 This text was originally published in 1579 under the pseudonym Stephen Junius Brutus. Today, it is commonly thought to have been written by Hubert Languet or Philippe de Mornay, both prominent Huguenot theorists. De Mornay in particular had significant influence in England, where he spent time at court and befriended people like Francis Walsingham, and Mary and Philip Sidney.
Disruptive terror

We have already seen some of the negative individual consequences of terror earlier in this chapter. But, as the early moderns recognised, terror could also cause disruption at the societal level. And disorder was to be feared in turn, especially when it took the shape of chaotic, class-defying violence. Terror thus presents the risk of setting in motion a vicious circle: terror begets disorder, which begets terror, which begets more disorder. The dispatch sent home by the Venetian ambassador Nicolò Molin after the Gunpowder Plot demonstrates how this cycle of cause and effect might work in practice: James, according to Molin, was ‘in terror’ and refused to appear in public, living ‘in the innermost rooms, with only Scotchmen about him’. The king’s terror, in turn, caused confusion and fear in others. Molin paints a vivid picture of emotional contagion – a contagion that is particularly disturbing because it disrupts the hierarchy of productive terror by making the king experience terror, instead of inspiring it in others:

The Lords of the Council also are alarmed and confused by the plot itself and the King’s suspicions; the city is in great uncertainty; Catholics fear heretics, and vice versa; both are armed; foreigners live in terror of their houses being sacked by the mob that is convinced that some, if not all, foreign Princes are at the bottom of the plot.

Many people, including the king and the Privy Council, feared disorder would break out. Molin approved of their efforts ‘to quiet the popular feeling’, but was not convinced entirely: ‘God grant this be sufficient, but as it is everyone has his own share of alarm’ (all quoted in Herman, 2014, p. 118). This terror-disorder cycle would later be conceptualised vividly in Hobbes’ state of nature: when everyone lives in constant fear for their lives and possessions, they will do whatever it takes to protect themselves. This leads to disorder and violence, which causes more terror, which causes more violent disorder, and so on (Hobbes, 1651, sigs. I1v–I3r).

To understand this disruptive aspect of terror, we must first have a brief look at the early modern aversion to chaos, a topic I will explore in greater detail in my discussion of rioting in chapter four. Order and control were highly prized by the early moderns. According to Carol Wiener, what they ‘admired most, the quality they sought most avidly in their own lives, was order, the establishment of control, the obliteration of chaos’ (1971, p. 41). Understandably so, when we look at texts like the Homilee Agaynst Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion – which the government required to be preached – that present the distinction between order and disorder as absolute and terrifying. On the one hand, there was ‘quietnesse, ioy, and felicitiie, which do folowe blessed peace and due obedience’; on the other, when ‘al good order’ was turned ‘vpsyde down’, one could expect ‘trouble, sorowe, disquietnesse of myndes and bodyes, and al mischeefe and calamities’ (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2O3r). The fear of and aversion to chaos were therefore not just fed by material worries
about property, but also by more existential ones: the crumbling of the social hierarchy, the incurring of God’s wrath, the coming of the end times. Indeed, Sharpe describes the early modern fear of chaos as ‘cosmic’ and ‘apocalyptic’; it affected people up and down the social scale (1984, p. 150), while it also ‘significantly motivated early modern legislators’ (Richardson, 2010, p. 19). Many predominant fears of the early modern period – the fear of civil war, of the supernatural, of the apocalypse – ultimately seem to be fears of disorder and its consequences.

Terror was considered to produce disorder in various ways, but they all stem from the idea that it caused people to act in strange, unpredictable and sometimes violent ways. We have already encountered Montaigne’s ‘Panike terror’ which leads to chaos on the battlefield; in the same essay he also warns his readers that, of all the passions, ‘there is none doth sooner transport our judgement out of his due seate’ than fear (Montaigne, 1603, sig. D2r). In Richard III, Richard asks Buckingham to pretend to be ‘mad with terror’ (3.5.4), this apparently being a recognisable affliction. Terror was also linked to melancholy, a condition characterised by despair and depression which had become a major concern by the late sixteenth century. According to Burton, it was often caused by religious terror, which could affect people so strongly they committed suicide: ‘And so far forth deaths terror doth affright, / He makes away himself, and hates the light’ (1621, sig. S1r).

Stachniewski argues Burton was critical of Puritans because he was primarily ‘interested in the maintenance of order in society, and religious zeal’ – with its accompanying terror and its disruptive side effects – ‘repelled and amused him’ (1991, p. 224). We have also already come across commoners in the theatre audience being carried away by violent passions they were unable to control, another dangerous instability. But the elite were not immune to such risks either: Irish argues the factionalism dividing the late Elizabethan court was characterised and exacerbated by ‘affective warfare’ in which the various opposing parties ‘found themselves both inspiring and succumbing to anxiety and terror’, contributing to an ‘atmosphere of suspicion and treachery’ (2018, p. 150). And there was always the problem of affective contagion: the desirable behaviours prompted by terror could spread, but so could the undesirable ones. While state and church authorities used terror to control their subjects, it was at the same time a volatile emotion that could cause people to act in a variety of disruptive ways.

Moreover, terror could also be inspired strategically in order to purposefully create disruptive behaviour by those who could use it to their advantage. Religious polemic frequently employed terrifying apocalyptic imagery to fuel civil strife throughout early modern Europe. The resistance

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14 As we already saw in the earlier section on affective theory, the standard explanation was an excess of black bile, however.
theorists – more on them in chapter four – painted nightmarish pictures of the havoc a bad ruler would wreak to convince their readers of the merits of tyrannicide. This strategy would later be employed by propagandists writing during the Civil War: the terror they deliberately inspired in their readers was used ‘as the instigating factor in cultivating counter-intuitive activities such as using violence to cause the necessary civil disorder of civil war, rather than using violence [...] to restore or maintain civil order’ (Heffernan, 2015, p. 177). The trick was to inspire such intense fear of what might happen that the predictable disadvantages of assassination and civil disorder seemed manageable in comparison.

Such practices were not limited to human beings, however: the devil was also thought to employ both terror and temptation to lead people astray. Nashe’s *The Terrors of the Night* explains how the devil tortures people with ‘night terrors’ to make them deviate from their virtuous, orderly behaviour, causing them to become ‘desperat like himselfe’ (1594b, sig. H1r; sig. B2r). Witches wanting to repent could expect the same treatment: once they had committed themselves to the devil, the early modern demonologist Hermann Wilken notes,

they are afraid to turn away from him again: so that he will not scare, inconvenience and harm them.

The oft-mentioned Faustus once resolved to repent, but the devil then threatened him so ferociously, terrified and scared him, that Faustus signed himself over to the devil once more (quoted in Theile, 2013, p. 69).

Terror can thus be used to cause people to engage in disruptive behaviour in the first place, but also to prevent them from regaining their former, orderly lives.

As we have seen in this chapter so far, then, even terror in its most productive incarnation – the reverential fear of God and the monarch – was susceptible to less positive complications and diversions. In Marshall’s words, ‘fear was an ambivalent, if not multi-faceted theme, capable of diverse constructions and meanings’ (1997, p. 159). While most early modern thinkers considered fear to be natural and unavoidable, it had to be trained in specific, appropriate directions to be profitable to the individual and society at large. If left unregulated, it could lead people astray, with potentially disastrous consequences. In other words, terror could damn as well as save. It could cause panic and disorder, but it could equally be used to avert civil war. It could be both a dangerous disease and an exciting stimulant. This is the complex and often ambiguous mixture of attitudes we need to keep in mind when researching early modern terror, and which – as the next sections will show – is reflected on the early modern stage.
2.3 TERROR ON THE EARLY MODERN STAGE

I will discuss the representation of terror on the early modern stage by considering two anonymous plays: *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* and *A Larum for London*. Before doing so, however, I want to explore how and why playwrights aimed to inspire terror in their audiences.

**Terror as a dramatic function**

Although scholarship on terror as an early modern emotion is rare, the increased critical attention paid in recent years to the experience of early modern theatregoing led me to expect there would be more work on the role of terror in the drama of the period, particularly since an *EEBO* search reveals playwrights are prolific users of the words ‘terror’ and ‘fear’.

Much of the scholarship on emotions in the early modern playhouse is focused on laughter and crying, however. When critics do explore terror as a specific emotion with relevance to early modern drama, two different approaches emerge. Some view terror primarily as a dramatic function that makes theatre more exciting and commercially viable, while others focus on the relation between terror on stage and real-world political oppression. The former – terror as a dramatic function – is a notion that has been put forward by several academics. Henry S. Turner argues that early modern plays [...] present us with some of the best examples we could hope to find, in any era or medium, of art’s capacity to [...] assemble new patterns of experience, from enjoyment to terror and everything in between (or both at once, as Aristotle perceived) (2013, p. 13).

Turner’s mention of Aristotle is pertinent, as one of the philosopher’s famous axioms from *The Poetics* refers to tragedy’s ability to effect a ‘catharsis’ in its spectators, specifically referring to the purging of the emotions of terror and pity. What exactly Aristotle means by this has been the subject of much debate throughout the work’s history, but since *The Poetics* did not enjoy the same popularity or influence as Aristotle’s other works did in early modern England, it is necessary to turn to Italian works for sustained commentary on the notion of catharsis in the early modern period (Lazarus, 2016). That said, plenty of English playwrights and poets – as well as their critics – were broadly aware of Aristotle’s ideas about the role of emotion in theatre, since many of them had access to continental responses to *The Poetics* (Pollard, 2012, pp. 461–462). With the rise of

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15 Of the 4,016 digitised texts that include ‘fear’, *EEBO* classifies 219 as drama; for ‘terror’, it’s 101 of 1,881.


17 Even writers like Ben Jonson and Philip Sidney, who seem to have been familiar with Aristotle’s literary theories, interpreted those in ways Thomas Rist calls ‘un-Aristotelian’ since ‘their ideas about the impact of tragedy on audiences bear little resemblance to the catharsis of Aristotle’ (2013, p. 139). The debate about the influence of Aristotelian catharsis on early modern writing remains ongoing, however, partly because critics continue to disagree what ‘Aristotelian’ actually means in this context.
commercial theatre came, inevitably, the necessity for playwrights to think about what their audiences wanted from a visit to the theatre, and Aristotle’s work suggested that intense emotional experiences might be the answer. So while the Aristotelian notion of terror specifically may not be particularly relevant to this study, his ideas about the role of emotions in general certainly are; as Tanya Pollard points out, by the late sixteenth century ‘accounts of the theatre by attackers, defenders, and playwrights themselves came to share a pervasive assumption that plays could successfully attract large paying audiences by imitating generic forms designed to manipulate emotions, appeal to the senses, and provide pleasure’ (2012, p. 462). As I discussed in the introduction, theatregoers willingly opened themselves up to affective experiences, and terror was one of the emotions playwrights willingly opened themselves up to affective experiences, and terror was one of the emotions playwrights could attempt to inspire.

What specific means they used to achieve this is more difficult to establish. Evidence of actual early modern staging practices is rare, and even when we have some idea of how specific scenes or effects were staged, we can’t be certain what reaction this was supposed to evoke in the audience. Besides, there could be a world of difference between the way a playwright intended for an audience to respond and the actual audience’s reaction (to the endless frustration of playwrights like Ben Jonson). However, many of the objects, events and phenomena that were said to inspire terror in the early modern Englishwoman or Englishman regularly appear on stage. Supernatural beings and practitioners of black magic are frequently represented in early modern drama, and scaring the living daylights out of the audience was undoubtedly one of their functions. The famous anecdote of the extra devil appearing on stage during a performance of *Doctor Faustus* and terrifying both actors and audience members is somewhat suspect since it appears in Prynne’s diatribe against the theatre, *Histrio-mastix* (1633, p. 556). Nevertheless, the fact that Prynne included this story shows it was conceivable for supernatural entities to have a deeply frightening effect on theatregoers. Moreover, playwrights often represented supernatural beings on stage in order to dramatise ‘the terror and horror of those to whom these agents appear’ (Walker, 2019, p. 59); clearly, then, fear was a normal response for someone facing such an apparition.

The (graphic) representation of violence was another way playwrights could frighten their audiences. War, civil unrest and violent death – whether by execution or otherwise – were objects of terror for the early moderns. It stands to reason, then, that the representation of these on stage was at least sometimes aimed at evoking this emotion. We probably shouldn’t take Heywood entirely at face value when he notes in *An Apology for Actors* that playwrights show ‘the fatal and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders, [...] aggrauated and acted with all the Art that may be, to
terrifie men from the like abhorred practises’ (1612, sig. F3v). But even if we assume playwrights’ motivations in terrifying their audiences were probably commercial as well as moralising, Heywood’s claim does show the idea of audience members being terrified by staged violence was not unusual. In the later decades of the sixteenth century, playwrights increasingly departed from the Senecan practice of having violent scenes take place off stage; as violence moved on stage instead, innovative props and effects became available to represent it.\(^{19}\) For audiences who were familiar with the sight of execution and mutilation, the staging of violence probably needed to be fairly realistic if it genuinely were to inspire fear, rather than laughter.\(^{20}\) Still, it’s not difficult to find early modern anecdotes about theatregoers being strongly affected by staged violence and other frightening scenes. Clearly, such representations of violence could still pack quite a punch, even for people who had seen the real thing.

At the same time, violent spectacle on stage also offered sensational, possibly even pornographic entertainment that would have attracted some theatregoers.\(^{21}\) The Red Bull Theatre, for example, specialised in these kinds of plays — in chapter four I discuss The Virgin Martyr, one of their offerings. Being terrified and being entertained could happily go hand in hand in the theatre. Hugh Mackay argues that ‘terror was one of the defining emotional pleasures of the [tragic] genre’ and uses the example of Tamburlaine to illustrate how the early modern theatregoer might have experienced such terror on stage. On the one hand, Tamburlaine is ‘the scourge of God’, a terrifying executor of divine punishment; on the other, Tamburlaine’s violence is only inflicted upon non-Christians, meaning ‘these terrors would be experienced at a safe remove for an Elizabethan audience, with a vicarious thrill rather than a moral lesson providing the emotional payoff’ (Mackay, 2010, pp. 91–92). In her work on the role of fear in early modern witchcraft plays, Harwood argues that playwrights like Thomas Middleton deliberately used visual representations of violence on stage to create a state of hyperarousal or ‘acute stress response’ — a common reaction to experiences of terror — ‘as an easy route to the satisfaction of their fright-hungry audience’ (2010, pp. 7–8).

Furthermore, the full titles of plays frequently specified what kind of violent spectacle theatregoers

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\(^{19}\) The decapitation trick described by Reginald Scot in The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584, p. 349), for example, could have been used on stage; Philip Henslowe’s March 1598 inventory of props owned by the Lord Admiral’s Men includes a ‘frame for the heading in Black Jone’, which may have been a similar contraption (2002, p. 321). Plays did need to be ‘portable’, however, so the use of elaborate effects or special constructions would have been the exception rather than the rule (Gurr and Ichikawa, 2000, pp. 57, 62).

\(^{20}\) On a related note, Steggle recounts several anecdotes about audiences laughing at staging blunders in early modern tragedies, including at a coughing ‘corpse’ (2007, pp. 115–117).

\(^{21}\) As Vindice memorably states in The Revenger’s Tragedy, ‘When the bad bleedes, then is the Tragedie good’ (Anonymous, 1607, sig. F3v).
could expect. It certainly seems plausible, then, that terror could be an enjoyable experience the early modern theatregoer actively sought out.

But – as we have already seen – exposing oneself to such intense emotions was not without risk, so there was more to the experience of terror in the theatre than simple enjoyment. As Mackay argues, ‘the idea that distressing emotions such as pity and fear could be pleasurable (and hence, in the case of a professional drama, marketable) to a general audience was a new and potentially troubling concept’ (2010, pp. 91–92). The theatregoers in Harwood’s study were, according to the author, prepared to risk their souls by exposing themselves to the visual spectacle of gore on stage, and were ‘hungry to be transported to the very boundaries of taste and safety’ (2010, pp. 7–8); this accords with Allison Hobgood’s argument that audiences deliberately put themselves at risk by hazarding emotional contagion. Here, I would suggest a final and perhaps more troubling way playwrights could evoke terror: through the representation of characters experiencing intense fear.

As my discussion of A Larum for London later in this chapter will show, a playwright could include characters the audience was supposed to relate to, and then have these characters experience terror in order to arouse the same emotion in the audience. Whereas Tamburlaine, according to Mackay, allows terror to be experienced at a safe distance, providing a ‘vicarious thrill rather than a moral lesson’, A Larum deliberately does not provide this safe remove and is clearly supposed to serve as ‘educational terror’ first and foremost. This is a somewhat ‘rational’ type of emotional contagion, which works by enabling identification between characters and audience members. But such identification was not strictly necessary; as discussed in the introduction, affective contagion was also very much a physical process, so simply seeing another person experience terror could be enough to ‘catch’ their fear and incur the dangerous consequences. As Rodgers notes, this phenomenon is vividly dramatised in Francis Beaumont’s The Knight of the Burning Pestle, which shows interfering audience members Nell and George responding to a play-within-a-play (2018, p. 78). Nell is so strongly affected by the violence on stage that she can no longer tell it’s not real, and she suffers physically because of it: the play, she complains, ‘has put me into such a fright, that I tremble (as they say) as ‘twere an Aspine leafe: looke a[t] my little finger George, how it shakes: now i[n] truth euery member of my body is the worse for’t’ (Beaumont, 1613, sig. F2r). Here, then, is a type of terror that is potentially less enjoyable for audiences – although it is important to note plays

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22 An example appearing in this thesis is Two Lamentable Tragedies. Or, to give it its full title: Tvvo lamentable tragedies[..] The one, of the murther of Maister Beech a chaundler in Thames-strecte, and his boye, done by Thomas Merry. The other of a young childe murthered in a wood by two ruffins, with the consent of hi[s] vnckle. Meanwhile, the full title of the First Quarto of 2 Henry VI manages to reference three deaths, a civil war, a rebellion and a coup d’état.
like A Larum and Two Lamentable Tragedies, which employ this type of ‘educational terror’ leaven it by providing plenty of sensationalist, vicarious terror too.

Of course, if seeing terror inspires terror, the next question is how actors represented the emotion of terror on stage in a way that was recognisable to audiences. Looking at plays that describe someone experiencing terror renders a couple of distinguishing features. Paleness and trembling are mentioned most frequently; in Richard III, Richard’s characterisation of someone who is ‘mad with terror’ also adds halting speech:

> Come, cousin, canst thou quake and change thy colour?
> Murder thy breath in the middle of a word?
> And then again begin, and stop again,
> As if thou wert distraught and mad with terror? (3.5.1–4)

I have also looked at scenes that describe someone experiencing a great fright, without mentioning terror specifically. In Hamlet, for example, the ghost of Old Hamlet claims his terrifying tales of purgatory would make Hamlet’s eyes ‘start from their spheres’ (1.5.17) and his hair ‘stand on end / Like quills upon the fretful porcupine’ (1.5.19–20). And after Macbeth has encountered the ghost of Banquo, Lady Macbeth reprimands his ‘flaws and starts’ and asks him why he makes ‘such faces’ (3.4.62; 66). Indeed, when Simon Forman attended a performance of Macbeth in 1611, he was sufficiently impressed by Macbeth’s ‘great passions of fear and fury’ in this scene to mention them in his diary (quoted in Cartelli, 1991, p. 105).

Some of these displays of terror would have been easier to realise on stage than others. Hobgood argues that ‘early modern actors conjured fear through the use of cosmetics or prosthetics as well as legitimate corporeal transformation’ (2013, p. 40). It seems likely actors would have made themselves shake or tremble to express terror. Halting speech, terrified facial expressions with wide eyes, and startled movements equally would have been recognisable to audience members and easy enough to portray. Hair raising, on the other hand, would almost certainly have been out of the question and paleness would probably have been tricky too. Although Hobgood asserts that the face of the actor playing Macbeth would ‘probably [be] powdered stark white’ (2013, p. 39) to show his terror when he encounters Banquo’s ghost, I’m not entirely convinced by this claim. As Farah Karim-Cooper has shown in her extensive study of the use of cosmetics on the early modern stage, white-painted faces were mostly used to signify a character was either a woman or a ghost (2006, p. 23).

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23 By 1772, David Garrick had the advantage of a mechanical wig to make his hair stand on end when his Hamlet saw his father’s ghost, but such ingenious props were not yet available to Richard Burbage (Folger Shakespeare Library, 2016).
Furthermore, at the point when Macbeth is supposed to pale in terror, he has already been on stage for some time. This means the actor would either have to play the entire scene with a painted face, or somehow apply the paint whilst on stage; clearly, neither would convey the desired effect of someone suddenly experiencing a great shock. Indeed, Carla Della Gatta has pointed out that, at this time when special effects were difficult to achieve, descriptive cues in the play text prompted the audience to visualise specific elements. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, Portia sees Bassanio reading a letter and comments that the content ‘steals the colour from Bassanio’s cheek’ (3.2.243), which cues the audience to imagine the actor turning pale (in Folger Shakespeare Library, 2021, 7:26). It seems plausible, then, that sudden paleness was a recognisable sign of terror, but one that audience members had to identify from textual rather than from visual signals. Even so, actors – aided by the playwright’s descriptive cues – would have had plenty of tools to portray the experience of terror for their audiences.

So far in this section, I have attempted to show playwrights deliberately set out to inspire terror in their audiences – for which they had a range of tools at their disposal – and that doing so made commercial sense, since audiences enjoyed being terrorised on their visits to the theatre. But why would audiences deliberately seek out such experiences? What was enjoyable about them? With the very limited evidence available to us, this is, of course, almost impossible to say. Hobgood plausibly suggests the attraction may have existed in the danger, rather than in spite of it; theatregoers got a chance to test their emotional discipline in their confrontation with the play (2013, p. 45). Furthermore, if one was inclined to subject oneself to such tests, the theatre was arguably a safer place to do it than out in the real world. Thomas Cartelli has argued drama offered a structure that allowed theatregoers to relax their ‘normative constraints’, enabling ‘the playgoer to entertain the fulfillment of fantasies whose realisation would prove positively disabling in the framework of ordinary experience’ (1991, p. 35). Although Cartelli is interested in the reason audiences enjoyed watching characters suffer or inflict pain, the same argument might explain why theatregoers enjoyed other non-normative experiences, like the experience of terror, as well. The theatre may have provided a favourable environment for audience members to challenge themselves in a way that was risky, but not too much so.

**Staged terror versus real-world terror**

Other scholars focus less on the popular and commercial appeal of terror, and more on its relation

24 Although, as noted in the introduction, the appeal of entertainment that provides ‘negative’ emotional experiences has long since been recognised. There is a vast amount of scholarship by literary critics and psychologists alike on topics such as the attractions of gothic literature and horror films, which offers some general insights into why people enjoy being terrified. See, for example, G. Neil Martin’s article ‘(Why) do you like scary movies?’ (2019).
to government oppression – a popular topic with new historicists and cultural materialists alike. Gerould, in his essay on terror on the early modern stage, argues that playwrights use terrorism on stage as a reflection on its role in early modern politics. Marlowe has characters like Edward II experiencing ‘moments of psycho-physiological terror’ in which ‘one can see right through the veils of civilisation to the very bottom of nature’s cruelty’; Shakespeare’s Henry VI plays show both ‘the origins and consequences of dynastic terrorism among warring factions of nobles’ and ‘the mob as an instrument of revolutionary terror’, which is ‘a direct consequence and mirror image of the terrorism of the state’ (Gerould, 1990, pp. 18–19). Gerould draws a comparison between public execution and the theatre, arguing that ‘beheading on the scaffold was Elizabethan terror theatricalised’ and that the obvious resonances between the two forms of spectacle made the instruments of execution present in the minds of theatregoers (Gerould, 1990, p. 21) – a topic I will return to in the next chapter. Kubiak, on the other hand, sees terror as an integral part of theatre, and theatre as an integral part of ‘the civilising process’. Throughout history, theatre has used terrorism as ‘a disciplining force applied to the body and mind’ in the name of the state; accordingly, ‘the history of performance becomes, in this sense, a history of the ways in which terror is [...] deployed as a means of socio-political conditioning’ (Kubiak, 1991, p. 16). Kubiak pays very little attention to the practicalities of this process, however, so it is unclear how this phenomenon of ‘terror theatre as suppression’ actually works on either side of the process: if and why playwrights deliberately choose to construct this ‘image of terror’ on stage, or how it is received by the audience.

I would suggest, then, that the existing research into the functions of terror in the playhouse presents a picture that is too limited. Gerould seems to be right in arguing playwrights used their work to engage with the mechanisms of state terrorism. Nevertheless, there doesn’t seem to be much room for nuance between Gerould’s notion of the playwright as critic of an oppressive state, and Kubiak’s suggestion that the playwright merely functions as a government mouthpiece. Neither of these two positions – which are essentially the cultural materialist versus the new historicist view respectively – takes into account the ambiguous nature of terror and fear I have described in this chapter, and the strong focus on terror as used by the state rather than by sub-state actors results in a skewed view. And while I agree with Harwood and Hobgood that terror in the theatre could be entertaining, this view also only reflects part of the picture. As I have argued, a play like A Larum for London clearly attempts not just to entertain but also to educate its audiences through the use of terror. Furthermore, the very real risk attached to feeling intense emotions, but especially fear, shows that audience experience was complex. Just as the nature of terror in the real world was far from straightforward, so too was the role and experience of terror in the playhouse. As Mullaney
argues, the early modern theatre ‘embodied thoughts, contradictions, and social traumas of its audiences’ (2015, p. 150). The plays included in this thesis illustrate this with regard to terror: they engage with the debates and anxieties about the use of terror in the real world, while also demonstrating its complex and multifaceted role in the theatre. In the final sections of this chapter, I will explore the representations and functions of terror in two specific plays: *The Life and Death of Jack Straw* and *A Larum for London*. 
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JACK STRAW

The Life and Death of Jack Straw was written in the late 1580s or early 1590s by an anonymous author. Only containing four acts, it’s an unusually short play, which has led some critics to speculate it was heavily censored (e.g. Clare, 1999, pp. 58–60); others have suggested it was originally written as a pageant (e.g. Manley, 1995, p. 273). The play is based on the events of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, of which Jack Straw was one of the leaders. After having killed a tax collector for going ‘beyond the Commission of the King’ (1594, sig. A3r), Straw joins with Wat Tyler and the preacher John Ball to lead a rebellion. They aim to draw the attention of the king to the dire conditions of the Kent commons and to displace the rich; Ball argues their venture has God’s blessing. After some initial successes, including the invasion of London, the rebels meet with the young king, Richard II, who promises to pardon them if they cease their uprising. Some of the rebels are content with this and depart, but Straw, Tyler and Ball choose to remain and spoil London. Ultimately their uprising is unsuccessful, however: Straw is killed by William Walworth, the mayor of London, and the rest of the rebels are arrested. Richard decides to pardon everyone except Tyler and Ball, who are sentenced to be executed.

As my discussion of rioting in chapter four will show, the 1590s were a troubled time for England, during which the country was frequently disturbed by popular uprisings. Rebellion was, therefore, a very concrete worry for theatre audiences in this period, particularly in London, which saw significantly more unrest than the rest of the country (Dunne, 2016, p. 75). Furthermore, the concerns of the Peasants’ Revolt – access to food and land, taxation, labour conditions – resonated with the concerns of commoners in the 1590s (Arab, 2011, pp. 82–83). This explains why, on the rare occasions Jack Straw is discussed by critics, it’s usually in comparison with 2 Henry VI, which tackles similar issues in its treatment of the Jack Cade rebellion. Furthermore, much as is the case with 2 Henry VI, academics often disagree on whether the sympathies of Jack Straw are obviously conservative and monarchical, or subtly subversive and pro-commons. The perceived legitimacy of violent rebellion (or, conversely, of the violent repression of rebellion) is an important topic in the discourse around terrorism, as the next two chapters will demonstrate. My interest here, however, lies in the role of terror in Jack Straw, a topic that has not yet been researched. This play makes for

25 Stephen Longstaffe discusses the date and authorship questions in some detail in his critical edition of the play (2002, pp. 1–8).
26 Late-twentieth-century criticism – e.g. by Helgerson (1992, pp. 211–212, 221) and Cohen (1985, pp. 223, 226–227) – tends to fall in the former group. Helgerson influentially argued that popular revolt was usually staged as carnivalesque in order to ‘stigmatize and compartmentalize’ it, a pattern he argues is present in both Jack Straw and 2 Henry VI (1992, p. 221). More recent criticism – e.g. by Schillinger (2008) – often takes the latter view. This interpretative shift seems to reflect the increased academic interest in the lives of early modern commoners as well as in audience reception in the theatre.
an interesting case study because it shows both productive and disruptive terror have their uses and their limitations. In other words, *Jack Straw* dramatises some of the ambiguities around the role of terror – particularly its reliability – in the maintenance of ‘civilised society’.

**Who’s afraid of Richard II?**

As observed earlier, terror was generally seen as an appropriate and necessary emotion when felt in relation to the monarch and God. In this mode, terror can be used to promote order; it is the driving force behind the mechanisms of state terrorism that I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. In *Jack Straw*, however, this type of terror is obviously lacking, at least with regard to the monarch. This is clear from the very first scene of the play: already in the first two pages Straw has killed the king’s tax collector and the villagers have concluded they will have to die for the crime. But the death sentence they have effectively pronounced upon themselves also liberates them, because it makes execution a certainty, and thereby their fear is taken away. The injustice of their situation – the fact they are being over-taxed by a greedy official overstepping his bounds – prompts their rebellion, but their lack of terror makes it possible. Once the fear of punishment is removed, the villagers ‘may as well go after what they want while they can’ (Arab, 2011, p. 86). As Nobs, one of the rebels, remarks: ‘the common reward for Rebels, Swangledome swangledome, you know as well as I, / But what care they, yee heare them say they owe God a death, and they can but die’ (1594, sig. B1r). The servile variety of terror, the fear of punishment, is therefore useless in this situation. Even when Tyler is about to be executed, he is still able to casually observe that the authorities ‘can but hang vs, and that is all’ (1594, sig. F1v). Such people are, of course, incredibly dangerous to society – a problem that will come up again numerous times in the plays discussed in chapter four.

This is borne out later in the play when the rebels first meet with Richard. The original group of rebels from Kent have by now been joined by another contingent from Essex, who prove to be more impressionable; when Richard first makes the offer of a pardon, the Essex rebels are happy to accept it and abandon the uprising. But the Kentish rebels don’t believe the pardon is genuine: ‘Trust not to his pardon for you die euerie Mothers sonne’ (1594, sig. D3r). Again, the Kentish rebels are convinced the gallows are waiting for them anyway, and that accepting a fake pardon will only get them there quicker. Having nothing to lose spurs them to fearlessly continue their rebellion. The Essex rebels, on the other hand, never use such desperate rhetoric – they don’t seem to take their own deaths as given, and this makes it possible for Richard to influence them with the promise of a pardon.

As Arab argues, the execution confessionsals that were so popular in the period (as well as, I would add, scaffold speeches) were aimed at showing off ‘the social and judiciary system’s ability to reform
criminals into penitent subjects who embodied, at their deaths, the imperative to uphold social and legal order’ (2011, p. 87). When executions are represented on the early modern stage, they often adhere to this format, which we will see exemplified in chapter three with Two Lamentable Tragedies. Conversely, Jack Straw and 2 Henry VI ‘amplify social fears’ by showing rebels like Straw and Cade as ‘impervious to […] human feeling’ (Arab, 2011, p. 87, emphasis added). Although Arab’s point about the rebels being portrayed as hardened, unemotional people is primarily about qualities such as mercy and remorse, I would argue that in Jack Straw the same can be said about terror. It’s true Straw, Tyler and Ball don’t express much fellow-feeling, but they also don’t express fear, and that is another aspect of what makes them both dangerous and terrifying.

The judicial system with its mechanisms of state terrorism does finally move into action at the very end of the play. But even then, its efficacy is somewhat questionable. Firstly, the person who most effectively employs terror to scare the rebels into submission is the mayor of London, William Walworth. He kills Straw in full view of the other rebels (and the theatre audience) and then orders his officers to ‘Drag this accursed villian [sic] through the streets. / To strike a terrour to the Rebels hearts’ (1594, sig. E2v). This is the only use of the word ‘terror’ in the play, in this very specific situation where an authority figure describes the intended effect of (what he considers to be) state terrorism. Walworth demonstrates that he, more than any other character in the play, understands how terrorism functions. Nevertheless, as James Holstun points out, the whole process is rather irregular (2007, pp. 205–206), since Walworth arrests Straw and essentially executes him on the spot:

Villaine I doe arrest thee in my Princes name,

Proud Rebel as thou art take that withall; Here he /

Learne thou and all posteritie after thee, stabs him.

VWhat tis a seruile slaue, to braue a King (1594, sig. E2r).

Certainly, Walworth acts in the king’s name, but not on the king’s orders: he kills Straw on his own initiative in order to ‘deserue some honour […] / VVith some or other Act of consequence (1594 sig. E2r). It does indeed do much for Walworth’s position – Richard knights him in the next act – but it is hardly Foucault’s spectacle of the scaffold that has the power to restore a monarch’s compromised sovereignty. On the contrary, the fact that one of the king’s officials commits an extra-judicial murder in front of his sovereign, rather than simply arresting Straw and trusting the justice system to handle him, denies Richard the opportunity to take responsibility for Straw’s execution and to be seen publicly in his appropriate role as sole dispenser (by proxy) of terror-violence. Even Walworth’s attempt at productive terror somewhat misses the mark, then.
Secondly, when we see the official justice system in operation, the results are simply not very impressive. The final act of the play is largely taken up with deliberations over the rebels’ punishment and the delivery of the pardon. Richard immediately wants to pardon everyone except Ball and Tyler, but his advisers press him to only let the pardon come at the last minute to make a bigger impact. The play text gives no evidence of any kind of emotional response from the rebels, however. Apart from a general ‘God saue the King’ after the reading of the pardon, the company of rebels make no reply (1594, sig. F1v). While they cried out at the death of Straw (1594, sig. E2r), their leader, their own impending executions aren’t graced with a response, and the reaction to their pardoning is minimal. Furthermore, all this plays out alongside the final remarks from the surviving rebel leaders, Ball and Tyler, who remain unimpressed and unrepentant until the last. Indeed, Ball uses his final words on stage to state that

what I said in time of our busines I repent not,
And if it were to speake againe,
Euerie word should be a whole sermon,
So much I repent me (1594, sig. F1v).

Dangerous until the very end, if Tyler and Ball’s executions had been shown on stage, their scaffold speeches would no doubt have been highly subversive and potentially incendiary, a problem the text points out. Morton, one of Richard’s advisers, orders the rebel leaders to be taken off for a safe, offstage execution: ‘Awaie with the Rebels suffer them not to speake, / His words are poyson in the eares of the people’ (1594, sigs. F1v–F2r). However, this also means the audience doesn’t actually see Tyler and Ball being punished and justice being carried out. As a result, Walworth’s spur of the moment, summary execution of Straw appears in the play as the more impressive event; it inspires terror and obedience in its intended audience in a way the workings of the official justice system simply can’t manage, either through last-minute pardons or through executions.

The king with his power to inflict punishment does not scare the rebels – there is none of the servile fear that, while not ideal, may still be useful for holding together the social order. Of course, servile fear would not be necessary when people feel a filial terror of the monarch, but that too is in short supply in Jack Straw. After all, the very first character we meet is an official of the crown abusing the power the king has conferred upon him. Although the rebels do not blame Richard for their circumstances, since ‘The king God wot knowes not whats done by such poore men as we’ (1594, sig. A4r), their attitude towards him can hardly be called reverent. A sharp contrast is presented in the scene where Tom Miller, one of the rebels, petitions the Queen Mother to intercede for him (1594, sig. D4r). Admittedly, this scene is meant to be funny due to Tom’s bungled attempts at sounding deferential and sophisticated; nevertheless, it is the only moment in the play when one of the rebels
displays the ‘appropriate’ attitude towards a royal, and it’s not the king. Richard’s entourage might be more respectful, but the play also shows them continually advising him. Indeed, Richard gives very few orders that haven’t first been suggested by someone else. As the Archbishop points out, Richard is ‘but young of age’ (1594, sig. B1v) – the historical Richard II was fourteen at the time of the Peasants’ Revolt – so it does make sense to show the king taking counsel. But it hardly posits him as an object of awe and terror, especially filial terror, which is probably difficult to inspire for someone who is himself effectively still a child; if the role was played by a boy actor, this predicament would likely have been obvious to theatregoers. Moreover, this view is further reinforced by the usher’s observation that Richard is ‘so we’ll ruled by diuers of his Pieres’ (1594, sig. B4r). So, although Richard is presented as a virtuous ruler, it’s at the same time easy to agree with the rebels that he is not a figure who commands productive terror of either the servile or the filial kind. The play seems to suggest the ability to inspire productive terror is an important tool in the effective ruler’s toolbox, but also that this is a skill rather than an inherent feature of legitimate monarchy.

Problematically, a weak monarch who is unable to inspire productive terror can also be a cause of disruptive terror for their subjects, who cannot rely on their ruler to keep peace and order. Although the play doesn’t develop this line, it is obvious the rebels cause a great deal of chaos and damage that anyone unlucky enough to be in their way, like the ‘Southwarkemen’ at the end of Act 2, has to deal with. In this sense, Jack Straw’s Richard II is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Henry VI: they are both rulers who present a danger to their country, not because they are tyrannical but because they are ineffective. The 1590s were a difficult time for fictionalised versions of Richard II more generally as well. His reign was a favourite vehicle for writers wanting to express their dissatisfaction with Elizabeth, who could similarly be seen as a weak monarch unduly influenced by ambitious councillors and unable to provide a successor to the throne. John Hayward’s depiction of Richard in The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie the IIII (1599), along with its dedication to the ambitious Earl of Essex, were particularly troubling for Elizabeth and her government. As James Shapiro notes, ‘the authorities were concerned that Londoners might draw the same conclusions as their rebellious ancestors had two centuries earlier, when they had supported a charismatic aristocrat’s overthrow of a childless monarch who had taxed them ruthlessly and mismanaged Ireland’ (2005, p. 136). Elizabeth herself came to a similar verdict about Shakespeare’s Richard II, which was performed on the eve of Essex’s rebellion in 1601: ‘I am Richard II, know ye not that’, she
famously remarked to the Keeper of the Records, William Lambarde (quoted in Hadfield, 2004, p. 16).²⁷

Furthermore, the problem the state and the monarch face in *Jack Straw* is not just that Richard is not an object of terror to the rebels – it’s also that the rebels themselves prove to be a source of terror to the king and his nobles. It is the king who, terror-stricken, flees from the rebels when he’s supposed to meet with them at Greenwich, in a disturbing deviation from the ‘natural’ hierarchy of terror. Straw, Tyler and their men

- filled the Aire with cries and fearfully noise.
- And from the water did an echo rise:
  - That pearest the years of our renowned King,
  - Affrighting so his heart with strong conceit,
  - Of some unhappy grievous stratigene;
  - That trust me with my ears I heard him say,
  - He thought they would have all like Spaniels,
  - Tane water despretly and bored him (1594, sig. C4r).

And Spencer, one of Richard’s advisers, concurs: ‘Indeed I could not greatly blame his Maiestie, / My selfe was not so scare this seaven yeare’ (1594, sig. C4r). Arab argues this episode in the play ‘makes apparent the sort of power and terror the needs of the grotesque body [i.e., the physical presence of the rebels] could evoke. [...] these mouths and the noise they make are physically threatening’ (2011, p. 80). Longstaffe calls the representation of the rebels ‘terrifying, even hysterical’; he identifies the rebels’ ‘ability to call up the Kentish commons’ and ‘the incendiary speech of Parson Ball’ as particularly threatening (2002, p. 53). The ability to inspire terror therefore lies firmly with the rebels, rather than with the king and state.

Richard’s decision to prematurely break off the meeting does not go down well with Straw, Tyler and their company. In their view, Richard makes them ‘runne about his pleasure, and to no end’, which they consider unacceptable disrespect. Terror in this situation is thus the kind that causes disorder rather than order. Had the king not fled the scene, he might have prevented the rebels from entering London, where they ‘spoilde all Southwarke[,] let out all the prisoners, broke vp the Marshalsea and the Kings bench, and made great hauocke in the Burrowe here’ (1594, sig. C4r). Instead, the rebels are now even angrier than before, and therefore more determined to demonstrate they ‘will not put vp this abuse’ (1594, sig. C3r).

²⁷ See also Guy (2016, pp. 333–346).
With God on our side

But what about that other form of productive terror, the fear of God and punishment after death? The play’s elite characters consider God to be on Richard’s side, the implication being that Straw’s uprising will be punished by God. Walworth claims cheerfully, for example, that ‘It is our God that giues the victorie’ over the rebels (1594 sig. E2v). But this notion has very little influence on the rebellious commoners because they, of course, also believe God is in their corner. Notably, one of the first things they do in deciding whether to rise up is to check with the priest in their midst whether they ‘may sticke together in such quarrels honestly’ (1594, sig. A4r). And in a long sermon, Ball makes clear they have God’s blessing in their mission to address the represson of the poor by the rich, since he is ‘able by good scripture before you to proue, / That God doth not this dealing allow nor loue’ (1594, sig. A4r). This divine approval means that, while temporal punishment seems to be a given, the rebels don’t need to fear any further punishment in the afterlife. After all, Ball assures them they are doing the right thing: ‘And rightly may you follow Armes, / To rid you from these ciuill harmes’ (1594, sig. A4v).

This way of thinking is indeed quite in line with that of the historical John Ball – or, at least, the historical John Ball as conceived of in the late sixteenth century.28 The historical Peasants’ Revolt was influenced by millenarian ideas that were still around in the early modern period, and which would also play a role in the events of the Civil War half a century later.29 As Cohn has argued, in the late fourteenth century ‘even the most orthodox preachers’ criticised the elite and ‘the interpretation of the Last Judgment as the day of vengeance of the poor’ was very common. Sermons on this theme were not aimed at inspiring rebellion; they were meant to bully the rich into being more charitable and to pacify the poor with the prospect of a better afterlife to come. Nevertheless, the topic could certainly be used to spark rebellious sentiments: ‘all that was required in order to turn such a prophecy into revolutionary propaganda of the most explosive kind was to bring the Day of Judgment nearer – to show it not as happening in some remote and indefinite future but as already at hand’ (Cohn, 1957, pp. 213–215), which is what happens in the sermons attributed to Ball. The millenarian line is not developed in Jack Straw, although it is referenced on several occasions, for example when Tom Miller claims that ‘if the world hold out we shalbe Kings shortly’ (1594, sig. C2v, emphasis added). Nevertheless, it does chime with the rebels’ notion of their uprising as legitimated, not just by their circumstances but also by God’s approval of their attempt to right an injustice.

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28 As Norman Cohn remarks, the sermons and rhymes attributed to Ball ‘should be regarded rather as of uncertain authorship’ (1957, p. 215).
29 For more on the Bible’s role in ‘radical’ politics, see Hill (1993, pp. 196–250).
terror of God should be felt by the rich who want to maintain the unfair existing order, not by the rebellious poor who are trying to overthrow it.30

Although the terror of God was often employed to produce and promote orderly behaviours amongst the commons, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it does not do so in this case. While in theory God and the monarch should evoke a productive terror that encourages submission to the status quo, Jack Straw shows this is not a dependable strategy that can always be relied on in practice – especially because terror can be inspired by the people who should feel it and felt by those who should inspire it. Instead, the play demonstrates terror is a multivalent force that can be both productive and disruptive: it can encourage orderly as well as disorderly behaviours, and serve both orderly and disorderly purposes.

30 Although the play makes no mention of it, a Tamburlaine-like reference from Ball to the rebels as ‘scourge of God’ for the elite would not have seemed out of place. That said, overall the religious side of the Peasants’ Revolt is underplayed in Jack Straw, probably in order to avoid a run in with the censor. In the next chapter I discuss Sir Thomas More, which was written around the same time and heavily censored by Edmund Tilney. If we follow Janet Clare’s argument that the extant Jack Straw text is the product of significant cuts, and that the scenes removed concerned further details of the uprising and anti-alien violence, the pattern is very similar to the censoring of Sir Thomas More (1999, pp. 58–60). In both plays, religious controversy is underplayed in the text – and therefore left alone – while the censor focused on scenes of rebellion and violence against immigrants, which were more pressing concerns in the 1590s.
2.5  A LARUM FOR LONDON

A Larum for London, or the Siedge of Antwerpe is an anonymous play, probably first performed in 1599 and published in 1602 (Cahill, 2008, p. 166). Like The Life and Death of Jack Straw, it has never garnered much critical interest, probably at least in part because many academics considered it a piece of hack writing. William Maltby, for example, states that A Larum ‘should serve to remind us that not all Elizabethan playwrights were touched with genius. It is basically a crude one-act play into which the anonymous author strove to compress as much bloodshed and rapine as possible’ (1971, p. 52). The play can, indeed, hardly be described as subtle: it dramatises the 1576 Sack of Antwerp by Spanish troops, taking plenty of licence in order to present the invading soldiers as exceptionally brutal. The citizens of Antwerp are portrayed as ‘swilling Epicures’ (1602, sig. A2r) who are only concerned with their pleasures, neglecting to ensure they are adequately protected against the army on their doorstep. The Spanish commander Davila ruthlessly exploits this weakness so he can plunder the wealthy city. He secretly brings in more soldiers, led by the Duke of Alva, and conspires with Van End, the commander of the German mercenaries paid to defend Antwerp, thereby leaving the city practically defenceless. The attackers quickly overrun Antwerp, and the rest of the play largely consists of violent scenes in which wealthy citizens and an English merchant are extorted, threatened, tortured, abused and murdered on stage. The main character resisting the Spanish is a one-legged war veteran, nicknamed Stump, who has previously been spurned by Antwerp’s well-to-do and is now their only defender. Stump manages to trouble the invaders, while at the same time criticising his fellow citizens for their neglect. Ultimately, it’s all in vain, however: Stump is killed in action and Antwerp is left to the Spanish.

The Sack of Antwerp shocked both Catholics and Protestants across the Dutch provinces and far beyond (Israel, 1995, pp. 185–186). In England, too, it was considered a fateful event; although the plundering of cities was hardly uncommon behaviour, ‘the fall of Antwerp caught and held the English imagination as no other foreign disaster was able to do’ (Maltby, 1971, p. 52). A Larum was first staged more than twenty years after the event, but the Sack was still considered an unforgettable demonstration of Spanish barbarity. Besides, there were plenty of contemporary resonances in 1599. The Nine Years’ War, in which Spain was implicated, was ongoing, and English troops were also still committed in the fight against Spain in The Netherlands. Furthermore, reports of a new armada kept England on high alert for part of the year, a particularly worrisome situation when so many trained soldiers were engaged elsewhere (Shapiro, 2005, p. 196). As Cahill states, ‘it seems clear that the portrayal of the Spanish and the Dutch in A Larum for London is the product of a moment when, to many in England, the Spanish threat was all-too-real’ (2008, p. 174). When Nancy Kay remarks that ‘the terror that is associated with this event [the Sack of Antwerp] was
captured quite vividly’ in A Larum (2020, p. 85, note 18), it therefore seems likely the playwright intended this terror equally to be felt by his audiences with regards to their own situation. In dramatising the terror of the citizens of Antwerp, the playwright shows a possible future for Londoners, should that dreaded Spanish invasion come to pass; the title makes clear that the play functions first as an ‘alarum for London’ and only secondly as a depiction of the sacking of Antwerp. The terror on stage thus serves as a warning and, ideally, a corrective for Londoners who were meant to recognise themselves in the hapless citizens of Antwerp. As Time states in the prologue, theatregoers should be prepared to ‘be holde their faultes’ on stage (1602, sig. A1v). I will look at A Larum’s strategic use of terror as a warning for theatregoers later in this section; first, I will explore the function of terror in the play itself.

