

*Preface*

This issue of *The Humanities Review* unites studies that consider the political, social and artistic machinery of death in early modern literature. More specifically, in their common efforts, the critics herein contact the ways in which death, in its various and intermittent moulds, influenced textual form and cultural behavior in Elizabethan England. The principal aim of this collection is to facilitate a deeper understanding of how sixteenth-century writers, namely Shakespeare, responded to complex social energies surrounding the horrors of corporeality. The early modern public had an intimate and complex relationship with death that, more often than not, was institutionally appropriated as a form of entertainment. Through the practices of public execution and open anatomies (where cadavers were opened and explored before a crowd of people), spectators were continually subjected to bodies in pieces before their eyes. These affecting events conspired to program the civic body with a set of emotional responses that deeply influenced the audient spaces of the theatre and printed page. It is important to provide a brief excavation of these cultural practices so that the trajectory of textual death and its imaginative function within early modern literature can be properly mapped.

The occasions of public dismemberment and torture, with their complementary valences of exhibition and shock, were amusing pastimes for the early modern populace. These practices generated an increasing awareness that the body was not one's own, becoming instead a vessel for power to display its influence over the individual and the collective through torture and the pain of execution. Such control over the physical body resonates with designs of the stage and the embodiment of the script within the flesh of an actor. The extent of the public's interest in executions during the early modern period is skillfully presented in Alfred Marks's *Tyburn Tree: Its History and Annals*,<sup>1</sup> a comprehensive chronicle of the infamous "triple tree" gallows in Tyburn, England. Over the course of six-hundred years, the Tyburn Tree was the stage for over fifty-thousand executions, a figure that Marks declares "a moderate computation." Marks's comments regarding attendance at such events are particularly telling: "They go, in batches of ten, fifteen, twenty, laughing boys, women with children at the breast, highwaymen decked out in gay clothes for this last scene of glory. [...] The long road<sup>2</sup> is thronged with spectators flocking in answer to the invitation of the state to attend these spectacles, designed to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror" (Marks 25). The onlookers are "invited" to observe "these spectacles" by the state and attend in

"gay attire," evoking notions of amusement and pleasure. By witnessing the power of the state inscribed upon the frail flesh of criminals, the public attests to the role of death in the process of subject formation. Without an audience, these horrors are useless. The social aspect of this ghoulish entertainment corresponds with artistic projects which are equally dependent upon an audience to produce meaning.

The open observation of a disciplined body was an important function of the state in early modern England and anatomies provided an institutional extension of this through their own techniques of mutilation. The purpose of public anatomies was not to circulate notions of punishment; however they similarly served to educate the public using an opened body as an example. In fact, one could argue that increasing knowledge of the body's many parts enriched the threat of execution by displaying the organic multitude susceptible to punishment. In any case, the respective communal spaces reserved for execution and anatomy contributed to a popular public discourse that generated an audience. Hilary Nunn<sup>3</sup> confirms this claim, indicating that during this time "anatomy demonstrations served as entertainment" and "By 1583 the close quarters of the physician's hall led the physicians to construct an anatomy theatre, the first in London, in which to stage their dissections" (Nunn 5). Remarkably, this space was designed by Inigo Jones, renowned architect of the London Cockpit and other dramatic theaters throughout the city. Additionally, Emma Smith<sup>4</sup> observes that stage performances and anatomies utilized similar "dramatic verbs" – "staging," "performing" – thickening the connection between public dismemberment and entertainment. Drawing more similarities between the stages of anatomical and dramatic concerts, Nunn remarks: "the similarities in Jones's architectural drawings suggest that public anatomies were taking on the characteristics of staged drama during the same years that the city's theatres were establishing their position with civic life" (Nunn 11). Nunn's comments allow us to specifically observe how dramatic spaces converged with the aesthetic topographies of death, and vice versa.

By guiding the formal gestures of a text or directing the central action itself, death complicates and frames the literature of this period in ways that attempt to reproduce and respond to the emotional affects of public executions and anatomies. The affects of death's spectacle bled into the margins of the printed page. The works assembled in this journal will show why it is useful to observe the equipment of demise within early modern texts in order to account for the ways in which death contributes to their stylistic and metaphysical aims. Writers in the English Renaissance responded to the discomfort, fear, amusement and horror of institutional death by writing

about and through them. In short, death penetrated psychic spaces of the early modern public and thus the narrative and dramatic spaces.

How fitting then, that this issue of *The Humanities Review* is itself a death of sorts, as it is my final issue as Editor. Sincere thanks to all of you who have made this journal possible over the last two years, it has been a highly rewarding experience that has contributed greatly to my intellectual progress as a graduate student. Anna Sicari has been an invaluable resource during the production of the journal over the past academic year, and I am proud to announce that she will serve as the next Editor-in-Chief. I have complete faith that Anna will continue and improve upon a product that attempts to responsibly represent the remarkable English Department here at St. John's University.

"*Paulo maiora canamus...*"

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New York City  
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marks, Alfred. *Tyburn Tree: Its History and Annals*. London: Brown, Langham and Company, 1901.

<sup>2</sup> The road to which Marks refers is the three mile long Via Dolorosa, the ritual path labored by condemned individuals on their way to the triple tree. It was common practice for spectators to line the road and witness the procession much like a modern day parade and then follow the felon up the hill, symbolically cutting off his means of escape. Here, the spectators are active participants in the execution process; they contain the criminal in a pen wrought by their own public bodies.

<sup>3</sup> Nunn, Hillary. *Staging Anatomies and Spectacle in Early Stewart Tragedy*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> "Shakespeare in Performance." *Shakespeare Survey 60: Theatres for Shakespeare*. Ed. Peter Holland. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 358.

The early modern mindset was peppered with images of death. High mortality rates rendered dying, typically of malnutrition or sickness, an everyday occurrence. Renaissance era paintings not infrequently included the skeletal personification of death stalking the righteous and the sinful alike, along with a multitude of corpses, plague victims, craniums, etc. So how did one come to grips with death constantly at the doorstep? This issue confronts that very question. The erudite elite of the period pondered at great length on the subject as the golden age of reasoning emerged. The liberal humanist, unlike his Classical Greek forbears after whom he aspired, chose the path of contemplation on death during life. For this purpose real and replica human skulls served as *memento mori*, a reminder of life's brevity and the Christian necessity to think on the self and afterlife. But, as our contents will demonstrate, these mementos also came in a variety of mediums and genres; gravestones, nonfiction religious tales, and the most inventive of literary minds grappled with the omnipresent threat. Literary depictions of death often strayed from the ubiquitous modes of dying to the irregular or downright extravagant in order to address the issue without hitting too close to home for the audience. Even still, the variety of ways to discuss death can be impressive. Hence prepare for our editorial farewell issue, a meditation on death in its multitude of forms and meanings in the early modern period.

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