‘Careles securitie’ and dangerous terror

Both terror and a dangerous lack thereof are shown to cause disorder in A Larum for London, much as in Jack Straw. In both plays, however, it’s the absence of terror that sparks all the trouble. While Jack Straw complicates the notion of ‘appropriate terror’ of the monarch by presenting Richard as more terrified than terrifying, A Larum makes very clear that the terror of the Spanish army which is sorely lacking among the citizens of Antwerp would have been entirely appropriate.31 Critics have frequently noted that the play characterises the people of Antwerp as too decadent, too greedy and too complacent to either train their own soldiers or to pay for a proper army.32 As Danila says, the citizens

are remisse and negligent,
Their bodies vs’d to soft effeminate silkes,
And their nice mindes set all on dalliance;
Which makes them fat for slaughter, fit for spoile (1602, sig. A3r)

I would argue these bad habits are caused by a lack of appropriate terror on the part of the citizens of Antwerp; they simply don’t see any incentive to do anything other than privileging their immediate comfort. To borrow a phrase from the Homilee Agaynst Disobedience and Wyfful Rebellion, the city is comfortable in the ‘dead sleepe of careles securitie’ (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2Q4r). This false security is diametrically opposed to the state of productive fear, which ‘makes vs carefull

31 It is worth noting that A Larum differs from the other plays considered in this thesis, in that it is primarily concerned with the terror caused by inter-state warfare, rather than with state or resistance terrorism. Its engagement with ideas about productive and disruptive terror, and the playwright’s efforts to inspire terror in his audiences, nevertheless make it a useful play to discuss.

32 The connection between England’s perceived military decline and the increasingly decadent – i.e., ‘feminised’ – behaviour of English men was commonly made in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century writing (Barker, 2003, pp. 143–145). Classical histories that were read at the time, such as Sallust’s The Conspiracy of Catiline, often made the same association to explain Rome’s decline.
and atentiue to looke to our affaires, and to giue order for that which is necessary to shelter vs from stormes’ (Coeffeteau, 1621, p. 472). The Spanish commanders have no qualms about exploiting the fact that the people of Antwerp are ‘carelesse and neglect our power’ (1602, sig. B1v). Had the citizens realistically apprehended the danger posed by the Spanish army, they would have been scared, and had they been scared, they would probably have spent their money on their defences instead of fancy clothes and nice food. Indeed, Danila argues it would have been better for the citizens of Antwerp if

in their peace
And daies of plenty, whilst they flourished
They had fore-seene the daunger might ensue,
And exercise themselves in feats of armes (1602, sig. A3r)

Antwerp’s lack of appropriate terror has thus left the city vulnerable to attack.

Furthermore, the play also posits the idea that the sacking of Antwerp is a punishment from God for its inhabitants’ indulgent lifestyles.33 One citizen comes to this realisation in the middle of the Spanish attack: ‘We are undone for want of discipline’ (1602, sig. C3r). Danila happily casts himself in the role of scourge of God, justifying his actions by arguing the people of Antwerp

were wanton and lascivious,
Too much addicted to their private lust:
And that concludes their Martirdoome was just (1602, sig. G1v).

This view is also found in George Gascoigne’s The Spoyle of Antwerpe, one of the sources for the play; Gascoigne argues the plundering ‘was the very ordinance of god [sic] for a just plague and scourge vnto the Towne’ (1576, sig. B7r). In this way too, the Sack of Antwerp is a consequence of a lack of appropriate terror, but here it’s the terror of God which is missing. God-fearing citizens would (supposedly) not have indulged in such sinful behaviours, and would therefore not have been the victims of such an attack.

If an appropriate fear of the Spanish would have been productive and helped the citizens of Antwerp, terror in battle tends to be less than useful; see, for example, Montaigne’s ‘Panike terror’ on the battlefield. A skilful military commander will therefore try to frighten the enemy, and Danila,

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33 Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene’s A Looking Glass for London and England (1594) uses the biblical story of the city of Nineveh to make much the same point, although Nineveh is spared when its citizens repent. Authorship of A Larum has sometimes been ascribed to Lodge on the basis of similarities between the two plays. See, for example, Hadfield (2005a).
Alva and Van End are no different. Van End favours Danila’s plan to fire a cannon at the unsuspecting city because ‘twill affright, / And strike the greater terror to their soules’ (1602, sig. A4r); Danila believes that taking the city will be easy, even with very few soldiers, since the citizens will be too terrified to act: ‘When once the Alarum soundes (like silly mice) / They’ll hyde them in the creuice of their walles’ (1602, sig. A3v). Interestingly, the initial attempt at terrorising the inhabitants of Antwerp is not exactly successful, however. The cannon fire is described in truly dreadful terms by Danila: it is ‘a very murdering piece, [...] / To vomit horred plagues vpon them all (1602, sig. B1r). Yet, the citizens’ shock at the attack is short-lived, and they rather quickly return to their eating and drinking. Again, the battle-hardened Spaniards show a more realistic grasp of the dangers and terrors of warfare than the citizens of Antwerp.

Ultimately though, emotional contagion does cause terror to spread and take hold, leading to chaotic scenes inside the besieged city that benefit the Spaniards. ‘The madding people [are] so amaz’d with feare’ that attempts by the commanders of the Prince of Orange’s army to organise some sort of defence of the city are hopeless: ‘turning head with every little noise’ the citizens ‘Stop’t the entrance of the streetes with throngs’ and ‘The vn certaine murmure of the multitude, / Increast but the confusion of the towne’ (1602, sig. F2v). As Danila accurately predicted before the attack, the citizens are too scared to mount any kind of defence and can only hide from the invading soldiers, or attempt to buy their lives by giving up their possessions; in Van End’s words, ‘treasure is the fee, / That bribes the terror of my threatening brest’ (1602, sig. E4v). It should also be noted, however, that much of the violence in the latter half of the play seems to serve no other purpose than to give the Spaniards an outlet for their cruelty. In a scene of stunningly gratuitous violence, a pair of soldiers stab two young children to death in front of their mother and their elderly, blind father, and then kill the parents for protesting. The Spanish army does not, therefore, terrorise the citizens of Antwerp purely for strategic reasons; the play also makes clear they enjoy doing so.

34 It is Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, however, who is without question the early modern stage’s most prolific user of terror in battle. When besieging a city, Tamburlaine changes the colours of his tents and flags to signal what he intends to do after his armies have taken the town: white means mercy, red means the slaughter of everyone bearing arms and black means total annihilation. The terror-inducing quality of the black tents is remarked upon several times, and there are plenty of references throughout the plays to Tamburlaine himself as ‘The Scourge of God and terror of the world’ (Marlowe, 1590, sig. I5r).
35 Referred to as ‘Cornelius’ in the first pages of the play and indicated here with the speech prefix ‘Cor’.
36 This attitude is in line with ‘the popular perception of firearms as brutal instruments of death’, which was frequently expressed on the early modern stage (Pugiatti, 2017, p. 154).
37 This idea of ‘bribing terror’ is both striking and unique – A Larum is the only (searchable) text on EEBO in which this expression occurs. It seems to play on the link between terror and not being in control: on the one hand, the objective of bribing someone is to gain some control over the outcome of a situation; on the other, Van End’s formulation – the terror needs to be bribed, not Van End himself – almost seems to depict the terror as a separate entity that Van End only has limited control over.
**Alarum for the audience: inspiring productive terror**

This leads us to another striking feature of *A Larum*: the playwright’s deliberate use of terror to influence his audiences. I agree with the prevalent critical view that the play was meant to impress upon Londoners the need to better prepare themselves to meet the Spanish threat. In Andrew Gurr’s words, it was ‘blatant propaganda aiming to warn government and city fathers’ (2004, p. 139); Cahill argues the play ‘implicitly warns that history will repeat itself in London: unless Londoners recognise the dangers of peace and the need for defense of the realm, they, too, will suffer Spanish invasion’ (2008, p. 166, emphasis original). In striking such a tone, *A Larum* was certainly not unique: Alexandra Walsham remarks, for example, that ‘there are dozens of Elizabethan songs affecting to be “warnings”, “lanthorns”, and death knells to a dangerously complacent and iniquitous nation’ (1999, p. 310). *A Larum* falls in the same category, because the play advocates for increased militarisation as well as for moral reform. As already mentioned, the Sack of Antwerp was often invoked by moralists who ‘saw it as a divine chastisement, a warning to the sinful Londoners to mend their ways and eschew the luxury that had weakened Antwerp’s moral fibre and brought about its collapse’ (Maltby, 1971, p. 52). In this scenario, Spain was not simply a military threat, but the scourge of God – as discussed in the previous chapter, the notion of divine providence often influenced how the early moderns interpreted violent events. In *A Watch-VVorde for Warre*, for example, Charles Gibbon argues that ‘the Lord vseth the Spaniard as a spur to prouoke vs to amendment’ (1596, sig. D4r). Strong military power therefore was needed to hold Spain at bay, while moral reform would hopefully prevent God from punishing England for its sins by granting a Spanish invasion success. However, as *A Larum* demonstrates through the citizens of Antwerp, complacency is a tough habit to kick. The playwright therefore shows terror being experienced by the characters on stage, in order to evoke it in his audience, which in turn will help him achieve his aims. The play admonishes

> playgoers both to comprehend the extent of their peril and to look forward with terror – to ‘dread’ – their future. [...] *A Larum for London* takes for granted what Steven Mullaney has aptly described as the ‘apprehensive power of the stage’ – that is, the play assumes an audience capable of both ‘mentally grasping or comprehending something in its entirety’ and feeling a modern sense of ‘self-reflexive shame, dread, or anxiety’ (Cahill, 2008, p. 167).

It could therefore be argued that *A Larum* is meant to function as exemplary terror in a similar way to early modern punishment, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Showing the devastating impact of invasion is one possible way of inspiring terror in a theatre audience. *A Larum* certainly doesn’t hold back in its depiction of the atrocities of war, some of which
are merely described by characters and some of which are acted out on stage. Even the Spanish characters acknowledge the destructiveness of

bloud be-sprinkled warre,
Who whilst he shewes wilde Friscoes in the streetes,
And with his Gamballes, ouerthrowes huge buildings,
Mingle their totter’d ruynes, with the limmes
And Clotted bloud of many thousand soules (1602, sig. D4v)

Such images would have played on the audience’s fear of war in general, as well as on the fear of the chaos and disorder that war usually brings. As Will Coster argues, ‘in a society without standing armies, war, and particularly civil war, did not simply threaten the social order, it was its antithesis. Thus the fear of soldiers was based on a deep-seated horror of cancer in the body politic’ (1997, p. 114). This attitude is recognisable in the play, for example in the discussion between the leaders of the Prince of Orange’s army and Monsieur Champaigne, the governor of Antwerp, on whether the former can station their soldiers in the city. Champaigne brings up all the usual early modern concerns about the presence of soldiers: they might riot, they might assault women, they will use up all the food or plunder it, it will be very expensive to maintain them (1602, sigs. B3r–B3v). These concerns no doubt would have been familiar to theatregoers, and would not have seemed illogical.

To overcome such objections, which the audience might well have entertained themselves, the playwright thus needed to show the consequences of not militarising are even less desirable; the Spanish soldiers do all the things Champaigne was worried the Dutch soldiers would do, and much worse. I won’t describe all the violent atrocities A Larum illustrates – in doing so, I would probably end up quoting a third of the play. Instead, I want to focus on the fate of one specific character: the English factor. This unfortunate figure appears on stage first to be tortured by Danila, who takes his money but also wants to make sure the ‘fiue hundred Dollors’ (1602, sig. D4r) he has with him are all he possesses. A couple of pages later, he is tortured by Alva, who is angry he has no more ransom money left and also wants to ascertain he hasn’t got anything else hidden away (1602, sigs. E3v–E4r). Finally, another Spanish commander, Verdugo, comes across the poor man and hangs him because he has no more money to give and there’s nothing to be gained anymore from torturing him, broken as he is by now:

They for that thou hadst, did torture thee,
I see that thou hast not: heere wee’ll put
A period to thy daies. Hang him out-right,
And so speed all, whose naked indigence,
Haue not to feede Verdugo for expence (1602, sig. E4v).
And to really drive the playwright’s point home, the factor finally dies with a warning specifically aimed at Londoners:

My destiny, was to dye this shamefull death,
Which I accept with thankes to him that giues it,
And England now and London both farewell,
Let after times of Spanish rygor tell (1602, sig. E4v).

The possibility for identification between audience and character is important here, because it enables the experience of exemplary terror. As William Walker notes, tragic fear in the Aristotelian sense is ultimately a fear for oneself, which is experienced when theatregoers see the suffering of a character in whom they recognise themselves: ‘concerned for our own welfare, we fear that we ourselves may be destroyed when we see someone like us destroyed’ (2019, p. 42).

These scenes don’t just reinforce the early modern fear of war in general, but also serve to make Spanish invasion in particular an object of terror. Several scholars have argued that the Sack of Antwerp as well as its depiction in A Larum contributed to the ‘Black Legend’ (Streeete, 2017, p. 69; Maltby, 1971, p. 53), the anti-Spanish rhetoric, employed mostly in Protestant parts of early modern Europe, that depicted the Spanish as cruel, bloodthirsty barbarians who would not rest until they had conquered all of Europe, if not the entire world. An official declaration described the armada of 1588, for example, as ‘so great a terour to all Christendome’ (Anonymous, 1589, sig. B1r). Such depictions made the prospect of Spanish invasion more terrifying, and thus established beyond doubt the need to prevent it at all costs. The playwright of A Larum therefore takes the events of the Sack of Antwerp, already horrifying, and embellishes them to make an even bigger impression on his audiences. The two main sources of the play (Fagel, 2017, p. 108), Gascoigne’s The Spoyle of Antwerpe and an anonymous pamphlet entitled An Historical Discourse or Rather a Tragicall Historie of the Citie of Antwerpe (1586), are decidedly less specific in their descriptions of the violent acts committed by the Spanish. Gascoigne’s pamphlet includes anecdotes about a young woman taken from a nunnery and an English merchant who is tortured, both of which appear in A Larum. But the playwright has elaborated on them extensively, probably in order to create dramatically satisfying scenes as well as elicit educational terror in his audiences. Overall, A Larum pays much more attention to the experiences of the victims than either of its pamphlet sources. Furthermore, Gascoigne’s text emphasises the sacking is committed by ordinary soldiers without approval from their commanders. In Discourse and A Larum, on the other hand, there is no such distinction between soldiers and officers, so all Spaniards are bad – a more powerful idea if one’s aim is to generate a fear of Spanish invasion. As Maltby remarks, ‘nonsense this [the play] may be, but it would be folly to deny its effectiveness’ (1971, p. 53).
The fate of the English factor also demonstrates England can only rely on itself to avert the Spanish threat. As Joseph Stephenson has observed, Stump and his allies only show up when the citizens of Antwerp are in need. Meanwhile,

no military ally from Antwerp arrives in order to help the English character, whether the consequences are financial loss, physical harm, or shameful death and defeat. Similarly, as the English began to muster an army in 1599, no military aid could be expected from their long-time allies in the Low Countries, who were far too busy with their own perpetual battle against the Spanish (Stephenson, 2013, p. 196).

It is therefore up to Londoners to step up and take responsibility, to avert disaster by preparing for war and by mending their immoral ways. Time makes this clear once more in the epilogue: ‘in his unwonted loue’, he has shared this cautionary tale so that ‘No heauie or disastrous chance befall / The sonnes of men if they will warned be’. However, if Londoners ignore the warning Time and A Larum present, they should be prepared to experience a ‘like misery’ to the inhabitants of Antwerp, whose bloody story ‘May be a meane all Citties to affright / How they in sinne and pleasure take delight’ (1602, sig. G2r). Both terror and the absence thereof have their consequences and functions in the world of the play, but ultimately they serve to produce a real-world effect on theatregoers by inspiring productive terror and prompting them into action.

At the same time, the play undoubtedly also evoked other reactions in its audiences. As previously noted, terror could be entertaining and there was (and is) a certain appeal to gory spectacle on stage, a phenomenon I will come back to with my discussion of The Virgin Martyr in chapter four. An event like the Sack of Antwerp made ‘an ideal vehicle for something not unlike pornography’ (Maltby, 1971, p. 52), and the violent scenes in A Larum were probably intended to terrify and titillate at the same time – a strategy also employed by Marlowe in The Massacre at Paris. There are, in fact, a few similarities between how violence is portrayed in The Massacre at Paris and A Larum for London. Much as in Marlowe’s play, the violence is often shockingly gratuitous, and it is unrelenting once it has started. The playwright seems to have deliberately structured the play to work up to several scenes of uninterrupted killing and torture. An old citizen who is forced to retrieve his daughter from a nunnery leaves the stage, only to be replaced by the English factor who is tortured for the first time in this scene. When he exits to find the money to pay off Danila, the old man returns with his daughter – at the end of the scene, they have both been killed by the Spanish. Next is a scene where soldiers threaten and eventually murder an entire family, at the end of which the factor has returned for another bout of torture. In this section of the play, characters conduct all their business that does not involve committing or being the victim of violence off stage, so that on stage, the violence can continue uninterrupted. That said, in The Massacre at Paris the violence
happens alarmingly quickly, in very short scenes. The scenes in A Larum are much longer and build suspense by working up to the violence. Furthermore, both plays are noisy. As Mathew Martin observes of The Massacre at Paris, the scenes depicting the massacre force ‘themselves upon the audience’s senses visually and aurally’ (2015, p. 134). Much the same could probably be said for A Larum, which contains a striking amount of stage directions that refer to crying, shrieking, shouting, shots being fired, cannons being discharged and, of course, alarums. Such ‘sonically assaultive drama’ (Deutermann, 2016, p. 26) makes audiences experience the same as the characters on stage, which probably aids identification and makes the scenes in question more forceful and exciting.

These two sides of dramatised terror – exemplary and entertaining – can coexist, but it’s not necessarily an easy fit. Since it has to be clear to audiences which bits they are supposed to be taking to heart, the moral of the story should be beyond doubt. At the same time, the playwright would have wanted A Larum to be seen by as many people as possible, which meant offering theatregoers something more exciting than a moralising lecture. For a play to be commercially successful, people had to want to see it. If Tamburlaine, as McKay argues, was set at a safe enough distance to produce a thrill rather than full-blown terror in its audiences, A Larum is much closer to home temporally and geographically – and of course the playwright explicitly equates Antwerp with London. It must have been an uncomfortable experience for audiences to see characters representing them being eviscerated (both literally and figuratively) on stage. I would suggest A Larum’s spectacular violence and extraordinary body count were meant to induce terror and thereby educate audiences, but also to keep them hooked at the same time. Although most critics have been fairly scathing about the playwright’s abilities, we should therefore at least entertain the possibility that A Larum is, in fact, a carefully calibrated piece of work intended to strike a fine balance between educating theatregoers through terror on the one hand, but also providing enough spectacular entertainment to prevent them from tuning out. In other words, both the functioning of terror in the world of the play and in the real world are integral to the way A Larum works as a piece of theatre.

38 See chapter two in this work (pp. 22–61) for an extensive discussion of sound and violence, and sound as violence, on the early modern stage.
2.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown that terror was a complicated concept in the early modern period, which has so far not received enough critical attention. Usage of the word by writers of the time suggests terror may be characterised as a type of fear that combines awe, frightful anticipation and often panic. It’s an overwhelming emotion one experiences in the presence of a powerful ruler, or when one is subjected to a frightening experience beyond one’s control. Unlike modern conceptions of terror, for the early moderns terror thus often combined positive and negative feelings into one complex mixture.

Although the experience of fear and terror could be dangerous – one might literally die of fearing too much – the early moderns also recognised it could help keep the social order intact by working as an instrument of social control. But not all forms of fear are created equal: I follow Tarbin in distinguishing between productive and disruptive terror. Reverential fear for one’s superiors was considered to be correct and appropriate, and promoted order by discouraging people from committing sin and crime – it was a productive type of terror. But terror could also be disruptive and lead to disorder when bad actors used fear to lead people astray or to keep them on the wrong path. In other words, fear and terror were complex, multivalent forces in the early modern experience.

This is reflected in the representation of terror on stage in the early modern period. Playwrights used terror to entertain and educate their audiences, and reflected upon its uses and abuses by state and sub-state actors. Plays could also show what the consequences were for society when terror was lacking, which is the jumping off point for both The Life and Death of Jack Straw and A Larum for London. In both plays, a lack of productive terror initially leads to a breakdown of the social order, but equally, both plays also show terror is not always helpful in restoring order. Amid disorder, disruptive terror is rife and continues to provoke further chaos. Besides, as Jack Straw shows, one can not necessarily rely on the productive terror inspired by God and the monarch to keep social order: not every legitimate ruler has the ability to command terror, and not every interpretation of the Bible endorses quiet submission to the status quo. The playwright of A Larum, on the other hand, employs terror on stage to inspire better behaviour in his audiences; dramatised terror is used to produce real-world effects. Achieving the desired result would have required a careful balancing of exemplary and entertaining terror, and A Larum demonstrates that evoking terror in their audiences was a deliberate strategy playwrights could employ and experiment with.

This chapter has shown that the uses and dangers of terror and fear were the subjects of much debate in the early modern period. Terror could help to maintain civil society, but also undermine it. The experience of terror could be dangerous and disconcerting, but also exciting and entertaining.
As both plays as well as the other texts discussed in this chapter demonstrate, the early moderns recognised that it was challenging (but not impossible) to employ terror productively, and that the results of meddling with such a volatile force were unpredictable. We can therefore conclude terror is a useful lens through which to analyse early modern political violence and its representation in the drama of the period. Even though the word ‘terrorism’ does not yet appear in early modern discourse, this chapter has shown the instrumental applications of terror were certainly a topic of (anxious) consideration.
CHAPTER 3: ‘FOR TERROUR AND EXAMPLE OF EVILL DOERS’: EARLY MODERN STATE TERRORISM

In this chapter I will focus on state terrorism, discussing what it looked like in early modern England, how it could be employed by the state to maintain its authority, and what political and religious ideas informed its application. I will also explore how state terrorism was represented in a variety of plays, showing that playwrights used their work to raise questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of state terrorism in the real world. To this end, I will look at four plays that depict punishment and execution: Ben Jonson’s Sejanus, Sir Thomas More by Munday, Chettle and others, Fletcher and Massinger’s Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt, and Two Lamentable Tragedies by Robert Yarington. These works show that a wide variety of views on state terrorism could have a place on the early modern stage. At the same time, similarities in their themes make it fruitful to discuss them alongside one another. Sejanus and Sir Thomas More both show the tragic fall of councillors at odds with their ruler due to diverging interpretations of the doctrine of state terrorism – reason of state and divine right, respectively – that they are supposed to uphold. Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt and Two Lamentable Tragedies show execution being used to restore political order at opposite ends of the social scale, but signal contrary concerns about state terrorism: in the former it is disconcertingly effective, whereas the latter suggests it’s not effective enough. This chapter will show that although the spectacle of violent punishment was intended ‘for Terrour and Example of evill doers’ (Luders, 1810-1825, p. 488) by the state, in practice there was room for other, more ambiguous interpretations too.

Sovereignty and violence

First things first: what do I mean when I talk about state terrorism in early modern England? To answer this, we should start with early modern ideas of sovereignty, and explore how these relate to the legitimate use of violence. There were several conceptions of sovereignty in currency at the time, the biggest difference between them being that some theorists saw sovereignty as issuing from God, while for others it issued from the people. Among the most notable in the first group is Bodin, who set out his ideas about absolute monarchy in The Six Bookes of the Commonweale (1606). In an absolute monarchy, the king or queen holds supreme and perpetual authority, and is not subject to the law – although early modern political theory did subject the monarch to the law of God.¹ In the latter group are resistance theorists like George Buchanan, who considered the

¹ See Franklin (1973) for a comprehensive overview of Bodin’s theory of sovereignty, particularly chapter four (pp. 54–69) on absolutism; Sarah Mortimer’s exploration of political thinking in the 1570s and 1580s productively places Bodin’s ideas on sovereignty alongside other theories discussed in this chapter, such as reason of state and Neostoicism (2021, pp. 178–200).
monarch’s sovereignty to be conditional; I will come back to them in chapter four. All these thinkers recognised, however, that sovereignty and violence are inherently linked. The sovereign must have some control over their subjects’ ability to use violence against one another or against the state itself. As noted in chapter two, the early modern state was attempting to establish a monopoly on the use of legitimate violence, but this was still a new idea and ‘state control of violence was tenuous at best’ (Ruff, 2001, p. 44). Moreover, the sovereign must be able to coerce unwilling subjects into adhering to the law, a process which either uses violence directly or relies on the state’s ability to use it. Violence is therefore ‘not just an object of control, but also a means’ (Kesselring, 2019, p. 129) – an instrument that ‘sustains the sovereign State’ (Blanchard, 2014, p. 107).

However, for this system to work it was also essential both the law and the sovereign’s use of violence to enforce it were recognised as legitimate by their subjects. After all, the early modern state did not have the capacity to actually force general compliance: the ‘fragmented nature of political and judicial power in early modern society’ meant the state was not a monolithic, unified body able to enforce the law and use its powers consistently (Amussen, 1995, p. 5). Besides, central government relied heavily on local representatives, from the justices of the peace to the parish constables, who were supposed to make sure the law was upheld and to occasionally enact violence on behalf of the state. These were people who, understandably, were not just concerned about doing their duty but also about not alienating the community they lived and worked in – a phenomenon vividly illustrated by the constable Dogberry in Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing. This naturally undermined the sovereignty of government rule somewhat (Ruff, 2001, p. 90; Amussen, 1995, p. 5). Compliance with the law, therefore, often had to result ‘from a recognition of the essential legitimacy of the action in hand’ on the part of subjects, rather than ‘from the use of force’ on behalf of the sovereign (Braddock, 2000, p. 9).

State terrorism
The sovereign thus faced two challenges relating to their use of violence: the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence was incomplete, and the state’s inability to consistently enforce the law meant violent enforcement could be somewhat haphazard. These challenges notwithstanding, violence was

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2 As Jacques Derrida points out, ‘the word “enforceability” reminds us that there is no such thing as law (droit) that doesn’t imply in itself [...] the possibility of being “enforced”, applied by force. There are, to be sure, laws that are not enforced, but there is no law without enforceability, and no applicability or enforceability of the law without force’ (1992, p. 6, emphasis original). This idea is reflected in the iconography: Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s engraving of Justice (1559) as one of the cardinal virtues, for example, gives a graphic depiction of the violent means the law provides for the purposes of coercion, correction and control. Furthermore, Justice usually was (and still is) depicted with a sword.
employed to protect and reinforce the state’s sovereignty. In fact, it was because of these problems that spectacular displays of violence by the state were more necessary; drawing on Scarry’s theory of the substantiating qualities of violence (1985, pp. 131–132) once more, it could be argued the early modern state used violence to attempt to forcibly realise a version of England in which its monopoly on violence was perfect and unchallenged. This is where state terrorism comes in. Appelbaum states that ‘it is crucial to distinguish between a repressive government harming citizens as a matter of policy and a body of government agents engaging in terrorist violence in special circumstances for the sake of a symbolic political gain’ (2015a, p. 16). In his view, however, terrorism is always extra-legal, so violence committed within the legal system can never be terrorist. I would suggest instead that the ‘state terrorism’ label can be applied to the kind of extra-legal actions Appelbaum is thinking of, like the assassination of the Duke of Guise by Henry III, as well as to legal practices such as violent public punishment. As my characterisation of terrorism in the introduction has shown, the fact that an act of violence is legal doesn’t preclude it from being an act of terrorism: legal violence, too, can involve the instrumental use of terror in service of an ideological goal. This chapter will demonstrate the early modern state deliberately set out to inspire terror in its subjects through the use of violent punishment in order to maintain control – in other words, that terrorism was pursued as policy.

Public punishment served to cement the power of the sovereign and was an important demonstration of the state’s control. To return to Foucault’s concept, early modern punishment revolved around the physical breaking of the transgressor’s body in the monarch’s name, thereby restoring the monarch’s injured sovereignty by a spectacular manifestation of their power (1977, pp. 47–49). This exemplary violence was partly symbolic: the state used this spectacle to project a level of power and control it didn’t actually have. To quote Denis Crouzet, ‘everything was built less on a reality of absolute power than on the rhetorical power of images and rituals’ (quoted in Ruff, 2001, p. 74). The use of state terrorism was therefore strategic: the symbolic power of the terrorist violence the state employed needed to make up for the fact that the state only had limited control over when and to what purpose violence was used, and by whom. Although the sovereign alone should have the power of life and death over their subjects, the state did not have the capacity to enforce this effectively. Spectacular displays of punishment thus had to make people forget about this incomplete control by the state and set an example that was impressive enough to function as a deterrent. In the words of K.J. Kesselring, ‘executions dispatched messages as well as offenders’ (2019, p. 129).

Towards the end of this chapter, I will come back to the topic of punishment – including execution – and discuss in detail how it worked as state terrorism. But first, I will explore two theories that were
used to legitimise the use of state terrorism: reason of state and divine right theory. On the surface, these seem to be very different. Reason of state was often considered to be immoral, whereas the divine right of kings was supposedly in complete accordance with God’s wishes. Nevertheless, both theories could provide handy justifications for the use of state terrorism, a potentially concerning fact that was noted by many early modern writers. As Annalisa Castaldo states, ‘the legitimate use of violence [was] a major concern of the early modern period’ (2009, p. 50), and playwrights engaged with this topic by interrogating the state’s use of violence on stage. Cynthia Marshall rightly recognises that early modern culture often shows contradicting currents, so ‘what a culture in its official versions of itself is suturing together and publicly solidifying’ – such as narratives about the legitimacy of state terrorism – ‘texts designed for entertainment [...] might be busily undoing’ (2002, pp. 2–3). Dramatists were not uncritical of state terrorism, nor of the way it was legitimised, whether through divine right or reason of state – as we will see in the next sections of this chapter.
3.1 REASON OF STATE: MACHIAVELLI AND THE ANTI-MACHIAVELLIANS

The doctrine of reason of state is inextricably intertwined with the name of Niccolò Machiavelli. Both infamous and influential, Machiavelli’s works offer practical advice to rulers on how to best govern their states, drawing on Roman history as well as the author’s own experience as diplomatic secretary to the republic of Florence. *Il Principe* (written in 1513, published in 1532), or *The Prince* in English translation, was a particularly controversial work. In it, Machiavelli goes against the established format of the ‘mirror for princes’ genre by severing the ethical imperatives set by religion from the business of politics. The popular view at the time was that the successful prince stays in power because they possess Christian virtues such as generosity and mercifulness, a stance argued perhaps most famously by Erasmus in his 1516 work, *Institutio Principis Christiani – The Education of a Christian Prince*. Machiavelli, however, claims the successful prince stays in power because they will do whatever it takes to hang on to that power and attain their goals, even if that means abandoning conventional virtues (2019, pp. xiv–xv). This is what Machiavelli calls ‘virtù’: the combination of qualities and characteristics that allow the ruler to stay in power, including their willingness to do ‘bad’ things. Because the world is not perfect, there is ‘a great distance between how we live and how we ought to live’, and so the prince has to be pragmatic – ‘it is necessary for a ruler who wishes to maintain his position to learn to be able to be not good, and to use that ability or not use it according to necessity’ (Machiavelli, 2019, p. 53).

A ruler must always first consider their actions in terms of the effects on the state and their ability to maintain it; morality should only come into consideration if it improves or hinders the effectiveness of the action. This is the doctrine of ‘reason of state’; although Machiavelli neither came up with the principle nor the term, it was frequently associated with the infamous Florentine by the early moderns. In a flawed society, Machiavelli sees government as a way of providing order and stability, which benefits the ruler as well as the ruled; aside from a stable state being easier to govern, it also protects the people against their own (and their neighbours’) worst instincts (2019, p. 25). Reason of

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3 Machiavelli writes predominantly – although not exclusively – about male rulers, and *virtù* is a male word etymologically. I nevertheless refer to the ruler with the gender-neutral singular ‘they’ throughout. This is partly because my main interest lies in the influence and application of Machiavelli’s ideas in England, where female rule had become an inescapable reality by the late sixteenth century. Moreover, some critics have departed from the traditional view that Machiavelli’s *virtù* is an inherently gendered concept that can’t apply to women. See, for example, Clarke (2005).

4 The principle of reason of state derives from classical authors like Tacitus and Livy, while the term was coined in 1547 by Giovanni della Casa and ‘passed into general currency’ in the 1580s (Burke, 1991, p. 479). In *Della Ragion di Stato* (1589), the first book published under that title, the Jesuit thinker Giovanni Botero argues in favour of a ‘moral’ reason of state which he opposes to Machiavelli’s ‘immoral’ interpretation. Although successful in continental Europe, the book was never published in England, where reason of state remained predominantly linked to Machiavelli. Peter Burke (1991) gives a useful general overview of the development of reason of state-thinking in early modern Europe, and its relationship to Tacitism.
state allows the prince to use whatever violence and deception are necessary to maintain their hold on the state and to defend it from enemies who threaten its stability. Assassination, mutilation, inciting rebellion and other forms of political violence are all fair game for Machiavelli, who regards (the threat of) violence as one of the most effective ways of ensuring compliance. The virtuoso prince knows how and when to use violence to get what they want, and Machiavelli provides plenty of strategies and examples to help the ruler manage this successfully.

**Machiavellian terrorism**

One of the reasons Machiavelli considers violence to generally be effective is that it can be used to inspire fear in people. Probably his most enduring piece of advice is ‘that it is desirable to be both loved and feared; but it is difficult to achieve both and, if one of them has to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved’ (2019, p. 57). Since fear keeps people more reliably in check than love, being feared is the better option. In other words, Machiavelli advises rulers to employ terrorism – to systematically and strategically use violence to inspire terror in people, and to use this terror to the prince’s advantage. Examples of this practice can be found in both Discorsi, translated as Discourses on Livy (written in 1517, published in 1531), and in The Prince. In the Discourses, Machiavelli describes how the Florentine government would ‘regain the state’ every five years by

> putting that terror and that fear in men that had been put there in taking it [the state], since at that time they had beaten down those who, according to that mode of life, had worked for ill. But as the memory of that beating is eliminated, men began to dare to try new things and to say evil; and so it is necessary to provide for it, drawing [the state] back toward its beginnings (1996, p. 211).

There is a clear correlation here between Machiavelli’s advocated use of terror-violence and Foucault’s spectacle of the scaffold: in both cases the ruler employs a form of exemplary violence to renew and reinforce their hold on power.

The most famous illustration of instrumental terror-violence, however, comes from The Prince, in its description of a masterstroke by Machiavelli’s poster boy for virtù, Cesare Borgia:

> After the duke [Borgia] had conquered the Romagna, he found that it had been controlled by violent lords, who were more disposed to despoil their subjects than to rule them properly, thus being a source of disorder rather than of order; consequently, that region was full of thefts, quarrels and outrages of every kind. He considered it necessary to introduce efficient government, because he wanted the region to be peaceful and its inhabitants obedient to his monarchical authority. He therefore sent there messer Rimirro de Orco, a cruel and energetic man, giving him full powers.

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5 In his history of terrorism, Andrew Sinclair names Machiavelli as one of the first ‘philosophers of terrorism’ (2004, p. xv).
Rimirro quickly restored order and peace, and acquired a very formidable reputation. Later, the duke considered that such great power was undesirable, because he was afraid it would incur hatred; and he set up a civil tribunal under a distinguished president, in the centre of the region, to which each city sent a lawyer. Because he recognised that the severe measures that had been taken had resulted in his becoming hated by some people, in order to dispel this ill-feeling and win everyone over to him, he wanted to show that if any cruel deeds had been committed they were attributable to the harshness of his governor, not to himself. And availing himself of an appropriate opportunity, one morning, the duke had Rimirro placed in two pieces in the square at Cesena, with a block of wood and a blood-stained sword at his side. This terrible spectacle left people both satisfied and amazed (2019, pp. 25–26).

John Roe observes that one of this episode’s most salient features is Borgia’s confidence in the ability of the act to speak for itself: ‘it is particularly awesome that the body is described as being left there alone, in silent but eloquent testimony, with no judge or executioner standing by with a ready explanation to solemnise or sanctify the occasion’ (2002, p. 11). Again, there’s a striking similarity here with Foucault’s spectacle of the scaffold, which works as ‘a policy of terror’ that makes ‘everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign’ (1977, p. 49).

Since Machiavelli values results above everything else, his approach to violence centres around ‘cruel deeds committed well’ (2019, p. 32). In this ‘by all means necessary’ philosophy, the ruler is limited only by effectiveness; unnecessary cruelty, or ‘cruel deeds committed badly’, is off-limits, since it increases the risk of rebellion against the prince, which makes them a less effective ruler. In the example quoted above, Borgia eliminated de Orco because he had been too violent, and Borgia was afraid his cruelty would induce opposition. But when employed well, violence can prove very effective, so Machiavelli has no qualms about advising the prince to ‘wipe out’ an entire ruling family or to suggest men should be ‘caressed or crushed’, since you can avenge a minor injury but usually not a severe one (2019, pp. 8; 9). The example of Rimirro de Orco stands out here because of its coldness and cunning: de Orco’s cruelty towards the people is necessary to bring the region in line, while Borgia’s cruelty to de Orco is necessary so he can distance himself from his lieutenant’s actions and restore his own popularity. This instrumental use of spectacular violence and cruelty in the service of a political goal is what we might call Machiavellian terrorism.

The anti-Machiavellians
Despite the similarities between Machiavellian terrorism and punishment practices, Machiavelli’s ideas were not exactly embraced in early modern England. Nevertheless, as studies by Alessandra Petrina (2009) and Sydney Anglo (2005) have shown, the reception of his work was more complex
than has often been assumed by academics such as Simon Haines, who claims that ‘every schoolboy knew by Shakespeare’s time that [...] his [Machiavelli’s] was the voice of Satan himself’ (2008, 10:03). Instead, Machiavelli was a figure of both fear and fascination to the early moderns. His works made for popular reading material: they were read in French, Italian and Latin before English translations became available; they circulated in manuscript and print; they were quoted, misquoted and plagiarised. Readers who were not immediately put off by Machiavelli’s directness seem to have found value in his ideas. Lord Morley encouraged Thomas Cromwell to read The Prince because it was ‘surely a good thing for your Lordship and for our Sovereign Lord in Council’ (quoted in Petrina, 2009, p. 15); Philip Sidney wrote to Hubert Languet that he ‘could never be induced to believe that Machiavelli was right about avoiding an excess of clemency, until I learned from my own experience what he has endeavoured with many arguments to prove’ (quoted in Petrina, 2009, p. 16); and Walter Raleigh and Francis Bacon used Machiavelli’s observations ‘to sharpen their own analysis of specific contemporary issues’ (Anglo, 2005, p. 446). Another aspect that obscures the reception of Machiavelli’s actual ideas is that many critics attached his name to a range of issues which had little to do with his writings. The struggle between Catholics and Protestants is an example of ‘a controversy that is totally extraneous to Machiavelli’s own political reflections, but which easily transforms the abhorrent suggestions of the Florentine writer into instances of the corrupt and devious Catholic way to power’ (Petrina, 2009, p. 6).

That said, there were also plenty of detractors who did engage with Machiavelli’s actual ideas. Possibly the most controversial implication of his work was that the political sphere is no place for ‘conventionally’ virtuous men, a notion the anti-Machiavellian authors sought to disprove. Calling them ‘anti-Machiavellians’ perhaps implies an ideological coherence that wasn’t always there; each of these authors had their own ‘ideal ruler’, and while some explicitly defined themselves as opponents of Machiavelli, others did not. What they did have in common was their aim to give rulers practical advice on how to govern in a way that was both effective and morally sound. Mikael Hörnvist states that ‘for Renaissance humanists the overriding moral conflict was [...] between honestas and utilitas, the honourable and the expedient or the useful’ (2011, p. 39). Anti-Machiavellian theorists set out to show honestas and utilitas could work alongside one another, rather than in opposition. Many even argued it was not only possible to be virtuous and politically powerful at the same time, but that adhering to Christian principles made the ruler more successful (Gibson, 2017, pp. 163–164; Bireley, 1990, p. 3). With practical advice and detailed exampla, these authors set out to counter many of Machiavelli’s precepts and to simultaneously disprove the most commonly made charge against them – ‘that they were utopians or idealists far removed from the realities of power in a hard world’ (Bireley, 1990, p. 27). In the section below, I will take a closer look
at the work of two of the most famous anti-Machiavellians of the early modern period: Innocent Gentillet and Justus Lipsius. Both influential in their own right, these authors approach anti-Machiavellianism from completely different angles and yet, both end up making recommendations that are at times surprisingly similar to those of the infamous Florentine.  

**Innocent Gentillet**

Innocent Gentillet was a Huguenot lawyer and politician who spent two periods in exile in Geneva due to his religious views. His most influential contribution to early modern thought is *Discours sur les Moyens de Bien Gouverner*, the original ‘Anti-Machiavel’, which was published in 1576 and made ‘the first attempt at a systematic refutation of Machiavelli’ (Bireley, 1990, p. 17). The work reached a large international audience, both Protestant and Catholic, and certainly influenced the reception of Machiavelli’s ideas in England. An English version of Gentillet’s work — *A Discourse Vpon the Meanes of VVel Governing* — was printed in 1602, while *The Prince* would only appear in translation decades later. That said, while anti-Machiavellian works in general were more readily available in English at this time than Machiavelli’s writings, the interest in the former clearly suggests some knowledge and awareness of the latter among the reading public.

Although Gentillet is morally outraged by Machiavelli’s work, he also makes a point of engaging with the practicality of his advice. The result, somewhat surprisingly, is that Gentillet ends up making recommendations of his own that are not all that different from those of Machiavelli, particularly when it comes to the role of terror in ruling a state. As noted in the previous chapter, terror could be inspired by the rightful prince and the tyrant alike, so Gentillet does not disapprove of terrifying...

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6 Indeed, the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods saw a particular interest in both Machiavellian and anti-Machiavellian thought at the same time; reason of state, Tacitism and Neostoicism were all popular topics and many influential works, including those by Lipsius and Gentillet discussed here, were translated into English in this period. Scholars have identified a wide range of contributing factors to this popularity. One major influence seems to have been the general tendency towards a more ‘scientific’ approach to all sorts of disciplines, such as warfare and administration, which also made room for pragmatic political thinking (Oestreich, 1982, p. 6). On the other hand, the political insecurities of the period and the increasingly autocratic environment at court made it profitable to obtain ‘social or political invulnerability’, which might be achieved ‘either through Machiavellian maneuvering, […] or else through a Senecan [i.e. Stoic] withdrawal into cultivated indifference’ (Gray, 2018, p. 26). Successfully weathering the dynastic change from Elizabeth to James – which meant new political ideas and shifting power dynamics – would certainly have required a fair bit of flexibility from courtiers, and both Machiavellian and anti-Machiavellian works provided practical advice that could be applied in such situations.

7 Many academics consider Gentillet’s work to be a significant factor in the negative interpretation of Machiavelli’s work, although the idea that all knowledge of Machiavelli up until the 1640s was filtered through Gentillet has been discredited. For more on this, see Petrina (2009, pp. 1–45) and Anglo (2005, pp. 325–373). At the same time, although Gentillet’s aim was to refute Machiavelli’s ideas, he also contributed to their spread; he had to set out Machiavelli’s arguments before he could counter them, so a significant portion of *Discourse* is taken up with descriptions of Machiavelli’s teachings.
rulers per se. Indeed, like Machiavelli, he instructs his readers to engender a mixture of fear and love in their subjects, but Gentillet considers this to be an easily achievable feat:

And as for that which Machiavelli saith, That it is very hard for a prince to bee feared and loved together, it is cleane contrarie: For there is nothing more easie for a prince, than to obtaine them both [...] When men understand, that the prince ministreth good justice in every place, without support, favour, or corruption, leaving not punishable faults unpunished, and is not prodigall in grauranting favours and pardons, unless hee have a good foundation upon reason and equitie, certaine it is, that hee shall be redoubted and feared (1602, sig. V1r).

How the ruler achieves or maintains this ideal fear-to-love ratio in practice is not entirely clear from Gentillet’s work. On the one hand, he highlights problems that can come from governing through fear: ‘obedience, founded upon feare, is incontinent broken’ and ‘feare of paine and punishment, engendreth hatred’ (1602, sig. V1r; sig. S5r). The prince should therefore aim to use clemency when possible. Furthermore, fear should never be brought about by cruelty, which is hated by everyone, and cruelty can never be justified by the common good (1602, sig. S5r; sigs. V6r–X2r). There seems to be no such thing as ‘cruel deeds committed well’ for Gentillet.

However, Gentillet also advises princes should be careful not to be too forgiving, since ‘it is not clemency but crueltie [...] when a prince may doe justice, and doth it not’ (1602, sig. 2A6v). The good ruler’s subjects ‘will obey him voluntarily and without constraint, some for love, others for feare of his justice, which he shall have well established in his domination’ (1602, sig. 2E2r). Harsh punishments are not off the table, provided they are just; Gentillet even advises the ruler to ‘commit to others’ the job of overseeing punishments ‘which seeme to be rigorous in execution’ (Gentillet, 1602, sig. 2H1v). On the topic of violent punishment, then, Gentillet and Machiavelli’s ideas don’t diverge all that much. Both writers consider the spectacle of the scaffold, used appropriately, to be a legitimate and effective way to consolidate the power of the ruler and nip burgeoning trouble in the bud. They disagree on the circumstances in which this is allowed – Gentillet talks about punishment in the legal sense, whereas Machiavelli is happy to condone extra-legal violence as well. In both cases, however, we could speak of ‘cruelty well used’ – a strategic employment of spectacular violence.

Justus Lipsius and Neostoicism

Justus Lipsius was a prominent humanist thinker who studied classical Stoic philosophy and wrote about its application in the political and religious circumstances of his time. His most influential original works were De Constantia (1584) and the already mentioned Politicorum Sive Civilis Doctrinae Libri Sex (1589) but his editions of Tacitus (1574) and Seneca (1605) were also widely read,
including in England. Neostoic works like the Sixe Bookes were built on an underlying philosophy of government and were not as outspokenly anti-Machiavellian as Gentillet’s Discourse, which explicitly defines itself against Machiavelli. But the Neostoics certainly engaged with Machiavelli’s ideas, albeit more subtly; as Gerhard Oestreich notes, Neostoicism aimed to provide tools for the ideal ‘political man’, who combined ‘practical wisdom and savoir-vivre’ (1982, p. 6), so Neostoic interest in Machiavelli’s practical approach to politics was natural. Sixe Bookes is a particularly interesting work because Lipsius responds to the principles set out by Machiavelli in an unusually considered manner for his time (Oestreich, 1982, pp. 70–71); as a result, the work contains ideas that would not have looked out of place in The Prince.

Like Machiavelli, Lipsius advocates for a strong state. He describes government as ‘that rod of Circes, which tameth both men, and beasts, that are touched therewith, whereby each one is brought in awe and due obedience, where before they were all fierce and vnruely’ (1594, sig. D1r). This is because, like Machiavelli, Lipsius has a rather low opinion of the general populace and their ability to govern themselves. In order to be effective, government should be ‘seuere’, since ‘lenitie induceth contempt, which is the very plague and ouerthrow of gouernment’ (1594, sig. L4r). For the commons, simply knowing something is unlawful or immoral will not stop them from doing it; only fear of pain and punishment will keep them obedient. After all, ‘who will stand in awe of him, whose sword is alwayes in his scabberd so fast tyed that it can hardly be drawne out?’ (1594, sig. L4r). But Lipsius also acknowledges that a combination of love and fear of their ruler is most effective to keep subjects in line; the prince should inspire both ‘admiration and feare, the temperature or mixture of both the which do make this vertue’ (1594, sig. L3v).

Whereas Machiavelli is often happy to rely on the debilitating and contagious power of terror, Lipsius advocates for ‘a temperate feare, vvhich restraineth, and bridleth’ over cruelty, which ‘bringeth more feare, then authoritie, to him that vseth it’. In the end, ‘Feare, and terror, are slender bondes to bind loue, the which when they are loosed, they that haue laid feare aside, do forthwith begin to hate’ (1594, sig. F1r). But this does not mean the ruler should not take strong measures when needed. Lipsius too sees the value of exemplary violence, since ‘punishment may teach some

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8 Despite his endorsement of absolute government, Lipsius was not uncontroversial in England. Tacitus’ work was often associated with disgruntled parties at court, such as those of Essex and later prince Henry (McEvoy, 2008, p. 33), and both Lipsius’s edition of Tacitus and his original works with their strong Tacitean influences were read in these circles. For more on the changing reception of Lipsius’s work in early modern England, see Goodburn (2015, pp. 32–35) and Tuck (1993, pp. 105–109).

9 In Lipsius’s original Latin text, this is a direct quotation from Tacitus’ Agricola – Sixe Bookes is in large part a collection of extracts from other sources, both ancient and more recent. Jan Papy notes that Lipsius ‘emphasized that the Politica was not a mere compilation’, since his choice and arrangement of the quotations allowed him to express ‘his own thought [...] through the authority of the ancients’ (2019).
fewe, and feare may light vppon all: and by the correction of one wicked man, the mischiefe of many may be bridled’ (1594, sig. L4r). He also advises executions can be considered to offer ‘certaine vile and abiect persons as a sacrifice to satisfie the publicke hate’ (1594, sig. N4v), a tactic reminiscent of Borgia’s ‘sacrifice’ of Rimirro de Orco. State terrorism has its uses for Lipsius then, although, like Gentillet, he allows a more restrained use of such violence than Machiavelli. The best results come from getting the mixture right, from knowing ‘how to blend the contrary elements of potencia et modestia, power and moderation, in such a way that the sentiments of love and fear contend with each other in his [the ruler’s] subjects’ (Oestreich, 1982, p. 41). Looking back to the previous chapter, it could be argued Lipsius and Gentillet subscribe to the notion of productive terror as a combination of love and fear, whereas Machiavelli assumes fear alone can still be productive rather than disruptive.

Furthermore, Lipsius is also quite happy to recommend the prince employs ‘prudentia mixta’, the mingling of ‘that which is profitable, with that which is honest’ (1594, sig. Q1r). He is firmly unapologetic about his advocacy of this rather Machiavellian policy and mocks those ‘pure men, nay rather poore children’ who confine themselves to the moral high ground (1594, sig. Q1r). And while his prudentia mixta mostly relies on fraud rather than force, Lipsius is clear violence may be employed against enemies,

\[\text{whome we may destroy both by custome, and lawe: and what matter is it by what means we geue them the ouerthrowe? That old saying of the Poet [Virgil], is well knowne: What importeth it, whether the enemy be ouercome by deceipt, or force? (1594, sig. Z4v)}\]

Although there are some fundamental differences between Machiavelli and Lipsius, they both recommend the strategic use of violence against people who threaten the prince and the state, whether these are traitorous subjects or external enemies; furthermore, both authors use a version of reason of state to justify such use of force. While reason of state and state terrorism seemed unsavoury to many early moderns when proposed by Machiavelli, writers like Gentillet and particularly Lipsius made them look a lot more palatable – even if they ended up recommending policies that were not that different. The ‘anti-Machiavellians’ therefore did a lot to contribute to the spread of these ideas, to promote the advantages of state terrorism as well as ‘to corroborate notions of reason of state and give them a veneer of orthodoxy’ (Braun, 2011, p. 137).

**Machiavelli on stage**

So far, I have focused on anti-Machiavellian discourse among early modern intellectuals, but most people did not read tracts like those of Gentillet or Lipsius. That doesn’t mean, however, that they did not engage with the ideas behind this debate. As Victoria Kahn explains,
by the late sixteenth century, it was not necessary actually to read Machiavelli to know what he said or, perhaps more accurately, what he meant for his contemporaries. Just as we modern Westerners ‘know’ Freud and Marx from the air we breathe, so Renaissance men and women ‘knew’ the author of *The Prince*. Machiavelli, we could say, had become an ‘ideologeme’, a cultural discourse regarding the use of force and fraud [...] in the realm of politics (2010, p. 245).

One of the ways people would have encountered this representation of Machiavelli as a symbol of wickedness was on stage, in the stock figure of the Machiavel. The Machiavel character has its roots in the early modern English interpretation of Machiavelli’s precepts, combined with traits of the Senecan tyrant and the morality play’s Vice character (Scott, 1984, p. 149). The Machiavel is dismissive of religion and morality, and explicitly enjoys deceiving people. He – it is usually a male character¹⁰ – is a driving force behind the drama, energetic, proactive and intelligent. He is ruthless in his quest for political or personal power and shows a complete disregard for the wellbeing of those who stand in his way (Grady, 2002, p. 73; Scott, 1984, pp. 158, 167–170).

For many years academics accepted Edward Meyer’s thesis (1897) that the English early modern playwrights based their characterisation of the Machiavel entirely on Gentillet’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s work, and that this resulted in a distorted stereotype rather than an accurate reflection. Today many scholars view the stock figure of the Machiavel as a simplification, but argue this does not necessarily mean early modern playwrights misunderstood Machiavelli’s ideas.¹¹ Rather, the choice to make the Machiavel into ‘a compendium of all the vices, a “Black Prince of Divels”’ (Scott, 1984, p. 155) served a dramatic and/or political purpose. Kahn, for example, focuses on the Machiavellian prince’s need to adapt themselves to circumstance and slip in and out of various roles, which is reflected in the stage Machiavel:

¹⁰ Female Machiavels did occasionally appear in early modern literature: on stage we might think of Queen Margaret in *Henry VI*, Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, and Catherine de’ Medici in *The Massacre at Paris*; in poetry, there is Thomas Andrew’s 1604 work, *The Unmasking of a Feminine Machiavel*. Like their male counterparts, female Machiavels tend to get what they want by manipulating others, but they do this by exerting sexual or maternal influence over their male marks. Unable to intervene directly in the political sphere, they try to achieve their ends by applying Machiavelli’s lessons in the personal sphere and gaining control over politically powerful men who can do the work for them; ‘Ile rule France, but they shall weare the crowne’, as Catherine remarks about her sons (Marlowe, 1594, sig. B6r). Often, their role as Machiavel is also bound up with their role as mother: Catherine exerts her maternal influence over her sons, while Margaret and Tamora scheme to protect and revenge their children.

¹¹ Indeed, it is entirely possible some playwrights directly read Machiavelli, although we can’t be certain ‘precisely how Machiavellian ideas were transmitted to the dramatists’ – Hugh Grady posits, for example, that Shakespeare may have drawn his Machiavellian statecraft from Marlowe’s plays, while Marlowe was at Cambridge when Gabriel Harvey remarked in a letter to Spenser that many of the students were reading the Florentine’s works (Grady, 2002, p. 29). And although it seems likely Jonson read Machiavelli himself (Cain, 2009, p. 164), it’s possible *Sejanus’s* statecraft derives from a combination of Tacitus – a source both Machiavelli and Jonson used – and Lipsius’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s work.
just as the new prince used his theatrical skills against the forces of custom and tradition, including the traditional notion of virtue, so the ‘Machiavel’ [...] employed the skills of self-fashioning and self-presentation against the intrinsic authority of hierarchy and status (2010, p. 246).

The early modern interest in this side of the Machiavel reflects political concerns of the period, ‘fears about the destabilizing role of rhetoric and theatricality in the new urban and courtly cultures of the period, [...] the threatening realities of de facto political power, the tricks of casuistry, and the new doctrine of reason of state’ (Kahn, 2010, p. 246).

The dramatic engagement with Machiavellian ideas was not exclusively negative, however; Machiavelli’s work provoked both fear and fascination, a double-sidedness which is reflected on stage. Early modern plays regularly feature characters who successfully employ Machiavellian policies, including Shakespeare’s Henry V and Fletcher and Massinger’s Maurice of Orange. These are characters with Machiavellian traits rather than Machiavels; unlike the scandalous and uncomplicated Machiavel, Machiavellian characters can be nuanced, and their use of violence and deceit can be effective as well as morally acceptable (Henry, more or less) or effective but morally dubious (Maurice). We should also not forget that the Machiavel, outrageous and evil though he might be, was a very popular character who spent a lot of time engaging directly with the audience and making them complicit in his plotting, which made him appealing and fun. Like the stock character of the tyrant, he was a memorable figure and theatregoers enjoyed seeing him in action.

Another way playwrights complicated the debate was by playing different types of Machiavellian characters off against each other. A common setup involves a confrontation between the Vice-like Machiavel, usually the more engaging but less adept party, and the more subtle Machiavellian, who tends to be further removed from the audience and keeps their cards close to their chest. Since Machiavels are often on a quest for power, they are typically not rulers themselves, but they do sometimes challenge rulers who are Machiavellians – as is the case in Sejanus. Marlowe arranges a similar structure in The Jew of Malta: the Machiavel Barabas is pitted against the Machiavellian

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12 Notably, the word ‘Machiavel’ is also an invention from this period; the OED credits Buchanan with its first written use in 1571, predating both Gentillet’s Anti-Machiavel and the first printing of Machiavelli’s works in English.

13 Frances Ringwood identifies the first group – somewhat confusingly – as ‘anti-Machiavels’: characters who use Machiavellian strategies such as lying and disguising themselves to benefit the common good (2019, p. 40).

14 This dynamic is still very visible in popular entertainment today: audiences often gravitate towards the bad guys. For more on this phenomenon in contemporary popular culture, see ‘Rooting for the Bad Guy’ (Keen et al., 2012).

15 Although there are some notable exceptions, such as Rodrigo Borgia – Pope Alexander VI – in Barnabe Barnes’s The Devil’s Charter. Strikingly for a play populated with characters who also appear in The Prince, however, Barnes never uses the word ‘Machiavel’ or any variation thereupon. See Anglo (2005, pp. 452–458) for an in-depth exploration of Barnes’s engagement with Machiavelli’s work.
governor Ferneze. If Ferneze appears to be a virtuous Machiavellian at first glance, it’s only because his deception runs deeper, which allows him to be successful where Barabas fails. Arata Ide observes that the governor ‘does not refer to nor proudly display his own impersonative talent but rather covers up his spectacular design’ by hiding behind divine providence. ‘While making a pretense of innocence or "simplicity", the government actually applies Machiavellian tactics to consolidate its power’ (2006, p. 268), a strategy which is repeated in Sejanus and Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt.

In The Spanish Tragedy, often considered to be the earliest play featuring a Machiavel character, Machiavel Lorenzo and virtuous Machiavellian Hieronimo confront one another. As Timothy Ponce points out, Machiavelli’s prince ‘must exercise both decisive violence and reflective contemplation’, but Lorenzo has missed the latter part of this lesson. In a setup we will also encounter in Sejanus, ‘Kyd illustrates how Machiavels who misinterpret The Prince and ignore this synthesis of the martial and the contemplative (like Lorenzo) lose their agency, becoming slaves to their visceral reaction’ while those ‘who reach their violent action by first engaging in contemplation (like Hieronimo) remain in control of their actions’ (Ponce, 2018, p. 444). Lorenzo also demonstrates that the Machiavel doesn’t always have a discernible (political) goal; much like Othello’s Iago, he mostly just seems to enjoy exercising and increasing his personal power by manipulating those around him, without there being an obvious aim to his machinations.

Early modern playwrights thus employed various methods of interrogating Machiavelli’s teachings on stage. By imbuing characters all along the moral spectrum with Machiavellian traits, they showed that violence and deceit – much like terror – can be used to achieve virtuous as well as evil ends. The role of Machiavellian tactics, including reason of state and state terrorism, in the acquisition and preservation of political power was clearly a concern to large sections of early modern society, from ordinary theatregoers to elite political thinkers. As Ben Jonson’s Sejanus demonstrates, they had good reasons to be anxious.
3.2 SEJANUS HIS FALL

Ben Jonson’s Sejanus His Fall – the playwright’s first tragedy – had a rocky early life. The response to the play’s debut at court in 1603 is unknown, but the reception at its first public outing at the Globe in 1604 was certainly less than appreciative; according to the dedicatory verse by ‘Ev. B.’, the audience broke out into a ‘beastly rage’ (5). That same year Jonson also faced accusations of ‘popery and treason’ over Sejanus and had to defend himself before the Privy Council. Intrigued by these controversies, modern commentators have suggested a wide variety of readings of the play, assuming that Jonson employed ‘application’ – the use of history to obliquely criticise current events – to comment on the political situation at hand.\(^\text{16}\) However, most seem to agree the play shows, in Ayres’ words, ‘a thoroughly pessimistic outlook on the human condition’ (in Jonson, 1990, p. 10), a pessimism that is closely connected to the characters’ use of Machiavellian statecraft. As discussed in the previous section, Machiavellian practices such as reason of state-politicking and state terrorism were looked on with both fear and fascination in early modern England, especially at the politically turbulent time when Sejanus was written and first performed – the transition between the reigns of Elizabeth and James. Indeed, in Sejanus ‘the Roman history of Tacitus and Juvenal has undergone a massive intrusion of Machiavellian elements’ (Boughner, 1968, p. 89). Like many of his contemporaries, Jonson seems to be caught between repulsion and reluctant admiration when faced with the figure of the virtuoso ruler. In Sejanus, the playwright explores the risks of employing practices like statecraft and state terrorism for the individual as well as for their wider community. At the same time, Jonson makes clear that viable alternatives are not available – once a society is marked by Machiavellian pragmatism, more pragmatism seems to be the only way to get results.

Fraud and force

Sejanus chronicles the events leading up to the death of the titular character, the ambitious favourite of the Roman emperor Tiberius. From the start of the play, it is apparent Rome is in a state of social degeneration. Intriguers and flatterers like Sejanus – ‘guilty men’ with ‘cleft tongues’ (1.12; 1.17) – have run the court, where they elevate themselves by flattering the emperor while

\(^{16}\) The precise matter of the charge against Jonson is uncertain, although critics have suggested offence may have been taken because the play was interpreted as comment on the recent treason charges against Essex (e.g. De Luna, 1967, p. 8) or Raleigh – Philip Ayres notes Jonson’s accuser, the Earl of Northampton, was one of the principal actors in Raleigh’s downfall (in Jonson, 1990, pp. 17–18). More recently, Ian Donaldson has suggested the play might be read as an illustration of the difficulties faced by Catholics in Protestant England (2012, p. 192). It’s impossible to be certain what the problem was, however: the earliest extant version of the play, the 1605 Quarto, is an adaptation by Jonson from which he cut the contributions of his original collaborator, probably George Chapman. It seems likely (most of) the material that caused offence, whether written by Chapman or Jonson himself, was removed at that time (McEvoy, 2008, p. 48). Nevertheless, despite Jonson’s efforts at making the play more acceptable to the authorities, it remains an ambiguous work and Jonson’s claim in the argument that it should simply serve ‘as a mark of terror to all traitors and treasons […] even to the worst of princes’ (39-40) seems a careful disclaimer more than an accurate reflection of the play.
accusing and undermining others. This is an environment where unscrupulous people thrive, ‘a pragmatic society’ where ‘virtue and guilt are concepts without weight’ (Chetwynd, 2007, p. 54). But, although Machiavellian politicking is depicted as morally reprehensible, Jonson also shows it can be an effective short-term strategy that allows the prince to fend off rivals.

*Sejanus* is an interesting study because, like the plays briefly discussed in the previous section, it pits two different types of Machiavellian characters against one another: the Machiavel Sejanus and the Machiavellian Tiberius. There are multiple layers of trickery at work in *Sejanus*, and Jonson reveals gradually to his audiences who is deceiving whom. It’s clear from the start that Sejanus and Tiberius are working together to manipulate the people of Rome and the emperor’s main opponents, the virtuous Germanicans. At the same time, Sejanus is operating behind Tiberius’s back to plot his way to the imperial throne. Being the Machiavel in this play, Sejanus makes the audience complicit in his conspiracy, so we understand what he’s doing and trying to achieve. Initially we might also believe, with the choral characters of the Germanican faction, that an oblivious Tiberius is susceptible to Sejanus’s flattery. But halfway through the play, when the emperor is alone on stage for the first time, it becomes clear he is perfectly aware of what’s going on (3.623–660). Tiberius reflects on how favourites who are raised too high by their benefactors will end up conspiring against them – a danger Machiavelli illustrates in the *Discourses* with, among others, the example of Sejanus’s conspiracy against Tiberius (1996, p. 221). It is a rare moment of audience insight into the emperor’s thinking, however. As a true *virtuoso* prince Tiberius typically keeps his cards close to his chest.

Sejanus thus turns out to be the less accomplished operator: overconfident in his own abilities as a Machiavellian *avant la lettre*, he spends the majority of the play happily assuming he’s got Tiberius wrapped around his little finger. Ironically, the confidence this self-appointed status gives him blinds him to the fact that he is actually going against many of Machiavelli’s teachings (Chetwynd, 2007, p. 57). While his strategising has allowed him to reach the heights that he has, Tacitus comments it was also ‘by such qualities that Sejanus was eventually undone’ (2008, p. 136). Like Marlowe’s Barabas, Sejanus is a Machiavel who is not quite Machiavellian enough to be successful and ends up being outsmarted by someone who’s read his *Prince* more carefully. In *Sejanus*, Jonson thus depicts two types of Machiavellian characters going head-to-head, showing that such a pragmatic approach to politics can be effective, but also blind people to the risks of their own ambition.

**Fearing and being feared**

So where do we encounter Machiavellian terrorism, or ‘cruelty well used’, in *Sejanus*? Tiberius and Sejanus are both aware of the essential role it plays in their success. Rome under their rule is ‘a society in the grip of state terror’ (Lever, 1971, p. 66); people live in constant fear, yet no one has
dared act against Tiberius and Sejanus. Sejanus appreciates fear as a useful political tool. After all, ‘Twas only fear first in the world made gods’ (2.162). Sejanus might not believe in those gods himself, but he knows other people do, and that fear of gods and leaders can be used to keep people in line. Exemplary terrorism is one of his favoured strategies. When he and Tiberius discuss which of the Germanicans they should eliminate first, Sejanus recommends they target Silius since

   His steep fall,
   By how much it doth give the weightier crack,  
   Will send more wounding terror to the rest (2.291–293).

Terror is a ‘wounding’ force in Sejanus’s conception – an idea that chimes with its characterisation as a physically debilitating experience that we encountered in several early modern sources in chapter two, as well as in Webel’s contemporary definition in chapter one – which makes it a useful weapon against one’s enemies. Sejanus also employs exemplary terrorism against Agrippina’s sons, keeping a close eye on their entourage and then picking off ‘some one or twain, or more / Of the main fautors – it will fright the store’ (2.264–265). And the favourite is not above evoking fear in his employer to get what he wants either: exaggerating the threat presented by Agrippina and her sons to Tiberius, he claims the best way to spur the emperor into action is by portraying

   the shapes 
   Of dangers greater than they are, like late 
   Or early shadows, and, sometimes, to feign 
   Where there are none, only to make him fear (2.384–387)

With this course of action, Sejanus thinks he is making Tiberius the unwitting assistant to Sejanus’s own rise to the imperial throne and that Tiberius will ‘in ruins of his house, and hate / Of all his subjects, bury his own state’ (2.401–402). Of course, it turns out Sejanus has fatally misjudged the situation. In a reversal of the expected roles, in Act 2 it is Sejanus who expounds on the virtues of reason of state while Tiberius plays coy: ‘State is enough to make th’act just, them [the ruler’s enemies] guilty’ (2.173), insists Sejanus. It is also Sejanus who devises and executes a plan to eliminate Germanicus’s sons – who stand to inherit the imperial throne over Tiberius’s grandson – and Tiberius’s most vocal critics, without Tiberius having to get his hands dirty. There’s an obvious similarity between the situation in which Sejanus finds himself and that of Rimirro de Orco, Cesare Borgia’s cruel deputy in the Romagna: both men unwittingly employed to do the dirty work their boss would rather not be seen doing, then ruthlessly dispatched with once they become too much of a risk themselves (Boughner, 1961, p. 97; Smith, 2018, p. 46).
Not only does Tiberius manipulate Sejanus into doing his dirty work for him, but this also gives Tiberius ammunition to use against Sejanus when he becomes too dangerous, again, much as in Machiavelli’s example of Rimirro de Orco. In his equivocating letter to the senate which will get Sejanus executed, Tiberius is free to talk about Sejanus’s ‘loyal fury’ (5.591) and his ‘public severity’ (5.594), and to wish the favourite’s ‘zeal had run a calmer course against Agrippina and our nephews’ (5.585–586). It’s then (ostensibly) up to the senate to decide how to proceed against Sejanus; as per the advice of Machiavelli, Gentillet and Lipsius, Tiberius has carefully orchestrated Sejanus’s ‘trial’ and execution to take place in his absence. As Gary Taylor remarks, ‘although Tiberius personally decided to eliminate Sejanus, other people did the dirty work of disposing of the man who had been doing his dirty work’ (2005).

And, to show Tiberius too is perfectly aware of the value of exemplary violence, the emperor raises the status of his favourite even higher before the fatal blow: the suggestion Sejanus will be made Tiberius’s heir doesn’t only lure Sejanus to the senate house and into the trap, but his ‘rising’ also serves ‘to make his fall more steep and grievous’ (5.440–442). But Sejanus is also easily tricked because he doesn’t believe in productive terror as something that would apply to him – a mistake also made by Julius Caesar, as we will see in chapter four. Fear is simply a useful tool for manipulating and controlling other people, so he quickly dismisses his short-lived but entirely appropriate fear of Tiberius, and blindly falls for the emperor’s ambush while declaring that ‘Who fears, is worthy of calamity’ (5.399). Sejanus is executed and his body torn to pieces by the angry mob – the latter too easily led by their emotions, the former not enough – while Tiberius is once again resolutely established on top. As Daniel Boughner argues, the audience has to reluctantly admire the emperor for his command of those ‘arts’, even if this admiration is combined with a distaste for his ethics – the ‘combination of moral sneer and intellectual recognition’ Jonson exhibits in his writing can ‘arouse a sardonic admiration’ in the audience (1961, pp. 82; 95). However, Tiberius’s politicking will only serve him this well in the short term.

**Macro: Sejanus 2.0**

Outside of the moral qualms one might have about advocating for Machiavellian statecraft, there is also a very practical objection: Tiberius models a way of conducting politics that ambitious subjects can emulate, potentially leading to attacks on his own position and life. With Sejanus, Tiberius

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17 As John Webster also notes in *The White Devil*, ‘Princes giue rewards with their owne hands, / But death or punishment by the handes of others’ (1612, sig. M1r).

18 In *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois*, Chapman includes an extraordinary speech on rulers’ responsibility to set a virtuous example for their subjects, which suggests princes who behave immorally should expect their subjects to do the same. Comparing the monarch to an archer and the subject to an arrow, the speech
handles this very well – one might even argue he coaches Sejanus into this position for his own benefit. But Macro, who becomes the emperor’s fixer once Tiberius starts planning to get rid of Sejanus, is a more accomplished Machiavellian than his predecessor. In the process of eliminating one rival, the emperor thus creates a new, more dangerous one. And in doing so, he does not just put himself at risk, but also Roman society as a whole. While the play ends with Tiberius firmly in control, Rome’s future hardly seems bright with Macro as the new second-in-command. His ruthlessness and grasp of Machiavellian strategy are far greater than those displayed by Sejanus – clearly a cause for concern after the bloodbath we have just witnessed. As Arruntius prophesies

this new fellow, Macro, will become
A greater prodigy in Rome, than he
That now is fallen (5.761–763).

All of this refers, of course, to ancient history: according to Tacitus, Macro played a role in the rise to power of Germanicus’s only surviving son, Caligula – Jonson shows the two of them plotting together in Act 4. Moreover, Tacitus also pinpoints Macro as the person who killed Tiberius, who thus ends up being bested by a Machiavellian favourite after all. But even theatregoers who were unaware of the rest of Tiberius’s story ‘could easily grasp that bad days were ahead for Rome’ (Ronan, 1995, p. 26).

Machiavellian statecraft, then, turns out to be effective only in the short term – in the long run, it’s unsustainable. Macro’s ruthlessness, particularly his fondness for pre-emptive violence, ‘does not merely assert one side of an opposition, moral or political, against the other, but leads to an escalatory, encompassing cycle of destruction’ (Chetwynd, 2007, p. 53). Even if properly executed Machiavellian statecraft has its uses and advantages, and can temporarily work to preserve the state, it will ultimately cause the downfall of its practitioners and damage society. Indeed, as Champion observes on both Sejanus and Jonson’s other Roman tragedy, Catiline, ‘the most significant characteristic of these stage worlds is the pervasively grim view of human nature unable to purge itself of those who through the abuse of power destroy themselves as well as those around them’ (1977, p. 62). Once a society has got on the Machiavellian merry-go-round, it’s very difficult to get off again.

**Making Rome great again?**

Jonson’s dramatic representation of reason of state-politicking is complex in itself already, but his engagement with the opposition forces in the play adds another layer of intricacy. Although it seems

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castigates rulers who ‘shoote them [their subjects] forth with faultie ayme and strength, / And lay the fault in them for flying amisse’ (Chapman, 1613, sig. H1r).
clear he takes Machiavellian statecraft off the table as a long-term ruling strategy, he also doesn’t offer any viable alternatives. Critics have suggested various reasons why the Germanicans, who form the only opposition to Tiberius in the play, do so very little. Stoic philosophy plays a role; to ‘suffer and be silent’ (4.295) is their default behaviour. Ayres also posits that the Germanicans, although republicans at heart, have recognised that in this new era ‘the kind of action Brutus took against Caesar is no longer justifiable against a Tiberius’ and that ‘they live under a different and properly constituted dispensation emerging out of, and finally putting to an end, a state of civil war’ (in Jonson, 1990, p. 34).

Whatever the reason behind their reluctance to take action, the Germanicans are supremely ineffective opponents. They might be virtuous, but their decision to yield the political battlefield to their enemies does nothing for Rome and, moreover, allows Sejanus to pick them off one by one. Caligula is the sole family member who escapes Sejanus’s plot – but only with Macro’s help and with disastrous future consequences to Rome. If the Germanicans have, perhaps rightly, internalised the lessons of Brutus and the civil war, they have also been unable to figure out a constructive way of dealing with the problem before them (Alyo, 1992; Champion, 1977).

Although Jonson’s dislike of Machiavellian politicking, including state terrorism, is clear throughout the play, it is the only ruling strategy that has some efficacy: no virtuous alternative is on offer in Sejanus’s Rome. Larry Champion remarks that ‘at best, Jonson has created a world in which some of the vicious are punished and none of the virtuous rewarded’ (1977, p. 65). The only positive outcome of the play – that punishment of ‘some of the vicious’ – has come about through Machiavellian statecraft, a ‘counterforce […] as tainted and corrupt as the individual it opposes (Champion, 1977, p. 73). It is clear, then, that state terrorism will ultimately only lead to more disorder and violence, rather than providing order and stability: in the long run, it is a disruptive force, not a productive one.
3.3 THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS

I next want to look at divine right theory, which at first glance seems very different from Machiavelli’s political thought. However, like reason of state, divine right theory equips the ruler with a rhetoric that can be employed to legitimise the use of state terrorism. The divine right of kings was a powerful notion that profoundly influenced the political landscape of early modern England. It entails

first, that the institution of kingship is divinely ordained. Second, that to God alone are kings held to be accountable. Third, that on pain of eternal punishment God enjoins on subjects the twin duties of passive obedience and nonresistance. Fourth, that the hereditary right of succession to the throne stemming from birth into the legitimate royal line is under no circumstances subject to forfeiture (Figgis summarised by Oakley, 2015, p. 159).

Jean-Christophe Mayer, however, warns the reality was slightly messier than this neat summary suggests:

The divine right of kings was never a consensual constitutional theory [...]. It was more akin to a set of various propositions, which evolved through troubled ages and whose aim was to provide some sort of stability from a legal and political point of view (2019, p. 158).

This was especially so during the Reformation and the troubled years of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Non-resistance became significant in light of the religious turbulence and violence of the period, while the focus on hereditary right to the throne reveals the influence of the equally disruptive dynastic struggles. Strict adherence to divine right theory could provide much-needed political and religious order, since it firmly placed the monarch beyond questioning or reproach.\(^\text{19}\)

The early moderns traditionally considered the structure of society from a religious perspective. The social order was supposed to be an unmoving reflection of the divine hierarchy on which it was based, with authority concentrated at the top in God and the monarch, and flowing downwards through the lower classes; this view is found in texts such as Thomas Elyot’s 1531 work *The Boke Named the Gouernour* and Thomas Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum*, published in 1583 (Wood, 2002, p. 25). In sermons like the regularly-preached *Homilee Agaynst Disobedience and Wyifull Rebellion*, the early moderns were informed by their clergy that the rebellion of Adam and Eve had led God to establish the social hierarchy ‘lest all thinges shoulde come vnto confusion and vtter ruine’ (Jewel,

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\(^{19}\) Regardless of who they were or how they got to the throne – James, for example, became king of England ‘in the teeth of two acts of parliament formally excluding the Stuart succession’ (Oakley, 2015, p. 160).
The authority of husband over wife, parent over child, master over servant and ruler over subject were all divinely ordained, so to rebel against this structure was to rebel against God himself (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2M2r). Indeed, defying the social order was ‘the greatest of all mischeefes’ and the rebel ‘the worst of all subiectes’ (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2M4v).

However, this ‘so-called “great chain of being” was in an advanced condition of rust by the end of the sixteenth century’ (Lever, 1971, p. 5); while the early moderns didn’t outright reject traditional ideas about the social order, including divine right theory, they did not embrace them uncritically either. Andrew Hadfield states that ‘mainstream Elizabethan political thought countenanced a number of lively and contentiousious visions, and argument over the social order was common enough, even if there were also many points of agreement’ (2008, pp. 185–186). Divine right theory was thus part of ‘an ideological legitimation of an existing social order, one rendered the more necessary by the apparent instability, actual and imagined, of that order’ (Dollimore, 1994, p. 5, emphasis original).

It was the arrival of the Stuarts that prompted the most sustained resistance to divine right theory. If the later years of Elizabeth’s reign had seen anxieties about the succession and civil war, James’s subjects worried about his absolutist tendencies; ‘what people feared now was not the weakness of the monarchy but its strength’ (Kewes, 2002, p. 155). Any challenge to the king’s divine right meant it had to be insisted upon even more. Indeed, James pursued his ‘lieutenant of God’ rhetoric more vehemently after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot (Hirst, 1986, p. 107). But such increased insistence on divine right theory prompted further pushback: the Stuarts’

royal aspirations to power of a quasi-absolutist nature came to face a degree of stubborn resistance from common lawyers and parliamentarians that threatened the political stability of the country and stimulated, in turn, the further elaboration and persistent dissemination of notions of divine right (Oakley, 2015, pp. 158–159).

When James became king of England in 1603, his new subjects could already have learnt about his political views from his writings. In Basilikon Doron (written in 1599), he explains a king ‘acknowledgeth himselfe ordained for his people, hauing receaued from God a burthen of gouernment whereof he must be count-able’ (1603, sig. D4v). For James, this meant he was placed above the law and accountable to God alone, a stance that would lead to a turbulent working relationship with Parliament. And Attorney General Edward Coke clashed on several occasions with

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20 Or, to borrow Ulysses’ phrasing from Troilus and Cressida (c. 1601-1602), ‘Take but degree away, untune that string, / And hark what discord follows’ (1.3.109–110). It should be noted, however, that Ulysses’ tone throughout the play is frequently satirical, and that he is by no means an unambiguous representative of this ‘ideal’ social order.
both James and Charles I over the relationship between monarch and law, asserting that the king was subject to the law just like everyone else (Coke, 1667, sig. J4v). (The monarch’s relation to the law will become very important in the next chapter, when I discuss resistance theory.)

**Divine right and state terrorism**

As should be apparent from the above, divine right theory was frequently employed as an argument by advocates for absolute monarchy; as rule in England became increasingly absolutist under the Stuarts, divine right theory was increasingly invoked as justification. In James’s words, ‘That as to dispute what God may doe is blasphemie; [...] So is it Sedition in Subjectes, to dispute what a King may do in the height of his power’ (1609, sig. B4v). Divine right theory considers the monarch the direct representative of God on earth and therefore anything God can do, they can do also. As the story of Adam and Eve shows, God is intolerant of disobedience and so should the monarch be, especially since they are put in their position by God with the express job of keeping order. In the words of Jewel’s *Homilee*, the monarch exists ‘for the great quiet and benefite of earthly men theyr subiectes’ (1571, sig. 2M3v). It is therefore both their right – as there are no earthly limits to what they may do – and their responsibility – as the very top of the social order ordained by God – to keep order, a task in which they are assisted by God himself.\(^{21}\) The productive terror the monarch (ideally) inspired was therefore due to their elevated position itself, as well as to the power to punish disobedience that came with that position.

This punishing of disobedience could take the form of execution. Monarchs can ‘make and vnmake their subiects: they haue power of raising, and casting downe: of life, and of death: ludges ouer all their subiects, and in all causes, and yet accomptable to none but God onely’ (James VI & I, 1609, sig. B1r). The monarch should use this power to keep the kingdom healthy: as head of the body politic,\(^{22}\) the king may be forced to ‘cut off some rotten member [...] to keep the rest of the body in integrity’ (James VI & I, 1642, sig. B3r). However, even when the king decides to ‘apply sharpe cures’, he should always do so proportionally, since ‘all this power [is] ordeined by God Ad *aedificationem*, non

\(^{21}\) In this, divine right theory differs from reason of state; although both theories can be used to legitimise state terrorism, the prince relying on reason of state to maintain their rule can ultimately choose whether to employ state terrorism or not. Divine right, on the other hand, does not just legitimise but also necessitate the use of state terrorism, at least to an extent.

\(^{22}\) The metaphor of the body politic, ‘perhaps the most vivid and enduring image in speech describing political community ever proposed’ (Dobski and Gish, 2013, p. x), was often employed in the early modern period in political and religious texts, as well as in plays. For a recent discussion of this, see Sălăvăstru (2019); see also Kantorowicz’s influential interpretation in *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957, pp. 7–23). In *Coriolanus* (1608), Shakespeare offers an elaborate reflection on the various limbs and their functions in the body politic via Aesop’s fable of the belly (1.1.85–147). While political theorists often focused on the role of the head – the monarch – and its relation to the rest of the body, Menenius’ body politic is unusually concentrated on the stomach, a preoccupation that makes sense in light of the issues around food distribution that motivated both the uprising in *Coriolanus* and the 1607 Midlands Revolt (Shakespeare, 2011, pp. 56–68).
This ‘constructive’ use of violent punishment had multiple aspects, as already noted in Foucault’s analysis of early modern execution: aside from the retributive function, the actual punishment of the criminal, there was also a restorative aspect, since the power of the monarch which had been challenged by the criminal act was re-established. This, in turn, had a preventative function by reinforcing the notion that rebellion against the social order was a sin that would be punished on earth and, if the criminal was not sufficiently repentant, in the afterlife too. Public executions ‘were mounted for the people, and the crowd’s function was to bear witness to the might of the law and the wickedness of crime and to internalise those things’ (Gatrell, 1994, pp. 90-91, emphasis original). Ruff thus argues the general acceptance of violent punishment stemmed not ‘from the violence of the age’, but from the prevailing view that ‘the retributive aspect of this justice’ was ‘a fundamental part of the divine order’ (2001, p. 106).

This divinely sanctioned air of execution could not just apply to the retributive aspect of executions, but also to its restorative and preventative functions. It was not just the subject’s godly duty to know their place; the king was similarly divinely charged with the job of keeping order, and sanctioning executions was a part of this. In the Homilee this is illustrated with a biblical example in which Saul angers God by not killing an enemy king when God had ordered him to do so (1 Samuel 15: 8-11). Sparing Agag is an act of ‘wrong mercy’ and God tells Saul that ‘obedience woulde haue more pleased him then such lenitie, whiche sinfull humanitie [...] is more cruell before God, then any murder or shedding of blood when it is commaunded of God’ (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2N2r).

I would argue the early modern attitude to execution was not quite as straightforward as Ruff’s quote above suggests, or indeed as Vic Gatrell pictures when he claims the early moderns felt ‘the order of the world depended on these slaughters’ (1994, p. 2). As the next chapter will further demonstrate, neither the existing social order nor the quasi-divine status of the monarch were unchallenged, so the spectacle of the scaffold was open to other interpretations than that of God’s earthly lieutenant dispensing justice. Nevertheless, Ruff and Gatrell do describe a view that was likely held by many people, and certainly one that was enthusiastically reinforced by the state, which had much to gain from people believing in it.

Divine right theory thus served as a legitimisation of execution and other forms of violent punishment – a legitimisation of state terrorism. I turn to the Homilee again, which ends with A
Thankes Geuing for the Suppression of the Last Rebellion. The eponymous thanks are directed at God, who

most dreadfully hast scourged some of the seditious persons with terrible executions, justly inflicted for their disobedience to thee, and to thy seruaunt their Soueraine, to the example of vs all, and to the warnyng, correction and amendement of thy seruauntes, of thyne accustomed goodnesse, turnyng alwayes the wickednesse of euyl men to the profite of them that feare thee (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2Q4r).

A more ringing endorsement of state terrorism – in this case, state terrorism practised in name of God and the monarch both – is difficult to imagine. At the same time, it is worth remembering that the Homilee was the direct product of a rebellion. The many expressions of resistance that occurred over the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – from riots to uprisings and assassination attempts – demonstrate the monarch’s divinely ordained position was not uncontested. Indeed, if divine right theory had been accepted without question, the Homilee would not have needed to exist.

Unlike Machiavellian reason of state, openly debating the pros and cons of divine right theory was not an option in early modern England, even though it equally was a cause for concern – particularly under the increasingly absolutist rule of the Stuarts. A play like Sir Thomas More, however, could be used to discuss it indirectly. And as the next section will show, one might even conclude the combination of divine right and state terrorism is questionable both in its legitimacy and effectiveness.

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23 This ‘Last Rebellion’ being the 1569 Northern Rising. For more on the Homilee’s engagement with the Northern Rising, see Kesselring (2004, pp. 433–435) and Bond (1987, pp. 40–44).
3.4 *SIR THOMAS MORE*

*SIR THOMAS MORE* is an interesting play to explore in the context of this thesis because it does two things that are quite rare on the early modern stage: it openly talks about the very risqué subject of divine right theory, and it stages an execution by state-sanctioned means. Traditionally, critics have argued the original text was written in the early 1590s by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle. It was censored heavily by the Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, who focused more on the contemporary resonances of the play’s rioting and xenophobia than on the religious controversies. The play was subsequently left for a decade and then revised by Chettle, Dekker, Heywood, Shakespeare and a scribe, known as ‘Hand C’, soon after Elizabeth’s death, when the civil unrest of the 1590s no longer loomed as large.24 Even in its revised version, however, *Sir Thomas More* contains risky material. It gives, after all, a sometimes heroic picture of a man who could be viewed as a traitor as well as an accomplished scholar, a protector of common Londoners and/or a Catholic martyr – although this last element is decidedly underplayed. It remains unclear if the play was performed at the time,25 but if it was, its equivocal take on divine right theory and state terrorism would certainly have made it a daring contribution to the political debate.

‘God on earth’ or ‘earthly king’?

*SIR THOMAS MORE* tells the story of More’s rise from sheriff of London to Chancellor in the first half, followed in the second half by his arrest and execution for treason. In the play’s most famous scene More confronts the ‘Evil May Day’ rioters, an encounter in which he appears as a loyal and capable servant of the king. It is also the only point where divine right theory is discussed at some length; More warns the rioters that

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24 This is, however, only one critical interpretation of the chronology of the composition; as Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane note, ‘the date of the original play remains debated’ and it is ‘uncertain’ how much later the revisions were made (2017, p. 551). Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori also date the original work to the early 1590s, but argue it was probably revised in 1593 or 1594 (in Munday et al., 1990, pp. 26–27). More recent research (e.g. Sharpe, 2013, pp. 691–693), on the other hand, retains the early Jacobean dating for the revisions, but suggests the play was originally written around 1600. Taylor and Loughnane settle on ‘best guesses’ of 1600 for the original text and 1604 for the revisions (2017, pp. 548–553). If the traditional dating of the original text to the early 1590s is correct, however, it provides an interesting contrast to Shakespeare’s 2*Henry VI*. This play seems to have been allowed on stage without significant intervention from the censor around the same time, despite the fact it includes a much more expansive dramatisation of a popular uprising (Lemonnier-Texier, 2013, p. 2).

25 There is no record of performance and, according to Harold Metz, the extant manuscript is ‘so disjointed’ that it is ‘unfit for the stage, suggesting that it was abandoned before it could be adequately prepared for performance’ (1989, p. 36). On the other hand, Gabrieli and Melchiori argue the revisions of the text were aimed at addressing the casting problem caused by the unusually large number of speaking roles, which suggests the play would at least have got close to being performed (in Munday et al., 1990, pp. 32–33). Equally, John Jowett proposes that the revisers’ careful ‘fine-tuning (…) gives the impression that a series of late-in-the-day alterations were made with performance closely in view’ (in Munday et al., 2011, p. 96).
to the king God hath His office lent
Of dread, of justice, power, and command;
Hath bid him rule, and willed you to obey.
And, to add ampler majesty to this,
He hath not only lent the king His figure,
His throne and sword, but given him His own name:
Calls him a god on earth. What do you, then,
Rising ‘gainst him that God Himself installs,
But rise ‘gainst God? (6.111–119)

The irony is that later More will do the very thing he criticises here by ‘rising’ against the king. *Sir Thomas More* is a play of two halves that mirror one another: a protest is considered rebellious by the authorities, and the protesters are arrested and tried. The difference is that More is the face of authority in the first instance, whereas he’s the rebel in the second. The play ‘thus frames a comparison between More’s active obedience and his passive disobedience’ (Woods, 2011, p. 12).

Historically, More’s rebellion against Henry VIII was explicitly religious: he refused to take the Oath of Supremacy that confirmed Henry as head of the church in England. In the play, however, this schismatic element of the story is underplayed. The content of the ‘articles’ More and the bishop of Rochester refuse to sign is never specified. To make the play palatable to the authorities, the overtly Catholic elements were suppressed and the crux of the disagreement between chancellor and king is instead presented as a much broader issue. Erin Kelly notes ‘how carefully the specific cause for which he [More] dies is obscured’ and that the religious language he employs ‘is so generic [...] that it prohibits associating him with any particular Christian doctrine’ (2005, pp. 29–30). Although that may be true, at the same time it seems silly to assume theatregoers wouldn’t have read between the lines. More was an (in)famous character and, as Gillian Woods argues, ‘audiences could hardly forget the controversial nature of the story that the play obscures’ (2011, p. 19). It seems unlikely audience members wouldn’t have recalled the fact that the quarrel between More and Henry was a religious matter concerning the position of the monarch, simply because it hadn’t been stated explicitly by the playwrights.

If More keeps silent about his reasons not to subscribe to Henry’s articles – apart from his initial refusal to sign immediately because his ‘conscience first shall parley with our laws’ (10.73) – the characters around him can give the audience an indication of what’s at stake. Rochester initially refuses to subscribe because it would make him a hypocrite, and shortly before his execution he explains his soul ‘aims at higher things / Than temporary pleasing earthly kings’ (12.3–4). This can easily be read as a comment on Henry’s divine right: Rochester sees Henry as an earthly king who
has commanded him to do something that would displease God, whom Rochester serves first and foremost. If Henry is God’s deputy on earth, he is not a very good one in Rochester’s opinion. The characters around More and Rochester also see their refusal as a challenge to Henry’s divine position. As Surrey remarks when More first declines to sign,

’Tis strange that my Lord Chancellor should refuse
The duty that the law of God bequeaths
Unto the king (10.105–107).

Playgoers too would have known this was at the heart of the issue: More puts what he considers to be his duty to God before his duty to the king, who has failed in his role as God’s representative on earth by commanding More to do something that goes against God’s will. Although More is no tyrannicide – his disobedience is decidedly passive – the implied reasoning is the same as that underpinning resistance theory, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. The king is God’s inviolable representative on earth only for as long as his commands accord with God’s will. The issue here is who gets to decide if the two match up. Supporters of the divine right of kings would have been happy to rely on Henry’s judgement; More, like the resistance theorists, prefers to follow his own conscience.

Scaffolds and steel versus empathy and eloquence

Even so, More is an enthusiastic proponent of divine right theory in the first act, and throughout the play, the concept is connected with state terrorism. More’s speech to the rioters makes clear their disruption is an offence against both God and the king. If the rioters would get their way with their ‘noise’ and ‘brawl’, it would be an offence to ‘majesty’ and ‘authority’ (6.82–88). Indeed, More continues, ‘twere no error if I told you all / You were in arms ‘gainst God’ (6.107–108). Fortunately, however, ‘God hath made weak More His instrument / To thwart sedition’s violent intent’ (6.206–207). The king has been chosen by God to rule and keep order in his kingdom, and therefore any violation of this order is an attack on both Henry and God.

As noted in the section on divine right theory, it was considered the monarch’s prerogative and responsibility to keep the body politic healthy by, among other things, cutting off ‘rotten members’ by execution (James VI & I, 1642, sig. B3r). In More’s words, ‘life or death hangs on our sovereign’s eye’ (6.235). Indeed, after both rebellions that occur in Sir Thomas More, there is quick recourse to the death penalty. In the case of the May Day rioters, city officials are so anxious to act on the Privy Council’s orders that by the time Surrey arrives bearing the king’s pardon, Lincoln, the leader of the rioters, has already been executed. The executions are staged for maximum effect: a messenger tells the sheriff that, rather than sticking to the customary location at Tyburn, it is
the Council’s pleasure,
For more example in so bad a case,
A gibbet be erected in Cheapside (7.4–6).

This spectacle of exemplary violence has to reach as many people as possible. In More’s case, the playwrights conspicuously fail to stage the trial scene where More is convicted of treason, which would probably have been too explosive for the censor. This means audiences don’t get any specifics about the motivations and legitimisations of either party. But, again, an example must be set, and More is beheaded in an (unseen) public execution for his ‘great offence unto his majesty’ (17.71).

So divine right theory appears in Sir Thomas More both as an impetus for resistance and to legitimise terrorism by the state. But how effective is this divine right-backed state terrorism? Despite the events of the play falling out in Henry’s favour, I would argue state terrorism only plays a minor role in that result. In the first instance where divine right is evoked – to quell the May Day riot – it is not this particular element of More’s speech that persuades the rioters to cease their rebellion. The king’s deputies who first arrive on the scene, Surrey and Shrewsbury, don’t succeed in capturing the crowd’s undivided attention, but More’s reputation as a good sheriff and decent human being makes the people listen to him. Although he reminds the rioters of their duties to God and the king in the section quoted above, what convinces them to stand down is More’s insistence they imagine themselves in their intended victims’ shoes. More ‘creates an imaginative description of their situation that moves hearers from anger and rebellion to empathy and obedience’ (Kelly, 2005, p. 24). Finally, More’s talk of mercy, which ‘may be found / If you so seek it’ (6.163–164), motivates the rioters to quietly go to prison. Mercy and empathy, rather than terrorism, save the day on this occasion, a feat which is even remarked upon in the play: ‘Not steel but eloquence hath wrought this good’ (6.201).26

Furthermore, in the actual execution scene, the image of the powerful king dispensing punishment and mercy is marred by the failure of the system when Lincoln is executed too soon. The tone and content of Lincoln’s scaffold speech are perfectly in line with what the authorities would have hoped for on such an occasion:

No, learn it now by me:
Obedience is the best in each degree.

26 Besides, some audience members would probably also have known that, historically, it did take violent suppression to put an end to the May Day riot. This makes More’s empathic intervention look even more effective when compared to state terrorism.
And, asking mercy meekly of my king,
I patiently submit me to the law (7.57–60).

Nevertheless, the failure to save Lincoln and the subsequent public squabble between two authority figures at the scene – the sheriff overseeing the executions and Surrey, who arrives with the king’s pardon – ‘deeply undermine the spectacle of what is one of the few staged capital punishments in extant early modern drama’ (Woods, 2011, p. 27).

It is also very conspicuous that, as observed earlier, in the second half of the play More himself seems quite undeterred by the divine right principle he had earlier lectured the May Day rioters on. At no point does he appear to regret his rebellion; he acknowledges his ‘offence to his highness’ (17.76) without apologising for or explaining it, even mentioning to the lieutenant of the Tower he has ‘peace of conscience, though the world and I / Are at a little odds’ (16.12–13). Throughout his ordeal More frequently refers to God, for example when, shortly before being taken to the scaffold, he tells his family that he goes ‘to talk with God, who now doth call’ (16.124). This is not a man who feels he has disobeyed God in any meaningful way, despite his acknowledgement that he has indeed committed a ‘trespass’ (17.78) against Henry. We can only assume Henry is confident in his right to be obeyed, whether in his capacity as earthly king or divine representative, since the king himself never appears in the play.\(^\text{27}\) But More is equally certain of the morality of his refusal to do so. He is, ‘in his steadfast certainty and self-righteousness, an immoveable object, a kind of unconquerable force’ (Kinney, 2008, p. 96). Indeed, I would agree with Gilles Bertheau’s assessment that ‘More’s death is not presented as a fall, but as an ascent’ (2020, p. 66); between Henry’s conspicuous absence and More’s overall likeability, the obvious choice for the audience is to empathise with and admire More.

Furthermore, the fact that ‘Merry More’ retains his fondness for joking around almost until the moment his head is chopped off also undermines the effectiveness of state terrorism. Carnival and rebellion are often linked on the early modern stage (Helgerson, 1992, pp. 220–222); in real life, carnivalesque behaviours of both the condemned and the scaffold crowd could subvert the solemn spectacle of the execution, a topic I will explore further in the next section of this chapter, which focuses on punishment. It’s certainly difficult to think of a scaffold speech more different to Lincoln’s, with its meek submission and prayer that others learn from his bad example: More uses

\(^{27}\) Representing Elizabeth’s father on stage during her reign would probably have resulted in interference from the censor. (Henry was, of course, allowed to appear in Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* in 1613.) But princes in general were often (comparatively) absent from the early modern stage, especially when justice was being meted out in their name – true to the best practices of statecraft. *Sejanus’s* Tiberius and *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt’s* Maurice are two other rulers who conform to this pattern.
his final moments on earth to joke about a variety of topics, including the practicalities of the execution itself. ‘Point me the block; I ne’er was here before’ (17.118), he cheerfully requests of the executioner a mere ten lines before the end of the play. Neither divine right theory nor state terrorism seems to affect the play’s eponymous hero, who simply refuses to be impressed by the spectacle of his own scaffold. While A Larum showed an abundance of terror being experienced by characters on stage, More’s attitude before his execution is more akin to that of Jack Straw’s defiantly unaffected rebel leaders. Even though More does acknowledge ‘his offence to his highness’ (17.76), his manner presents an entirely different picture and the execution can hardly provide an edifying example for the scaffold crowd, who, after all, can’t be appropriately and productively ‘infected’ with terror if the condemned doesn’t display any.

Arthur F. Kinney has suggested that, after its revision in the early 1600s, the play could be seen as a critique of James’s fondness for his own divine rights: ‘Moore [sic] is the playwrights’ character who can easily harbor the new anxieties over James and the character and disposition of his rule’ (2008, p. 96). As discussed in the previous section, when divine right theory met with resistance, an even stronger insistence upon the monarch’s divine position was often the response. The more the existing order was questioned, the more the state had to insist on its legitimacy. Although divine right theory was supposed to bring order and stability, then, it could also create a potentially destructive cycle of resistance and suppression. The writers of Sir Thomas More certainly don’t go that far, but at the same time, divine right theory isn’t an unequivocal force for order either. In the play, it both prompts resistance and helps to diffuse it, and it legitimises state terrorism, but only half-heartedly. Furthermore, the spectacle of the scaffold ends up looking rather ineffective, especially when compared with the more moderate approach taken in dealing with the May Day rioters. The combination of More’s empathy and Henry’s mercy achieves a more convincing result than a stubborn insistence upon divine right and an unimpressive execution. Even if some parts at first glance seem to endorse divine right-inspired state terrorism, ultimately the play raises more questions than it answers. I therefore agree with Woods’ assessment that ‘unequivocal significance [...] is kept offstage’ (2011, p. 19).

28 Greenblatt sees the historical Thomas More’s use of humour at his execution as a type of ‘self-fashioning’ that was both ‘the expression of an oblique resistance to authority’ and ‘a way of mastering the terror of his situation’ (1980, p. 71); the play does nothing to suggest this second reading, however.
3.5 PUNISHMENT AND EXECUTION

So far in this chapter, I have looked at theories used to legitimise state terrorism while only touching on its practice briefly. In this section, I will discuss in more detail what violent punishment looked like in early modern England, and how it functioned as a form of state terrorism. Public displays of violence played a major role in early modern punishment practice. Most punishments were physical ones, although fines, imprisonment and banishment could also be imposed. Whipping and bodily mutilation were generally practised publicly, as were punishments that focused predominantly on shame, such as being put in the stocks. Both the physical and public aspects of punishment served important functions, and complemented one another. Ruff comments that ‘the publicity of such punishments compounded the severity of even relatively light corporal punishment through the shame incurred by the offender’ (2001, p. 102). Execution also took place publicly and could take a variety of forms: hanging was most common, but heretics were often burnt at the stake and the nobility had the ‘honour’ of dying by beheading. Traitors were hanged but taken down before they were dead, and subsequently castrated, disembowelled and quartered. After the deed was done, for particularly notorious criminals and traitors the punishment also often involved the public desecration and display of their bodies, the knowledge of which brought further shame and anxiety (Smith, 1982, pp. 117–119). As is described in the Homilee Agyynst Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion, rebels are ‘rewarded with shamful deathes, their heades & carkases set vpon poles, or hanged in chaines, eaten with kytes and crowes, iudged vnworthie the honour of buryall’ (Jewel, 1571, sig. 2O3v). The early moderns, then, ‘were certainly quite familiar with the spectacle of the hanged body and the disembowelled and quartered corpse’ (Smith, 2001, p. 71).

The public nature of punishment was typically not experienced as overly shocking: it was simply a fact of life. The subject’s life and body ultimately belonged to the monarch. As such, it was not only the monarch’s prerogative but also their duty to punish anyone who infringed on this monopoly by killing or assaulting another person (Smith, 1982, p. 87). Thomas Smith remarks in De Republica Anglorum that, since ‘the life and member of an Englishman is in the power onely of the prince and his lawes, when any of his subjectes is disspoyled either life or member, the prince is endammaged thereby’; the prince

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29 People feared shame much like they feared violence, so both could motivate people to avoid punishment. Since terrorism always involves (the threat of) violence, my focus is on the violent aspects of punishment practice, but shame also played a role in the preventative and exemplary functions of punishment. See Ingram (2004, 2003) for more on this topic.
hath this in his care and charge, to see the realme well governed, the life, members and possessions
of his subjectes kept in peace and assurance: he that by violence shall attempt to breake that peace

This quote again chimes with Foucault’s analysis of the relationship between sovereignty and
punishment: the prince’s status has been damaged by the crime, and the punishment must
therefore happen in the prince’s name to restore their sovereign status. The public punishment ‘is a
ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty
by manifesting it at its most spectacular’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 48). As Karen Cunningham observes, the
whole process of trial and execution is ‘designed to enhance and validate the ruler’s power’, a
performance in which the monarch dramatically triumphs over the ‘figure of evil’ that is the offender

This ceremony not only reinforces the ruler’s power but also serves as an exercise in exemplary
violence. Smith felt the general populace responded well to the English judicial system ‘whereby
they are kept alwaies as it were in a bridle of good order, and sooner looked unto that they should
not offend, than punished when they have offended’ (1982, p. 106). The occasional exemplary
punishment played a vital role in making this system work. When people saw

one or two presently either punished or sent to prison for disobedience to those olde orders and
lawes, they take a feare within themselves, they amende and doe promise more amendment. So that
it is as a newe forbushing of the good lawes of the realme, and a continuall repressing of disorders
(Smith, 1982, p. 106).

The public nature of punishment did therefore not only worsen the experience for the criminal, but
also provided an opportunity to instil a sense of obedience into the public. As stated in the
Elizabethan statute against pickpocketing from which I have borrowed the title of this chapter,
displays of punishment were ‘ordeigned chieflye for Terrour and Example of evill doers’ (Luders,
1810-1825, p. 488).

There was, however, also such a thing as inappropriate violence in the course of the judicial process.
Interrogatory torture, for example, occupied an uneasy position within the legal system.  
Maintaining an appropriate level of violence could also mean not punishing to the fullest extent of
the law. Executions weren’t always conducted by the book. After the first Babington plotters had

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30 A humorous interpretation of the same idea is found in The Faithful Friends (c. 1620s, sometimes attributed
to Fletcher), when the Constable concludes that an attack on the Tapster is high treason, since ‘euery true
Subjects bloud [is] the Kings’ and it is ‘treason to spill the kings bloud’ (1.485–1.490).
31 It did play a role in the system of state terrorism, but in a different way than public punishment, since
interrogatory torture was practised semi-covertly: see Simpson (2011) and Hanson (1991).
been put to death, the other seven were punished ‘with lesse seueritie, by the Queenes commandement, who hated the first dayes cruelty’. The executioner was instructed to make sure they were actually dead before being drawn and quartered (Camden, 1625, sig. T3v). And this was by no means a unique occurrence: ‘traitors were drawn to the scaffold on hurdles to save them from death or unconsciousness; others were strangled before disembowelling or burning; aristocrats were decapititated immediately by the king’s grace’ (Gatrell, 1994, p. 316). At the same time, many people undoubtedly were also fascinated by punishment and execution: the large crowds at executions, the gory spectacles at the playhouses and the popularity of Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* with its graphic woodcuts all attest to that. The relationship between the average person and the scaffold was a complex one, and therefore so was the role of terror in punishment, and of punishment in the system of state terrorism.

Punishment as state terrorism

Although we know executions and other public punishments were well-attended events, we can only speculate what effect they had on those present. It nevertheless seems plausible that terror would have been a common emotion, both in the spectators and in the condemned, due to the impact of the spectacle itself as well as to the effects of affective contagion. Although some researchers have made much of the examples of riotous behaviour recorded at executions, others maintain their significance should not be overstated. Gatrell argues that when the condemned felon played to the approbation of his fellows and mocked the hangman, he was calling on the last, only, and narrow resource available to him with which to anaesthesise mortal fear. The parodic splendour of the Tyburn procession should not obliterate the truth that at the end of it the law killed people who were powerless to prevent that outcome and whose bodies were dissolving in terror (1994, p. 40).

Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan also draws attention to the variety and complexity of emotions in these situations, as well as to the reluctance of many academics to engage with them in all their messiness. She argues that, aside from demonstrating ‘how evil is eradicated’, punishment was ‘perhaps intended to elicit compassion, definitely fear and undoubtedly terror, but also respect for

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32 Interestingly, Lord Burghley wrote to Lord Chancellor Christopher Hatton shortly before the plotters were put on trial that Elizabeth wished ‘that the manner of their death, for more terror, be referred to her Majesty and her Council’ rather than being left for the judges to decide. Burghley ‘told her Majesty that if the execution shall be duly and orderly executed, by protracting the same both to the extremity of the pains in the action, and to the sight of the people to behold it, the manner of their death would be as terrible as any other new device could be’ (quoted in Read, 1965, p. 346). Perhaps Elizabeth regretted getting what she had wished for, or perhaps this ‘alleviation’ of the punishment was a strategic display of mercy, which also played a role in the system of state terrorism – this topic is discussed further on the next page.
exemplary justice. But such emotions in gathered masses go well beyond the repertoire that historians of the law and the state are content to cite’ (Crousset-Pavan, 2015, p. 25).

The creation of the terror that both Gatrell and Crousset-Pavan refer to was one of the objectives of public punishment and could be used in service of exemplarity. Pieter Spierenburg’s analysis of punishment in the early modern Netherlands reveals that

exemplarity was a matter of course. It is reflected in the formulation of the sentences in cases of public punishment. They conclude with a recurrent routine statement: ‘these are things which cannot be tolerated in a city of law and have to be punished as an example to others’. Such a routine conclusion was common in the Republic. The standard formula might vary a little. [...] But the word ‘example’ recurred everywhere (1984, p. 55).

This exemplarity works in two ways: on the one hand, spectators are shown what happens when they transgress the law; on the other, there is an ‘edifying aspect’ to ‘a punishment suffered humbly and dutifully’ (Spierenburg, 1984, p. 54). The first is arguably the most important; if not, a practice like punishing dead bodies would not have been so widespread (Spierenburg, 1984, p. 79).

Nevertheless, the exemplary aspect of public punishment was only one part (if an important one) of a complex mix of responses elicited and functions served. Sharpe points out the law could also function effectively because of its ideological value. The law

did not exercise control merely through physical repression, through the stocks, whips, pillory, ropes, prison and gallows. It also succeeded because, ultimately, a large proportion of the population accepted the idea of a rule of law. [...] As Douglas Hay has pointed out, much of the success of the law depended upon its being merciful as well as an object of terror. The systems of pardons and reprieves ensured that a fair number of convicted felons left the courtroom feeling fortunate rather than aggrieved, and thus mercy ensured the acceptance of the rule of law more surely than festooning the gibbets after every assize would have done (1984, p. 145).

Punishment practice was not as straightforward as simply scaring people into obedience. As both Jack Straw and Sir Thomas More illustrate, the strategic granting of mercy and pardons was an essential part of the system of state terrorism. A dramatic last-minute pardon like the one given on the scaffold to some of the Bye Plot conspirators was a calculated display; Dudley Carleton, who described it in detail, suspected it was staged in part for the benefit of Walter Raleigh, who had also been caught up in the plot and was watching the event from his cell (Greenblatt, 1988, pp. 136–137;
p. 194, note 18). Of course, this also meant that hoped-for mercy could be deliberately withheld. Foucault notes this all added to the power of the monarch:

The sovereign was [symbolically] present at the execution not only as the power exacting the vengeance of the law, but as the power that could suspend both law and vengeance. [...] he alone could wash away the offences committed on his person (1977, p. 53).

Aside from punishment, early modern monarchs thus also ‘deployed the prerogative of pardon in ways both concrete and symbolic in efforts to enhance their power and legitimize that power as authority’ (Kesselring, 2003, p. 16, emphasis added). And while the spectacle of violent public punishment occupied an important role in early modern society, at the same time workhouses and asylums were increasingly used as an alternative to punish criminals and remove ‘troublemakers’ from society. From the late sixteenth century onwards,

the increasing stability of early modern states meant that their judicial systems did not have to engage as frequently in the rituals of public execution. Quite simply, [...] as state authority became more firmly established the ritual demonstration of it became less necessary (Ruff, 2001, p. 113).

To sum up: public punishment was a form of state terrorism, but also elicited emotions other than terror, and we can only speculate on the full emotional effect it had. It served as exemplary violence, but in the understanding there were limitations to its preventative function. It was a tool the state could employ to keep social order, but only one amongst others. Public punishment thus occupied an ambiguous position in the system of early modern power relations.

Subversion at the scaffold
This ambiguity is particularly apparent when looking at the ways the scaffold spectacle could be undermined or resisted. Although occasions of public punishment were aimed at reinforcing the power of the sovereign and the state, they offered opportunities for subversion too. This could happen in small, individual ways. The aforementioned act against pickpocketing, for example, complains thieves even operated at executions, showing no ‘respect or regarde of anye tyme place or person, or anye feare or dreade of God, or anye Lawe or Punyshment’ (Luders, 1810-1825, p. 488). But whole crowds could also become disruptive, breaking out into carnivalesque behaviour.

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33 Machiavelli, Lipsius and Gentillet all share the idea that being merciful can benefit the ruler, but only if it is done correctly. In Machiavelli’s words, ‘every ruler should want to be thought merciful [...] ; nevertheless, one should take care not to be merciful in an inappropriate way’ (2019, p. 56).

34 This formulation points again to the similarities between terror and dread, both types of fear people (ought to) feel when confronted with powerful and awe-inspiring entities such as God and the law.

35 See Lake and Questier (1996, pp. 97–103) for a number of examples from Elizabethan and Jacobean executions.
Academics disagree over who had the upper hand at these events: the state or the spectators. As Gatrell explains, a case can be made for either scenario, since records reflect a complex range of responses from the scaffold crowd:

On the one hand, it could be claimed that the spectacle of execution was awesome enough to induce the watching populace to consent in the law’s magnitude, and that they did consent on the whole, as when they applauded murderers’ hanging [sic]. On the other hand, it has been argued just as plausibly that it was the populace, not the law, that controlled the scaffold arena, converting the ritual to carnival as their parodies turned the world upside down (1994, p. 90).

Violent punishment could certainly end up undermining the control of the state rather than reinforcing it if spectators decided not to go along with the script. Punishment was supposed to be proportional, for example: if it did not fit the crime or the character of the criminal, it might not be accepted as legitimate by the public. Spectators sometimes employed violence to get justice, by attacking the executioner or trying to free the condemned if they felt the punishment was too heavy, or by exacting a more severe punishment themselves if they felt the criminal was getting off too easily (Amussen, 1995, pp. 10–12).

Scaffold speeches too could be a cause for concern for the authorities. (As I have already shown in my discussion of Sir Thomas More – I will come back to scaffold speeches on stage in the next section.) If the condemned stayed on track and delivered an appropriately repentant speech, all was well – an example of the ‘penitent and edifying death’ the authorities preferred. But there are also examples of victims who used their final words to protest their innocence or rile up the crowds, in which case the effects of emotional contagion could turn from productive to problematic. Molly Easo Smith observes that the condemned, aware of their ‘profound relevance’ to both authorities and spectators in this moment, regularly attempted ‘to manipulate and modify the distance that separated criminals from onlookers’. If they were successful, ‘events could easily transform into celebration of the condemned victim’s role as a defier of repressive authority’ (2001, p. 75).

Cunningham equally argues that displays of public punishment ‘serve their public function only if the condemned seem to be [...] wholly other’ (1990, p. 211). And Spierenburg notes executions tended to derail if the condemned was punished for having taken part in crowd violence. The connection between the scaffold crowd and the executed could in these cases be too close for comfort, which made such executions ‘precarious events’ that ‘caused continued or renewed restiveness and harboured the danger of a flaring up of violence’ (Spierenburg, 1984, p. 100).36 Here too, then, the

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36 If this seems to contradict the early modern aversion of disorder, it is worth noting rioters often considered themselves to be operating within certain boundaries of legitimacy. To the early modern commons, rioting
authorities could benefit from the criminal being presented as ‘other’. I disagree, however, with Cunningham’s assessment that the execution could only function as intended if the condemned was considered ‘wholly other’ by the spectating crowd; if there was absolutely no sense of identification with the condemned, the spectator would hardly consider the punishment exemplary or preventative, and it would be ineffective.

This seems to be borne out by the strategic use playwrights made of the identification between characters and audience members, a technique used in both A Larum for London and Two Lamentable Tragedies. Although they may not have been aware of it, the authors of these plays were applying one of Aristotle’s theories: to make theatregoers experience tragic fear, the playwright had to make them afraid for themselves by showing them the destruction of someone they identified with (Walker, 2019, p. 41). And execution ballads frequently employed a similar technique by using the first-person voice, allowing ‘the singer to momentarily take on the role of the criminal and vicariously experience the emotions of remorse and fear of someone about to die’, thereby encouraging ‘an identification with the condemned’ (McIlvenna et al., 2021, p. 147). At the same time, as Spierenburg’s example shows, too much identification was clearly dangerous.

It is certain executions and other public punishments in early modern England could be made to work against the authorities, but it’s also possible to overstate the role carnivalesque violence and subversion would likely have played in these situations. Instances of executions going off script and ending in rebellion were probably recorded because they were remarkable (Spierenburg, 1984, p. 81). The fact there are stories about executions gone off the rails should therefore not lead us to conclude that state terrorism in the form of punishment was largely ineffective. At the same time, in practice the spectacle of the scaffold was often not as straightforward and easy to interpret as the authorities would have liked, which is reflected in the representation of execution on the early modern stage.

Execution on stage

The similarities between the stage and the scaffold have frequently been commented upon by academics. Smith talks extensively about the relationship between the two, arguing that ‘dramatic deaths [on stage] could suggest public maimings and executions’, while ‘the latter could as easily and as vividly evoke its theatrical counterparts’ (2001, p. 73). Spierenburg comments that real executions ‘were dramatised in order to serve as a sort of morality play’ (1984, p. 43). Scholars’ ideas therefore probably did not seem as disruptive as it does to us today. In the next chapter, I will explore this topic in more detail.

37 See my earlier discussion of Aristotle in chapter two, section three.
as to what a staged execution does diverge, however. While some maintain the theatrical execution could serve as an object lesson in obedience and morality, others point to its subversive potential. Cunningham, for example, argues Marlowe uses the powerful symbolism of the punishment ritual on stage, but only to emphasise and exaggerate its artifice – to expose it as theatre (1990, p. 210). The assassination of Admiral de Coligny in *The Massacre at Paris* is a good example of this: it’s a brutal act of extra-legal violence, committed with the approval of the rightful monarch, that parodies elements of the execution ritual like the prayer before death and the display of the body. This thesis shows staged executions could do either; the plays discussed provide perfect, exemplary executions (*Merry* in *Two Lamentable Tragedies*) and ideal scaffold behaviour (*Lincoln* in *Sir Thomas More*) as well as punishment scenes that are ambiguous (*Jack Straw*) or downright undermining (*Thomas More* himself).

Scaffold speeches also offered an opportunity to either uphold or undermine the staged execution spectacle, much as they did in real life. As we already saw with the historical Thomas More, the scaffold speech provided a final opportunity for ‘self-fashioning’: the condemned could distinguish themselves by actively choosing to stick to the state’s script, or to resist it. In staged scaffold speeches the same pattern emerges, leading to a wide variety of behaviours by the condemned. Some characters are meek and repentant, some are openly defiant, while others offer more subtle forms of resistance by presenting themselves as martyrs, or by employing gallows humour; all of these strategies appear in the plays discussed in this thesis. Some speeches arouse pity or admiration in the scaffold crowd on stage, and probably evoked a similar response in the theatre audience. But whether a staged scaffold speech reinforces or subverts the execution also depends on other elements, such as whether the condemned character is a protagonist or antagonist, and whether the person who has ordered the execution is a legitimate ruler or a tyrant. All these factors can add up to an execution that defies easy interpretation, as is the case in Chapman’s *The Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron*. Byron is without question guilty of conspiring against a legitimate monarch and is furthermore a mostly unpleasant character, but we still have to (reluctantly) admire his bold refusal to play along with the execution ritual like the ‘tame Nobilitie’ who behave on the scaffold like ‘exemplarie, and formall sheepe’ (Chapman, 1608, sig. R2v). As Margaret Owens argues, ‘the impact of this scaffold scene derives not from the hero’s exemplary adherence to received values but from the audacity with which he repudiates the pious, submissive formulas that governed real-life executions’ (2005, p. 135).

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38 See, for example, Murphy (2016) on ‘musical self-fashioning’ by Catholic priests and Dolan (1994) on women’s scaffold speeches.
It is notable, however, that state-sanctioned execution methods were used on stage less than one might expect based on the frequency with which characters died violent deaths. Shapiro argues that showing beheadings and hangings on stage was breaking a taboo: ‘to imitate state spectacle could undermine the terrible power of officially sanctioned violence by showing it often enough to make it familiar or by resituating it within ethically and politically ambiguous contexts’ (1991, p. 100). Ivo Kamps points out this argument works on the basis of Foucault’s assertion that ‘the public execution [...] belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which [state] power is eclipsed and restored’ (Foucault, 1977, pp. 48–49). In Kamps’ own words, ‘the idea is not only that these types of events reestablish justice or order but that they reactivate state power’ (1996, p. 165). Displaying such rituals on stage would therefore undermine their authority. Owens, on the other hand, has identified a significant number of plays where these state-sanctioned modes of execution are used, but points out there’s a strange dearth of them in the period between 1580 and 1610. She posits this might indeed be explained by Shapiro’s taboo, which for some reason was more pertinent during this period. Alternatively – and more convincingly, in my opinion – she suggests playwrights perhaps simply preferred to keep executions off stage to avoid the difficulty and expense that came with staging them; once this custom was broken, it’s possible audiences flocked to see spectacular dramatisations of beheadings and hangings, while the conventional offstage execution suddenly seemed tame or old-fashioned (Owens, 2005, pp. 139–140).

It is indeed important to consider the possibility of this more pragmatic reason. Peter Womack rightly argues academics should avoid making the early modern playwrights into ‘liberal critic[s]’, while overlooking the fact they were ‘producing scripts for what they hoped would be successful public performance’ (Womack, 2020, pp. 3–4). As discussed in the previous chapter, violent spectacle attracted people; for plenty of spectators, the violence itself would have been the main attraction, especially since the theatre was ‘often in direct competition with the various public spectacles of pain that proliferated in the period’ (Staines, 2009, p. 7). Critics have argued the plays of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods set new trends in staging violence; Owens remarks on the prevalence of scenes involving ‘poisoning, dismemberment, and cannibalism’ in the revenge tragedies of the period (2005, p. 114), while Karim-Cooper notes the popularity of ‘amputation plays’ in the 1590s (2016, pp. 221–222). The execution methods playwrights showed on stage would therefore probably have been judged on their novelty, sensationalism and goriness rather than on whether they were state-sanctioned.

The staged execution, then, could have a variety of functions, and how it should be read is highly dependent on the context provided by the play; it is not enough to simply assume an execution scene always confirms state authority because it imitates the spectacle of the scaffold, or that it
always undermines it because it does so in a fictionalised setting. Much like its real-world counterpart, the theatrical execution had an inherent potential for ambiguity. I will explore this further by looking at the dramatic representation of execution in two very different plays: *The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* and *Two Lamentable Tragedies*. 
3.6 THE TRAGEDY OF SIR JOHN VAN OLDEN BARNAVELT

The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt, written by John Fletcher and Philip Massinger\(^{39}\) in 1619, would likely have been a major draw for early modern theatregoers. Firstly, it depicts political events that were very recent and much debated in England at the time. Secondly, it ends with an onstage beheading, a rare sight in the early modern theatre. The play takes place towards the end of the Dutch Revolt, the struggle of the Protestant provinces in the north of the Low Countries to free themselves of Spanish monarchical control. At this point, the United Provinces had their own political and military leadership.\(^{40}\) The head of the army was Maurits, the prince of Orange. The political leadership lay with a council called the States-General, and the leader of this council was the Land’s Advocate, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt.\(^{41}\) At the start of the play, Barnavelt and Maurice have worked together successfully for many years, but Barnavelt feels he has now been pushed to the side by Maurice and has not been given the credit he is due. He therefore initially tries to curb Orange’s power in the States-General and when this doesn’t work, he starts a rebellion by raising militias in several cities in an attempt to occupy them. The rebellion fails too, and Barnavelt is arrested and executed for treason.

Sir John ends with a spectacular onstage beheading that is carried out next to the decomposing body of the suicide Leiderberch, which has been hanged as additional punishment. My interest lies mainly in this depiction of state terrorism at the very end of the play. This scene resists a straightforward interpretation, however, so in order to know how to view it, I will first look more closely at the two main characters and their real-life counterparts. Van Oldenbarnevelt’s execution had taken place only three months before the play was first shown on the London stage. The circumstances of the trial and execution were hotly debated, both in the United Provinces and England, which by this time had been heavily invested in the Dutch political situation for decades. Although this is not immediately apparent from the play text, Van Oldenbarnevelt’s trial and execution were somewhat shaky from a legal perspective (Israel, 1995, pp. 458–459), so the appearance of legitimacy was particularly important to the Dutch authorities. The Dutch leaders sought endorsement from the French and English ambassadors posted to the United Provinces. Dudley Carleton, the English ambassador, was no supporter of Van Oldenbarnevelt, but also wrote to James that the whole

\(^{39}\) This play was one of Fletcher and Massinger’s early joint ventures. Both playwrights seem to have preferred collaborative writing over solo work, and they ‘collaborated on approximately seventeen plays’ in total (McMullan, 2006). Fletcher was the more experienced partner: at this point, he was the King’s Men’s chief playwright, a role Massinger would take over after Fletcher’s death in 1625 (Garrett, 2011).

\(^{40}\) The Dutch political context is quite complex; see Israel (1995, pp. 276–306, 421–449) for a general overview.

\(^{41}\) I use the Dutch spelling ‘Van Oldenbarnevelt’ and ‘Maurits’ to refer to the historical figures, and ‘Barnavelt’ and ‘Maurice’ or ‘Orange’ to refer to the characters in the play.
process appeared ‘rather a persecution than a trial; and the cause itself rather matter of faction than justice’ (quoted in Hackett, 2014, p. 165). James nevertheless supported Maurits and the government line in England was that the execution was justified. But in the United Provinces the opinions were mixed, and since many Dutch pamphlets were translated into English or quoted by English authors, this point of view also gained some traction in England. Religious disagreement came into the conflict too, although this takes a backseat in the play, and some of the tracts denouncing Van Oldenbarnevelt did so from an anti-Catholic sentiment. This bled into anti-Spanish rhetoric, since the Advocate had also been accused of working with Spain. Indeed, several pamphlets by English authors used Van Oldenbarnevelt’s supposed treason to urge James to reconsider his friendlier stance towards Spain. All this considered, theatregoers would probably have come to Sir John holding a range of conflicting opinions, influenced by religious and political points of view, on the figures of Barnavelt and Orange and the legitimacy of their actions.

Barnavelt versus Orange

I can very well imagine that, after the play, audience members would have left equally divided or confused as to how they should feel. Academics have widely disagreed whether Barnavelt is portrayed as an ambitious traitor getting his comeuppance, or a flawed but sincere defender of republican values being persecuted by an aspiring tyrant. What seems clear is that neither Barnavelt nor Orange is a particularly likeable character. They both attempt to manipulate events and people by using Machiavellian subterfuge. Much as in Sejanus, however, one of them is more accomplished than the other: Orange ultimately gains the upper hand by hiding his own political manoeuvring. Barnavelt, with his republican sympathies, is overcome while Maurice increases his power by playing at divine right. As Kamps puts it, ‘the play enacts Maurits’s gradual and extra-legal but inevitable rise to power’ (1996, p. 150). Whether the audience should applaud his victory remains ambiguous, but there is no doubt he comes out on top.

Initially, Barnavelt appears to be a classic Machiavel who is willing to sell out his country to Spain to spite Orange. Not long into the first scene, Barnavelt rants to his closest allies that

this ingratefull Cuntry, and this bold
Usurper of what’s mine shall first with horror
Know he that could defeat the Spanish cousnailes,
And countermyne their darck works, he that made

42 As my discussion of The Virgin Martyr in the next chapter will also show, Massinger’s plays are often characterised by such ambivalence, since he allows his audiences to engage with views from opposing sides.
The State what 'tis, will change it once againe
Ere fall with such dishonour (1.1.50–55).

Towards the end of the play, however, Barnavelt’s focus shifts away from his own position and onto the threat that Orange’s growing power poses to the state. Barnavelt has absolutely no qualms about telling his allies he is trying to undermine Maurice out of jealousy, so when he increasingly expresses concern about the wellbeing of his country, it seems to be genuine worry rather than an attempt to hide his motives or legitimise his actions.

Orange, on the other hand, is never this open about his true motivations. By the final act, ‘while Barnavelt has truly remained forthright and steadfast about his motives, the Prince is revealed as a figure deeply engaged in various stratagems in order to disguise his true political will and identity’ (Kamps, 1996, p. 147) – much like Jonson’s Tiberius. That Maurice can be viewed as a proponent of inherited power is apparent from the moment he first enters the play:

I, now, methincks, I feele the happynes
Of being sproong from such a noble Father
That sacrificd his honour, life, and fortune
For his lov’d Cuntry (1.3.1–4)

Maurice’s father, William of Orange, was the first leader of the Dutch revolt against Spain and was assassinated in 1584. His legacy looms large in the history of the Dutch rebellion, which makes Maurice’s homage to his family tree suspect in the context of the republican government of the United Provinces; William was stadtholder, a position that came with a lot of power but that was still subordinate to the States-General and, more importantly, that was elected rather than inherited. Maurice also refers to two other ‘Martires’ (1.3.5) of the rebellion, Hoorne and Egmont, as ‘blood and Kindred’ (1.3.4) – despite not being related to either. The ‘rhetoric of inheritance’ is thus employed strategically by Maurice, who ‘implicitly claims the social capital that these names bear in Dutch politics’ (Park, 2010, pp. 166–167).

If Maurice claims some form of kingship here, it’s subtle and indirect, and his winning over of the Dutch leadership is gradual. There is no denying, however, that while Orange’s first interaction with the States-General is very respectful, by the end of the play he behaves and is treated like a king. Vandort, one of the members of the States-General, apparently thinks nothing of telling Maurice to ‘proceed; when it please you: and what you thinck fit / We shall subscribe to all’ (4.2.51–52). Later he asks Orange, whom he addresses as ‘your Highnes’, to answer the French ambassadors’ request for mercy for Barnavelt ‘in the names of all’ without any prior deliberation (5.1.157). Barnavelt’s
warning to the members of the States-General – ‘when too late you see this Goverment / Chained to a Monarchie, you’ll howle in vain’ (4.5.200–201) – certainly seems prescient.

This careful approach is a good indicator of Maurice’s modus operandi in the rest of the play, where he cleverly camouflages his actions in various ways, including by hiding his own schemes behind ‘the divine plan’. Shortly before Barnavelt’s execution, Orange spells out the exemplary function of Barnavelt’s punishment:

all that plot against the generall good
Learne from this mans example, great in age,
Greater in wealth, and in authoritie,
But matches in his worldly pollicie,
That there is one above, that do’s deride
The wisest counsailes, that are misaplide (5.1.214–19)

But, as Kamps points out, ‘nothing in Massinger and Fletcher’s play suggest that “one aboue” had anything to do with the denouement’ (1996, p. 148, emphasis original), while the play does show Maurice himself had argued that Barnavelt ‘should receive his Sentence, / Then dye as he deserves’ (5.1.97–98). Divine providence hardly plays a role, other than its use by Maurice ‘to camouflage his political chicanery’ (Kamps, 1996, p. 153), which includes orchestrating an illegal raid to kidnap Barnavelt’s accomplice Modesbargen out of Germany (3.2.104–138) and staging a show trial to convict Barnavelt (5.1.95–98). Both Orange’s dig at Barnavelt’s ‘worldly pollicie’ and his appeal to divine providence seem rather hypocritical, considering his own actions are very similar and show a primarily functional understanding of religion.

An equivocal execution
The playwrights thus present their audiences with an ambiguous picture that complicates the interpretation of Barnavelt’s execution. It is clear, however, that the rebels’ punishment is approached as a pragmatic matter rather than a question of justice. Orange initially counsels against punishing them because it ‘will bring forth / [...] new birthes of tumult’, which would cause the deaths of ‘many thousand innocents’ (3.2.53–54; 59). His concern is whether ‘doing Justice’ (3.2.56) will lead to the desired result. The response of the members of the States-General to this proposal is in line with common notions about punishment discussed earlier in this chapter: not punishing the rebels would be preparing ‘a way for our owne ruyn’, since punishment will ‘deter / Others by example’ (3.2.71; 79–80).

The problem is Barnavelt is very popular among the people, who stand by him in part because they don’t believe anyone would dare execute him. ‘Tis said / They will cutt of his head’, says one burgher
to another. ‘Much: with a Cusshion: / They know he h’as too many Frends’ comes the response (4.4.20–22). In a later scene, Vandort complains about this attitude, annoyed that the citizens continue supporting Barnavelt ‘In the dispight of us, and of our Justice’ (5.1.81–83). The commons are insufficiently awed by the power of the state and must be made to change their tune. The irony of the situation is that, although Barnavelt and his supporters draw comfort from the fact that he is so popular, it’s his popularity that makes it necessary for him to be executed: the only way the States-General can continue to rule with a semblance of authority and control is by proceeding with the trial and execution as planned, and by making its citizens more susceptible to productive terror in the process.

If Orange had initially advised against it, by Act 5 he is fully prepared to encourage the States-General to execute Barnavelt:

The freedom of the government, and our honours,
And what we dare doe now lies at the stake;
The better part of all the christian [sic] world
Marks our proceedings, and it wilbe said
Yf having the Conspirators in our power
We sentence non of them, being convincd too
Of fowre and thirtie Articles, and each treason,
‘Tis done for feare: then to affright the rest
I hold it fitt, that Barnavelt, one that has
Most frends, and meanes to hurt, and will fall therefore
With greater terror, should receive his Sentence,
Then dye as he deserves (5.1.87–98)

Barnavelt, on account of his popularity, is the one who has to take the fall, because his execution will make the biggest impression; there is a striking similarity here with Sejanus’s plan for Silius, which is also based on the premise that a greater fall inspires more terror. Strikingly, the decision to execute Barnavelt has already been made before he has been sentenced – and not by judges, but by Orange. A spectacular punishment to instil terror in Barnavelt’s supporters and the wider population is what Maurice, Vandort and the others are aiming for; again, the question of justice is not under discussion. When Maurice remarks that ‘the world shall know, that what’s just we dare do’ (5.1.208), the main concern lies in the first part of that statement: it’s about the world seeing that the Dutch government is prepared to execute someone popular and powerful. The playwrights thus ‘do not present the Advocate’s punishment as an act of divine or even social justice; rather they offer it as an act necessary for the maintenance of political power’ (Kamps, 1996, p. 153). Of course, Maurice
also has his own, less legitimate reasons for wanting rid of Barnavelt, the only member of the
government who challenges his power and can equal him in popularity. Maurice thus uses reason of
state as a legitimation here in much the same way he appealed to divine providence earlier: to hide
his personal drive to power.

Barnavelt’s punishment turns out to be spectacular indeed. His execution is preceded by the display
of the body of Leiderberch, one of Barnavelt’s allies who has committed suicide in prison. This is an
example of the punishing of the dead body discussed earlier: the state must demonstrate it has
control over the criminal and their punishment. As Vandort says,

Nor shall the desperate act of Leiderberch
Delude what we determin’d; let his Coffin
Be therefore hang’d up on the publique Gallows (5.1.209–211).

This gruesome spectacle is described in graphic detail by the executioner, who complains the body
‘stinks like a hung poll cat’ (5.3.32). But that is precisely the point: it is meant to instil a sense of
terror in the people seeing it. ‘These examples will make ’em shake’ (5.3.41), predicts one of the
English captains present at the execution.

When Barnavelt enters the scene, he is at first perfectly composed, but that does indeed change
when he spots the body; he complains only ‘most greedy men’ would feel the need to ‘trym up
death in all his terrors, / And add to soules departing frights and feavors’ (5.3.82; 84–85). He
collects himself enough to deliver a defiant scaffold speech though, in which the only ‘falt’ he admits
to is dying ‘for saving this unthankfull Cuntry’ (5.3.147–149). Then the execution itself takes place:
the executioner strikes Barnavelt’s head off while the latter is speaking, taking off a couple of fingers
in the process as well. In Sir John, then, we get the dramatic rendition of one of those state-
sanctioned methods of execution that, according to Shapiro, ought not to be represented on stage.
Kamps agrees that

Massinger and Fletcher’s dramatic rendition of Barnavelt’s death must be considered an infringement
on that power [of the state]. It cheapens and deflates the ritual through appropriation and repetition

43 Leiderberch has done this on Barnavelt’s instigation; it is one of the ways the playwrights demonstrate that
Barnavelt is a Machiavellian pragmatist too.
44 This formulation shares important features with Burton’s description of terror: Barnavelt’s terror is caused
by ‘the apprehension of some terrible object’ – Leiderberch’s body; it ‘alter[s] the whole temperature of the
body’ – causing ‘feavors’; and it ‘moue[s] the soule and spirits’, striking ‘a deepe impression’ (Burton, 1621,
sigs. N1v–N2r).
45 ‘Is it well don mine Heeres’, asks the executioner after the deed; ‘Somewhat too much: you have stroke his
fingers too’, is the reply (5.3.183–184).
(in a fictional setting) and it lampoons the state by depicting it as inept in performing the very task designed to reactivate its power (1996, p. 165).

I agree with Owens, however, that the meaning of the execution scene is inconclusive. Focusing particularly on the gruesome image of the chopped off fingers, she writes that precisely what the detail signifies, whether it’s meant to undercut the heroic decorum of Barnavelt’s farewell or to hint at the barbarity of the punishment inflicted on the Dutch patriot, is as impenetrable as the other ambiguous elements in this scaffold scene. As much as the severed fingers seem to demand an allegorical/moral interpretation, they also prove peculiarly resistant to this type of rationalisation and containment (2005, p. 142).

Equally, the executioner’s curious claim that he is equipped with ‘the Sword that cutt of Pompeis head’ (5.2.21) seems a deliberate attempt by the playwrights to create ambiguity. On the one hand, Kamps is right in stating Pompey ‘was not tried, sentenced, and executed by any court of law’ but ‘betrayed and assassinated brutally’ (1996, p. 152). On the other, in the early modern period Pompey was chiefly considered as ‘an anti-Caesar’ (Cox Jensen, 2012, p. 94); how audience members felt about Pompey would have depended to a large extent on how they viewed Caesar, and he was used as an example both of an admirably canny politician and a tyrant. Knowing Barnavelt is beheaded with the same sword that killed Pompey only reinforces that there are multiple ways of interpreting his death.

The execution occurs within a few lines of the end of the play, with the last bit of dialogue left to two unnamed lords. Maurice, Vandort and the other members of the States-General have been absent from the execution, as recommended by the theorists quoted earlier in this chapter. Just as in Sejanus and Sir Thomas More, justice is carried out in the ruler’s name, but they are not present to see it done. However, even if Maurice is not there in person, his presence is felt – not least because Barnavelt talks about him moments before his execution, commending ‘my last breath to his Excellence’ (5.3.169). I therefore disagree with Kamps’ assessment that it is ‘notable that there’s no prince or new head of state at the end of the play’ (1996, p. 166), because throughout the last two acts it has become very clear Orange is the de facto head of state, if not (yet) in title. Moreover, as Owens argues, ‘the display of the [severed] head serves as a striking, unmistakable icon signifying not only the defeat and demise of the victim but, more crucially, the transfer of political power that

46 Besides, as Lucy Munro notes, ‘stage blood and severed limbs’ often have ‘specific social and iconographical functions’, but at the same time their appearance frequently ‘create[s] an uncertainty of tone’, since such scenes can easily ‘tip into parody or even farce’ (2014, pp. 75–76). The use of these props is therefore rarely uncomplicatedly gruesome.
is often consolidated through this act of violence’ (2005, p. 145). And audiences know who the beneficiary of that power transferral is.

The obvious Machiavellianism of the two main characters and the ambiguity of the execution scene make it challenging for the audience to determine whose side they are supposed to be on, and in the end, Fletcher and Massinger do not leave their spectators with a clear answer. What is certain is that Maurice has triumphed and that state terrorism in the form of violent punishment has done its job. While the other plays discussed in this chapter all question the efficacy of state terrorism to some extent, in *Sir John* it is frighteningly effective – but in the hands of someone of dubious morality. In this sense, the play expresses one of the biggest worries about the use and legitimisation of state terrorism that we have encountered in this chapter so far: an ambitious and unscrupulous person like Maurice can employ state terrorism to further his personal aims while legitimising his actions with the rhetorics of divine right and reason of state. They can make powerful weapons, but ones that could be used by good and bad rulers alike. When *Sir John* was performed on the London stage, its audiences would have to wait to find out in which category the real Maurits would fall. The play reflects this uncertainty: ultimately, the question remains whether we should applaud or condemn Maurice’s success.
3.7 TWO LAMENTABLE TRAGEDIES

A more straightforward picture of execution is presented in the last play I discuss in this chapter, Robert Yarington’s\footnote{Although the title page of Two Lamentable Tragedies identifies the playwright as Robert Yarington, this has been disputed by some academics, who suggest the play was written by William Haughton, Henry Chettle and John Day, based on payments made to them by Henslowe. Since the authorship of the play falls outside the scope of this thesis, however, I will refer to Yarington as the playwright. An overview of the authorship debate is given by Chiaki Hanabusa in his introduction to the Malone Society edition of the play (in Yarington, 2013, pp. xxiv–xxix).} Two Lamentable Tragedies (written c. 1594-1595, published in 1601). The play has not been the subject of much scholarly attention, and early criticism in particular is not kind. With its detailed look at execution practices in early modern London, however, it provides a very interesting focus for my research.

Two Lamentable Tragedies presents two unrelated storylines side by side, alternating scenes between the two plots. The first is a dramatisation of a real event, the murder of the chandler Robert Beech by his neighbour Thomas Merry. Merry subsequently kills Beech’s servant, Thomas Winchester, and dismembers Beech’s corpse, hiding the pieces in various places around the local area. Merry’s sister Rachel and his servant Harry Williams become inadvertently involved, and when Williams accidentally betrays the secret, Merry and Rachel are arrested and executed. The second storyline, which is set in Italy, is probably fictitious. It concerns an orphan who is killed by two assassins by order of his uncle, who wants the boy’s inheritance for himself and his own son. Apart from the framing device involving the characters Homicide, Avarice and Truth as narrators, the two stories are completely separate, although they share the same moral and both aim at educating the audience. Since my interest lies in its depiction of execution, which only happens onstage in the London storyline, I will just discuss this part of the play.

Like other domestic tragedies such as Arden of Faversham and A Warning for Fair Women, the London plot capitalises on the fascination a real-life murder provoked, and the Beech case certainly appears to have drawn plenty of interest. Several ballads were published in the aftermath of the murders, which took place on 23 August 1594, and the execution of Thomas and Rachel on 6 September (Coursey, 2019, p. 118). Thomas Johnson, in his collection of true crime reports A VVorld of VVonders, considers the Beech case to be so well known it barely needs mentioning:

It shall be needlesse to reporte vnto you the most hainous murther committed vppon the Chaundlar neere broken Wharff in London the matter beeing so fresh in memorie, the male actor still hanging as

\footnote{W.W. Greg called it ‘an extraordinarily wooden bombast of grotesque commonplace’ (quoted in Coursey, 2019, p. 103), while Robert Law felt the need to apologise ‘for seriously discussing the date and authorship of a play admittedly gruesome and crude beyond redemption’ (1910, p. 168).}
a notable example to our eyes, a greif to the godly a terrour to the wicked and reprobate (1595, sig. F4r).

The fact that the audience is probably familiar with the story is reinforced in the play by Truth, who summarises the plot before remarking that ‘The most here present, know this to be true: / Would truth were false, so this were but a tale’ (1601, sig. A3r).

Don’t brutally murder thy neighbour: the exemplary function of Thomas Merry

In my discussion, I will focus on how the real-life executions of Merry and Rachel are dramatised by Yarington. Contrary to the beheading at the end of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt, Two Lamentable Tragedies presents a fairly straightforward picture: whether these executions should have happened is not in doubt. Throughout the play, the unusually detailed stage directions show the violence committed by Merry would have been graphic. Beech is killed when ‘Merry strickes him in the head fifteene times’ (1601, sig. B3r), while the apprentice Winchester is left with ‘the hammer sticking in his head’ (1601, sig. C4r).49 Beech’s body is dismembered on stage (1601, sig. E2r), and his severed limbs later make another appearance when his neighbours try to solve the crime by putting him back together like a gruesome jigsaw puzzle (1601, sig. G2r). Merry’s deeds are thus committed right in front of theatregoers, who get a detailed re-enactment of the horrific violence the real Thomas Merry inflicted on his neighbour for the sake of a meagre ten groats (1601, sig. B3r).

Audiences shouldn’t doubt Merry deserves to pay for his crimes, especially since he is fully aware of this himself as well. Shortly after committing the murders, Merry complains that ‘grim visadged dispaire, / Hath tane possession of my guiltie heart’ and although he goes on to dismember and hide Beech’s body, he already expects that ‘The eye of heauen beholdes our wickednesse, / And will no doubt reuenge the innocent’ (1601, sig. D2r). When his time comes to be executed, he does take the opportunity to protest the rumour that he was ‘Train’d vp in murther, or in crueltie’ (1601, sig. K2r). Nevertheless, he is also quick to accept that he deserves to be punished anyway:

God strengthen me with patience to endure,
This chastisement, which I confesse too small
A punishment for this my hainous sinne (1601, sig. K2r)

49 Munro’s analysis (2014, pp. 82–89) of the practicalities of staging violence makes clear that detailed stage directions, either explicit or implied in the text, were often needed when the dramatist was aiming at a particularly gory or novel effect. At the same time, novice playwrights were also likely to use highly specific explicit stage directions (Pangallo, 2017, p. 108). Two Lamentable Tragedies and Barnes’s The Devil’s Charter – both, as far as we know, by single-play authors – are two examples that include precise directions detailing the violence on stage.
In contrast to most violent acts committed in the other plays discussed in this thesis, Merry gives no political or ideological rationale for his murder of Beech. While characters like Sejanus, Orange and Cade are often less than convincing in their efforts to legitimise their violence, they do attempt to do so and sometimes achieve success with the characters around them, even if not always with the theatre audience. Merry, on the other hand, can serve as a straightforwardly exemplary character because he simply does not try to justify his actions. Everyone – all the characters in the play, including Merry himself, and the audience – can therefore be united in condemning Merry’s violence, as was probably Yarington’s aim. After Rachel too has been hanged, the officer gives the order to

Cut downe their bodies, giue hers funerall,
But let his body be conueyed hence,
To Mile-end greene, and there be hang’d in chaines (1601, sig. K2v).

Merry’s exemplary function is not at an end with his death and, as the report quoted above shows, his body would have been on display for quite a while after the execution. Much like A Larum for London, Two Lamentable Tragedies attempts to instruct its audiences on how they should (and shouldn’t) behave, staging the spectacle of punishment to show criminals will ultimately get their lawful comeuppance.

Thomas Merry already provides Yarington with an effective vehicle for educating his audience on crime and punishment, but the inclusion of the morality play characters Homicide, Avarice and Truth makes Two Lamentable Tragedies even more of an exemplary tale. Their narration makes abundantly clear how audiences should feel about the events and characters depicted on stage, and Truth frequently addresses theatregoers directly to instruct them on how to behave, reminding them that they should ‘be farre of, to harbour such a thought, / As this audicuous murtherer put in ure’ (1601, sig. E2v). They should be vigilant of their own thoughts and behaviours, and learn from Merry’s example what not to do. Furthermore, Truth’s comments emphasise that theatregoers should treat the play as an educational experience, not a piece of lurid entertainment. As Stella Coursey observes, ‘throughout the entire play, Truth’s addresses to the audience assume they are already crying’ (2019, p. 130). An example of this occurs when Truth appears on stage – while Merry is busy hacking Beech’s body into pieces – to address ‘you the sad spectators of this Acte’ and claims to ‘see your sorrowes flowe vp to the brim, / And ouerflowe your cheekes with brinish teares’ (1601, sig. E2v). Truth’s comments signal to the spectators that this is the appropriate response to have, rather than voyeuristically enjoying the violent spectacle. The fact that people could be entertained by depictions of true crime and violence was a noted problem, which many writers felt compelled to address. Indeed, in his report of the 1573 murder of George Saunders, Arthur Golding notes that
when God bringeth such matters vpon the stage, vnto the open face of the world: It is not to the intent that men should gaze and wonder at the persons, [...] not that they should delight them selues & others with the fond & peradventure sinister reporting of them (1573, sigs. C3v–C4r).

Whether Yarington truly meant for his audience to be unequivocally appalled at the killings on stage or whether he added Truth’s moralising comments to avoid appearing too sensationalist is impossible to know, although I’m inclined to suspect the latter. Certainly Two Lamentable Tragedies employs a similar combination of spectacular, graphic violence and educational terror to A Larum, and both playwrights use characters their audiences could identify with to drive their point home. I will come back to this topic later – first, I want to explore the more complex depiction of Rachel and her execution.

‘Wretched’ Rachel

Although Rachel’s fate is also meant to present an example to the audience, her case is not quite as straightforward as her brother’s. If hangings and beheadings on stage were unusual, the onstage hanging of a woman was doubly so: the execution of a woman, by any method, was hardly ever shown. Frances Dolan remarks that

in the theatrical staging of women’s executions, reluctance to reduplicate the spectacle of state execution for reasons of decorum and expediency combines with a reluctance to display a woman’s suffering body. Certainly standards of bodily propriety did not prevent the public executions of women or the dramatization of women’s gruesome deaths. However, while women are killed in Renaissance drama with alarming frequency, they are rarely executed on stage. Criminals and villainesses such as Alice Arden or Joan La Pucelle are led off to the pyre or scaffold, but we do not see them once they get there (1994, pp. 162–163).

Possibly Yarington was trying to surpass the competition in displays of spectacular and gory onstage violence; after all, early modern theatregoers ‘were keenly interested in the violence [on stage] and approved of the playwright’s [sic] imaginative attempts to outdo each other’ (Castaldo, 2009, p. 50).

The scene certainly doesn’t read like an attempt at undermining or ridiculing state-sanctioned execution in the way the beheading in Sir John can do. And yet, it’s hard not to feel sorry for Rachel, who has found herself in an impossible position since she has discovered the murder. As noted earlier in this chapter, the commonwealth was often likened to a body of which the monarch was the head. The early modern household was supposed to be a reflection in miniature of this situation: a ‘little commonwealth’ governed by the man as head of the household. In the words of A Godlie Forme of Householde Gouvernment,
A Householde is as it were a little common wealth, by the good gouernment wherof, Gods glorie may be aduaunced, the common wealth which standeth of seuerall families, benefited, and al that liue in that familie may receiue much comfort and commoditie (Anonymous, 1598, sig. A7r).

In domestic tragedy, disorder in the household is often caused by women not keeping to their place in the social order, but this is not the case for Rachel. She does everything her brother asks and helps him dispose of the evidence of his crime, even though she doesn’t want to. And it is in acting according to her place in the little commonwealth that Rachel violates the law of the commonwealth at large, for which she eventually pays the price. She can obey her brother as head of the household or the rules of the monarch as head of the state, but she can’t do both. She is clearly aware of her dilemma, complaining that she ‘shall neuer thinke my selfe secure’ (1601, sig. F3v) before resolving to stand by Thomas:

Lo he is my brother, I will couer it,
And rather dye then haue it spoken rife,
Lo where she goes, betrai’d her brothers life (1601, sig. F4r).

She knows what her punishment will be if they are caught, but she would rather honour her responsibility to her brother than betray him.\(^\text{50}\) So, although Catherine Richardson remarks that ‘the household was a crucial political tool in early modern England because it was seen as the smallest unit in a system of analogies that stretched right up to the nation itself’ (2010, p. 18), the Merry household seems to function in opposition to the state. Rachel’s adherence to the household hierarchy puts the course of justice at risk, while Williams deviates from this hierarchy by betraying his master and thereby ensures law and order are restored. And it is Rachel who goes to the gallows with her brother, while Williams avoids a death sentence by claiming benefit of clergy.

At the execution itself, Rachel is one of the few characters I have encountered in my research who exhibits signs of terror:

Officer: Nay shrinke not woman, haue a cheerefull hart.
Rachel: I, so I do, and yet this sinfull flesh,
Will be rebellious gainst my willing spirit (1601, sig. K2r)

Nevertheless, she gathers herself sufficiently to give a perfect scaffold speech, presenting herself as ‘merror to ensuing times’ that will teach others to ‘Conceale no murther, least it do beget, / More bloody deeds of like deformitie (1601, sig. K2v). Equally, after her death one of the officers hopes that her example will

\(^{50}\) As already noted, the early moderns feared shame as well as violence; Rachel clearly fears shame more.
teach all other by this spectacle,
To shunne such dangers as she ran into,
By her misguided taciturnitie (1601, sig. K2v)

The conclusion of the play thus makes clear that Rachel was justly executed and that the audience should learn from her bad example. Still, the play is not unsympathetic to Rachel’s dilemma; whereas Merry is consistently characterised with words like ‘relentlesse’, ‘cruell’ and ‘mercy wanting’ (1601, sigs. A2v, A3r) by the narrators, ‘wretched’ (1601, sig. I2v) Rachel is depicted as someone caught up in a maelstrom of events she fails to navigate correctly. Before his execution, Truth even charges Merry with responsibility for ‘Thy sisters death’ (1601, sig. I2v). So, although it is never drawn into question whether Rachel should be executed, the way she is characterised allows the audience to feel empathy for her difficult situation. More so than her brother, Rachel is presented as a character that audience members can feel for and identify with, and this identification plays a role in making her tale an exemplary one. When seeing Rachel struggle, fail and be forced to face the terror of the gallows as a result, Yarington probably wanted his spectators to imagine themselves doing the same, and to be frightened into behaving better to avoid meeting the same fate.

**True crime: terror and titillation**

Another feature that makes the London plotline of *Two Lamentable Tragedies* of interest to my research is the level of detail with which the case is depicted. The most striking example of this is the conversation between two watermen who literally trip over some of Beech’s dumped body parts:

[Waterman] 2: I tell you I am indifferent, but to be plaine with you, I am greeued to stumble at the hangmans budget.
[Waterman] 1: At the hangmans budget, why this is a sack. 2: And to speake indifferently, it is the hang-mans Budget, and because he thought too much of his labour to set this head vpon the bridge, and the legs vpon the gates, he flings them in the streete for men to stumble at, but if I get him in my boate, Ile so belabour him in a stretcher, that he had better be strecht in one of his owne halfpenny halters: if this be a good conceit, why so, if not, why so. 1: Thou art deceiu’d, this head hath many wounds, And hoase and shoos remaining on the legs, Bull alwayes strips all quartered traitors quite. 2: I am indifferent whether you beleue me or no, these were not worth taking off, and therfore he left them on (1601, sig. G1r)

The exchange shows the great level of familiarity some early modern Londoners might have had with the practicalities of execution: they know the name of the hangman and his particular *modus*
operandi when it comes to taking his victims’ clothes, while also showing an awareness of the process of execution and disposal of the body. Coursey argues that ‘it is this knowledge, likely gained by both spectatorship and participation in the written and oral market of crime ballads and broadsides, which allow [sic] these watermen to identify the circumstances surrounding their unusual findings’ (2019, p. 122).

This irreverent and comical discussion of the practice of execution does perhaps not present the spectacle with all its supposed shock and awe. Yet, at the same time, this instance is one of many highly specific details Yarington has been careful to include, like names of streets and local landmarks as well as regular references to the date. By specifying where and when the various parts of Beech’s body were found or where Merry’s shop is, Yarington draws attention to the fact that he is relating a true story. This probably makes the play more titillating, but also more threatening for its spectators: it reinforces the idea this could happen to them or to someone they know. Perhaps they even know a would-be murderer themselves. After all, Merry was considered ‘a plaine and honest man’ (1601, sig. A4r) by his neighbours, who are extremely surprised that ‘of all the men aliue, / [...] Thomas Merry would haue done this deede’ (1601, sig. I1v).

The play thus also exhibits an anxiety that is not about becoming the victim of murder, but about becoming a murderer (or accessory) yourself. As Kesselring argues, the early moderns believed ‘that the same passions, humours, and susceptibility to sin that made some people murderers existed in all people’ (2019, p. 2). Murder pamphlets often ‘warned their readers not about the dangers posed by others, but about the dangers within themselves’. Readers could identify with the killers, who were not presented as ‘fundamentally different from the reader’ but instead ‘remained all too familiar, as fellow sinners who had fallen prey to Satan’s temptations’ (Kesselring, 2019, pp. 132–133). Golding, in the report quoted above, maintains God’s purpose in letting murders and other crimes come to light is that

the terror of the outward sight of the example, drie[s] vs to the inward consideration of our selues. Beholde, wee bee all made of the same moulde, printed with the same stampe, and indued with the same nature that the offenders are. We be the impes of the olde Adam, and the venim of sinne whiche he receiued from the olde serpent, is shedde into vs all, and woorketh effectuall[y] in vs all (1573, sig. C4r).

This exemplary terror is similar to Wright’s description – as a force that ‘further[s] vs to goodnesse’ when we are tempted to sin (1604, sig. Z1r). It acknowledges that people will always have sinful urges, but Golding and Wright suggest that those who want to be virtuous can actively embrace terror as an incentive to stay on the straight and narrow, rather than simply seeing it as something
that is imposed upon them by state and church. Kesselring notes that if the author of a murder pamphlet ‘expected the reader to identify with anyone in his account – to think “that could have been me” – it is typically with the killer, not the victim’ (2019, p. 134). That same dynamic is at play in Two Lamentable Tragedies, which suggests that anyone who doesn’t carefully police their own sinful impulses can fall under the influence of Avarice and Homicide, either directly – like Merry – or indirectly – like Rachel. And the fact that this is a domestic tragedy with ordinary, recognisable characters brings it even closer to home.

Strikingly, it’s also through the intervention of ordinary people that justice can ultimately be done. Although the investigation by Beech’s landlord Loney and the unnamed neighbours is more energetic than successful, they do take it upon themselves to solve the crime. And it is thanks to Cowley’s badgering of Williams that the latter accidentally reveals Merry’s involvement in the murder and confesses to the authorities. This is by no means a perfect system though: ‘no matter how consistently English jurists proclaimed the wonders of participatory justice, the real experience could (and did) fall short of the ideal’ (Geng, 2021, p. 73). Indeed, participatory justice in Two Lamentable Tragedies is a decidedly haphazard process – a far cry from the thorough, efficient, all-encompassing justice system projected at public executions.

Furthermore, although the executions of Rachel and Merry are presented as appropriate and legitimate, it is also conspicuous that state terrorism has a limited effect in Two Lamentable Tragedies: it fails to prevent Merry from committing his gruesome double murder in the first place, while his fear of punishment makes him dismember and hide Beech’s body to avoid being discovered, despite his guilty conscience. In Rachel’s case, the result is not much better: the fear of being punished herself is completely cancelled out by the shame she thinks she would feel over giving her brother up to the authorities, since she knows this would lead to his execution. Even while drawing attention to the exemplary function of punishment, the play therefore also expresses a concern that it’s not a watertight system. State terrorism has its limitations, especially when it comes to preventing crime. This is a worrying observation if anyone has the potential to commit murder. It’s therefore essential that individuals police their own unlawful urges, and keep an eye on their neighbours too. Ultimately, then, it’s not surprising that in the final scene, Truth presents a highly idealised vision of England as a country where ‘No hart shall entertained a murderous thought’ (1601, sig. K3r), even though this is so clearly at odds with the rest of the play. When both state terrorism and participatory justice are less-than-perfect systems, the only way a crime-free England could be realised would be by no one having criminal impulses in the first place. Until that time, however, audiences could learn from Two Lamentable Tragedies what their responsibilities were as good members of the body politic, even while enjoying the play’s gory spectacle. Yarington has
harnessed the powers of the true crime story to make his audiences experience both entertaining and educational terror.
In this chapter, I have shown that terrorism was employed by the early modern state to help maintain its authority. Although the state strove to monopolise the use of legitimate violence, that process was not yet complete; this made spectacular displays of legal violence – state terrorism – necessary to protect and reinforce the state’s sovereignty. State terrorism was legitimised through the theories of reason of state and divine right, which both present it as an acceptable policy for the ruler to pursue, albeit for different reasons.

Reason of state was used as legitimisation for state terrorism by Machiavelli as well as by many authors who on the surface opposed him, but ultimately recommend similar courses of action. Both Machiavelli and the anti-Machiavellians consider the stability of the state to be one of the highest goals. This end justifies a wide array of means (or, in Machiavelli’s case, any means) that do not necessarily conform to conventional morality, including state terrorism. Together, the work of both Machiavelli and the anti-Machiavellians contributed to the spread of reason of state theory across early modern Europe. This debate also extended to the early modern stage, where audiences could encounter both virtuous and immoral, successful and ineffective characters with Machiavellian traits. *Sejanus* reflects this complexity: Jonson shows that Machiavellian statecraft and terrorism can go hand in hand as an effective short-term ruling strategy, but that this will ultimately only lead to a downward spiral of increasing violence and brutality that is difficult to escape. At the same time, Jonson doesn’t present any viable alternatives, suggesting there is very little that can be done against the ruthless pragmatism of Machiavellian statecraft.

Divine right theory could also be used to legitimise state terrorism, but from the perspective that the ruler has been chosen by God and is therefore entitled to keep order however they like. Moreover, this is their God-given duty: it is not only the subject’s responsibility to stay in their assigned position in the social hierarchy, but also the ruler’s job to enforce this. Putting rebellious subjects to death – ‘cutting off rotten members’ – is required to keep the body politic healthy. State terrorism in the shape of exemplary violence plays an important role in this. Much like reason of state, divine right theory was contested, however. Under the Stuarts in particular, this contributed to increasingly absolutist rule, since any challenge to the monarch’s divine right meant it had to be insisted upon even more. This is also demonstrated in *Sir Thomas More*, which presents a rather equivocal take on divine right theory. Although More employs the rhetoric of divine right in his efforts to suppress a riot in the first part of the play, his own rebellion against the king and his subsequent execution draw the legitimacy and the effectiveness of divine right-backed state terrorism into question. Certainly in
its revised version, the play seems to speak to the concerns brought on by James’s insistence upon absolutist monarchical rule.

Punishment was one of the methods by which the government practised state terrorism. Often physical and public, punishment served three functions: it was retributive in disciplining the criminal; restorative in repairing the power of the sovereign, which had been infringed upon by the criminal act; and preventative in setting an example for the watching crowd that was meant to deter them from committing similar crimes. Nevertheless, the role of public, violent punishment in early modern society was complex: it was not always seen as the most appropriate response from the state, which also had other tools at its disposal to keep or restore social order. Furthermore, spectators’ responses were diverse and could include awe at the spectacular display of state power as well as carnivalesque subversion.

This ambiguity could extend to the representation of punishment and execution on the early modern stage, as it does in Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt. Fletcher and Massinger present a complex picture of state-sanctioned execution by questioning the legitimacy of Barnavelt’s death. Both Barnavelt and his opponent Maurice of Orange are shown as Machiavellian schemers who attempt to get what they want through political cunning and a pragmatic use of religion. Barnavelt’s punishment, furthermore, is not discussed in the play at all in terms of its justice, but only in terms of its desired effects – the efficacy of its terrorism. Orange emerges victorious as the most adept user of Machiavellian statecraft, and he expertly employs state terrorism to gain and maintain political power. While the other plays in this chapter question the efficacy of state terrorism, it appears to be frighteningly effective here, and it’s uncertain whether the audience is supposed to admire Orange’s success or be scared of it.

Two Lamentable Tragedies presents a less complicated picture of state-sanctioned execution in the true story of Thomas and Rachel Merry. But while Merry is presented as a straightforward object lesson, the play’s depiction of Rachel is more complex. Having been forced to choose between respecting her position in the household and the larger commonwealth, Rachel pays the price for obeying her brother over the law. Although the legitimacy of her execution is not questioned, she is nevertheless depicted with sympathy, allowing audience members to identify with her. Such identification makes Rachel’s story more exemplary, while also pointing to the anxiety the early moderns felt about people’s inherent sinfulness that made it possible for anyone to commit murder. Although the play underwrites the system of state terrorism, it also shows its effectiveness in preventing crime is limited; individuals thus need to take responsibility for keeping their own criminal urges in check.
Both the political theories and the plays I have discussed in this chapter show there was an early modern discourse on state terrorism that was engaged in by political thinkers as well as playwrights – and, by extension, theatregoers. Even if the term ‘state terrorism’ itself wasn’t used, playwrights clearly felt their audiences were interested in the ways rulers created terror in their subjects and legitimised such practices. Although the majority of the theatregoing public would not have read complex theoretical works like those of Lipsius, the plays they saw presented them with a variety of views on and questions about the legitimacy and efficacy of state terrorism. It is clear that neither the use of state terrorism nor its legitimising theories were simply accepted without question, but that they caused social anxieties which playwrights addressed in their work. Despite the official representation of state terrorism as perfectly legitimate and effective, then, the wider early modern discourse on state terrorism allows for a variety of more complex interpretations.
CHAPTER 4: ‘A TERROR VNTO THE TYRANTES’: EARLY MODERN RESISTANCE TERRORISM

In this chapter, I will look at three very different forms of violent resistance to the authorities – tyrannicide, martyrdom and rioting – and explore the political and religious ideas underlying and legitimising their use. Whereas state terrorism was aimed at (re)establishing the political control and authority of the sovereign and the state, resistance terrorism aimed to disrupt these. This chapter therefore mirrors the previous one: the political theories discussed here often directly counter those used to justify state terrorism, and the violence itself responds to the terrorism employed by the state. Furthermore, resistance terrorism frequently appropriated elements of state terrorism to appear more legitimate. This mirroring was also a common dynamic on the early modern stage; dramatists often considered the legitimacy and effectiveness of violent resistance by contrasting it with state terrorism. I will explore how playwrights represented resistance terrorism in three works: William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *2 Henry VI*, and *The Virgin Martyr* by Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger. Each of these plays shows in its own way the clash between the opposed discourses of resistance and state terrorism, and complicates the supposedly simple distinctions between right and wrong that these theories trade on. *Julius Caesar*’s conspirators unintentionally unleash a destructive civil war that may be worse than tyrannical rule; *The Virgin Martyr*’s Dorothea is not simply an innocent victim of religious persecution, but also a dangerous agitator; the existence of Jack Cade’s brand of chaotic violence allows a more organised commons uprising to be successful. Despite the challenges of censorship, playwrights thus presented complex depictions of resistance to authority that went beyond straightforward denunciation.

Resistance terrorism

Terror-violence could be used to reinforce the sovereignty of the monarch and their government, but it could also be leveraged for opposite ends by those looking to challenge sovereignty. The early modern state’s control over the use of violence was tenuous; when people opted to stick to old customs such as duelling or feuding rather than resolving issues in the court of law, they indirectly challenged the sovereign’s monopoly on legitimate violence and undermined the state.¹ But there also were forms of violence that were directly aimed at undermining these power structures, and these are the kinds of violence I will examine in this chapter. I refer to them collectively as

¹ See Kesselring (2019) on the reconceptualisation of homicide from an offence against the victim and their family to an offence against ‘the king’s peace’ and finally against ‘the public peace’ over the course of the early modern period; chapters three (pp. 68–93) and four (pp. 94–119) explore how duelling and feuding fit into this process.
‘resistance terrorism’: the strategic use of terror-violence by sub-state actors to achieve certain ideological goals. Resistance terrorism could take many shapes and, as a category, it therefore incorporates a wide variety of objectives, targets and tactics. The three forms I will explore – tyrannicide, martyrdom and rioting – played a significant role in early modern political discourse. They all have their own particular characteristics, but they can be usefully discussed together because they also share key features. Each of these forms of violent resistance was directed upwards by people who felt the sovereign or their government infringed on subjects’ rights and endangered the commonwealth or the ‘True Church’ – often by making what was seen as illegitimate use of state terrorism. Resistance was therefore undertaken for ‘the greater good’.

Furthermore, these various types of resistance terrorism all appropriated the trappings of state terrorism. As I have shown in the previous two chapters, God and the monarch were generally seen as the only appropriate inspirers of productive terror, so state terrorism enjoyed a certain ‘inbuilt’ legitimacy. In such a hierarchical society, legitimising violence that was directed upward was a more challenging and therefore more necessary task. Resistance terrorism was not openly presented as terrorism in the same way that state terrorism was – instead, it borrowed the familiar language and rituals of state terrorism to increase its legitimacy and effectiveness. This chapter will show how tyrannicide makes the king subject to the law and punishment, martyrdom appropriates the power of the scaffold, and rioting uses the rhetoric around the sinfulness of rebellion to its own advantage while also often employing the rituals and mechanisms of punishment. But first, I briefly want to talk about ‘treason’ – like ‘terrorism’, a term used to delegitimise violent resistance.

Resistance or treason?
Acts of resistance against the sovereign or government were readily defined as treason by those who were being resisted or rebelled against. The people committing these acts of ‘treason’ naturally didn’t characterise their actions as such, opting instead for the more legitimate-sounding terms that appear in this chapter, such as ‘tyrannicide’. Resistance terrorists claimed they were attempting to save the state from (further) deterioration, but their characterisation as ‘traitors’ by the authorities implied that their actions harmed the commonwealth and that their punishment would restore it. This chapter will show, then, that alongside the violent conflicts discussed, there was always also a polemical tug-of-war over who got to occupy the moral high ground, bearing out Zulaika and Douglass’s observation ‘that legitimacy and criminality do not always depend on the facts of the case, but rather that “legitimacy is evaluative”’ (1996, p. 171). Such battles of interpretation were a characteristic feature of almost every form of resistance in early modern England (and a defining element of terrorism, as discussed in the introduction), and as important as the violent acts themselves.
Violent resistance was closely linked to the debate on sovereignty and the rights of monarchs versus the rights of their people. For proponents of absolute monarchy, (attempting to) depose a monarch was always an act of treason, whether the monarch was a tyrant or not. Popular uprisings were often aimed at the monarch’s officials rather than at the sovereign themselves, but this too was regularly characterised as treason in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In fact, legislation was expanded dramatically during the late 1500s so that ‘treason’ came to include a range of non-violent offences such as insulting the monarch or ‘compassing’ their death (Lemon, 2006, pp. 6–10). When monarchs and those who wielded power on their behalf were challenged by subjects in words and (violent) deeds, treason law could help protect the sovereign’s position by employing the Foucauldian spectacle of the scaffold. But the monarch’s response to perceived acts of treason could also prompt further debate, for example on the possibility of ‘loyal opposition’ (Cunningham, 2001, p. 82). As Rebecca Lemon observes, ‘crises of treason [...] were really crises of sovereignty’ because they ‘raised questions about the rights and prerogatives of sovereignty itself’ (2006, p. 5). Some early modern writers registered suspicion of authorities’ handling of treason, implying it was simply a handy rhetorical construct the ruler, wise to the ways of statecraft, could wheel out when needed. As Crassus notes in Catiline, ‘Treasons, and guiltie men are made in States / Too oft, to dignifie the Magistrates’ (1611, sig. F1r). Or, in John Harington’s equally cynical epigram, ‘Treason doth neuer prosper, whats the reason? / For if it prosper, none dare call it Treason’ (1615, sig. A4v). This conception of treason as a useful tool in the repressive government’s toolbox recurs frequently in the debate around the right to resistance.

In this chapter, I will first take a closer look at resistance theory, the discourse that informs much early modern thinking about the legitimacy of resistance. Some theorists promoted active forms of resistance, which could include deposition of the ruler and even tyrannicide. Next, I will discuss martyrdom, an ostensibly strictly passive form of resistance which, I will argue, was not quite so passive after all. The final part of this chapter will consider rioting, another form of active resistance, but one typically aimed at the people wielding power on the ruler’s behalf rather than the monarch themselves. Again, throughout this chapter we will see that playwrights used their work to question the legitimate uses of violence, which was ‘a major concern of the early modern period’ (Castaldo, 2009, p. 50) – they could be critical of state terrorism and its justifications, but dramatists challenged the legitimacy and efficacy of resistance terrorism just as well. Nevertheless, none of the plays discussed here takes a straightforward authoritarian perspective that denies legitimacy to all forms of resistance. Instead, this chapter will show that, despite censorship constraints, early modern drama could present a sophisticated perspective on the question of whether (or when) violent resistance to the ruler was justified.
4.1 RESISTANCE THEORY

Resistance theory is the name now given to the early modern discourse on the right to disobey or resist temporal authority. As is the case with divine right theory, the ‘theory’ label is somewhat misleading, since the ideas collected under it are varied and sometimes contradictory. Most notably, there was disagreement over whether resistance should be active or passive, the main distinction between these two forms being the role people play in casting down the tyrant. Although it was generally accepted ‘that only God could depose a tyrannical monarch’, theorists promoting active resistance also saw a need for human intervention to make this happen (Majumder, 2019, p. 47) – one of the key characteristics of terrorism, as discussed in the introduction. In this section I will focus on the active strand of resistance theory; passive resistance will be the topic of the next.

When early modern resistance theory originated with the Protestants, the focus was on the subject’s right to passive resistance. Luther and Calvin maintained that obedience to the ruler should be absolute in temporal matters, but that subjects had a right to defy the monarch’s commands when these conflicted with the demands made by God. Disobedience should be strictly passive, however, which meant ignoring the law and accepting the resulting punishment. The first move towards more active resistance was made around the middle of the sixteenth century, when the ‘increasingly menacing political conditions’ that the Protestants encountered necessitated a different approach (Oakley, 1991, p. 192). ‘Second generation’ Protestant theorists such as Theodore Beza, John Ponet and Christopher Goodman argued the case for active opposition to the tyrannical ruler, which could either be framed as the right of the godly subject or, in more radical conceptions such as Goodman’s, their duty. The idea of active resistance as a moral obligation was also put forward in the next wave of treatises: the Monarchomach works of the 1570s, written by Huguenot theorists in response to the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. However, the vulnerable position in which French Protestants found themselves at this point required another reconsideration of the conceptual basis of resistance theory as well. Although the religious legitimisation of resistance remained important, political arguments recognising ‘the natural rights and original sovereignty of the people’ started to play a more prominent role (Skinner, 1978, p. 338). At the same time, the shifting balance of power meant that Catholic treatises – until now largely focused on undermining

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2 In Beaumont and Fletcher’s The Maid’s Tragedy, Armintor sums up the opposing, passive view: ‘in that sacred word, / The King, there lies a terror, what fraile man / Dares lift his hand against it, let the Gods / Speake to him when they please, till when let vs / Suffer, and waite’ (1619, sig. D4r). This characterisation shares with divine right theory the idea of the monarch being accountable to God alone, but also the notion that the terror inspired by the monarch is ‘borrowed’ from God; see also Thomas More’s claim that ‘to the king God hath His office lent / Of dread’ (6.111–112). Later in The Maid’s Tragedy, however, many of the characters – including Armintor himself – are only too happy to kill the unnamed king, who ends up being stabbed to death by Armintor’s wife Evadne.
the resistance theorists’ writings – began to adopt these same arguments; thinkers such as Robert Parsons\(^3\) and Juan de Mariana now defended the right of Catholic subjects to resist their Protestant rulers. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the different stages of the Reformation and the various religiopolitical changes it led to in England, Scotland and continental Europe, therefore significantly influenced how ‘legitimate resistance’ was conceptualised. Furthermore, towards the end of the century resistance theorists also had to contend with the increasing influence of two doctrines, both discussed in the previous chapter, which opposed active resistance: absolutism and Neostoicism.

**Legitimising resistance**

The first step for any resistance theorist was to establish the difference between the rightful ruler and the tyrant. In the early modern period, tyranny was viewed in the terms of medieval theorists like Bartolus of Saxoferrato, who in turn followed Aristotle. In this model, a state ruled by a single person can either be a monarchy or a tyranny, the former being ruled justly and the latter unjustly. This justness is determined by whether the ruler rules by right; the unrightful ruler might have come to power unjustly, abuses their power once installed, or both. According to Bartolus, ‘a king forfeits his kingdom through sin, and therefore he is a tyrant because he does not rule according to law’ (in Emerton, 1964, p. 127). Even if these criteria seem straightforward at first glance, however, determining whether someone was a tyrant was not that simple. As the debate around Elizabeth’s successor shows, deciding who had the most legitimate claim to the throne could be complicated. And ruling ‘justly’ was also open to a wealth of interpretations, especially since ‘the line between monarchical absolutism and tyranny was nebulous in sixteenth-century political theory and practice’ (Majumder, 2019, p. 127).

Furthermore, even if it were possible for a people to unanimously agree their ruler was a tyrant, the question remained whether something could or should be done to remove them. Those who denied the right to active resistance – a group that included proponents of passive resistance as well as absolutists, who opposed resistance of all kinds – typically considered tyranny to be a problem beyond the scope of direct human intervention. Indeed, it was sometimes argued that tyrannical rule was something people simply needed to accept, since it constituted much-needed divine correction: Calvin held that ‘they who rule unjustly and incompetently’ have been raised up by God ‘to punish the wickedness of the people’ (quoted in Skinner, 1978, p. 194); decades later, James echoed this sentiment in his arguments in favour of absolute rule, claiming that ‘a wicked K.[ing] is sent by God for a curse to his people, and a plague for their sins’ (1642, sig. B3v). Neostoics such as

\(^3\) Also known as Robert Persons.
Lipsius and Montaigne also encouraged submission rather than resistance to even the most tyrannical rulers, a position profoundly influenced by the violent upheavals plaguing continental Europe in particular in the late sixteenth century. Skinner notes that these authors claim that all the revolutionary movements of the age are equally and unforgivably destructive, so that the very idea of political resistance, on whatever grounds, deserves to be completely repudiated. The main reason given for this conclusion is simply a general sense of horror at the cruelties and disorders of civil war’ (1978, pp. 282–283).  

The resistance theorists, however, were undeterred by such arguments. They sought to prove the tyrant’s illegitimacy and to use this status to provoke corrective action – as we will see throughout this chapter, the legitimacy of violent resistance from below was often predicated upon the illegitimacy of the ruler or their deputies. Both Protestant and Catholic theorists attempted to legitimise resistance to the unjust monarch with a mix of legal, political and religious arguments; indeed, they often employed the same reasoning, which necessitated a fair bit of polemical manoeuvring. Many Protestant writers who had vigorously defended the right to resist when they were in the minority later had to resort to semantic contortionism to deny Catholics the same (Streeete, 2017, pp. 104–105). Jesuits gladly employed arguments the Catholic Church had once opposed when these could be used ‘to undermine [...] the authority of the English sovereign’ (Tutino, 2007, p. 175). Much like reason of state, resistance theory was thus often praised or denounced depending on whether the ‘tyrant’ under attack was of one’s own religious or political affiliation or not.

From a religious point of view, the monarch of an opposing denomination offended against the ‘True Religion’ – i.e., the one the resistance theorist themselves subscribed to. The ‘heretical prince or princess was an outcast in the eyes of God and hence enjoyed no divine protection against a would-be slayer’ (Ford, 1985, p. 151). Thus Elizabeth was declared ‘a heretic and favourer of heretics’ by Pope Pius V in Regnans in Excelsis (1570), meaning that she had no right to the throne and that all oaths her subjects had made to her were invalid. Ten years later Pope Gregory XIII specifically stated that whoever managed to assassinate Elizabeth ‘with the pious intention of doing God service, not only does not sin, but gains merit in the eyes of God’ (quoted in Neale, 1952, p. 258). Human

As already noted in my discussion of divine right theory, the insistence on complete obedience to the divinely ordained, absolute monarch was thus, at least in part, a response to the turbulence of the period. Francis Oakley observes that, while some of divine right theory’s central propositions were rooted ‘in the soil of medieval regal and imperial ideology’, the ‘solemn emphasis on passive obedience and nonresistance would have seemed quite odd to most medievals. It mainly reflected, in fact, the revolutionary changes introduced by the Reformation’. Indeed, the more forcibly the legitimate right to active resistance was insisted upon by the resistance theorists, the more their claims ‘came to be met in turn by an increasingly elaborated assertion of the king’s indefeasible right’ (Oakley, 2015, p. 159).
intervention could, in other words, be part of God’s plan for the tyrant; the author of *Vindiciæ Contra Tyrannos* argues that ‘as God doth oftentimes chastise a people by the cruelty of tyrants: so also doth he many times punish tyrants by the hands of the people’ (1648, sig. R4v).

Another bit of religiopolitical theory resistance theorists employed was that of the contract between ruler and subjects. According to contract theory, upon their accession the monarch makes a contract with God and their people. The monarch swears to rule their subjects justly as God’s deputy, and the people swear to obey them. Resistance theorists argued that if this contract was broken by the monarch, if they neglected to rule ‘justly’ and became tyrannical, subjects were released from their side of the agreement. Further emphasising this mutuality of the relationship between the people and the ruler, many resistance theorists also made use of the metaphor of the body politic. In *A Shorte Treatise of Politike Poure*, Ponet claims that

> it is naturall to cutte awaie an incurable membre, which (being suffred) wolde destroie the hole body. Kinges, Princes and other gouernours, albeit they are the headdes of a politike body, yet they are not the hole body. And though they be the chief membres, yet they are but membres: nother are the people ordained for them, but they are ordained for the people (1556, sig. G6v).

In other words, the ruler is *created*; their power is bestowed upon them by the people (albeit under God’s watchful eye) and can therefore also be taken away.

Finally, resistance theory was also associated with Roman and republican thought. The history and writings of the Romans, particularly those concerning the transitional period from republic to empire, were of great interest to the early moderns (Cox Jensen, 2012, p. 2). One could and should learn from Roman history, its failures as well as its successes. Absolute monarchs like James drew on ancient Roman ideas about imperial rule (Dandelet, 2014, p. 4), but the resistance theorists too learnt from classic exempla. Resistance theory had its roots in ancient Greece and was frequently discussed by writers like Tacitus and Cicero, whose works were popular in early modern England. Roman ideas about legitimate resistance were often bound up with republican values, a connection also made by the early modern resistance theorists. *Vindiciae*, for example,

> devoted as much time and space to the secular obligations of princes as it did to religious matters. In doing so it expressed the grievances not just of Protestant Frenchman but also [...] those of nobles, justices in the courts of law, and local ‘notables’, irrespective of denominational ties (Ford, 1985, p. 153).

Like their French equivalents, many educated Englishmen had political as well as religious concerns about their rulers. There was dissatisfaction about the amount of power the monarch aggregated to themselves and on whom they bestowed their favours, as well as anxiety about the influence of
power-hungry advisors. These concerns could also lead one to advocate for resistance to the
monarch, from a stance which, as Hadfield argues, we might now view as republican (2005b, p. 17).

The relationship between monarch and Parliament could be interpreted in a variety of ways. The
ultimate power on earth was supposed to lie with ‘the monarch in parliament’, but which of the two
had the upper hand? In the early 1560s, Smith could wax lyrical about the mixed policy employed in
England; by the later years of Elizabeth’s reign, however, this ‘was no longer so obviously an
establishment view, but could be utilised by disaffected subjects to argue that parliament should
play a more central role in governing England’ (Hadfield, 2005b, p. 25). Beyond Parliament, an
advisory body like the Privy Council could also have a place in this mixed system, the main aim being
to control the powers of the crown by establishing a means of ensuring that a coterie of virtuous
advisors and servants would always have the constitutional right to counsel the monarch, and so
influence and control his or her actions within the limits of the law (Hadfield, 2005b, p. 17).

These arguments were also used by the resistance theorists. Ponet emphasises the role of bad
councillors on notorious rulers like Nero (1556, sig. B8r); in How Superior Powers Oght to Be Obeyd,
Goodman uses the threat of Spanish influence to discredit Mary, asking his readers if they ‘thinke
that Philip will be crowned kinge of Englane, and retayne in honor Englishe counsellers?’ (1558, sig.
G2v). These thinkers thus argued for a system that enabled preventative action: the ruler who
availed themselves of wise counsel was unlikely to become a tyrant, since they would have capable
advisors to guide them and keep them on the straight and narrow. But if the ruler refused to take
good advice and strayed into tyrannical behaviour, it became necessary to take more drastic action
and engage in active resistance.

**Theorising tyrannicide**

Active resistance could take a variety of forms, the most extreme of which was tyrannicide – the
assassination of the tyrant. Like the ancient Greek and Roman advocates for resistance, early
modern resistance theorists argued that neutralising the threat the tyrant presented required
human intervention; it was a noble action undertaken on behalf of the commonwealth, and

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5 Patrick Collinson has argued Elizabethan England was a ‘monarchical republic’ already, since Elizabeth’s
subjects were to some extent self-governing (1994, pp. 32–34); see also Peltonen (1995, pp. 18–53) on the role
of republican thought in Elizabethan politics.

6 Henry Savile’s 1591 translation of Tacitus, with its warning that ‘a good Prince gouerned by euill ministers is
as dangerous as if hee were euill himselfe’ (1591, sig. 3) came at a time when this kind of rhetoric was much
more subversive. Savile’s relationship with the Essex Circle and their interest in ‘the application of the Tacitean
critique of power to contemporary politics’ – including reason of state-thinking – made such a comment even
more telling a decade later, although Savile probably didn’t have any part in Essex’s failed uprising and
escaped without punishment (Goulding, 2015).
therefore one that had legitimacy. Many resistance theorists preferred early intercession where possible: as the author of *Vindiciae* argues, tyranny resembles

a Feaver Hectick, the which at the first is easie to be cured, but with much difficulty to be known; but after it is sufficiently known, it becomes uncurable. Therefore small beginnings are to be carefully observed, and by those whom it concerns diligently prevented (Anonymous, 1648, sig. Q1v).

Rebellion, deposition and ultimately tyrannicide were best avoided if possible, and not every resistance theorist was happy to explicitly advocate taking the process all the way to a bloody conclusion. But even when writers stopped short of recommending assassination as a legitimate course of action, the possibility is often signalled in their texts, as we will see below in *Vindiciae*, for example.

Those who were open to the option of tyrannicide stressed the public good it would do, since it would put an end to the devastation tyranny brought upon the commonwealth: Ponet compares the tyrant to

a sowe comyng in to a faire gardin, roteth vp all the faire and swet flowres and holsome simples, leaving nothing behinde, but her owne filthye dirte: so dothe an euil gouernour subuerte the lawes and ordres, or maketh them to be wrenched or racked to serue his affectiones, that they can no longer doo their office (1556, sig. G2r).

As David George argues,

within the Western political tradition, tyrannicide has always been distinguished from common political assassination, and its value differently assessed. [...] tyrannicide was always supposed to be undertaken by private men *pro bono publico*. Hence tyrannicides (but never common assassins) were revered and honored as supreme patriots (1988, p. 391).

Of course, this hinges on the assassinated ruler being recognised as a tyrant, which only tends to happen if the tyrannicides are not just successful in killing the ruler but also in subsequently coming to power and taking control of the political narrative. In this, tyrannicide follows Webel’s characterisation of terrorism as acquiring ‘its political content *retrospectively*, based on the success [...] or failure [...] of those who employ political violence in achieving specific political goals’ (2004, p. 10, emphasis original). History is often (re)written by the victors, and they don’t label themselves ‘terrorists’ or ‘traitors’ – but they can be ‘tyrannicides’.7

7 As Caesar shrewdly notes in *Catiline*, ‘Let ‘hem call it mischiefe; / When it is past, and prosper’d, ’t will be vertue’ (1611, sig. G2v).
Resistance theorists did not just rely on the notion of ‘the greater good’ to legitimise taking violent action: they also fell back on contract theory. After establishing that the tyrannical monarch invalidates the contract between themselves and their subjects, the author of *Vindiciae* argues that the people are within their rights to ‘publiquely renounce’ the tyrant and to ‘expulse him by force of armes’ if needed (1648, sigs. Q2v–Q3r). Indeed, when the monarch defaults on their obligation to rule justly, ‘the whole people [is] the lawfull punisher of delinquency’ (Anonymous, 1648, sig. N3r). Therefore it is ‘permitted the Officers of a Kingdome [...] to suppresse a Tyrant; And it is not only lawfull for them to doe it, but their duty expressly requires it’ (Anonymous, 1648, sig. Q3r).

But how should the tyrannical monarch be ‘suppressed’? This is the point at which many resistance theorists suddenly become quite unspecific. The author of *Vindiciae* considers tyranny to be not just a crime but ‘the chiefe and as it were the complement and abstract of vices’, particularly because the tyrant’s offences victimise the entire country (1648, sig. Q1v). He also notes that ordinary criminals ‘justly suffer corporall punishment by death’ and that the tyrant ‘is liable to the same punishment, yea and certainly deserves much more greater than the equity of those lawes inflict on the delinquents’ (1648, sig. Q1v; sig. Q2r). But the author stops short of proposing any concrete punishments himself, instead leaving the subject to Bartolus, who states the tyrant could be ‘justly punished according to the Law Julia, which codemnes those which offer violence to the publick’ (1648, sig. Q2r). Ultimately, how far resistance should go is hinted at rather than made explicit. *Vindiciae* points out that treason is punishable by death and that the tyrant’s crime is worse than treason, but it’s up to the reader to put two and two together. Both Ponet and Parsons pursue similar lines, arguing that the monarch is subject to the law and should be punished accordingly (Parsons, 1595, sig. G1v; Ponet, 1556, sig. H1r).

George Buchanan’s *De Iure Regni Apud Scotos*, originally published in 1579, comes closest to openly advocating for tyrannicide. After establishing that the tyrant is an enemy of the commonwealth and that it is therefore ‘just and Lawfull’ to wage war upon them, Buchanan argues that ‘every one out of the whole maltitude [sic] of mankind [may] assault with all the calamities of war, a Tyrant who is a publick enemy, with whom all good men have a perpetuall warfare’ (1680, sig. G1r). Unlike the author of *Vindiciae*, Buchanan does not confine the right to resist the monarch to the magistrates: rebellion by the commons can be a legitimate form of resistance, and tyrannicide can just as lawfully be undertaken by a commoner as by a magistrate. Goodman equally argues the protection of the commonwealth is the duty of all its citizens, which means higher-level political thinking is required

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8 Susannah Brietz Monta calls this way of writing ‘slant’, meaning that readers who are sympathetic to the author’s message ‘should infer the context [...] overhear justifications for action, and be persuaded to act’ without the author having to tell them to directly (2014, p. 84).
from everyone, not just the educated upper crust (1558, sig. M2v). This notion that ordinary people are in a position to judge their rulers was also implicit in many of the history plays of the 1590s, which taught their audiences to evaluate the actions of the monarchs on stage (Heinemann, 1990, p. 176). However, these plays also often showed that, for magistrates and commoners alike, it was easier to judge an unjust ruler than to take effective political action themselves – as my discussions of _Julius Caesar_ and _2 Henry VI_ will demonstrate.

**Resistance theory and terrorism**

So, how does the doctrine of resistance theory and tyrannicide work in the context of terrorism? As we have seen, the resistance theorists were preoccupied with legitimacy: they set out to prove that, under certain circumstances, the assassination of the ruler was both morally and legally justified. Their texts are largely taken up with religious polemic, political arguments and legal nitpicking, rather than detailing the violent means by which resistance might be accomplished. After all, it was probably easier to convince readers there was a legitimate right to resistance when it was presented as an abstract concept that didn’t include lurid descriptions of rulers being assassinated. Resistance theory, then, does not talk about *itself* as a way of frightening rulers into good behaviour.

Instead, the resistance theorists took the common early modern view that the law, both human and divine, should be an object of terror that keeps people in line. And since the ruler is also subject to the law, they should be equally wary of breaking it. Of course, human law only inspires terror because those who break it are punished, which is precisely what the concept of ‘the monarch above the law’ makes impossible. The resistance theorists, therefore, attempted to make human law an object of terror to rulers by giving their subjects the right to punish their infractions. Buchanan conceptualises this as follows:

> Now if we confess Lawes to be good (as indeed they are) and the keepers thereof worthy of honour, we will be forced to confess that the office of the keepers is a good and profitable thing. But Magistracy is terrible, but to whom? to the good, or bad? to the good it is not a terrour: it being to them a defence from injury: but to wicked men it is a terrour: it is not so to you, who are ruled by the Spirit of God (1680, sig. E4v).

The law itself is good, but the upholding of it by the magistrates is a source of terror for transgressors. As Buchanan also argues that the monarch is subject to the law and is therefore capable of breaking it, the statement above applies to the ruler as much as to any of their subjects. The author of _Vindiciae_, meanwhile, illustrates the system by which the pope is held accountable by those who elected him and argues the same principle should apply to bad rulers. If popes
obstinately abuse their authoritie, there must [...] first be used verball ad
monitions; secondly, herball medicaments or remedies; thirdly, stones or compulsion; for where vertue and faire meanes, have not power to perswade, there force and terror must be put in ure to compell (Anonymous, 1648, sig. R1v).

‘Force and terror’ can thus be used on popes and princes as well as on ordinary subjects to protect the commonwealth.

Both Elizabeth and James survived multiple plots, while fellow rulers like William the Silent and Henry III and IV were assassinated. Even if they did not agree with the right to resistance as set out by the resistance theorists, they would have been very aware that there were people who did find these arguments convincing and felt entitled to act accordingly: ‘I am not so carelesse, as not to weigh that my life dayly is in hazard’, Elizabeth remarked to Parliament in 1586 (quoted in Fitter, 2011, p. 82). Even though ‘who or what might provide sufficient warrant to kill admitted of no easy or agreed upon answer’, it was clear that ‘by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, more people believed themselves and other [sic] licensed to do so’ (Kesselring, 2013, p. 425). The fact James made the effort in The True Lawv of Free Monarchy to counter many of the resistance theorists’ arguments shows this was a doctrine that was taken seriously. It could therefore be argued that the threat of deposition and tyrannicide was meant to function in much the same way punishment did for the rest of the population: by making the monarch aware of what could happen if they broke the law, tyrannical behaviour might be prevented. (This is not to suggest that Elizabeth or James would have interpreted resistance theory this way, of course – simply that this is how the resistance theorists probably envisioned it working.) And if it did come to assassination, that could equally be seen in the same terms as the execution of the criminal: sovereignty, which for the resistance theorists originates with the people, is injured by the tyrant and restored by their execution. Just as is the case with state-sanctioned punishment, then, this is a system with a broader function beyond the disciplining of the deviant individual. It is about maintaining a legitimate political order where neither subject nor ruler takes liberties. Catherine Gray writes about the Florentine practice of ‘retaking the state’ that ‘political violence functions here as a mnemonic device, recalling the fear that, Machiavelli implies, helps found new states and then working by punitive threat to delay those states’ fall into tyrannical corrupt license’ (2016, p. 183). The memory of terror-violence helps the state to function properly by keeping both rulers and ruled in line.

Karl Härter states that ‘the early modern period can be seen as an incubation period of “modern” political crime’, in which ‘the manifestations of political violence changed’ and ‘the perception and conceptualisation of political crime’ shifted (2014, p. 147). Although rebellions and assassinations occurred regularly in the medieval period, Härter argues that in the sixteenth century they first
began to be used to achieve wider political aims beyond simply gaining power for oneself. This timeline may be oversimplified, but I do believe Härter is right to suggest this kind of political violence became more common in the early modern period. The move towards centrally organised nation-states also meant attacks on the ruler were more easily construed as attacks on the state and civil order itself. Citing ‘the examples of the Guises (1588), Henry III (1589), Henry IV (1610), or the Gunpowder plot (1605)’, Härter argues that

the intentions and patterns of political violence had changed and assassination increasingly became a public, performative and symbolic act of dissenting individuals or groups, who sometimes risked their own life via a ‘suicide attack’ or used ‘terrorist’ methods (such as bombing) against a ruler to denounce or change a ‘tyrannical’, ‘ despotic’, ‘unjust’ or ‘illegitimate’ political/religious order’ (2014, p. 147).

This analysis implies the presence of the preventative and retributive aspects also found in punishment practices; the assassinated ruler has been punished for their tyranny, and their successor (or other authority figures) will hopefully think twice before indulging in any tyrannical behaviours themselves. I therefore disagree with George, who argues that tyrannicide isn’t terrorism because ‘the tyrant’s life is not taken in order to achieve what is termed a "demonstration effect", but simply to end his personal tyranny’ (1988, p. 14). This assessment overlooks the fact that the assassination may aim for concrete political intervention – to challenge the belief system the ruler represents – while putting a stop to the ruler’s tyranny at the same time.

That the early moderns could conceive of assassination in this way is clear from portrayals of Julius Caesar, for example in Shakespeare’s play: killing Caesar puts an end to his personal (potential for) tyranny, but it is also meant to function as an ideological wakeup call to the people of Rome. Härter rightly argues that those committing political violence in the early modern period set out ‘to communicate a “message”, to emphasise and legitimise their motivation […], to arouse a public dispute on the political or religious order or even to instigate revolt and change’ (2014, p. 148) – many of the key features of terrorism. But, although Julius Caesar recognises this is what the conspirators are trying to do, in practice it proves problematic for the would-be tyrannicides to have their motivations recognised as legitimate, let alone to achieve the desired political change. We will explore these difficulties in the next section, looking in more detail at Shakespeare’s famously ambiguous reflection on tyranny and resistance.
4.2 JULIUS CAESAR

Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599) doesn’t need much introduction. There has been a lot of scholarly interest in the play and the ways it addresses some of the most pressing political concerns of Shakespeare’s own time, such as Elizabeth’s succession (e.g. Shapiro, 2005, pp. 156–192; Hadfield, 2004, pp. 111–149). My interest lies in the play’s engagement with resistance theory and the (il)legitimacy of tyrannicide, another enduring early modern preoccupation. Elizabeth had by this time survived multiple plots against her life, so the relevance of resistance theory was by no means purely theoretical. But if tyrannicide was a topical and engaging subject, it was also a ‘dangerous, double-edged’ one that playwrights likely approached with ‘deep ambivalence and reservations’ (Majumder, 2019, p. 179). The story of Caesar’s assassination provided a perfect vehicle for a discussion of resistance theory, allowing writers to tackle this thorny subject from a safe(ish) historical distance. Nevertheless, caution on the playwright’s part was still very necessary; although Caesar was not universally looked upon as a model ruler, one would also not want to endorse his assassination with too much enthusiasm. Shakespeare solved this conundrum by making *Julius Caesar* difficult to pin down: he presents arguments for tyrannicide, but also explicitly connects Caesar’s death with the civil war that follows. This is a divided play, which is about the assassination itself as much as it’s about the aftermath. I argue that in making this connection, Shakespeare shows his audiences the gap between the theoretical ideals of resistance theory, which look good on paper, and the practical application, which is infinitely trickier. Although the play doesn’t endorse tyranny (or absolute rule), at the same time it makes the rather Machiavellian point that abiding by the rules of resistance theory and committing tyrannicide in a ‘morally correct’ manner is very difficult, if not impossible.

**Successful assassins, failed terrorists**

Since Roman history played such a significant role in the debate around resistance theory and tyrannicide, it’s unsurprising that the assassination of Julius Caesar was frequently invoked as a test case. Caesar’s death divided early modern intellectuals: some considered his assassination to be

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9 Comprehensive surveys of recent criticism in general and of dominant critical themes are offered by Cadman (2016), Lovascio (2016) and Miola (2016).

10 A useful contrast here is with Dekker’s 1607 play *The Whore of Babylon*, which dramatises several of the assassination attempts against Elizabeth. Although Dekker includes some discussion of the principles of resistance theory, the play decisively condemns the doctrine of tyrannicide. Of course, Dekker did dramatise recent history, by means of a very thinly veiled allegory, *and* only two years after the Gunpowder Plot, so it’s hard to imagine he would have got away with anything more ambiguous than outright condemnation. At the same time, it seems likely Dekker was to some extent simply trying (but failing) to capitalise on post-Gunpowder Plot anti-Catholic feeling – like *The Whore of Babylon*, his 1606 pamphlet *The Double PP* was strongly anti-papist and not very successful. Shakespeare’s plays, on the other hand, were rarely explicitly topical, which allowed more room for ambiguity.
necessary and justified, while others saw it as a monstrous crime. His story was used both to legitimise tyrannicide and to warn against it (Hadfield, 2004, p. 138), while Caesar himself was represented ‘as a kind of paragon even while he was an embodiment of certain vices’ (Cox Jensen, 2012, p. 99). The historical figure of Caesar was thus quite as open to various interpretations as his dramatic counterpart in Shakespeare’s play.

*Julius Caesar* engages extensively with the questions and concerns elicited by resistance theory.¹¹ My interest lies mainly in the play’s depiction of the assassination as an act intended, but failing, to function as terrorism aimed at the ruler and his faction. The fact tyrannicide is a possibility in pre-imperial Rome has no influence on Caesar, who seems determined to present himself as a superhuman figure, comparable to the ‘Northern Star’ or ‘Olympus’ (3.1.60; 74). If he doesn’t quite consider himself to be a god, he certainly does talk about himself as more than an ordinary human being. The idea that he might be held accountable to the human laws of the republic, like everyone else, simply doesn’t fit with his self-mythologising. Furthermore, the law can only be an object of productive terror – as intended by the resistance theorists – to people who experience fear, and Caesar regularly points out he is above such an emotion. He initially agrees to stay at home after Calpurnia’s ominous dream only to humour her, and doesn’t take the warning of the soothsayer seriously at all. Ironically, he even goes so far as to warn Antony against the ‘very dangerous’ Cassius (1.2.211), while at the same time stating he doesn’t worry about Cassius himself since he isn’t ‘liable to fear’ (1.2.200). This was, incidentally, not an uncommon portrayal of Caesar: in William Alexander’s closet drama *Julius Caesar*, Caesar boasts to Calpurnia that ‘My breast from terror hath bin alwayes cleare’, to which she presciently replies that ‘When one feares least, oft daunger lurkes most neare’ (1607, sig. 2A1r). While Calpurnia recognises terror as a potentially productive emotion, Alexander’s Caesar, like Sejanus, makes the mistake of dismissing its usefulness. Whether Shakespeare’s Caesar *truly* doesn’t fear assassination or whether he presents this unflinching persona because he feels that he can’t be seen to be influenced by fear, never becomes entirely clear. For the purposes of preventative terror, however, it amounts to the same: the existence of a doctrine of tyrannicide does not in any way modify Caesar’s behaviour. In attempting to function in a similar way to state terrorism, then, resistance theory also runs into a similar problem: the threat of execution can’t be used to control people who don’t fear being executed, like the rebels in *The Life and Death of Jack Straw, 2 Henry VI*’s Jack Cade or Dorothea in *The Virgin Martyr*.

¹¹ See Miola (1985) for an in-depth exploration of the play’s engagement with some of resistance theory’s key ideas and texts.
The conspirators attempt to create their own spectacle of exemplary terror with Caesar’s assassination. The terror spectacle described by Foucault and Machiavelli is a punishment aimed at re-establishing the power of the ruler. Caesar’s assassination works similarly, although instead of reaffirming the sovereignty of a person, it reaffirms the sovereignty of the republic Caesar has violated. Again, there’s a distinct parallel here to the Machiavellian practice of ‘retaking the state’, which is a violent ‘renewal’ of government aimed at ‘taking an order back to its beginnings and curing its corruption’ (Norton, 1985, p. 308). This ‘corruption’ of the republic is expressed most passionately by Cassius, who regularly talks of tyranny and tyrants, and laments Rome ‘hast lost the breed of noble bloods’ (1.2.152). Cassius is hardly a neutral observer, of course, but other signs appear throughout the play, such as Caesar’s co-opting of the Lupercalia, a public holiday associated with the foundation of Rome, to celebrate his own victory; and the increasing volatility of the people, which suggests a descent into mob rule might also be on the cards. Caesar himself is not singlehandedly responsible for the deplorable state of the republic, but his rise to power is its latest and possibly most dangerous symptom. And it’s not just the conspirators who see this, but the tribunes too: they want to make Caesar

fly an ordinary pitch,
Who else would soar above the view of men
And keep us all in servile fearfulness (1.1.72–74).

The suppression has to be violent, according to the conspirators: their work is ‘most bloody, fiery, and most terrible’ (1.3.129). Fortunately, an executioner is at hand in Brutus, who has the tyrantslaying family credentials and the favour of the people of Rome (or so he believes). To complete the terrible spectacle of the assassination, the execution is a public display in the senate itself, the heart of republican Rome. The conspirators see the assassination as an inspirational piece of exemplary violence, one that will be ‘acted over, / In states unborn and accents yet unknown’ (3.1.113–114), while they will be called ‘the men that gave their country liberty’ (3.1.118). Brutus and the other conspirators act on behalf of the republic and punish Caesar with ‘death for his ambition’ (3.2.26). In doing so they strive to return the state to its ‘proper’, republican form, which it took after Lucius Junius Brutus expelled Tarquinius from Rome.12 The story of Tarquinius’s banishment and the execution of Brutus’s sons for their involvement in a plot to return Tarquinius to the city would have provided educated audience members at Julius Caesar with further context for the establishing and upholding of the republican state through terrorism.

12 See also Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece; as Andrew Moore points out, in both works political change is achieved through the strategic interpretation of a dead body (2016, pp. 83–84). As the next section will show, this process of imposing meaning on the corpse is also critical to the concept of martyrdom.
To ensure the survival of the republic in Marcus Brutus and Cassius’s Rome, however, Roman citizens must be empowered again to become ‘true’ republicans. The threat of tyrannicide can only work in a preventative, productive manner – as terrorism – in a society where individual subjects will appropriate the tools of state terrorism to punish tyranny. Unfortunately, the ability or willingness to do so is lacking in Julius Caesar’s Rome, where the citizens behave like ‘sheep’ (1.3.104) who seem happy to be ruled by Caesar. The assassination is thus meant to breathe new life into the failing state by reawakening republicanism in its citizens. A series of metaphors plays on the idea of Rome as a diseased body politic that must be cured; the conspirators ‘have the falling sickness’ (1.2.254), while the assassination itself is ‘A piece of work that will make sick men whole’ (2.1.326). The body politic can only function properly if every part does its job, and Rome is failing both because of its citizens’ lack of political awareness and because of Caesar’s ambition, which intrudes upon the body politic as a disease. Although absolutists often appropriated the idea of the body politic to defend their ideas about the illegitimacy of resistance, in Julius Caesar it is aligned with the rhetoric of legitimate rebellion, just like in the writings of Ponet and Parsons. Through the perspectives of Brutus and Cassius, the audience can therefore see how, theoretically, the assassination could have worked as an act of terrorism that served the conspirators’ purpose of ‘fixing’ the republic. The problem, of course, is that things don’t quite go as they had imagined. Terrorism fails to be productive in Julius Caesar: it fails to moderate Caesar’s behaviour before his death, and, as we will see later, it fails to elicit the desired effects in the citizens of Rome and the rest of Caesar’s faction afterwards.

‘We should totally just stab Caesar’

First I want to have a closer look at how Shakespeare represents resistance theory in the play, however. Julius Caesar is an ambivalent work that shows its audiences both sides of the tyrannicide question. The conspirators and the Caesareans all have legitimate grievances and credible reasons to act as they do, but they are also moved by less admirable motivations. As Shapiro points out, ‘one measure of Shakespeare’s success in employing this balanced dramatic structure is that four centuries later critics continue to debate whether he sides with or against Brutus and his fellow conspirators’ (2005, p. 147). What is clear is that this deeply human dimension of the play, with its flawed, doubting, scheming characters, is crucial to its engagement with resistance theory; Doyeeta Majumder argues the early modern playwrights often had little time for comforting notions about a divine hand directly intervening to solve the problem of the tyrant (2019, p. 133). Instead, they

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13 In Machiavelli’s words, ‘Caesar [...] could so blind the multitude that it did not recognise the yoke that it was putting on its own neck’ (1996, p. 48).
showed political problems had to be addressed through human intervention – a difficult and chaotic process, as *Julius Caesar* makes abundantly clear. The play demonstrates how wide the gap can be between the clean, theoretical ideals of resistance theory and the messy, practical reality of tyrannicide.

Unmistakably, though, there are some arguments in favour of tyrannicide to be found in the first half of the play – indications that terrorism is quite possibly a legitimate option. The text makes clear that Caesar is a ruler who has tyrannical potential and that his behaviour is aggravating an already fraught political situation. At the start of the play, Rome is still a republic, although one that has been flirting with autocracy for a while. In the first scenes, the spasms of this transition from republic to principality are clearly visible: republican institutions are teetering as the people perform Caesar’s regality at the Lupercalia, while the objecting tribunes are ‘put to silence’ (1.2.280). Cassius’s bitter remarks about Caesar, who ‘doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus’ (1.2.136–137) while treating the other citizens of the republic as ‘underlings’ (1.2.142), add to this problematic picture, as does Brutus’s warning about letting Caesar’s ‘high-sighted tyranny range on / Till each man drop by lottery’ (2.1.117–118). The conspirators’ view is confirmed by Caesar’s actions on stage: he is a vain individual who is fond of referring to himself in the third person and making grandiose claims about himself. Although he is friendly with some of the senators, he shows little respect for them in their function as representatives of the republic and considers his unwillingness to be influenced or advised by them a virtue. Furthermore, as I have already established, Caesar will not be swayed by fear, making it practically impossible for the conspirators to moderate his behaviour.

But, if the text shows Caesar could be a tyrant, it doesn’t offer any unequivocal signs to help audiences determine whether he already is one. I would argue that this is a deliberate choice on Shakespeare’s part to reflect the complexities of the resistance theory debate. After all, ‘whether or not an absolutist monarch was a tyrant was often a matter of opinion’ (Majumder, 2019, p. 178). The same could be said about the situation in *Julius Caesar*: is Caesar an ambitious leader occupying the unusual but legitimate role of dictator for life, or an actual tyrant? In the context of the play’s engagement with resistance theory, the answer doesn’t really matter. The ambiguity of Caesar’s position leaves characters and audiences space to argue both ways, and in this, the play imitates real life. What matters is not so much whether Caesar is a tyrant, but that there are characters in the

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15 Arthur Humphreys notes that ‘the idea that Caesar habitually referred to himself as “Caesar” may have originated in his doing so in his *Commentaries*, works highly regarded in the sixteenth century’ (in Shakespeare, 1984, p. 103).
play who see him as such, and that Caesar’s behaviour gives them enough cues to argue their point. Equally, the fact other characters can argue the exact opposite shows the precariousness of the situation. The ostensibly simple exercise of sorting rulers into ‘tyrants’ and ‘not-tyrants’, a strategy which both resistance theorists and their opponents employ, is much more precarious than these writers acknowledge.

Brutus clearly demonstrates this problem. On the one hand, he is sincere in his intentions and the assassination is not something he undertakes for personal gain. He only decides to join the conspiracy after having been up every night for a month weighing the pros and cons, and after the assassination he tells the funeral crowd he ‘slew his best lover for the good of Rome’ (3.2.41–42). On the other hand, the play posits the possibility that Brutus’s intentions, genuine though they might be, are misguided. He is ultimately convinced by letters which are a ploy on Cassius’s part. His objections against Caesar, furthermore, are based upon a general expectation he has of human nature: he says himself that his estimation that Caesar will become ambitious enough to disjoin ‘Remorse from power’ is based upon ‘common proof’ rather than any ‘personal cause’ Caesar has provided (2.1.19; 21; 9). At the moment of Brutus’s dilemma, there is no reason yet to kill Caesar, but he ‘may’ become dangerous and ‘lest he may, prevent’ (2.1.28). At the same time, there are signs of potential tyranny, such as Caesar’s ruthless dealing with the tribunes, and Brutus completely ignores these. So, if the scene on the one hand shows Brutus effectively undermining his own arguments in favour of tyrannicide, on the other it also shows how he fails to ‘start with the evidence under his nose’ (Leggatt, 1989, p. 144). In other words, Brutus demonstrates here how difficult it is to apply the arguments of resistance theory in practice.

Furthermore, the conspirators are acutely aware of this problem. They know Caesar’s supposed tyranny can be drawn into question, and therefore so can their status as ‘tyrannicides’. This is why it’s of the utmost importance to the conspirators that they look legitimate in all their actions. Brutus is particularly aware of this need, and aims to solve their difficulty by having the conspirators play by the rules of resistance theory. Their violence against Caesar should be measured; they will be ‘sacrificers, but not butchers’ (2.1.166).16 This also means killing Antony is off the table. Sparing him will prove the conspirators were only doing what had to be done; ‘their reluctance to do their duty will show that their action was prompted by nothing but their duty’ (Blits, 2015, p. 56). It’s an opportunity for the conspirators to show that they are only interested in achieving the political aim of freeing Rome from tyranny, and that this is not about personal grievances against Caesar and his

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16 The word ‘sacrifice’ is pertinent here, since early modern executions were also discussed in such terms; as noted in the previous chapter, Lipsius argued executions should be considered to offer up ‘certaine vile and abiect persons as a sacrifice to satisfie the publicke hate’ (1594, sig. N4v), for example.
faction. Indeed, stressing his love for Caesar is another tactic Brutus relies on heavily to prove he is a genuine tyrannicide, rather than a cold-blooded opportunist or someone out to settle a personal score. The early modern resistance theorists too were very scrupulous in determining who could be a legitimate object of tyrannicide; one couldn’t simply go around killing people who weren’t actual tyrants, like Antony. As the play shows, however, this is another point where theory doesn’t line up with practice. Cassius is right, after all, that killing Antony absolutely would have been the smart thing to do, politically speaking. A bit more of Machiavelli’s ‘cruelty well used’ would not have gone amiss here; although Antony criticises Brutus for his savagery, Brutus’s real mistake is ‘that he is not savage enough’ (Roe, 2002, p. 164, emphasis original).17 Ironically, the very things Brutus does to confer legitimacy onto the conspirators’ actions – sparing Antony’s life and allowing him to give Caesar a public funeral – ultimately undo them, because they allow Antony to hijack the proceedings and completely delegitimise their enterprise. Brutus tries to ensure their success by playing by the rules of resistance theory, but it’s because they play by the rules that the conspirators fail.

‘I have raised the neighbourhood panic level to “wild hysteria”’18

The biggest indictment of the efficacy of resistance theory, however, is the descent into chaos and brutality that takes place after the assassination in the middle of the play. I would suggest Julius Caesar has this unconventional, decentred structure – Emma Smith calls it ‘unusually unteleological’ (2019, p. 118) – because Shakespeare wanted to show both the preamble to and the aftermath of Caesar’s death. In contrast to plays that are all about the build-up to or fallout of an assassination (like Richard II and Macbeth, respectively), the ‘two halves’ structure of Julius Caesar gives both characters and audiences space to seriously consider the pros and cons of the assassination plan and resistance theory in the abstract, while also showing the practical implications after the event – in this case, civil war.

My discussion of A Larum for London already showed that the early moderns feared war, but civil war in particular was an object of terror in the collective imagination: a war ‘wherein no blood is usually spared, nor mercie yeelded, and wherin neither the vanqueror nor the vanquished, haue

17 Roe offers interesting Machiavellian readings of several of Shakespeare’s plays, as do Moore (2016) and Grady (2002). They don’t claim Shakespeare intended his plays to directly comment on the Florentine’s work – there is no evidence of Shakespeare having read Machiavelli. However, as Grady points out, ‘several sets of discourses of Machiavellian provenance somehow got transmitted into the remarkable theatre of late Tudor, early Stuart London’ (2002, p. 29), and Shakespeare’s work certainly engages with these ideas, although not as directly as, for example, Jonson’s or Marlowe’s.

18 Mr Curry in Paddington 2 (2017).
cause of triumph’ (Cecil, 1583, sig. B1r).\(^{19}\) Freyja Cox Jensen remarks that ‘the perils of civil dissent [...] preoccupied much of educated English society in the post-Reformation period’ (2012, p. 94), and the debate on resistance theory could not be detached from the topic of civil war. As absolutist theorists like James never hesitated to point out, the aftermath of a ruler’s assassination often involves societal breakdown:

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\text{all sudden mutations are perilous in common-wealths, hope being thereby given to all bare men to set up themselves, and flie with other mens feathers, the reines being loosed to all the insolencies that disordered people can commit by hope of impunity (James VI & I, 1642, sig. B3r).}
\]

The fact that the author of *Vindiciae* tells his readers all other avenues should be exhausted first, lest ‘the medicine proves more dangerous than the disease’ (1648, sig. Q1v), shows resistance theorists were also aware of this risk. Some, like the author of *Vindiciae*, stress that committing tyrannicide is part of the magistrates’ responsibility in looking after the commonwealth; presumably, the implication is these same magistrates would also provide the leadership needed to get the country through the aftermath without descending into civil war. Goodman, on the other hand, counters the ‘chaos and destruction’ argument simply by stating that allowing the tyrant to continue their rule will always lead to worse disorder than removing them:

\[
\text{And thoghe it appeare at the firste sight a great disordre, that the people shulde take vnto them the punishment of transgression, yet, when the Magistrates and other officers cease to do their duetie, they are as it were, without officers, yea, worse then if they had none at all (1558, sig. M5r).}
\]

He does not make any suggestions on how to prevent this ‘less bad’ type of disorder from occurring after the tyrannicide, however; Ponet, meanwhile, doesn’t talk about the issue at all. The avoidance of this thorny problem seems to show these writers could not come up with a satisfactory solution. If tyrannicide is the morally right course of action, it seems logical that it should also be clean and straightforward. History suggests, however, that this was usually not the case, and this is also borne out in *Julius Caesar*.

In the aftermath of Caesar’s assassination, disruptive terror quickly spreads through the city – the people ‘cry out, and run, / As it were doomsday’ and are ‘beside themselves with fear’ (3.1.98–99; 181). Next is a succession of brutal acts of violence: the Triumvirate’s proscriptions, Portia’s suicide,

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\(^{19}\) One of the most poignant illustrations of the senselessness of civil war is Lodge’s *The Wounds of Civil War* (c. 1587-1592), which shows the conflict between Marius and Sulla. After the first four acts of the play have been taken up with Romans slaughtering one another in the brutal power struggle between the two generals, Marius is defeated and commits suicide. Dictatorship for life is granted to Sulla, who, upon finally getting what he fought for, promptly decides to retire to the countryside.
The most disturbing violent episode happens immediately after the funeral speeches, however, when Cinna the poet is savagely murdered by an angry mob. It’s unclear how much of this happens on stage, but the stage direction ‘Exeunt all the Plebeians’ at the end of the scene suggests Cinna is murdered on stage and his body left behind. If that was the case, this scene in *Julius Caesar* is comparable to the graphic acts of staged violence in *A Larum for London*. Both the brutality of the violence – Cinna is literally torn to pieces – and its absolute gratuitousness – he is killed because he shares the name of one of the conspirators – powerfully evoke the horrors of civil war. Unlike in *A Larum*, there’s no explicit incentive for audience members to identify with the victim, and I don’t necessarily want to suggest theatregoers were meant to experience this scene as ‘educational terror’ prompting them to take action. However, I do believe it would have functioned as a compelling illustration of what could happen in the power vacuum generated by the assassination of a ruler. The scene reinforces the early modern fear of societal breakdown and civil strife. As Shapiro argues,

> moral qualms aside, the real problem with political assassination for Elizabethans – and Shakespeare’s play makes this abundantly clear – was that it unleashed forces that could not be predicted or controlled. [...] Even as Shakespeare offers compelling arguments for tyrannicide in the opening acts of the play, he shows in the closing ones the savage blood-letting and political breakdown that, if the English history he had so compellingly chronicled was any example, were sure to follow (2005, p. 163).

Of course, this violent chaos is not merely an unfortunate side effect of Caesar’s death – it also means the assassination fails as terrorism, because the conspirators fail to effect the violent ‘renewal’ of the state they were aiming for. Amidst the disruption of civil war, the citizens of Rome do not become empowered republicans again, and Rome itself is not restored to its former republican glory. Even if the republic was (perhaps) doomed from the start of the play, ‘Caesar’s death results only in protracted civil war, a series of unstable and undesirable alliances, and the eventual establishment of the Roman empire’ (Hadfield, 2004, p. 146). If anything, the conspirators’ foray into resistance theory and self-determination reaffirms their opponents’ conviction that absolute, individual rule is the way forward. *Antony and Cleopatra* shows Octavius well on his way to the imperial throne of Rome, while Antony and Cleopatra’s rule in Egypt is hardly very republican either. As Greenblatt remarks, ‘Caesar is dead, but by the end of the play Caesarism is triumphant’

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20 In this second half of the play, Shakespeare telescopes historic events that took place over a number of years, like Marlowe does in *The Massacre at Paris*. Aside from adding dramatic effect, this strategy allows both playwrights to make explicit connections between violent events: Caesar’s assassination and the civil war in *Julius Caesar*, and the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and the assassinations of the Duke of Guise and Henry III in *The Massacre at Paris*.
The assassination has thus also failed to produce the appropriate exemplary effect in Caesar’s followers; disruptive terror is rife, but productive terror is sorely lacking.

All in all, I would argue that *Julius Caesar* makes plain beyond doubt that the ideals of resistance theory do not neatly line up with practice; that ‘life resists legal definition and the formulations of jurists’ (Miola, 1985, p. 288). The conspirators, and Brutus in particular, love the abstract idea of tyrannicide and the ‘Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement’ (3.1.80) it will bring. The actual consequences that come from killing a real person come as an unexpected shock, as does the fact that tyranny has not automatically been eradicated with the assassination of the tyrant. Although Shakespeare never makes this explicit, the play seems to suggest it would have taken more than a single terrorist act to kill Caesarism – it would have taken a commitment to terrorism until the job was done. Roe makes a useful comparison between Caesar’s assassination and Cesare Borgia’s execution of Rimirro de Orco. Once Borgia has got what he wanted from de Orco’s reign of terror – a quiet, stable Romagna – he does not, as part of the appeasement, give back the ground won for him by Remirro [sic]; on the contrary, the threat of further blood hangs over those very citizens whose pleas have been answered (in part) by the ‘sacrifice’ of his henchman. Savagery, far from being removed by Remirro’s grim fate, remains in force – indeed is emphasised by the nature of the punishment (Roe, 2002, p. 165).

In their pursuit of legitimacy, the conspirators want to keep their violence to an absolute minimum and therefore relinquish their terrorism too soon. Brutus especially, ‘in his perpetual desire to distinguish bloody action from abstract principle, […] loses sight of the Machiavellian truth that the bloodier the action, the more likely that principle will be served’ (Roe, 2002, p. 165). Of course, as Roe strikingly neglects to mention, such a commitment to Machiavellian terrorism on the conspirators’ part would have raised the problem of when to stop. A sustained reign of terror would, after all, equally have failed to return Rome to republicanism; instead, it would merely have replaced Caesar with Brutus as absolute ruler/tyrant, instead of Octavian.

The unsavoury truth, *Julius Caesar* suggests, is that it’s very difficult to achieve the political change the conspirators want without obtaining power, and it’s very hard to obtain (and maintain) power without resorting to more terrorism and violence – something Antony and Octavian, and indeed Machiavelli, know very well, and the resistance theorists noticeably fail to address. Tyranny may be immoral, but tyrannicide can just as easily replace one tyrant with another, with an optional period of bloody civil war in between. In the words of theatre director Krzysztof Zanussi, the play is about ‘good intentions that produce negative effects – violence begets violence, crime another crime. Tyranny begets terrorism, which kills freedom just as surely as tyranny did’ (quoted in Tempera,
2005, p. 340). *Julius Caesar* shows resistance theory should primarily be judged not on its morality, but on its effectiveness in dealing with the problem tyranny poses. And on that subject, the play is quite clear: tyrannicide simply isn’t the right tool for the job.
4.3 MARTYRDOM

So far, this chapter has discussed resistance theory in its active forms. I will now focus on its (supposedly) more passive sibling: martyrdom. Resistance theory in its passive incarnation distinguishes between the subject’s temporal duties to the monarch and their religious duties to God. When the ruler is ‘good’, these two allegiances complement each other, because the monarch demands their subjects follow the ‘correct’ religion with all the ‘proper’ rituals (or lack thereof). On the other hand, if the monarch is ‘bad’, making religious demands that are ‘incorrect’, a gap opens; in this case the subject should still obey the monarch in temporal matters, but disobey in matters of religion, since one’s duty always lies first and foremost with God. The subject’s resistance remains passive, however: they don’t take active action against the ruler and accept the punishment for their disobedience without protest if they are caught. The punishment for not following the state-sanctioned religion was, ultimately, execution; under Mary, Protestants could be burned at the stake as heretics, while under Elizabeth and James, Catholics could be hanged, drawn and quartered as traitors. Despite such less-than-flattering labels, these people were considered martyrs by their religious communities.

As the description above should make clear, the term ‘martyr’ – like ‘terrorist’, ‘traitor’ or ‘tyrant’ – is a rhetorical construct, ‘generated by individual egos, popular opinion, and partisan warfare more than actual deeds and constantly subject to reinterpretation with the vagaries of political change’ (Douthwaite, 2014, p. 110). For both Catholics and Protestants, the martyr was someone who accepted death rather than abandon the ‘True Religion’, a person who sacrificed their life to demonstrate their religious truth and to expose the persecuting authorities and their violence as illegitimate. Martyrdom was therefore an incredibly powerful concept, and one that had been an important part of Christianity for a long time. According to Pauline theology, Jesus had sacrificed himself for humanity, and his church was able to survive thanks to the early Christians dying under Roman persecution or being killed in their attempts to convert various ‘barbaric’ peoples. In many ways, ‘history since Christ was the history of violence suffered’ (Appelbaum, 2015a, p. 47). Suffering and persecution thus became markers of the ‘True Church’ for both Protestants and Catholics, and both denominations were invested in employing this powerful polemical concept.

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21 In this section I will explore representations of Protestant and Catholic martyrdom, which I will use alongside one another to show they often employ the same arguments and polemical devices. In doing so, I’m not suggesting that there are no conceptual differences between Catholic and Protestant notions of martyrdom, nor that the martyr deaths of minority groups such as the Anabaptists are not worth studying. However, the precise differences between conceptions of martyrdom within faith communities is not my focal concern.

22 Although religious executions had tapered off considerably towards the end of Elizabeth’s reign (Ellison, 2003, pp. 46–47) and far fewer occurred under James (Coffey, 2000, p. 90).
The passiveness of their resistance was one of the reasons the martyr was such a compelling figure: a person ‘without political intent, one who neither procures the deaths of others nor acts seditiously’ (Monta, 2014, p. 66) – or that is how they were portrayed in martyrlogies, at least. Martyrologists often claimed that the state tried to make the martyr’s intentions seem political to delegitimise their religious cause. These writers subsequently made it their mission to correct this wrong, detaching ‘martyrs from politics, even in cases where the separation is patently dubious’ (Monta, 2014, p. 66). The 1580s treatise row between Lord Burghley and William Allen, the leader of the English College in France, about the death of Edmund Campion illustrates this debate. Burghley argued missionary priests like Campion hid their true aim – to overthrow the state – behind religious pretences; Allen disputed Burghley’s claim that the priests were condemned ‘for no other causes or questions of religion’ (1583, sig. B3v) and asserted that the treason verdict was essentially a coverup. As Monta remarks, ‘the strain of these arguments becomes evident insofar as religion and politics are deeply imbricated in the early modern period and inseparable even at the level of polemical rhetoric’ (2014, p. 69). The problem is that martyrdom is an inherently oppositional concept: without the contrast between evil, persecuting authority and devout victim, or between legitimate authority and misguided, stubborn heretic, it simply doesn’t work. In Kelly’s words, ‘to admit that the same individual might reasonably be seen as a heretic by some, a martyr by others, would undercut the absolute distinctions that are foundational to the discourse of martyrdom’ (2005, p. 32). As a result, ‘martyrologies [...] often overlap uncomfortably with their polemical opposites in their rhetoric, conventions, and assumptions’ (Monta, 2005, p. 2). The issue, then, is ultimately the same one that already came up in the context of resistance theory, as well as in the discussion over the definition of terrorism: the categorical distinctions that are so important to the debate are difficult to maintain in practice.

**Martyrdom as active resistance**

In exploring early modern martyrdom we could follow the lead of the martyrologists and approach martyrdom as a form of passive resistance to the terrorism of the state. However, as the debate between Burghley and Allen shows, the matter was not quite so straightforward. Academics have shown that on a community level, people made an effort to live alongside neighbours of other denominations relatively peaceably, albeit not always successfully (Anderson, 2016, pp. 17–19; Kaplan, 2007, p. 76; Marsh, 1998, pp. 202–203). The uncompromising attitude of the martyr could seriously disrupt this tenuous communal balance. To borrow Christopher Marsh’s metaphor, religious non-conformity at the local level was ‘a small bottle of poison bobbing in the village well. Everybody knew it was there, and that it would break if struck too forcefully by a visiting bucket’ (1998, p. 196). From this perspective, the martyr’s actions and their refusal to be pragmatic can
hardly be considered passive, or perhaps even non-violent; Monta’s phrase ‘aggressive passivity’ (2005, p. 194) is useful here.

Philippe Buc shows that the potential for violence is inherent in the very concept of the martyr: ‘Christian martyrdom, far from being as a general rule pacifist or passive, was often enough bellicose and active’ (2015, p. 23). There is a fine line between zealous devotion to God and hatred of his enemies, which made the step between ‘martyr and holy warrior’ very small indeed (Buc, 2015, p. 34). Even though many martyrologists openly argued for passive resistance, their examples sometimes told a different story. Actes and Monuments includes as martyrs people like Nicholas Ridley, who played a role in barring Mary from the throne in favour of Jane Grey; William Flowers, who was executed for attempting to murder a priest; and John Oldcastle, who led a rebellion against Henry V which would have seen Oldcastle himself installed as regent. Julia Gasper even goes so far as to argue that ‘Foxe by implication did more to encourage rebellion against any future tyrant and persecutor than he did resignation’ (1990, p. 3); Assaf Pinkus sees illustrated martyrologies as a type of ‘visual aggression’ in and of themselves (2021, p. 9). Martyrologies thus often normalised intolerance and even violence towards people of other denominations in the name of religion, (indirectly) legitimising and promoting terrorism.

Furthermore, even if the martyr stuck to sacrificing their own life without threatening those of others, their martyrdom was often still conceived of as an act of active opposition to the government. Those arrested for religious non-conformity were always given the option to recant, which was generally what the government preferred (Monta, 2014, pp. 63–64). Going against every instinct of self-preservation, undergoing torture and a painful death rather than recanting was an explicit choice and therein blatantly a form of resistance, a way to deny the state that triumph of converting the would-be martyr. Especially because one might say, as critics often did, that some martyrs effectively sought out their death. David Anderson remarks, for example, that ‘many English Catholics, lay and clerical, [...] frowned on the recklessness of the Jesuits, who courted martyrdom with such irresponsible zeal’ (2016, p. 98).

Martyrologists, on the other hand, praised the constancy of the martyr and the eloquent way they rejected any attempt to get them to recant. That the martyrologists had such good material to work with was certainly no accident: there is evidence of preparation for martyrdom on either side of the

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23 Although Banu Bargu’s research into suicide as a political tool focuses on the twenty-first century, her concept of ‘necroresistance’ (2014) is a useful way of looking at this aspect of early modern martyrdom too.

24 John Donne argued in Pseudo-Martyr that the Jesuits were inclined ‘to urge and importune, and force men to kill them, and if they could not extort this from others, then to kill themselves, and call all this Martyrdom’ (1610, sigs. Y1v–Y2r).
confessional divide. Anne Dillon has shown how extensively Jesuits at the English College in Rome prepared themselves to die in the ‘best’ way possible, for example by contemplating the chapel’s graphic fresco depictions of their colleagues’ executions (2003, p. 180). Such practices unmistakably draw attention to the active involvement of the martyr and their explicit choice to resist state authority by their death. The line between active and passive resistance is thus not quite as clear-cut as it may seem at first glance.

**Martyrdom versus state terrorism**

Before looking further at martyrdom as a form of active resistance and terrorism in itself, I want to explore its relation to and engagement with state terrorism; the martyr was, after all, a direct result of the terror-violence employed by the state. From the point of view of the authorities, violence and the force of law were often seen as the only way to deal with religious deviance. As Thomas More had already expressed as early as 1515, reasoned argument was futile; repression through violence and fear was much more effective, since heretics were ‘more intimidated by one little bundle of faggots than daunted by many bundles of syllogisms’ (quoted in Simpson, 2007, p. 265). Almost a century later this argument had not changed much, despite the by now large number of martyrs executed in England and abroad. Parsons, writing in 1603, had absolutely no qualms about the deaths of the Marian martyrs. Even while his coreligionists were being subjected to similar treatment in England, Parsons wrote that, although some people might have experienced ‘a certayne horror of mynd’ at the sheer numbers of burnings, it was ‘necessary iustice, and no cruelty to punish such willfull and malignant people’ (1603, volume 3, sig. A1r). The plan he set out for England’s restoration to the Catholic faith did include an initial period of conversion through education ‘rather then by any kind of seuerity’ (Parsons, 1603, volume 3, sig. 2B6r). Nevertheless, as Dillon points out,

> the use of the stake as both threat and expedient was on Persons’s agenda for such a possible restoration. [...] in order to preserve ‘the floké’, the ‘wolves’ in the Protestant community would have been subjected to a terrible inquisition and the burnings would have begun (2003, p. 368).

Clearly, the notion that state terrorism was the best way to deal with religious non-conformity was persistent. The question, then, was if and how non-conforming communities could use this violence that was directed against them to their advantage. They employed the figure of the martyr and the rhetoric of martyrdom for a variety of functions. Firstly, there was conversion. The ideal situation would be one where spectators attending the execution of a martyr were so moved by this spectacle that it allowed them to see the truth of the religion the martyr witnessed to; being able to bear extreme suffering with equanimity was often interpreted as a sign the martyr was supported by
God. Richard Verstegan describes the final moments of Margaret Clitherow,\textsuperscript{25} who was pressed to death, as follows:

> While she was so afflicted with torment, she demonstrated that she was armed and defended by an admirable divine patience and steadfastness, with which God always strengthens his saints and faithful witnesses against the dire torments of the cruelty of the tyrants (quoted in Dillon, 2003, p. 267).

Even if actual conversions were probably rare,\textsuperscript{26} it seems executions were emotionally loaded events for onlookers of all denominations. Several scholars have found reports that show spectators were moved to admire victims, whose steadfastness on the scaffold often made a powerful impression (Anderson, 2016, pp. 71–73; Lake and Questier, 2002, pp. 271–272; Gregory, 1999, pp. 17–18). Indeed, as I have already shown, the spectacle of the scaffold could sometimes end up working against the state. John Staines identifies ‘radical pity’ – ‘a pity that moves to indignant anger and thence to speech and action’ – as another emotion that could arise and then spread among scaffold spectators, but one that was far less desirable than the productive terror authorities aimed for (2009, pp. 79–80).\textsuperscript{27}

Furthermore, witnessing pain could also work as a communal experience that brought people together. This was, on the one hand, exactly what the authorities wanted from the execution of a non-conformist, who was cast as the troublemaker being ousted by the community. However, the execution could also unite non-conformists and doubters, strengthening rather than weakening their resolve. As Jean-Vincent Blanchard argues, ‘pain is also more than a deterrent. It creates memory that can be shared and lived collectively. [...] To experience and witness pain is to exist together’ (2014, p. 94). The persecuted community could feel strengthened and reassured by the suffering of their coreligionists because it reinforced the connection between the martyr and Christ, reminding them the ‘True Church’ and the persecuted church were the same. They could, in other words, refuse to be terrorised (or, perhaps more accurately, they could refuse to allow their fear to dictate their behaviour) and feel empowered by this refusal. It was a function martyrs themselves were aware of and sought to reinforce:

\textsuperscript{25} Verstegan refers to her by her birth name, Margaret Middleton.

\textsuperscript{26} Evidence survives to suggest people did sometimes convert after seeing a martyr execution (Gregory, 1999, p. 283), but academics have found relatively few reports of this happening, especially compared to the number of people who must have witnessed such executions.

\textsuperscript{27} In Massinger’s *The Roman Actor*, Parthenius advises the emperor Domitian to have two popular senators executed privately since the spectacle ‘may beget compassion / In the giddie rout, and cause some sudaine vprore’; instead, Domitian opts to have his guards watch the crowd and arrest anyone who shows signs of pitying the condemned (1629, sig. F2r).
Anthony Middleton’s last words from the scaffold, ‘I hope my death shall confirm many Catholics in their faith which are present’, represent only one of similar reports that recur throughout the sources. Accounts such as these served both as exemplum and as validation (Dillon, 2003, p. 371).

Martyrologists were keenly aware they could turn this spectacle of pain to their advantage. Saint Augustine’s dictum that it was the cause rather than the suffering which made the martyr was a commonplace in the early modern period (Dillon, 2003, p. 19). Yet, most martyrologies strongly emphasised the way their subjects were tortured and killed. These graphic depictions in text and illustration attempted to recreate the experience of the scaffold crowd for those who had to rely on second-hand accounts, strengthening their ties to their religious community through a shared abhorrence of the cruelty the martyr endured and recalling the similar suffering of Christ.

The focus on the martyr’s suffering also emphasised the illegitimacy of the persecuting authority that exposed its subjects to such tortures. And when the state was delegitimised, the martyr who defied that state automatically became more legitimate. Both Protestants and Catholics employed this tactic. Dillon notes, for example, that the English martyrs in Verstegan’s Theatre of Cruelties ‘became the international Catholic banner around which Catholic countries were urged to rally as a united force to support the invasion of England by Spain’ (2003, p. 276). The suffering of English Catholics thus served to delegitimise the English government and to unite Catholics all over Europe against a common enemy.

In these various ways, martyrs and martyrologists attempted to hijack the spectacle of the scaffold and use its power for their own ends, against the authority that made the spectacle possible. As Walsham argues, these executions ‘could be appropriated and subverted by the very individuals they were designed to annihilate, to glorify themselves and the faith for which they died’ (2006, p. 79). The death of the heretic or the traitor could thus become the triumph of the martyr (Dillon, 2003, p. 225).

At this point, we might wonder why the authorities continued to execute religious non-conformists in the full knowledge they would be claimed as martyrs for their cause. The state was well aware of the power of martyrdom and sought to prevent this from being accessed. Under Elizabeth the legislation against Catholics had piled up to drive recusants either into conforming, or into bankruptcy or exile before they got to the stage of imprisonment and execution (Monta, 2014, p. 63). The policy of prosecuting religious non-conformists as traitors rather than heretics was another attempt to avoid creating more martyrs. The authorities accused martyrs of using religion as a front to hide political aims; their claim to martyrdom was invalid because they didn’t actually die for their religious beliefs but because of their political subversion, which made their execution perfectly
legitimate. It was also not in the government’s interests to engage in religious persecution too openly. According to Protestant polemic, after all, the Catholic church had shown its inherently evil nature by burning non-conformists. Besides, by the late sixteenth century people on either side of the denominational divide had been executed for heresy and claimed as martyrs by their coreligionists, so ‘heretic’ was an ideologically slippery term that was inextricably bound up with the discourse of martyrdom. Shakespeare illustrates this poignantly in *The Winter’s Tale*, when Paulina answers Leontes’ threat to have her burnt at the stake by telling him that ‘it is an heretic that makes the fire, / Not she which burns in’t’ (2.3.114–116). Clearly, ‘religious execution had become an even less reliable tool by the time Elizabeth’s government began hanging and mutilating Jesuits and priests, a strategy that had to be used with care, and a fair degree of dissembling’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 67).

The authorities tried to employ these mitigating factors because, despite the difficulties, they also could not simply stop executing would-be martyrs. Public punishment was an essential part of the system of state terrorism that was supposed to keep the country stable. Religious non-conformity was dangerous not just because it disrupted the temporal order, but because it threatened people’s souls too. If executing non-conformists was harsh, it was still preferable to religious toleration, which would allow heretics to spread their beliefs and further infect the body politic, corrupting not only their own souls but also those of others (Anderson, 2016, p. 40); Walsham has termed this attitude ‘charitable hatred’ (2006, p. 2). It’s unsurprising, then, that traitors and heretics were subjected to the most gruesome punishments employed in early modern England. When someone was burnt as a heretic, the process of dying was often more protracted than even the ‘double death’ traitors suffered – dying at the stake could take an hour or more and was extremely painful (Anderson, 2016, p. 28). It would certainly have made a vivid impression on the spectators; as Jessie Childs states, ‘the sight of “fat, water and blood” dripping from roasting bodies, or lips moving in prayer till “shrunk to the gums”, lived long in the memory’ (2014, p. 18). These punishments served as powerful incentives not to emulate the victims, and undoubtedly they would have terrorised many non-conformists into (some manner of) compliance.

**Martyrdom as terrorism**

Martyrdom, then, was a considered response to terrorism enacted by the state. Martyrs and their martyrologists deliberately used the trope of the passively suffering victim to their own polemical ends. Furthermore, the cause martyrologies served was by no means a passive one: they could be used as propaganda to foment internal resistance against authority, widen the religious divide and normalise animosity between citizens of the same country, and encourage (violent) interference by foreign powers. Martyrdom can therefore also function as a type of terrorism in itself. Martyrs
elicited a range of emotional responses, including anger, wonder and admiration, but also fear. By the time of the Elizabethan religious executions, ‘the Church of England had changed direction four times […]’, and might change again’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 68). It seems likely, then, that a significant chunk of the population had a somewhat uncertain relationship with organised religion. How uncertain is still a matter of debate; there is a considerable distance, for example, between Fitter’s assessment that ‘a deep-seated religious apathy’ had enveloped the country by the 1590s (2011, p. 7) and Marsh’s claim that ‘the overwhelming majority of people were reasonably content to participate in the religion established by law, even though it changed so frequently’ (1998, p. 194). It’s clear, however, that in either scenario the martyr would have stood out. To the people occupying the non-zealous religious middle ground – whether they were ‘apathetic’ or ‘reasonably content’ – the zeal of the martyr probably seemed strange and frightening. It took a certain level of alienation, as well as a lack of fear, to explicitly resist conforming to the state-sanctioned religion (Marsh, 1998, p. 194), let alone to persist in this refusal until one was executed. ‘In such circumstances’, Marsh remarks, ‘people are usually more likely to comply with change than to resist it’ (1998, p. 201).

The early Christian martyrs were often described by their Roman judges as either mad or possessed (Buc, 2015, p. 23), a view of the martyr that was still common by the early modern period. Although labelling the martyr as ‘mad’ could be a delegitimising strategy, it was also a way for outside observers to make sense of the martyr’s motives, which otherwise often appeared to be scarily incomprehensible. As works from Erasmus’ The Praise of Folie (1549, written in 1509 as Moriae Encomium, sig. P3r) to Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621, sigs. 3B3r–3B3v) observed, madness and zeal could look a lot alike. The figures of the ‘mad terrorist’ and the ‘suicidal martyr’ are ‘phenomenological twin[s]’, and their connection can be traced through history from the early Christian martyrs to contemporary suicide bombers (Buc, 2015, p. 112). Indeed, Marsh argues that although ‘the ordinary folk of England were repeatedly criticised by godly ministers for their tendency in religious matters to “do as others do”’ – to decline to take a principled stand – this was quite a sensible strategy (1998, p. 202). Not only was it ‘safer and less challenging’, but also more neighbourly, since it emphasised ‘communal harmony in circumstances that often encouraged discord’ (Marsh, 1998, pp. 203; 216). The people who explicitly chose to depart from this were in many ways dangerous outsiders, and in encouraging others to follow their example, both martyrs and martyrologists purposefully invited conflict. When Henry Wotton pleaded for religious unity in The State of Christendom (written in the early 1590s), he noted with consternation that all sorts of ‘Sectaries’, from the ‘Puritan’ to the ‘Papist’, were ‘ready in outward appearance to dye for [their]

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28 Madness was also frequently linked to resistance to authority in general; it was ‘the internalisation of disobedience, prerequisite and portent of the external violation of order’ (Coddon, 1989, p. 53).
Religion’ – behaviour which could ‘subvert the Countries wherein it is suffered’ (1657, sig. B3v). Even though Philippe de Mornay argued it was the ‘vndaunted boldnesse’ of the martyr that made them ‘a terrour vnto the tyrantes’ (1600, sig. 2F1v), less positive interpretations of this type of behaviour – like recklessness and madness – were also available, and made the martyr a source of anxiety not just to the ‘tyrant’ alone.

Around the figure of the martyr, we thus see a normalisation of violence: a willingness, sometimes even an eagerness, to give up one’s own life; an attitude that encouraged hostility within the local community; and, sometimes, the promotion of violent resistance against the authorities. Despite their supposed passivity, the early moderns therefore had good reasons to fear the martyr and the power of the martyrdom discourse, which could cause disruption on the local level as well as on a wider scale. Before looking at how martyrdom was used to terrorise the ‘heretic’ out-group, however, it is worth noting martyrologists also attempted to scare their own community into the ‘correct’ behaviour. The martyrologies of Verstegan, who mainly worked in France, were used by the Catholic League to show the complacent Catholic laity what they could expect if the Huguenots succeeded in coming to power. Verstegan’s Descriptiones includes an engraving of a Catholic family being attacked by Protestants in their own home, with the following annotation:

> how many of every family and sex, cast out from their ancestral fortunes and homes, hide themselves away in secret places, how many more, living in solitude and terror, fear day and night lest they fall into the hands of executioners and spies (quoted in Dillon, 2003, p. 150).

With such images, Verstegan warned his readers to ‘keep this criminal Calvinist pestilence far from your shores’ (quoted in Dillon, 2003, p. 161). An enlarged picture from Descriptiones was put to similar use when it was displayed in the churchyard of Saint Séverin by the Catholic League. The Parisian diarist Pierre de L’Estoile comments that this tableau, which depicted English Catholics being tortured, aimed at ‘stirring up the people to make war on the Huguenots and even to stir them up against the king who is said to favour them secretly’ (quoted in Dillon, 2003, p. 164). The Catholic League thus strategically used the rhetoric of martyrdom and the mechanics of affective contagion to widen the divide between Catholics and Protestants by encouraging fear and hatred between the two groups, aiming to preserve Catholic dominance.

The most obvious uses of martyrdom-as-terrorism were directed at the out-group, however. In England the authorities certainly had legitimate reasons to worry; the Jesuits in particular had shown they were largely impervious to the effects state terrorism was meant to have. This presented the Elizabethan and Jacobean governments with a similar challenge to the one the Marian authorities
had had with the Protestant martyrs. Upon his arrival in England, Campion confidently announced that

we have made a league – all the Jesuits in the world, whose succession and multitude must overreach all the practices of England – cheerfully to carry the cross you shall lay upon us, and never to despair your recovery, while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments, or consumed with your prisons. The expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun, it is of God, it cannot be withstood (quoted in McCoog, 1996, p. 128, note 35).

That kind of determination was difficult to deal with. Execution didn’t scare them: they would come, they would do their work until they were caught, and then they would allow themselves to be executed. Buc observes that in ‘the early modern Europe of the wars of religion, martyrdom justified terror; the willingness to die legitimised massive shedding of blood’ (Buc, 2015, p. 61). While there were people willing to die for their religious cause, they could sacrifice themselves and this sacrifice validated and avenged the cause they died for, as well as engendering hatred of their executioners. With their ‘innumerable gruesome stories of godly men and women burned and broken for their faith’, martyrologies ‘could promote intolerance in the reader toward their tormenters’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 62). Each martyr execution could therefore be a catalyst for unrest and rebellion, while simultaneously providing martyrologists with new propaganda material to continue sowing the seeds of sedition. Ironically, the problem wasn’t simply that religious non-conformists encouraged resistance among their own communities – it was also that zealous followers of the state-sanctioned religion could feel compelled to do something about the ‘heretics’ in their midst themselves. As the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre had shown, such initiative could lead to a descent into popular chaos, which was precisely what the government wanted to prevent. From the perspective of a state attempting to establish a monopoly on violence, people aren’t just dangerous when they commit violence themselves, but also when, in Donne’s words, they ‘force men to kill them’.

The risk martyrs presented was not confined to their ability to inspire popular unrest. The involvement of Catholic religious figures in assassination attempts like the Babington and Gunpowder Plots shows that the ostensible distinction between political and religious work the Jesuits made was not strictly observed. (Indeed, after Regnans in Excelsis confirmed Elizabeth’s deposition and excommunication, it was essentially impossible to be an English Catholic and not be politicised.) Missionary priests were suspected of not just supporting, but actively encouraging such blatant resistance – of, to use a modern term, ‘radicalising’ English recusants to the point where they, too, were willing to martyr themselves in assassination attempts or other treasonous activities.

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29 See footnote 24, above.
These priests thus became ‘the target of all the worst fears of the queen and the [Privy] Council’, which included ‘invasion, deposition of the sovereign, regicide and the reversal of the religious settlement’ (Dillon, 2003, p. 15).

Summing up, martyrdom and the discourse around it were dangerous in two ways. Firstly, martyrs and their communities worked to legitimise terrorism from below, albeit indirectly. Although martyrrologists openly promoted passive resistance, one does not have to look hard to see how their work could also be used to justify and inspire more active forms of resistance like tyrannicide. Much like the resistance theorists, martyrrologists wrote in a way that at the very least allowed readers to interpret their texts as calls to action, and sometimes encouraged such a reading. And, even if they did not openly promote violence, their texts were purposely divisive, contributing to an atmosphere in which ostracising or committing violence against people of other denominations seemed legitimate. Secondly, martyrs inspired fear, both on an individual level and on a wider, societal scale. Despite claims people like William Allen made to the contrary, martyring oneself was not exclusively a religious action, but also a political one. The would-be martyr embodied a whole collection of dangers for the authorities, including rebellion, civil war, assassination, and foreign invasion.

Because their actions posed a threat to the stability of the country, they had to be executed, but by being executed, the martyr had made their point. So, even if the martyrs – like the resistance theorists – probably didn’t conceive of themselves as terrorists, they were certainly seen and treated as such by the authorities they opposed. Allen’s cynical remark that ‘Campion on the scaffold would be far more effective for the Catholic cause than in disputation’ (Dillon, 2003, p. 75) shows he was perfectly prepared to capitalise on the situation. As long as the government feared what people like Campion might do while they were alive, they would keep making martyrs of them, and in doing so they would keep providing people like Allen with ammunition. As Stephen Alford states, ‘martyrdom was the inspiration as well as the sustaining fuel of the international Catholic cause’ (2012, p. 276).

So, at the martyr-heretic-traitor’s execution, two kinds of terrorism clashed with one another. Martyrs and their communities often made full use of the political possibilities that the powerful symbol of martyrdom afforded them, even while denying they were doing so. At the same time, the prosecuting-persecuting government used the terrorism of gruesome public punishment to discredit the martyr and discourage their supporters. That said, interpreting the death of the religious non-conformist on the scaffold was by no means as straightforward as either the state or the would-be martyr’s own community would have liked. It seems likely that many people who witnessed religious executions or read about them later, whether in state or martyr propaganda, were left with ambivalent feelings, a doubt that regularly rears its head on the early modern stage. Playwrights ‘wrote about what they knew, which was uncertainty: uncertainty surrounding sacrificial violence,
despite loud claims of certainty from church, state, victim, martyrologist and polemicist’ (Anderson, 2016, p. 21). It is one of these dramatisations of doubt about martyrdom that we will explore next, in Dekker and Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr*. 
4.4 THE VIRGIN MARTYR

The Virgin Martyr is a collaboration between Philip Massinger and Thomas Dekker, written in 1620 and performed at the Red Bull Theatre amidst a surge of interest in early Christian martyrdom stories on stage (Williamson, 2013, p. 43). A popular success, it was ‘DIVERS times publickely Acted with great Applause’ (1622, title page) and went through four editions as well as a stage revival in the seventeenth century (Degenhardt, 2010, p. 74). It is a remarkable work, particularly because it is a reworking of the story of a saint that retains many Catholic elements. Holly Crawford Pickett suggests the play might be considered ‘as one of several Protestant experiments in hagiographic drama’ (2009, p. 440). Such innovation didn’t happen without struggle, however: the play’s other claim to fame is that it required a record fee to be paid to the Master of Revels for his efforts in the ‘new reforming’ of the text (Degenhardt, 2010, p. 74).

The Virgin Martyr is set during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian and focuses on the persecution of Dorothea, a prominent Christian in the city of Caesarea. Dorothea’s main opponents are the governor Sapritius and his right-hand man Theophilus, who is an enthusiastic persecutor of Christians. On a visit from Diocletian, the emperor’s daughter Artemia takes a fancy to Sapritius’ son Antoninus, a distinguished soldier. Antoninus, however, has his sights set on Dorothea, who is committed to virginity and has no interest in him whatsoever. Antoninus’s offence of preferring a Christian over the emperor’s daughter leads to both Dorothea and Antoninus being imprisoned. Dorothea’s scornful refusal to fear her persecutors angers Theophilus, who sends his daughters to convert Dorothea. When this fails, Sapritius and Theophilus attempt to have her tortured, which doesn’t work either due to Dorothea’s divine protection. Finally, she is beheaded, but not before she arranges for her angel-servant Angelo to bring Theophilus a basket of fruit from heaven. Upon receiving this, Theophilus converts and releases his Christian prisoners. He is subsequently tortured to death by order of Sapritius and Diocletian, but he too gets divine protection and becomes a martyr.

30 Anthony Dawson suggests these stories, which dramatised ‘a displaced version of a past in which religion was a matter of life and death’, offered playwrights and their audiences an opportunity to ‘disperse’ anxieties about the religious struggles of their own time (2009, pp. 252–253).

31 Academics remain divided as to whether the play’s sympathies are Protestant (e.g. Gasper, 1990, pp. 141–143), Catholic (e.g. Thomas, 2018, pp. 185–187), or more ambiguous (e.g. Degenhardt, 2010, pp. 85–87). Looking at the playwrights’ biographies does little to resolve this uncertainty: Massinger’s confessional status is unclear, while Dekker was solely dependent on income from his writing and therefore appears to have been an adaptable writer by necessity (Garrett, 2011; Twyning, 2008).

32 At 40 shillings, it was the double the amount usually charged, possibly reflecting the amount of work that had to be done to remove controversial elements (Gasper, 1990, p. 143).
When *The Virgin Martyr* was first performed, the period of intense religious persecution discussed in the previous section was a thing of the not-too-distant past. While Catholics had not secured the official toleration they had hoped for and religious executions did still take place, recusants were overall in a more secure position than they had been under Elizabeth. This was particularly so between 1618 and 1624, when James had his sights set on a Spanish marriage for Charles (Bamford, 2000, p. 33). However, James’s overtures towards Spain and his reluctance to aid his Protestant son-in-law Frederick V, who had been ousted from Bohemia by the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II in 1620, did not go down well in England. The official stance on Catholics might have altered, but that ‘certainly did not indicate that the London [and English] public had become any friendlier towards Rome’ (Gasper, 1990, p. 139). Indeed, Margot Heinemann remarks that ‘the deep-rooted anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic feeling was roused to a new intensity after 1618’ by James’s newly pro-Spanish politics (1980, p. 153). The Thirty Years’ War was frequently presented as another battle in the epic war between the Protestant and Catholic churches; ‘there were many both at court and in Parliament who accepted the Palatine argument that on the success of Frederick’s cause hung the fate of Protestantism’ (Parker, 1997, pp. 56–57). Militant Protestants wanted James to get involved, but others registered the increasing religious tensions and violence with more apprehension. Dudley Carleton, still in his post as ambassador to the United Provinces, worried that ‘this business of Bohemia is like to put all Christendom in combustion’ and that a Catholic victory would have serious consequences for the rest of Europe: ‘Where it will stay, God knows, being pushed on by the Jesuits and commanded by the new emperor, who flatters himself with prophecies of extirpating the reformed religion and restoring the Roman Church to the ancient greatness’ (Carleton, 1972, pp. 270; 271).

In England, the increased tensions caused an outpouring of polemical pamphlets, and the disciplining of church leaders and MPs who openly supported the Palatine cause (Gasper, 1990, pp. 147–148). In 1621, a group of London apprentices insulted the Spanish ambassador and the reluctant Lord Mayor was forced into sentencing them to a public flogging. The apprentices were subsequently rescued by the crowd and the sentence was only carried out after James personally insisted upon it; one of the apprentices died during the whipping (Heinemann, 1980, p. 151). In these tense circumstances, a renewed outbreak of religiously motivated violence, whether in the shape of state-authorised executions, violent resistance against the government, or both, must have seemed likely to many.

It’s against this background of increasing religious tension and the prospect of religious violence that would quite likely create more martyrs (and traitors) on both sides of the denominational divide that we should read *The Virgin Martyr*. Unlike Gasper, I do not argue the play is a militant Protestant call
to arms. Instead, I suggest it registers the anxieties that religiously-legitimised violence probably caused most of those early moderns who occupied the non-zealous middle ground: the friction between the obedience due to God and the monarch; the difficulty in distinguishing between martyr and traitor; the uncomfortable role of state terrorism as both a necessary means to defend the ‘True Church’ from the threat of heresy and an abhorrent cruelty committed by illegitimate, heretical tyrants. As I have shown throughout this thesis, the theatre was one of the places where concerns about violence, power and legitimacy could publicly be explored, and ‘the deepest preoccupations of the culture found expression’ (O’Connell, 2000, p. 18). The figure of the martyr, around which so many tensions and anxieties clashed, certainly was one such preoccupation. Blanchard observes that the martyr can be simultaneously religiously innocent and politically guilty, a combination which ‘generates rich dramatic possibilities’ for a playwright (2014, p. 102). As I will show in this section, Dekker and Massinger gratefully exploit the inherent frictions and contradictions of the martyr figure to create dramatic interest by positing Dorothea as a potentially troubling operator.

**Staging martyrdom**

*The Virgin Martyr* has so far not been the subject of much academic attention, and existing research often focuses on the play’s use of both Protestant and Catholic elements in its representation of martyrdom. Leaving this admittedly interesting mashup aside, the dramatists’ depiction of martyrdom is fairly straightforward. The play’s martyrs are shown to be unafraid of death, even to welcome it. Elizabeth Williamson has observed martyr plays can be classified as ‘ambiguously tragic’ since there is suffering, but that suffering is borne quite happily (2013, p. 43). This is certainly applicable to *The Virgin Martyr*. Throughout the play, Dorothea shows the threats of temporal authority do not scare her. When she and Antoninus are discovered together by the enraged Artemia and Antoninus fears for his life, Dorothea rebukes him for lingering in his futile fear of death itself, instead of productively fearing the afterlife and moderating his behaviour:

> That feare, is base,  
> Of death, when that death doth but life displace  
> Out of her house of earth; you onely dread  
> The stroke, and not what followes when you are dead,

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33 Massinger’s other work shows his general attraction to this kind of ambivalence: he ‘is interested in drama as dialectic, as a way of engaging with the views of the other side’ (Streete, 2017, p. 144). The other play he collaborated on which is part of this research, *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, was written a year before *The Virgin Martyr* and shows a similar uneasiness with both political violence practised by the state – represented by Maurice and Diocletian – and by those attempting to destabilise it – Barnavelt and Dorothea. See also page 119, above.
There’s the great feare indeed: come, let your eye,
Dwell where mine doe, youle scorne their tyrannies (2.3.128–133).

Since Dorothea has worked to break ‘Through all the army of my sinnes’ (2.3.164) in life, she doesn’t fear what’s in store for her after death; she hasn’t got the slightest doubt about her elect status. Torture and execution are therefore, to her, simply ‘scaffoldings, by which my soule climbes vp / To an Eternall habitation’ (3.2.167–169).

The same goes for the play’s other martyrs, most notably for Theophilus, who even wishes to be tortured with the ‘thousand engines / Of studied crueltie’ that he himself used to torment the ‘miserable Christians’ (5.2.182–184). This request furthermore emphasises the dramatic turnaround from persecutor to martyr that Theophilus has undergone, thanks to Dorothea. In this, *The Virgin Martyr* affirms another martyrological trope: the martyr death of one person will inspire the conversion of others. Williamson rightly remarks that ‘the play repeatedly bears out the fact that killing Christians is no way to eliminate the religion, since martyrdom will always inspire new converts’ (2013, p. 46). It is clear, moreover, that Dorothea’s opponents are aware of this problem. As Theophilus’ devil-servant Harpax reminds him, they can’t afford to let Dorothea run around influencing and converting people:

for Dorothea hates your gods,

And if she once blast Antoninus soule,

Making it foule like hers: Oh the example — (2.2.62–64)

Yet they also wish to deny her the power of martyrdom, which is why Theophilus wants to convert Dorothea, instead of executing her and allowing her to ‘Build to her selfe a kingdome in her death’ (2.3.173). This plan goes completely awry when Dorothea instead converts her would-be converters, Theophilus’ daughters Caliste and Christeta, who are instantly killed (and thus made martyrs) by their outraged father. And so, despite Theophilus’ strategising, Dorothea secures two more souls for Christianity.

Of course, martyrdom can’t be martyrdom without state terrorism, and state terrorism through torture and execution is a constant, gruesome presence in *The Virgin Martyr*. The play is unusually preoccupied with violent spectacle, not only as an integral part of the plot but also in its descriptions of violent events taking place elsewhere. The opening of Act 5, for example, finds Theophilus entertaining himself by reading a record of tortures practised on British Christians, including:

A thousand wiues with brats sucking their brests,
Had hot Irons pinch ‘em off, and throwne to swine;
And then their fleshy backparts hewed with hatchets, 
Were minc’d and bak’d in Pies to feede staru’d Christians (5.1.20–23).

Such descriptions of torture are reminiscent of martyrologies like *The Theatre of Cruelties* and *Actes and Monuments*. On the one hand, this is a way playwrights (and martyrologists) catered to their spectacle-hungry audiences. Jane Hwang Degenhardt states that

part of what made this material good theater was its sadistic and titillating nature. Despite the divine intervention that renders Dorothea’s tortures ineffectual, the scene nonetheless produces a spectacle of her body being tied to a pillar and beaten by two men. [...] this spectacle of violence was potentially erotic and thrilling in the way that pornography might be considered thrilling (2010, pp. 94–95).

Karen Bamford argues that the playwrights exploit ‘the erotic potential latent in their sources’ to ‘represent their heroine’s suffering with pornographic emphasis’ (2000, p. 34). Probably, as Williamson suggests, the writers of martyr dramas felt pressured to keep coming up with new, more graphic depictions of violence ‘to surpass previous stage depictions of martyrdom’ and keep their audiences satisfied (2013, p. 47).  

(It seems likely that martyrologies like Foxe’s, which featured historical and foreign martyrs being tortured and killed in particularly ‘barbaric’ and therefore sensational ways, were a source of inspiration for plenty of playwrights, although much of the violence described would have been challenging to stage.) This would have applied especially at the Red Bull Theatre, which ‘had a particular penchant for drawing large crowds to witness shocking scenes and violence’ (Degenhardt, 2010, p. 95). It is another conspicuous example of the early modern fascination with and enjoyment of spectacular violence, which contributed to the popularity of plays and martyrologies alike.

On the other hand, the emphasis on graphic violence also served the same polemical purpose it had in martyrologies: the cruelty practised by the state validates the martyr and legitimises their cause. Without it, Dorothea’s disruption of the social order would look an awful lot like inciting rebellion and treason; by including it, Massinger and Dekker provide a legitimisation for Dorothea’s subversion as well as the means that will eventually make her a martyr. The fact that Dorothea is a woman and a virgin strengthens her position, underscoring ‘both the excessive cruelty of her persecutors and the remarkable power of God that renders her impervious to physical suffering’ (Degenhardt, 2010, p. 101). While she is alive, Dorothea’s resistance is thus legitimised by the prior terrorism practised by the authorities; since it enables her martyrdom, state terrorism at the same

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34 Dekker especially needed a hit, having just spent seven years in debtors’ prison. Although his work was generally not that gory, this was the fashion at the time, and Dekker was very much a commercial writer (Twyning, 2008) – this perhaps helps to explain why *The Virgin Martyr* is quite so violent.
time allows her story to be used to incite and legitimate further resistance and to inspire terror in the Christians’ opponents.

*The Virgin Terrorist?*

Although the connection between early modern martyrdom and terrorism has been noted by the scholars quoted in the previous section, this relationship has not yet been explored in the context of *The Virgin Martyr*. While some academics have suggested Dorothea’s martyr status can be questioned, Nova Myhill remarks that ‘none of the critics go so far as to read Dorothea in Diocletian’s terms’ (2004, p. 24). But that is precisely what I will do: look at Dorothea’s actions from the point of view of the state.

Dekker and Massinger probably used one or several of three versions of Dorothea’s story that were available in England at the time and Diocletian is merely namechecked in one of these (Champion, 1984, p. 206). His much-enlarged role in *The Virgin Martyr*, then, is a deliberate choice by the dramatists; as Champion remarks, the emperor is the catalyst setting the plot in motion, and his inclusion makes for a more dramatically satisfying play (1984, pp. 206–207). However, I suggest Diocletian’s presence also ensures the audience is reminded of the problematic, disruptive side of the martyr – the martyr as a threat to law and order. From the emperor’s point of view, *The Virgin Martyr* confirms the worst fears early modern rulers had about martyrs. A stable, peaceful part of the empire is disrupted by one person ‘infecting’ people with her Christianity, including one of Diocletian’s best soldiers and one of his most efficient executioners. Theophilus subsequently also releases a group of Christian prisoners, who could now spread this disruption to other parts of the empire. This is religious deviance (and defiance) as a disease, infecting and corrupting people, and undermining peace and stability.

Diocletian, in Monta’s words, is ‘the arch-villain of Christian martyrdom’ (2005, p. 196); Foxe describes his persecutions as ‘so horrible and greuous, that it maketh the penne almost to tremble to wryte upon it’ (1570, p. 109). But Dekker and Massinger subvert their audiences’ expectations early on, when the emperor deals mercifully with three rebellious vassal kings whom he has just defeated in battle, returning their crowns and embracing them (1.1.259–260). This course of action is inspired by his philosophy on the use of state terrorism:

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In all growing Empires
Eu’n cruelty is vsefull, some must suffer
And be set vp examples to strike terror
In others though far of, but when a State
Is raysde to her perfection, and her Bases
Too firme, to shrinke, or yeeld, we may vse mercy
And do’t with safety (1.1.236–242)

This policy is remarkably similar to that advocated by many of the theorists discussed in chapter three and, indeed, employs similar terms to the statute from which the title of that chapter derives – punishment is intended ‘for Terrour and Example of evill doers’ (Luders, 1810-1825, p. 488). Clearly, the emperor shares the common early modern idea that state terrorism is useful to prevent disorder, but should be used in moderation.

Although Massinger and Dekker never deny Diocletian’s involvement in the persecution of Christians, they establish Sapritius and Theophilus as the main culprits, while at the same time allowing Diocletian to show good governance. The emperor’s philosophy of rule – teaching people obedience and discipline, confining them ‘in modest limits’ rather than compelling them ‘with rigor’ (1.1.121–123) – would not have been out of place in Lipsius’s work. In The Virgin Martyr, then, the emperor is less Monta’s ‘arch-villain’ and more a realistically flawed ruler who shares many early modern conceptions about power, order and violence. The playwrights therefore do not allow their audiences to immediately discard Diocletian’s concerns about the disruptive potential of ‘the Christian sect’ (1.1.147) as the crazy notions of a depraved sadist.

By enclosing her story in the Diocletian framework, Massinger and Dekker draw focus to the threat Dorothea presents to Caesarea’s peace and stability. As a result, the play shows ‘female martyrdom primarily as resistance to domestic hierarchies, imperial authority, militant masculinity, and even, implicitly, the absolutist politics of James I himself’ (Monta, 2005, p. 198). That is not to say the playwrights present the violence directed against Dorothea or the other Christians as morally correct. The torture and terrorism practised by Theophilus and Sapritius are clearly deplorable, and if spectators should ever doubt Dorothea’s virtue, her literal angel companion Angelo would remind them she has God on her side. But because Dorothea believes so strongly in her own moral superiority, her behaviour is not guided or limited by temporal rules, which makes her a destabilising
factor. It is easy to see why Sapritius on several occasions calls her a witch, another one of those dangerously disruptive figures in the collective early modern imagination.36

Although the female martyr, and the virgin martyr in particular, ‘was celebrated for her passivity’ (Williamson, 2013, p. 48), Dorothea’s passivity is both limited and strategic. By refusing to conform to the dominant religious and social mores she engages in active resistance, and her eventual acceptance of her fate is purposeful. Williamson rightly talks about ‘the virgin martyr’s passivity [...] as her ultimate weapon’ (2013, p. 52); Monta calls Dorothea’s attitude in her suffering ‘aggressive passivity’ (2005, p. 194). Indeed, Dorothea’s actions in her final scenes show her to be an active participant who knows perfectly well how to turn her execution into a moment of victory. While her tormentors uselessly attempt to beat her, Dorothea smiles and encourages them to ‘strike home / And feast your fury full’ (4.2.92–93). When Theophilus threatens her with execution, she tells him the only value of her life is ‘that I loose it / To win a better’ (4.3.74–75); her suffering is

To me but as a ladder to mount vp
To such a height of happinesse where I shall
Looke downe with scorne on thee, and on the world (4.3.76–78).

And her last words before she is beheaded show Dorothea is already thinking about the influence her subsequent martyrlogy will have:

Hereafter when my story shall be read,
As they were present now, the hearers shall
Say this of Dorothea with wet eyes
She liu’d a virgin, and a virgin dies (4.3.176–179).

Clearly, a martyr’s death is something she has been aiming for; in fact, one could easily take a cynical view of Dorothea as someone who courts martyrdom with rather too much enthusiasm.

But Dorothea is not only an active participant in her own martyrdom; her actions are interpreted by the play’s authority figures as a form of terrorism. Dorothea’s actions and attitude make her a threat to law and order, so Blanchard’s characterisation of the martyr as religiously innocent and politically guilty certainly applies to her (2014, p. 102). Kelley Hogue argues that

36 In 1621, Dekker collaborated with William Rowley and John Ford on The Witch of Edmonton, wherein Elizabeth Sawyer turns to witchcraft to wreak havoc on her neighbours. Just as The Virgin Martyr presents a complex picture of the martyr, the figure of the witch in The Witch of Edmonton is an ambiguous one. Sawyer’s pact with the devil is a direct consequence of her ill-treatment by her neighbours, who already consider her a witch before she actually becomes one. Furthermore, the many transgressions committed by the other characters in the play highlight that ‘all human relationships are corrupt, and corrupting’ (Pudney, 2019, p. 205) even in the absence of direct diabolical influence.
even before we are introduced to Caesaria’s ‘witch’ Dorothea, we recognize the endemic threat of
her appeal to a higher power in justifying civil insubordination. Indeed, the first half of the play
depends on the theatergoers’ foreknowledge of its sources to repudiate the virgin who otherwise appears
a menace to society (2011, p. 86).

Dorothea presents the Roman authorities with a twofold problem: because she considers them
heretical she does not abide by their rules, and because she is unafraid of pain or death she can’t be
controlled with the threat of punishment. Just like Wat Tyler and Jack Cade, she puts herself outside
the influence of the system of state terrorism. She can’t even really be used as an example to inspire
terror in others, because her body resists torture. Being therefore essentially a free agent,
Dorothea does what her conscience dictates rather than abiding by the law or convention. She
intervenes in the judicial system by sending money to ‘releeue and release prisoners’ (2.1.64) and
has previously saved her servants Hircius and Spungius from being hanged (2.1.145).

Dorothea’s refusal to marry Antoninus further compounds her threat to the social order. As noted in
my discussion of Two Lamentable Tragedies, the domestic hierarchy was supposed to reflect the
national hierarchy. If wives obeyed their husbands, children their parents, and servants their
masters, all would be well in the commonwealth. But Dorothea considers herself already committed
to God and therefore lacks an earthly husband to keep her in check. In Act 1, Antoninus confides in
his friend Macrinus that he prefers to marry Dorothea over Artemia because the latter is his social
superior, while, married to Dorothea, he can ‘Rule as becomes a husband’ (1.1.454). But Antoninus
becomes increasingly enthralled with Dorothea. Her influence over him is so strong that he falls
terminally ill when she is imprisoned and dies when she is executed, begging her to ‘take my soule
along to waite on thine’ (4.3.180). This was hardly the appropriate relationship between man and
woman in early modern thought. Dorothea’s virginity would also have made her rather suspect in
Protestant eyes. As Hogue argues,

post-Reformation Protestants stressed virginity as a temporary state that young women leave behind
to marry and fulfill the Biblical command of procreation. Theatergoers were conditioned to be
skeptical towards militant defenses of female chastity despite their knowledge of Dorothea’s heroic
origins. [...] [They] valued marriage as a necessary component of social stability through its
preservation of gender roles (2011, p. 89).

37 In the medieval version of the story Dorothea was beaten black and blue, but she miraculously healed
overnight (Myhill, 2004, p. 20). By taking this last bit of vulnerability away, the playwrights make her resistance
to state terrorism complete.
Dorothea’s commitment to virginity and her refusal to marry thus marked her as a dangerously independent woman.38

Dorothea doesn’t merely engage in subversive behaviour herself, however: she also causes other characters in the play to defy the accepted social order. She tells Antoninus, for example, that once he has become a Christian, ‘you shall boast / Y’are equall to a King’ (2.3.89–90). And her influence causes upset in domestic hierarchies too, as in Theophilus’ household. Theophilus’ daughters are first introduced as redeemed pagans, who had previously been converted to Christianity by Dorothea. Their return to the Roman faith – after having been tortured by their father – is short-lived, however. When the sisters confront Dorothea, she manages to convert them again and Theophilus kills his daughters in a fit of rage. Although Theophilus is the obvious culprit here, Dorothea is the one who in both cases encouraged the sisters to stray from their ‘natural’ duties and obedience to their parents.39 A similar scenario occurs later, when Sapritius orders Antoninus to rape Dorothea and the latter refuses (4.1.102–108). Degenhardt writes that ‘Dekker and Massinger’s representation of Dorothea’s virginity and threatened rape […] are emphasized far more in the play than in medieval versions of her legend’ (2010, p. 100), a change which highlights the effect Dorothea has on the people around her. First Antoninus disobeys his father and then the slave who is ordered to commit the rape also indignantly refuses to comply (4.1.151–157), adding insult to injury for Sapritius. Dorothea’s influence thus causes many of the people around her to defy the accepted social order. For the play’s authority figures, this is a world turned on its head. Even while audiences surely would have applauded Dorothea’s victories over the play’s villains, her total disregard for the social hierarchy and its obligations would probably have caused plenty of theatregoers some discomfort at the same time.

But Dorothea’s biggest influence is on Theophilus, who undergoes the play’s most dramatic transformation. Since Dorothea has died by the end of Act 4, Act 5 is essentially a demonstration of the effect the martyrdom of one person could have on others.40 Theophilus transforms from persecutor to true believer to martyr, a powerful manifestation of Dorothea’s posthumous influence. Furthermore, before his execution Theophilus manages to strike a final blow to

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38 Similarly, historical female martyrs like Anne Askew occupied an uneasy position, being both admired for their commitment to God and suspect because this commitment superseded all social obligations (Hickerson, 2004, pp. 1038–1039).

39 The image of parent and child turning against one another was often used on the early modern stage to signify the terrible cost of civil war, for example in 3 Henry VI. That Dorothea causes the same to happen is obviously not to her credit.

40 Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (c.1612-1613), which some consider to be a martyr play (e.g. Thomas, 2018, pp. 149–189; Diehl, 1997, pp. 182–212), employs a similar structure, the final act showing the effects of the Duchess’s death in Act 4 on the play’s other characters. It also shares The Virgin Martyr’s pornographic emphasis on the central female character’s suffering.
Diocletian’s regime by releasing his Christian prisoners. With the inclusion of his martyrdom, Dekker and Massinger thus broaden ‘the possibilities for resistance by blurring the lines between a victimised martyr and a militant insurgent’ (Monta, 2005, p. 215). If Dorothea remains ‘aggressively passive’ throughout the play, Theophilus comes closer to crossing that fine line between martyr and holy warrior. None of the martyrs in the play express political intent – they justify their actions purely in religious terms, just like historical early modern martyrs did. Still, their actions undeniably have social and political consequences; even if these go unacknowledged by the martyrs themselves, they are recognised by authority figures such as Diocletian and Sapritius, who see the martyrs as threats to social, political and religious order. Both these points of view are accessible to the audience, so even if one’s natural inclination is to feel sympathetic towards Dorothea, at the same time it is clear she poses a threat to the government and Caesarea’s stability. Again, like the early modern martyrs, Dorothea might not think of herself as a terrorist, but it’s easy to see why she looks like one from the point of view of the state.

Christian martyrdom thus proves a dangerously destabilising influence in Caesarea. Arguably, however, it is not very effective as a form of terrorism. At the end of the play, the moral victory belongs to the Christians, and Dorothea in particular. Her actions have resulted in her achieving the martyr status she was aiming for, and her influence has won four more souls for Christianity. Furthermore, the Christians who were in prison have escaped and their most prolific persecutor is dead. Nevertheless, for the Christians remaining in Caesarea, the situation has not improved. The last lines of the play, spoken by Diocletian, make clear that the emperor has not even come close to a religious epiphany, and that life for Christians in the Roman empire is about to get much worse:

- I think the centre of the earth be crackt,
- Yet I still stand unmov’d, and will go on,
- The persecution that is here begun,
- Through all the world with violence shall run (S.2.239-242).

It is a moral victory for Christianity: the more martyrs Diocletian creates, the more he validates their cause. Politically, however, very little has changed, and knowing that what followed was the painful death of many of their coreligionists could hardly have been cause for celebration for The Virgin Martyr’s audiences, especially not for theatregoers who had witnessed a religious execution.

Furthermore, in giving Diocletian these final lines, the playwrights bring their audiences back to the emperor’s point of view and for him, the triumph of the martyrs in the afterlife is not accessible. In the political framework that encompasses Dorothea’s story, her victory is inconsequential (Myhill, 2004, p. 26). Her religious innocence does not matter; all that remains is her political guilt. I’m not
suggesting Dekker and Massinger want their audiences to take Diocletian’s side, but it is striking that they use the final lines of the play to bring spectators back to this hostile view of the martyr. By placing the two perspectives alongside one another, the playwrights show the tensions that are inherent in the concept of martyrdom. Both Diocletian and Dorothea are adamant about their own and the other’s role in the narrative: divinely authorised ruler versus traitorous rebel for the former, righteous martyr versus persecuting tyrant for the latter. But the audience occupies an uncertain world where, in practice, it is often disconcertingly difficult to distinguish between traitors and martyrs.
4.5 RIOTING

Finally, we will turn to what was perhaps the most blatant form of resistance employed in early modern England: rioting and rebellion. While resistance theory and tyrannicide offered a form of active resistance that was predominantly debated and employed by the educated upper classes, rioting was the method of active resistance linked most strongly to the commons. And while resistance theory enabled the upper classes to express dissatisfaction with the ruler, rioting was often (although not exclusively) directed against the perceived undue influence of ‘the rich’ rather than against the monarch. Of course, rioting and rebellion were not the only means for the commons to express their grievances: other strategies included ‘petitioning (either alone or as part of a county-wide initiative) and passive resistance (concealment, evasion, foot-dragging)’ (Kümin, 1997, p. 131). In the context of resistance terrorism, however, rioting is particularly interesting because it was such a pronounced source of terror – a ‘spectre of riot’ (Sharpe, 1995, p. 193) haunting the early modern collective imagination.

The ‘spectre of riot’

As already noted, the early moderns had a deep-seated fear of chaos and disorder, which was intimately linked to their terror of popular rebellion. Many political tracts from the period reference the threat of riot and rebellion, while some are devoted to it entirely. George North’s 1576 treatise A Brief Discourse of Rebels and Rebellion, for example, describes ‘the common people’ as ‘still contentious, envying nobility, and in all things seditious, desiring willful liberty, apt to uproar and ready to rebellion, condemning the wise and worthy if they gainsay their braying folly’ (2018, p. 121). Even many resistance theorists would only countenance active resistance if it was undertaken by the upper classes. One of the most vitriolic denunciations of popular rebellion comes not from a tract defending absolute monarchy or divine right, but from Luther’s response to the Peasants’ Revolt. As James Simpson remarks,

> Luther exhorted those repressing the revolt ‘to smite, slay and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog’. If a man is in open rebellion, ‘everyone is both his judge and his executioner’ (2007, p. 18).

One of the reasons for this pronounced fear of rebellion was that it was a common occurrence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: scholars sometimes refer to the ‘general crisis’ of this period

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41 While rioting (‘localised collective violence of limited duration’) and rebellion (‘collective violence transcending one locale and enduring for more than a few days’) (Ruff, 2001, p. 184) are not the same thing, the way that both harness notions of social legitimacy and the terror of disorder are very similar. I therefore use the terms interchangeably here.

42 Martyrdom was available to all classes, although for Catholics it was often an elite vocation in practice.
‘After the Reformation, the rulers of England were continually confronted by the grim spectre of religious, ideological, and social unrest’, which expressed itself, among other things, in increasingly harsh treason law and criminal statutes (Sharpe, 1984, p. 17). It also resulted in ‘a neurotic fear of levelling, a tendency to see any sign of popular dissent as a fundamental challenge to the status quo’ (Wood, 2015, p. 245). ‘Levelling’ was particularly problematic because, as discussed in the previous two chapters, obedience to the social hierarchy was often represented as the only thing keeping complete pandemonium at bay.

Furthermore, by the late sixteenth century, every riot and rebellion was coloured by memories of the much larger uprisings of the first half of the century, like the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536) and Kett’s Rebellion (1549) in England, and the Anabaptist rebellion in Münster (1534-1535). Even decades later, these remained terrifying events. Holstun posits, for example, the existence of ‘the *reductio ad Münsterum*, the favorite trope of the Tudor theorist of order: each new hint of popular resistance, no matter how small, threatens a domestic outbreak of murderous Anabaptistry’ (2007, p. 212). These historical rebellions also remained in the forefront of people’s minds because they were frequently referenced in accounts of contemporary uprisings: Tudor rebels were compared to Robert Kett as well as to notorious figures from the more distant past, such as Jack Cade (1450) and Wat Tyler (1381). Indeed, Dutton remarks that these rebels ‘became, as it were, interchangeable; from an official perspective, they were vilified undifferentiated heads [...] of that Hydra which is popular revolt’ (in Longstaffe, 2002, p. xii). (The next section will show how Shakespeare merges events from Jack Cade’s rebellion with the Peasants’ Revolt.)

To the government and the upper classes in general, the collective poor were an object of intense anxiety, ‘as potentially alarming an enemy as the Spaniard’ (Fitter, 2011, p. 4). And, by the late sixteenth century, there were a lot of poor people with a lot of grievances. Due to a combination of failed harvests, inflation and high taxes to subsidise the various wars England was fighting abroad – not to mention the government’s repeated failure to pay its soldiers and sailors – ‘the poor were no longer the destitute victims of misfortune or old age, but a substantial proportion of the population living in constant danger of destitution’ (Wrightson, 2003, p. 149). A strain of egalitarian thinking did exist throughout the period; ‘radical’ religious thinkers such as the Anabaptists and ‘hot’ Protestants

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43 Under millenarian Anabaptist leadership, Münster briefly became a ‘New Jerusalem’ where all property was communal, adult rebaptism was compulsory and polygamy was legal. Those who didn’t conform were ousted, and many of the city’s monuments and statues were destroyed in a storm of iconoclastic violence. After a siege of over a year, Münster was reconquered by the expelled bishop and the rebellion’s leaders were publicly tortured and executed.
like Philip Stubbs and William Perkins were among those who argued the focus should be on eradicating poverty, preferably by redistributing the assets of the rich (e.g. Stubbs, 1583, sig. C2r). Still, even they were probably at least partly motivated by fear: poverty was ‘a fearsome ground of crime, unrest and insurrection’ and ‘left unchecked, it could destroy the state itself’ (Fitter, 2011, p. 17).

Naturally, then, rebellion was vociferously opposed and propagandised against by the government and the upper classes. At the same time, however, there had to be some opportunity for the commons to express their grievances if the authorities wanted to prevent riots from breaking out. Petitioning and legal action were supposed to provide room for this limited dissent. As a result, ‘early modern governors defined themselves in opposition to popular anarchy, while simultaneously granting a restricted space within which plebeian complaint could be articulated (Wood, 2002, p. 39). This combination of strongly worded government propaganda condemning rebellion, limited legitimate means of dissenting and harsh penalties for lawbreakers was meant to keep the lower classes in check.

**Revolting commons**

Riot and rebellion were thus very much conceived of as a class-based threat, endangering the upper echelons of society from below. Rebellion was considered a serious risk by early modern monarchs; nevertheless, it was often not aimed at them directly, but at the ruling classes. This was a familiar pattern; as one judge at the York assizes worried, ‘Without justice the land would be full of theesves, the sea full of pirates, the commons would ryse against the noblytye, and the noblytye against the Crowne’ (quoted in Dunne, 2016, p. 71 emphasis added). If my exploration of resistance theory has shown there were people among the upper classes who felt obliged to hold the ruler accountable to protect the commonwealth, among the lower classes there were equally those who felt the same about the nobility and the gentry, and particularly about those elites who wielded power on the monarch’s behalf. In Beat Kümin’s words, ‘the monarch, quite in contrast to many of his representatives and lawyers, enjoyed great personal authority among his subjects, who often appealed to him directly when they found faults or negligence in the government machinery’ (1997, p. 130). Therefore, ‘loyalty to the Crown was perfectly compatible with criticism of those who exercised power on the Crown’s behalf’ (Archer, 2000, p. 35). So, while government propaganda such as the *Homilee Agaynst Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion* depicts all rebellion as treason, to the people participating in these rebellions, it was quite the opposite: they were loyal subjects protecting the monarch and the commonwealth from the overbearing and/or neglectful behaviour
of the monarch’s ‘evil councillors’.⁴⁴ John Guy writes that the people involved in the 1569 Northern Rising, for example,

saw themselves as defenders of the commonwealth, claiming that they wanted to save Elizabeth from a ‘lawless faction of Machiavellians’. By this, they meant that they aimed to purge Burghley – they called him ‘King Cecil’ – and his Protestant friends from the Privy Council and Parliament. They would replace them with good Catholic noblemen loyal to the queen (2016, p. 26).

The ‘evil councillor’ took advantage of the monarch, who in this scenario was (almost) as much a victim as the oppressed commons. This trope was employed by martyrlogists as well as rebels; Robinson talks about ‘the Foxean fiction of the victimised monarch’ who was manipulated into persecuting their own subjects (2002, p. 34). And Ruff remarks that

rioters also believed they had justice on their side. Tax protesters, for example, often assumed that new imposts were the work of corrupt royal ministers, and that if the monarch only knew of their dishonesty, the taxes would be abolished. The protesters therefore often saw themselves as loyal subjects upholding the old order in defying new taxes or extensions of existing exactions (2001, p. 188).

By portraying the ruler as a victim of dishonest officials, rebels and martyrlogists could criticise the state’s corruption without laying it to the monarch’s charge, thereby still presenting themselves as loyal subjects.⁴⁵

The upper classes were therefore often the target of riots and rebellion, which was a source of deep anxiety. The early modern hierarchy possessed many degrees, but popular politics usually represented society as divided simply into rich and poor. And the poor certainly had a bone to pick with the rich: ‘plebeian class critique was frequently convinced that its superiors were conspiring to destroy working men. As Somerset food rioters expressed it in 1596, “the ritche men have gotten all into their hands and will starve the poore”’ (Fitter, 2011, pp. 110–111). The perception was that many elites abused the powers conferred upon them by the monarch; instead of looking after the commonwealth and its subjects, they enriched themselves by gaming the system. When the commons rose to address these issues, they saw it as a legitimate way of bringing injustice to the attention of the monarch, who would then (hopefully) resolve the problem.

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⁴⁴ As Burke observes, this pattern is also frequently found in popular literature, for example in the stories of Robin Hood (2009, p. 208).

⁴⁵ That is not to say the monarch was never criticised by the commons. In 1585, for example, the labourer Jeremy Vanhill was sentenced to be hanged for wishing Elizabeth ‘were dead that I might shytt on her face’ (quoted in Wood, 2001, p. 81).
**Rioting as social crime**

Although the upper classes, being under attack, thus thought of riot and rebellion as dangerous and disorderly, the people involved in these uprisings did not conceive of them this way. Orazio Busino, the chaplain to the Venetian ambassador, wrote that the riots that occurred during his residence in London were often distinguished by a mixture of good though misguided feeling—by a wild notion of righting some imaginary wrong, of reaching some offence, or abating some nuisance untouched by law—which raised their authors above the level of vulgar rioters (quoted in Freedman, 1996, p. 31).

Although ‘plebeians often defined conflict in desperate, violent language’ (Wood, 2002, p. xii) which terrified the upper classes, we should not think of popular uprisings as irrational orgies of violence. Sharpe uses the concept of ‘social crime’ to talk about riots and other types of politically motivated rule breaking in which ‘popular notions of legality and legitimacy’ clash ‘with those of officialdom’ (1984, p. 122). Rioters were standing up for rights they felt were being violated by unscrupulous superiors. E.P. Thompson calls this a ‘legitimising notion’, which entails ‘that the men and women in the crowd were defending traditional rights and customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community’ (quoted in Sharpe, 1984, pp. 132–133).

Research has furthermore shown that uprisings by the poor were typically more organised than the ‘riot’ label suggests. Sharpe argues that ‘the actions of the crowd were probably most often directed by a cultural awareness of the forms of behaviour appropriate to popular disturbance’ (1984, p. 133). Their disorder, far from being the violent rampage conjured up by government propaganda, was often remarkably orderly. Rebellion was typically used to address specific grievances, not to create a new, Münster-style society; furthermore, it was frequently employed alongside legal means such as petitioning. Thus, ‘even when local authority is being defied, the mob rarely loses respect for all forms of hierarchy and order’ (Sharpe, 1984, p. 139). Although ‘rioters achieve their aims through extra-legal methods, [...] they do not entirely subvert the system that has failed them’ (Dunne, 2016, p. 76).

An example frequently used to illustrate this phenomenon is Kett’s Rebellion, which ‘was considerably more orderly than the gentlemen’s riot that eventually crushed it’ (Holstun, 2007, p. 197). The rebels created their own government and ‘appropriated the mechanisms of state process, from bell-ringing, oath-taking and militia-style organisation to establishing courts and meting execution’ (Fitter, 2011, p. 90). Rioters thus went to some lengths to present their grievances and their actions as both reasonable and legitimate. And, despite its forceful language against rebellion, there is reason to believe the government did at times acknowledge this point of view: ‘the
frequency with which the authorities handled riots cautiously supports the suspicion [...] that both sides knew that they were participating in a social process which was governed by certain rules and conventions’ (Sharpe, 1984, p. 139). There are echoes of this in Sir Thomas More’s depiction of the May Day riot: More ends the uprising not just by reasoning with the rebels but by actually engaging with the substance of their complaint. The next section will show the same happening in 2 Henry VI, when the commons rise to oust Suffolk.

**Rioting as terrorism**

Derek Dunne thus states that ‘such measured and rational action on the part of the mob has led social historians to see riot in this period as a bargaining chip of sorts’ (2016, p. 76); Wood characterises rebellion as ‘a means of opening a dialogue’ with the government (2002, p. 67). At first glance, considering rioting as a ‘measured and rational action’ seems to contradict the notion it can work as a form of terrorism. But we should not forget the tangible fear of riot and rebellion that existed among the ruling classes, who associated popular uprisings with general chaos, random violence and levelling practices, even when these fears were not necessarily substantiated by the actions of the commons; according to Holstun, ‘the nobility and gentry responded to relatively orderly and nonviolent forms of plebeian “rebellion” with hysterical charges of an impending anarchy, and preemptive cavalry charges and hangings’ (2007, p. 210). The system was ‘astonishingly vulnerable to a concerted challenge from below, and an awareness of that vulnerability shaped the panic-stricken rhetoric of the 1590s’ (Archer, 1991, p. 259). As Fulke Greville remarked to the House of Commons, ‘If the feet knew their strength as well as we know their oppression, they would not bear as they do’ (quoted in Arab, 2011, p. 70). The fear was that ‘the feet’ would indeed become aware of their strength and start leveraging it, which is why any political or religious rhetoric that might cause such awareness among the commons, like Anabaptism, was regarded with deep hostility. Charles Hobday argues popular politics had been a source of anxiety for the upper classes since the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, a threat serious enough to have elicited ‘their terrified denunciations’ ever since (1979, p. 64). According to Fitter, therefore, ‘the majority of propertied Englishmen swallowed political grievances to support the status quo from [the] terror of anarchy and levelling underclass rebellion’ (2011, pp. 29–30).

This fear of ‘the mob’ was a useful political tool that could be employed by the government to keep its elite subjects in line. But, ironically, it also played into rebels’ hands. Riots could work as bargaining chips not just because they were relatively orderly and limited, but also because the implication was that they could become a lot less so if the rioters’ demands were not heard. As Wood argues, ‘popular responses’ to authoritarian behaviour from the ruling class ‘fell broadly into three forms: confrontation; manipulation; and threat’. In this third scenario, ‘subordinates
sometimes hinted to their rulers that failure to attend to their grievances would lead to unspecified, anonymous disorder’ (2002, pp. 19–20). Dunne quotes ‘an anonymous letter to Norwich magistrates in 1595 [which] complained of the high price of grain and warned of the possibility of taking what they needed by force, ending with the ominous observation “Necessity hath no law’’” (2016, p. 75). Such threats would have been a lot less effective if the collective imagination had not been quite as saturated with the slightly hysterical rhetoric that painted rebellion as the ultimate sin and the inevitable end of civilised society. Whether terror works productively or disruptively here is thus very much dependent on perspective.

That is not to say fears about the dangers of rebellion were entirely unrealistic. Uprisings could spread across the country and most commoners owned weapons, so local trouble could spark into widespread, armed rebellion. Without a police force or standing army, the government was often not able to respond effectively to such events. Furthermore, violent intervention by the state could lead to renewed unrest. An example is the 1592 feltmakers’ uprising in Southwark, which started when a group of feltmongers gathered to free a wrongfully arrested colleague from the Marshalsea. In their attempt to suppress the disturbance, ‘the Knight Marshal’s men attacked the group’, resulting in ‘a violent riot’ (Dunnum, 2019, p. 21). This potential for escalation frequently led the authorities to tread cautiously in their dealing with popular uprisings. Getting the response right was a balancing act: the mass execution of everyone involved would likely be further cause for rioting, but giving in to all the rebels’ demands could set a dangerous precedent. Anxiety about this latter scenario is registered in Coriolanus, which depicts a successful commons uprising in the very first scene. The senators’ decision to give the rebels the corn they demand is frequently criticised by Coriolanus:

Whoever gave that counsel to give forth
The corn o’th’ storehouse gratis [...]  
I say they nourished disobedience, fed
The ruin of the state’ (3.1.116–121).

The rebellious citizens, on the other hand, operate under something much like Thompson’s ‘legitimising notion’ and use this to justify their resistance.

One way authorities tried to resolve their dilemma was to punish rebel leaders and pardon everyone else (Ruff, 2001, p. 191) – a strategy illustrated in Jack Straw. But smaller-scale rebellions often also enjoyed success in getting some of their demands met (Sharpe, 1984, p. 138). Buchanan Sharp’s study of artisans’ riots shows the Privy Council’s frantic attempts to regulate food supplies and provide work in times of hardship were prompted more by their desire to prevent rioting than by
charitable impulse; these were matters ‘of dangerous consequence to the State if speedie order be not taken therein’ (quoted in Sharp, 1980, pp. 67–68). The ‘spectre of riot’ could thus serve (would-be) rebels’ purposes. Similar to the other discourses of resistance considered in this chapter, rioting could therefore work as a form of terrorism without describing itself as such. The terror lies beneath the surface, present as a threat that influences the behaviour of those who are targeted. And, in the case of rioting, it often worked, making this arguably the most successful form of resistance terrorism discussed. That said, the representation of riot serves a different function in Shakespeare’s 2 Henry VI, the play I will explore next.
4.6 2 HENRY VI

William Shakespeare wrote 2 Henry VI in the early 1590s, a time when England suffered regular outbreaks of rioting. The late sixteenth century did not see rebellions on the scale of the earlier Kett’s Rebellion or the Northern Rising, but there were plenty of smaller uprisings. London was a particular hotspot for trouble: the city ‘saw no fewer than thirty-five outbreaks of disorder between 1581 and 1602’ (Dunne, 2016, p. 75). This tense situation is reflected in 2 Henry VI Act 4, which is largely taken up with chronicling the 1450 Jack Cade rebellion. Taking quite a bit of dramatic licence with the historical record, Shakespeare’s Cade is a ferocious, violent commoner who has been hired by York to test the waters for the duke’s claim to the throne. The main demand of the historical Cade rebellion was that action be taken against corrupt government officials, but in the play these complaints are replaced by those of the earlier Peasants’ Revolt – about ‘land use, food distribution, and the social distinctions they constituted’ – which better ‘resonated with socioeconomic issues of Shakespeare’s own world’ (Arab, 2011, p. 83). Furthermore, in pitting labourers and vagrants against the nobility, the staged rebellion imitates real life. In a variety of ways, the Jack Cade sections of 2 Henry VI therefore engage with the idea of rioting as social crime.

The failure of ‘festive atrocity’: the Cade rebellion

This way of looking at the Cade scenes contrasts sharply with the critical tradition that views Shakespeare’s depiction of Jack Cade as proof of the playwright’s conservatism and his scepticism regarding popular politics. Shakespeare deviated from his primary sources, Hall and Holinshed, in his representation of Cade to turn the rebel leader from an eloquent, persuasive figure with moderate aims into the notoriously violent Cade of the play, who in many ways seems to be the embodiment of the ‘spectre of riot’. More recently, however, scholars have started to view Cade as a more complicated figure who mixes abhorrent violence with the playful chaos of carnival, a combination Womack appropriately terms ‘festive atrocity’ (2020, p. 21). Fitter sees Shakespeare’s Cade as ‘that ancient delight, the carnival tradition’s Lord of Misrule’, a character that ‘guarantees much popular appeal’ (2011, p. 51); Womack characterises him as a ‘Summer Lord [who] exercises his playful sovereignty’ during his brief moment in the sun (2020, p. 20). Furthermore, as both Fitter

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46 There is no critical consensus on the date or the order in which the Henry VI plays were written. A common view, however, is that Shakespeare wrote the second and third parts before the first, which would make it likely 2 Henry VI was composed in 1590 or 1591. For an overview of the debate, see critical editions of the play by Warren (in Shakespeare, 2002, pp. 60–74) and Knowles (in Shakespeare, 1999, pp. 111–121).

47 See, for example, Wilson (1993, pp. 26–28) and Helgerson (1992, pp. 212–215).

48 As is the case with Jack Straw, increased academic interest in the audience reception of early modern drama, as well as in the lives of the ordinary women and men of the period, seems to coincide with this interpretive shift.
and Arab have pointed out, the complaints voiced by the rebels reflect some of the most acute problems the lower classes faced in the 1590s: food shortages, high inflation, high taxation, enclosing and general infringements on the commons’ ‘ancient freedom’ (4.7.169). Cade and his rebels are therefore not unappealing characters – at least, to lower-class audience members, who would probably have recognised their grievances as legitimate.

But if the rebels’ complaints are valid, the play also makes clear that their way of addressing them is not the right one. Although the rebels (nominally) fight for radical levelling practices, their uprising quickly turns into a storm of brutal and often arbitrary violence, which suggests that what they actually want is to do whatever they please without consequences, as they feel the upper classes can. Cade might object to the nobility ‘ravish[ing] your wives and daughters’ (4.7.172), but he responds rather differently when it’s Dick the butcher being accused of doing the same to a sergeant’s wife: ‘Go, Dick, take him hence: cut out his tongue for cogging, hough him for running, and, to conclude, brain him with his own mace’ (4.7.129–131). Moreover, the rebellion quickly descends into violence for violence’s sake, the rebels running through the streets of London to ‘Kill and knock down’ anyone they encounter (4.7.145–146). And in the end, they are won back over to the king’s side with relatively little trouble, leaving Cade to die an ignominious death by himself, with no results to show for their efforts.

So, while their carnivalesque attitude makes them more appealing characters, the rebels at the same time display a ‘horrific ruthlessness’ which makes them very dangerous indeed: ‘a threat needing to be controlled’ (Arab, 2011, pp. 71–72). The play therefore also gives some credence to the nightmare vision of popular uprisings entertained by the upper classes, particularly since, in keeping with the general pattern, the rioters are mainly interested in addressing their grievances against ‘scholars, lawyers, courtiers, gentlemen’ (4.4.35). The rebels show on multiple occasions that they have no problem with Henry himself; Cade even orders Stafford to ‘tell the king from me that for his father’s sake, […] I am content he shall reign; but I’ll be Protector over him’ (4.2.141–144). The Cade

49 The 1997 Norton Shakespeare, from which all quotations from the play are taken, is one of the few modern editions that incorporates a fair amount of material from the 1594 Quarto as well as from the Folio text; Cade’s lines to Dick quoted here are not included in the Folio.

50 There is a contrast here with A Larum for London, where similar atrocities are committed by characters who are not carnivalesque or appealing at all. Lord of Misrule Jack Cade has a rapport with the audience that A Larum’s Spanish characters lack. Furthermore, A Larum makes clear that audience members are meant to relate to the atrocities’ victims, whereas 2 Henry VI leaves this more ambiguous. In the absence of a foreign enemy to identify against, it seems likely many audience members would have felt most kinship with the characters who shared their class and their socioeconomic concerns, meaning that parts of the audience would probably have related more to the rebels and others to their upper-class enemies. A Larum, on the other hand, would probably have provided a more ‘unified’ audience experience. Overall, then, the picture presented by Shakespeare’s play is more complex.
rebellion presents an ominous vision of class warfare between the commons and the elite, fuelled by justified grievances on the side of the commons, but also by a hatred of their superiors and a general desire to cause trouble.

**How to win conflicts and influence people: the other rebellion**

If this seems like a dark view of popular uprising, however, it is also notable that Cade is not really a representative of the commons, but an *agent provocateur* sent by York. Although he voices authentic commons’ complaints, Cade’s orders are to test how much popular support a Yorkist claim to the throne could potentially count on (3.1.374–375). Neither becoming king nor resolving any of the problems he broaches are really within his remit. However, the play does offer another version of a commons rising in Scene 3.2. While Cade’s rebellion seems in many ways to be a dramatisation of the elite’s worst nightmares, this earlier uprising owes much to the notion of legitimate rebellion discussed in the previous section. The commons have gathered outside the palace to inform Henry that they want Suffolk ‘straight be done to death, / Or banishèd fair England’s territories’ (3.2.246–247) since they suspect him of murdering Gloucester and having designs on Henry’s life. Although openly rebellious – they threaten to ‘by violence tear him [Suffolk] from your palace / And torture him with grievous ling’ring death’ (3.2.248–249) if Henry does not do as they ask – they also couch their demand in assurances of loyalty: they are protecting Henry from a threat he has not yet perceived. This excuses their rebellion; Salisbury explains to Henry that his subjects intend to guard him, ‘whe’er you will or no’ (3.2.267). This is in line with a prevailing idea in popular politics that ‘if the ruler failed to remedy his people’s grievances or was misled by corrupt advisors’, it was up to the commons ‘to remedy their problems independent of his authority’ (Mathur, 2015, p. 346). In Fitter’s words, ‘the first rising shrewdly diagnosed an incompetent sovereign in need of an arm-twisting’ (2011, p. 74).

This is a perfect example of an uprising that abides by the conventions for legitimate dissent. Its aims are limited and in line with the monarch’s best interest, removing him from the influence of an ‘evil councillor’. Gloucester was also the champion of the people in the first two *Henry VI* plays, so the commons and the king are equally victimised by his death, and their interests are therefore aligned. Although their rebellion is aimed at a nobleman, the commons have persuaded Salisbury to present their argument to the king, which gives them greater legitimacy. The rebels make clear that their present disorder is limited in comparison to what they’ll do if their demands are not met, in which case they will unleash an onslaught of chaotic violence by storming the Tower, kidnapping Suffolk and torturing him to death. Furthermore, the rebels have got the measure of the situation a great

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51 Although his role in the Simpcox episode does complicate this status – see Fitter (2005, pp. 141–142).
deal better than their king has. I therefore disagree with Wood’s assessment that ‘the orderly strain within popular politics finds no voice within the play’ (2002, p. 4); this first uprising is an illustration of it. Shakespeare provides his audiences with a model of a legitimate and effective rebellion, which contrasts sharply with the Cade rebellion in the next act. Indeed, to the plotting nobles at Henry’s court,

the people in arms prove heroic nemesis. Swift, shrewd, and successful, the commons’ intervention to drive murderous Suffolk from a dithering court seems to glow with authorial approval. Contrasts between this insurgency and Cade’s appear crafted, in Annabel Patterson’s words, to offer ‘an opportunity for discrimination [...] between socially useful or abusive styles’ of ‘the popular voice protesting’ (Fitter, 2011, p. 99).

2 Henry VI therefore does not delegitimise popular protest outright, but it shows ways in which it can and cannot work. However, I would suggest there’s another point to including both kinds of rebellion. As I have argued in the previous section, limited rebellion could be effective not only because it appeared legitimate and reasonable, but also because everyone knew what the flipside was; an ‘or else’ that could be explicitly stated or merely implied. In 2 Henry VI, the commoners of the first uprising are very specific about what that ‘or else’ will entail, and it’s certainly not lost on Henry and his nobles how dangerous they can be. Even before they have made their demand for Suffolk’s execution, Warwick describes their reaction to Gloucester’s death in unsettling terms: ‘The commons, like an angry hive of bees [...] / care not who they sting in his revenge’ (3.2.125–127). The Jack Cade scenes are essentially an extended illustration of this threat – of what happens when the demands of the commons are not met. The Cade rebellion vividly shows the flipside that would otherwise remain unexamined.

The rebel ‘theatre of terror’

Cade’s uprising is in many ways that archetypical riot – a combination of gratuitous violence, destruction and radical levelling – that caused such intense terror in the upper classes. The representation of Cade as Lord of Misrule draws attention to his disorderly behaviour. The rebels’ suspicion of literacy and education plays on the upper-class fear of the uneducated mob which is unsusceptible to reason. Worst of all, the rebels are actively trying to create a new, Münster-like world order. They aim to supplant the upper classes, whom ‘They call false caterpillars and intend their death’ (4.4.36). And they subvert the rule of law by ‘Burn[ing] all the records of the realm’ (4.7.11–12), releasing all the prisoners (4.3.13–14) and, famously, ‘kill[ing] all the lawyers’ (4.2.68). It is easy to see why Jack Cade and his mob inspire such fear in their social superiors that the inhabitants of the royal court flee the city, or that Lord Saye trembles in their presence.
But the rebels’ subversion of the existing order goes beyond simple destruction: they also appropriate the instruments of their suppression, including the mechanisms of state terrorism. As Owens remarks, ‘the seizure by the lower orders of the apparatus of punishment typically plays a central role in popular risings’ (2005, p. 195). The spectacle of the scaffold, after all, existed to establish and reaffirm the sovereignty of the ruler and the state, so in seizing it rebels could assert their power and turn the system used to oppress them against their class enemies. Although this theme of upper-class oppression and lower-class resistance finds its most elaborate expression in the Cade rebellion, it is echoed at various other points throughout the play: Margaret and Suffolk’s contempt for the petitioners attempting to register a complaint about enclosures (1.3.1–44); the apprentice who defeats his master in trial by combat, and the casual callousness with which both are treated by the present nobles and the king (1.3.185–227; 2.3.59–95); Gloucester’s indifference to the ‘pure need’ of the swindling vagrant Simpcox and his wife (2.1.99–159); Suffolk mocking the ‘paltry, servile, abject’ pirates who have captured him until they cut off his head (4.1.30–145).

Lower-class characters are treated with contempt and/or threatened with legal violence by their social superiors in each of these scenes, which don’t merely illustrate how an oppressive justice system deals with lower-class dissent in various forms, but also how far the apprentice Peter Thump and the pirate Walter Whitmore go to punish their superiors for perceived disloyalty to king and commonwealth. These scenes of increasingly violent lower-class resistance ‘asked more alert souls to acknowledge that there might be risks to the summary treatment of the disenfranchised’ (Pearlman, 1999, p. 312), who could start applying the lessons they learnt from their ‘betters’ – a threat which the Cade scenes then go on to explore in great detail.

Indeed, the rebels’ punishment of their opponents mirrors the punishments meted out by the early modern state. The Staffords’ bodies are dragged to London behind Cade’s horse (4.3.10–11), much like convicts would be dragged to the scaffold for their execution; Saye and Cromer are decapitated and their heads are displayed on poles, just as the heads of traitors would be displayed on London Bridge (4.7.137–144). To quote Owens, ‘the mutilated and humiliated bodies of aristocrats are flaunted by Cade’s crew as the very sign of their own newly won power’ (2005, p. 194). Fitter argues that ‘Shakespeare presents a commons whose actions are not hoarse blood-lust, but rather a bitter class retaliation that works, initially at least, through the familiar mechanism of impromptu application of official process’ (2011, p. 90). In other words, Cade ‘produces his own theater of terror’ (Arab, 2011, p. 77).

From this perspective, Cade seems to work with the same ideas as the theorists of tyrannicide, who also saw the usefulness of appropriating the mechanisms of state terrorism to their own ends. The connection between Cade and York – an innovation by Shakespeare (Hadfield, 2008, p. 197) –
enables audiences to compare the actions of commoners and nobility. As many critics have observed, ‘Cade’s arbitrary killings and casual slaughters cast an ironic light on the behaviour of York and the nobles at Henry’s court’ (Wood, 2002, p. 45). The ruling class is shown not to be any better than the commoners, often themselves engaging in the very behaviours termed as disorderly and illegitimate in the lower classes. In fact, the ‘revolutionary terror’ of Cade’s rebellion is ‘a direct consequence and mirror image of the terrorism of the state’ (Gerould, 1990, p. 19). Perhaps then, one of the reasons the upper classes are so afraid of the commons is because they know the system of state terrorism can now be used against them.

Arab’s study of labourers-as-rebels in early modern drama convincingly argues Cade’s rioters also inspire such fear in their superiors because they are labourers, which not only means they have plenty to complain about, but also that they have the physical strength and tools to violently address these grievances. Of the early modern plays that stage popular uprisings,

2 Henry VI provides the most chilling representation of the breakdown of unity among social groups and stages the most notable and gruesome reign of lower-class terror. [...] the play articulates the potential power, as well as the motives, of late sixteenth-century laborers to wreak bloody havoc on the social body (Arab, 2011, p. 70).

In the play’s very first introduction of the rebels, for example, the audience hears in detail how the skills of the tanner, the butcher and the weaver might come in handy in violent rebellion:

Second rebel: There’s Best’s son, the tanner of Wingham –
First rebel: He shall have the skins of our enemies to make dog’s leather of.
Second rebel: And Dick the butcher –
First rebel: Then is sin struck down like an ox, and iniquity’s throat cut like a calf.
Second rebel: And Smith the weaver –
First rebel: Argo, their threat of life is spun (4.2.18–26).

In Arab’s words, the play ‘vividly conceives of the work that artisans do in such a way as to construct horrified imaginations of the mechanisms of terror artisan men might have at their disposal’ (2011, p. 76).

Cade himself is even worse, because he is presented as a vagrant, another one of those early modern bogeymen. As ‘masterless men’, vagrants stood outside of the law and the social hierarchy, which meant they were not kept in check by these systems; as such, they were considered to be an
‘uncontrollable, chaotic energy threatening the entire social order’ (Carroll, 1994, p. 36). Much as the ruling classes were not subject to the system of state terrorism to the same extent as the commons they governed, Cade administrates his own system of terrorism while standing outside of it. The problem Jack Cade poses to the authorities is therefore similar to that of the rebels in Jack Straw and Dorothea in The Virgin Martyr: they can’t be controlled with the threat of execution, which makes them loose cannons, and therefore particularly scary. Arab argues plays like 2 Henry VI and Jack Straw amplify social fears by portraying violent rebellious masculine subjects who are constructed by the socioeconomic conditions of the contemporary world and physically enabled by the very work that keeps their status low. These rebellious characters are hardened and brutal ideologues, impervious to redemption or human feeling (2011, p. 87).

Despite furnishing Cade’s rebels with fully justifiable grievances, Shakespeare has also not spared any effort in making them fit the nightmare vision of riot that so troubled the ruling classes. In this play, he thus presents the orderly disorder that was often effective – as it is here – in the commons rising against Suffolk, and the disorderly disorder that was its flipside in Cade’s rebellion. The latter is in some ways not an ‘authentic’ commons rising: Cade works on behalf of a disaffected member of the aristocracy rather than the commons, and the rebels themselves often appear to be opportunistically enjoying themselves rather than trying to resolve their problems. But at the same time, Cade’s rebellion does represent that ‘spectre of riot’ – the terrorism – that makes the other commons rising work. If there was no idea in the elites’ minds that every rising might turn into Cade’s rebellion, they probably also would not have listened to the commons’ complaint against Suffolk. My argument is therefore that, while the Cade rebellion is not successful – it doesn’t even really attempt to achieve any of its objectives – the terrorism it illustrates is necessary for the rising against Suffolk to succeed. The Suffolk uprising doesn’t need the Cade rebellion per se – after all, it’s done and dusted before Cade has even appeared on stage – but it does need Cade’s brand of violent chaos to exist in the collective consciousness.

52 Johannes Dillinger notes that vagrants were also suspected of organised plague-spreading and arson campaigns, and convincingly argues the vagrant often took on the role of ‘terrorist’ in the early modern imagination (2006, 2004).
4.7 CONCLUSION

In many ways, this chapter has presented a mirror image of the previous one: whereas state terrorism aimed to (re)establish the authority of the sovereign and their government, resistance terrorism attempted to disrupt these. Such disruption needed to be justified, however, which is why this chapter has tracked the various polemical battles for legitimacy that took place alongside the violent events themselves. Whereas the authorities were often quick to label resistance as ‘treason’ or ‘heresy’, those opposing the state favoured more legitimate-sounding terms such as ‘tyrannicide’ or ‘martyrdom’ to describe their actions.

Opposition to the sovereign was often justified through resistance theory, which uses religious and political reasoning to argue subjects have the right to resist a tyrannical ruler, either actively or passively. Although most resistance theorists deliberately stopped short of recommending assassinating the tyrant, they claimed that the monarch should be subject to the law and should therefore be punished for their crimes just like anyone else – potentially with execution. These ideas were adopted by some to justify taking violent action against rulers they disagreed with. I have suggested resistance theory served as the equivalent of state terrorism for the monarch: by making the ruler subject to the law, the law could be an object of terror to them in the same way it was to their subjects, thereby hopefully encouraging them away from tyrannical behaviour.

If resistance theory looked good on paper, however, Julius Caesar demonstrates that reality was often more complicated. The play paints a complex picture, making it unclear whether Caesar is a tyrant at all, and if so, whether assassinating him is morally the right course of action. Ultimately, however, the civil war that dominates the latter half of the play makes it impossible to unequivocally endorse the practical application of resistance theory and tyrannicide. Shakespeare clearly shows that real life is messier and more complex than the theory suggests and that it’s difficult, if not impossible, to apply resistance theory in a way that is both morally right and effective. Furthermore, the doctrine of tyrannicide turns out to be insufficiently frightening to deter Caesar from tyrannical behaviours. Overall, then, resistance theory doesn’t seem to be a viable option.

Another polemically complex discourse is that around martyrdom, which I have shown should be considered an active political strategy rather than passive victimhood. Martyrdom’s relationship to terrorism is twofold: the martyr’s story could be used to foment resistance and delegitimise the ‘persecuting’ authorities, but the martyr themselves often also presented a concrete threat, especially if they were involved in active resistance. The state was therefore presented with a dilemma: the would-be martyr had to be dealt with through the system of state terrorism, but doing so would be the final step in making them a martyr, with all the attendant risks. State terrorism and
resistance terrorism thus clashed while both sides attempted to appropriate the spectacle of the scaffold to their own ends.

This complexity is illustrated in *The Virgin Martyr*, where Massinger and Dekker present Dorothea as a victim who can win our sympathies, but also allow us to see her through the eyes of the authorities: as a dangerous destabilising factor who has to be controlled to prevent the social order from collapsing. In doing so, the writers play with the many uncertainties around the martyr figure, and with their potential to stoke destructive religious unrest. Furthermore, both state and resistance terrorism occupy questionable positions in the play, since neither appears to be both legitimate and effective. While the characters are certain about their own moral positions, audiences are left mainly with shades of grey.

The final form of resistance terrorism discussed in this chapter is rioting, which differs from the other forms in that it was often directed specifically at members of the elite exercising power on the monarch’s behalf, rather than at the monarch themselves. The ‘spectre of riot’ certainly terrified the early modern upper classes, who envisioned rioting as a descent into lawless, violent levelling practice. Rioters themselves, meanwhile, saw their actions as a legitimate means of addressing grievances about misrule (as ‘social crime’), aligning their interests with those of monarch and commonwealth. Uprisings were often organised and contained, but they could nevertheless still work as a form of terrorism, since the fear of violent riot was deeply embedded in the early modern collective consciousness. Even if in practice rebellion hardly ever devolved into the chaotic violence people dreaded, the idea it could do so scared the ruling classes and encouraged them to treat rebellion with some caution. This sometimes enabled rioters to achieve their aims, arguably making them the most successful resistance terrorists discussed here.

In *2 Henry VI*, Shakespeare presents a nightmarish vision of violent levelling practices in the Cade rebellion, which contrasts with the more contained uprising against Suffolk that happens earlier in the play. Although Cade’s rebels are not without legitimate grievances or dramatic appeal, their randomly violent behaviour makes it ultimately impossible to label their actions as ‘social crime’. However, Cade’s rebellion does represent the violent flipside of the earlier ‘orderly disorder’; without the underlying threat of a Cade-style riot and the terror it causes, it would be much harder for the other uprising to be taken seriously and to succeed. Furthermore, the play shows Cade’s rebels effectively appropriating the judicial system to their own ends, thereby confirming once more that resistance terrorism needs the mechanisms of state terrorism to function.

The three types of resistance terrorism we have seen in this chapter have a common factor: they all attempted to work as terrorism by adopting elements of state terrorism. Tyrannicide subjected the
monarch to legal punishment, martyrs and martyrrologists appropriated the power of the scaffold to their own ends, and rioting used the ‘spectre of riot’ to its advantage while also often employing the rituals and mechanisms of punishment. In doing so, resistance terrorism aimed to absorb the legitimacy of state terrorism, thereby increasing its own effectiveness. And in the three plays discussed, we have seen the simplicity of oppositional discourses being put to the side in favour of more complex, realistic approaches. In theory, it might be straightforward enough to discern a good ruler from a tyrant, a martyr from a heretic, or a commoner trying to address a legitimate grievance from a traitorous rebel attempting to overthrow the state. Early modern drama seems to acknowledge, however, that things were rarely this simple in real life. The plays discussed here show that resistance terrorism, just like state terrorism, could be a topic of debate on the early modern stage – a phenomenon that playwrights as well as their audiences were aware of and interested in.
CONCLUSION: ‘LET’S START WITH THE RACK’

Okay but if the question is how are we, how are we finding a way to process all of this thoughtfully is Shakespeare any kind of answer? Is Shakespeare really relevant to the current day? Isn’t the whole point of Shakespeare he’s Eternal and doesn’t that kind of mean he can’t be Contemporary? And, like, relevant to the current political moment (Washburn, 2019, p. 25).

The quotation above is from Anne Washburn’s 2019 play Shipwreck (subtitled, A History Play About 2017), which follows a group of horrified American liberals who over the course of a weekend getaway try to figure out how they have ended up with Donald Trump as president – the ‘this’ that needs to be ‘processed thoughtfully’. The questions are prompted by a discussion about the controversial 2017 Shakespeare in the Park production of Julius Caesar, which featured the assassination of an obviously Trump-like Caesar. The question of the relevance of Shakespeare and his contemporaries to ‘the current political moment’ has not been foregrounded in this thesis, as my focus has been on early modern depictions of early modern terrorism. Still, it inevitably asserts itself when researching a topic like terrorism, which is also very much a modern concern, in relation to early modern drama and as such, I do want to address it here.

The quotation from Shipwreck is a bit of a metatheatrical joke – the characters are, after all, talking about Shakespeare in the Park’s Julius Caesar because it caused a massive public debate, which clearly shows the play stimulated concerns that were both contemporary and relevant. Modern theatremakers frequently adapt and reimagine early modern plays, particularly those by Shakespeare, to engage with today’s political issues, including terrorism. This isn’t simply a case of reading a modern concern into an old text, although there is an element of that too. Emma Smith has argued Shakespeare’s works are still interesting and relevant to contemporary audiences because they have an inbuilt ambiguity she calls ‘gappiness’ (2019, p. 2). This feature allows audience members today to read the plays as responding to their own interests and worries. Because Shakespeare left these gaps – a deliberate strategy, according to Smith – the plays ‘have the extraordinary ability to ventriloquize and stimulate our current concerns’ (2019, p. 322). ‘Gappiness’ acknowledges our interest in Shakespeare’s works, and in those of his contemporaries, is always at least partially driven by the questions, hopes and anxieties of our own time.

That being said, in this thesis I set out to show that terrorism was a highly relevant, contemporary issue for the early modern dramatists as well. Terrorism was a recognisable strategy before there was a term for it, and the instrumental use of terror by a wide variety of parties has left its marks on the plays I have discussed. Much as it is today, terrorism was a complex and contentious phenomenon in the early modern period. Terror was seen as a double-sided emotion that could lead
to orderly and disorderly behaviours; while productive terror was generally considered to be useful and appropriate, it wasn’t that far removed from disruptive terror, which could have undesirable and dangerous consequences. Deliberately inspiring terror in people to achieve a specific result was therefore a potentially risky strategy. Furthermore, questions such as who could legitimately employ terror-violence and under what circumstances were much-debated. State terrorism was legitimised with the doctrines of divine right and reason of state, both of which allowed the ruler recourse to terrorist violence – but both theories could be (and were) challenged, and the accusation of ‘tyranny’ was not uncommon. Resistance terrorism, meanwhile, employed the notion of ‘the greater good’ and appropriated elements of state terrorism to make violent resistance appear more legitimate – but the line between justified opposition and treason was tenuous, while the effectiveness of violent resistance was frequently debatable. Playwrights engaged with all these issues in their work: despite the constraints of censorship, they often didn’t shy away from addressing politically fraught topics like the right to resistance or Jacobean absolutism, and thereby contributed to the discourse around early modern terrorism. Looking at early modern drama through the terrorism lens therefore provides a meaningful new angle for exploring these plays.

Of course, we should keep in mind that early modern terrorism and contemporary terrorism are not the same. Brutus and Jack Cade are not early modern versions of Anders Breivik and Osama bin Laden; when Carey argued that Milton’s Samson was a suicide bomber, he was generalising rather too much. After all, as I argued in the first chapter, there are important differences between how terrorism worked in a sixteenth-century absolute monarchy and in a liberal democracy today, so a direct, one-to-one comparison between specific early modern and modern ‘terrorist events’ is not necessarily helpful. But, at the same time, there are surprising similarities between the fundamental concerns the early moderns had about terrorism and the ones we have: are there situations in which terrorism can be used legitimately? Who gets to decide when terrorism is ‘terrorism’ and when it is ‘freedom fighting’; when it is ‘tyranny’ or ‘treason’ and when it is ‘execution’ or ‘tyrannicide’? Can terrorism ever be a viable political strategy, or is it bound to be ineffective? Early modern plays, then, do lend themselves to a discussion about terrorism today, and plenty of twenty-first-century theatremakers have gratefully used and adapted them for that purpose. Therefore, I want to end this thesis by looking at a couple of modern reimaginings of early modern plays and exploring how they engage with present-day terrorism.

Shakespeare in the Park

An obvious example to consider is the Public Theatre’s 2017 production of Julius Caesar, referenced in Shipwreck. Probably no early modern play has lent itself so often to politically-inspired reimaginings as Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar – a possibility explicitly signalled in the text when the
conspirators predict Caesar’s assassination will be ‘acted over, / In states unborn and accents yet unknown’ (3.1.113–114). The show’s director, Oskar Eustis, made clear that the production was meant as a comment on the then-current political situation, not long into the presidency of Donald Trump. Julius Caesar stands for Trump, another leader who ‘just has no belief whatsoever that he should be accountable the way other people are accountable’ (quoted in Wilson, 2020, p. 148) – the problem the early modern resistance theorists also tried to solve. Eustis’s Julius Caesar was highly controversial: Trump supporters and right-wing commentators argued it encouraged political violence, and over the course of its run the show was interrupted by protests and stage invasions multiple times. Protestors compared the Public Theatre’s staff and supporters to terrorists, Nazis and ISIS members, among other things (Wilson, 2020, pp. 175–177) – demonstrating that, in everyday usage, the word ‘terrorist’ is often not much more than a very imprecise condemnation. Jeffrey Wilson argues this particular production was so controversial because ‘for the first time since Welles’s Mussolini, assassination seemed to fall within the realm of something that might actually happen’ (2020, p. 137). In the United States’ deeply polarised political climate of 2017, Julius Caesar struck a chord because of its profound contemporary relevance, much as 2 Henry VI and Jack Straw’s depictions of rebellion would likely have done in England in the troubled early 1590s. But Eustis dismissed all claims his production was meant to incite violence against Trump, arguing that he saw the play as ‘as a warning parable to those who try to fight for democracy by undemocratic means’; ‘a progressive’s nightmare vision of [resistance]’ (quoted in Wilson, 2020, p. 140). Rather than inspire an assassination attempt, Eustis states the show was meant to bring about ‘catharsis’ in its audiences, many of whom

fear and loathe the person who is now president of the United States. And watching that fear and loathing acted out in the form of murder purged many of those emotions. It made me – it made many in the audience – feel, ‘Oh, right, this is absolutely not the way to go. This is not an effective or appropriate solution, whatever fear and disagreement we feel’ (quoted in Wilson, 2020, p. 140).

Not only did Julius Caesar address similar concerns in 2017 and 1599, but it also engaged with them in a similar way: by providing ‘a space for thinking […] through the issue that was one step removed from the gritty reality’ (Wilson, 2020, p. 129).

**The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy**

Sulayman Al Bassam’s adaptations of Hamlet, Richard III and Twelfth Night – collectively known as The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy – are much more thorough transformations of Shakespeare’s original

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1 Orson Welles’s 1937 anti-fascist reimagining of Julius Caesar figured Caesar as a fascist dictator.

2 This last play is not discussed below, since it is less concerned with terrorism than the other two.
texts. Set in the early 2000s Middle East, these plays explore the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror on the region and dramatise the consequences of both state and sub-state terrorism. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* shows a corrupt, oppressive regime being challenged by violent, religiously motivated resistance; while Claudius uses violence to stay in power so he can keep enriching himself with ‘petro dollars’ (2014, p. 40), Hamlet turns to jihad to overthrow his uncle, and Ophelia becomes a suicide bomber. To borrow Holderness’s description, ‘Shakespeare’s tragedy of revenge [becomes] a war of terror against terror’ (2014, p. xi). A war of terror against terror, moreover, in which very little is achieved – Fortinbras, backed by Western powers, is at the gates at the start of the play and takes over at its end mostly by virtue of being the only major player left alive. The play closes on the unscrupulous Western Arms Dealer, who has been making deals with anyone and everyone, approaching the new ruler. Indeed, as Polonius had already observed early in the play, ‘Terrorist! Excellent word, much money in this word’ (2014, p. 25). Similar to its depiction in *Sejanus*, terrorism in *Al-Hamlet* is a futile, nihilistic enterprise that only ends up clearing the way for and enriching the Western powers both Claudius and Hamlet had been so keen to keep out. The idea of terror as a potentially productive force, suggested by *A Larum for London* and *Two Lamentable Tragedies*, has no place here.

*Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, meanwhile, offers a poignant reflection on how the ‘terrorism’ label can be used as a strategic weapon. Richard, who’s certainly not above using terror-violence to get his way, is very happy to accuse his opponents of being terrorists so he has a legitimate excuse to get rid of them – a trick he’s taught by Buckingham, who turns out to be a Western spy:

**RICHARD** Buckingham, tell me by God, how do we sink terror into their souls, prune as many heads as we need to, lock up the rest and make it all legit?

**BUCKINGHAM** You kidding? I can redraw the map of the globe with my finger; invade foreign lands with a flick of the wrist; flatten countries with the cock of a brow; I can make a mockery of the judiciary; thread an axis of evil through the eye of the press; turn a democracy into a tyranny and keep it all as clean and transparent as a Security Council resolution.

**RICHARD** I love you. But how?

**BUCKINGHAM** War on Terror! (2014, p. 109)

When Hastings gets in Richard’s way to the throne, he is quickly denounced as a terrorist and executed without trial, since ‘the extreme peril of the case, the immediate danger to our lives and the manifest threat to the supreme national interests, forced us to it’. Even Hastings’ brother, the Lord Mayor, unquestioningly accepts the verdict from Richard and Buckingham. When Richard
laments they didn’t have time to make Hastings confess before his execution, the Mayor’s response is forceful: ‘I have no need to hear sounds from the mouth of a traitor! Your testimony, your Excellency, will more than suffice. Fear not, I’ll acquaint our citizens with all your just proceedings in the name of National Security’ (2014, p. 111). The play shows how the discourse of counter-terrorism can be used as a convenient way of providing (false) clarity amidst the chaos and fear caused by the succession crisis. Branding his opponents as terrorists makes it easier for Richard to silence them and gives him a veneer of legitimacy at the same time. The specifics may be different, but the dynamics at play are immediately recognisable from, for example, *The Virgin Martyr* and *Sejanus*.

**I, Cinna (the Poet)**

Also concerned with such questions of legitimacy is Tim Crouch’s play *I, Cinna (the Poet)*, which tells the story of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* from the perspective of the eponymous Cinna. The play was written in 2012 and engaged – particularly through its set design – with the London riots that had taken place the year before. But when it was revived in early 2020, its meaning had shifted; in Crouch’s own words,

> the riots feel piecemeal, small scale, compared to what’s happening globally now. [...] Words at the moment are really complex, slippery, things politically. In 2012, we were infants in that world, and now we’re horrified teenagers going, ‘Can words really have that effect?’ People can lie, using the right words, they lie and everyone just accepts them (in Unicorn Theatre, 2020, p. 9 emphasis original).

*I, Cinna* is about the power of legitimising discourses. As Cinna explains halfway through the play, we should ‘Think of words as a republic. Every word equal, yes? Every word from the same place, made from the same 26 letters. But some words are more equal than others’ (2012, p. 25). This republic of words has ‘slaves’ (such as ‘and’, ‘of’, ‘in’), ‘citizens’ (like ‘teabag’, ‘corpse’, ‘dagger’) and ‘politicians’ (such as ‘corrupted’, ‘noble’, ‘fearful’). But they are all outdone by the fourth category:

> the most powerful words – words for things we didn’t know existed until they are named – GODS, HEAVEN, HELL, SOUL, EVIL, TERROR. Still from the same 26 letters but these are dangerous. These are the dictator words that keep the other words in fear. They can destroy peace. Be careful of them. Use them very carefully (2012, pp. 26–27 emphasis original).

Terrorist violence is dangerous in *I, Cinna* but the discourses surrounding it are just as dangerous, if not more so. Caesar’s assassination only becomes a flash point because Mark Antony has the final say on how it should be interpreted, thanks to his superior command of the ‘republic of words’:
Antony has found his subject and his words and the world changes. I understand it now. Words for things we didn’t even know. Mark Antony’s words change history. The people’s anger is ignited against the conspirators now. Poetry has done its job. Words have defeated actions. Caesar’s death is seen in a new light. Brutus and Cassius are traitors now, ambitious murderers. How can words have this effect? Breaking news: Poetry beats prose (2012, pp. 40–41).

And, as in *Sejanus* and *Al-Hamlet*, here too terrorism ultimately only amounts to a pile of dead bodies. Crouch’s play ends with Cinna relating the final moments of those who die after him, and marvelling at the senselessness of it all: ‘And all this was for what? What was achieved? A line of corpses leading back to Caesar. For what? To test an idea? An idea of equality and democracy. And idea worth killing for? An idea worth dying for?’ (2012, p. 50). Even in this play which stands at a significant remove from its source text, the concerns of the original *Julius Caesar* remain clearly legible.

*Mortal Terror*

The final example I want to consider is Robert Brustein’s *Mortal Terror* (written in 2011), part of a trilogy about Shakespeare’s life. The play imagines the influence of the Gunpowder Plot on *Macbeth*, dovetailing the playwright’s writing process with James’s war on Catholic conspiracy. A scene in which the king himself interrogates Guy Fawkes devolves into a back-and-forth between the two men that quickly exposes James’ too keen interest in ‘enhanced interrogation procedures’ (2014, p. 49). ‘It is my duty to wring a confession from you by whatever means available’, James angrily states to an unimpressed Fawkes:

> It was God himself prevented this unprecedented disaster to our kingdom. Many likeminded villains are still at large. We must root them out. I herewith declare a war on terror, and swear to arm our nation with every defense available. Let’s start with the rack (2014, pp. 49–50).

A melancholy Shakespeare, meanwhile, is ordered to write a play for the court and finds his work is increasingly becoming a product of the violence around him. As he drunkenly complains to John Harington,

> my pickled brain is slowly coming to grasp [...] that faith partly exists to sanctify murder. The Catholics chant *Blessed be Our Redeemer, Death to the Unbeliever*. The Protestants scream *God Save the King, Death to the Papist*. The Mohammedans howl *God is Great, Death to the Infidel*. Yes, even the Gunpowder Plotters believed they would be welcomed into Paradise for blowing Protestant royals to bits. We have always been told that the only earthly evil is Machiavellian atheism. But evil circumscribes both the blessed and the damned (2014, pp. 50–51, emphasis original).
Clearly, this could equally be a comment on the dominant religiopolitical discourses of the early 2010s, with their ‘Axis of Evil’ and ‘clash of civilisations’ narratives. *Mortal Terror* contributes to the debate around terrorism by interrogating the discourses of legitimacy involved in the War on Terror, much in the same way plays like *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* and *Sir Thomas More* questioned the discourses used to legitimise early modern state terrorism. And, just like *Macbeth*, *Mortal Terror* deliberately employs the ‘tropes and terminology related to terrorism’ which, as Issa observes, ‘were and continue to be embedded into popular cultural responses’ (2021, p. 179). *Macbeth* includes words like ‘blow’ and ‘equivocate’; *Mortal Terror* has ‘war on terror’ and ‘enhanced interrogation’.

Brustein suggests a play like *Macbeth* – and by extension, *Mortal Terror* itself – is profoundly influenced by the terrorism that exists in the world around the playwright, in the early modern period as well as today. We don’t anachronistically read terrorism into early modern plays because it is something we are anxious about – the marks of it exist in the texts themselves.

**Conclusion**

I have shown in this thesis that terrorism was a topic of great interest and concern to early modern dramatists and theatregoers alike; as the varied range of plays and playwrights I have discussed suggests, the discourse around terrorism was widespread. The years between 1590 and 1620 were not only the heyday of early modern theatre, but also a period when political and religious pressures spurred the employment of terrorism by both state and sub-state actors. And since terrorism directly or indirectly affected most of the population, theatre – as a popular form of mass entertainment – would have been an obvious medium to engage with questions and anxieties about its uses and abuses. The plays discussed here often reflect critically on the political theories that were used to legitimise terrorism and explore how it functions in the real world, where actions have unintended consequences, people behave unpredictably, and the slipperiness of supposedly categorical distinctions makes discerning ‘good’ from ‘bad’ a lot more difficult than it is on paper. My research has shown, therefore, that exploring early modern drama from the angle of terrorism can not only expand our understanding of the plays themselves, but also of the ways early modern theatre related to its religiopolitical milieu more generally. Although terrorism has typically been considered not relevant to the study of early modern drama, my thesis has shown that it is, and that both early modern terrorism in general and its representation in the drama of the period are subjects that would reward further enquiry. Recent publications on Shakespeare’s work and terrorism by Issa (2021) and Roberts (2021) suggest that the pertinence of the topic is increasingly

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being appreciated, and that we can look forward to more publications on terrorism in early modern drama in the near future.

Furthermore, more sustained research into early modern terrorism might help to dispel the belief that contemporary terrorism is ‘unprecedented’, an idea which has consistently characterised the discourse about and response to terrorism throughout its history (Powell, 2015, p. 344). Each successive wave of terrorism with its own particular features is inevitably described as ‘nothing like we’ve ever seen before’. 4 Exploring the discourse around early modern terrorism can remind us that contemporary terrorism is not, in fact, unprecedented at all, but that it is a political strategy with a long history going back to the early modern period and beyond. And the consequences – both intended and unintended – of employing that strategy are dramatised vividly by the early modern playwrights. Exploring such a contentious and emotionally laden topic as terrorism, which profoundly affects our lives in a wide variety of ways, with something approaching ‘neutrality’ is probably an impossible ask for most; the four centuries of historical distance that the plays in this thesis provide come with challenges, but also with the benefits of some critical distance, breathing space and the possibility of a more nuanced perspective.

4 As the comedian Stewart Lee once (controversially) joked about the London bombings by Al-Qaeda, ‘Who are they, these inhuman bombers that strike at the very heart of our society with no respect for human life, without even the courtesy of a perfunctory warning? It makes you nostalgic, doesn’t it, for the good old days of the IRA. [...] They were gentleman bombers, the finest terrorists this country’s ever had. We’ll not see their like again’ (2010, p. 178).
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