

The Deaths of Kings and Other People: Comparing the Narratology of Mortality in Shakespeare and Modern Cinema

P. Aaron Potter
University of California, Riverside

I - "Produce their bodies, be they alive or dead"
King Lear, 5.3.233

Shakespeare is a bloody business.

Over the course of *Hamlet*'s five acts, no fewer than eight people die. Note that this counts only named characters with speaking roles who die over the course of the play, not those who die prior to the action, offstage, such as Yorick, or Hamlet and Fortinbras' fathers. Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Ophelia precede the absolute bloodbath which caps the play.

Upping the ante, in *King Lear*, we are treated to at least nine (9!) corpses: Cornwall, Gloucester's servant, Oswald, Gloucester (finally!), Regan, Goneril, Edmund (also finally!), Cordelia, and Lear himself. Variations in staging and text sometimes increase this freight of corpses, adding victims such as the Fool or Cordelia's assassin to the onstage body count, not even counting the untold numbers of soldiers slain in battle sequences, which may or may not be presented to the audience.

Romeo and Juliet? The play which forms the cornerstone of the romances and has been hailed as the archetypal love story of Western literature, features no less than six grisly ends, all of named characters with speaking parts, including the two principles, and all of them on stage and in full view of the audience. If this is love, it seems to be as deadly a business as any battle.

Let's not even talk about *Titus Andronicus*.

That is to be expected, though. These plays are, after all, tragedies, identified as such in the title, and accepted as such by generations of audiences and critics.

If tragedy is, as Aristotle declared, engendered by actions which are both "serious" and "of a certain magnitude," there are no candidates better suited for the job than death itself (Butcher 23). If Shakespeare's aim is to emphasize the brevity of life and the permanence of real loss, in order to elicit an emotional affect in his audience, death is almost mandatory. Any other tragic circumstance (even the really awful ones in *Titus*) becomes a mere shadow by comparison, a metaphor for the eventual, and final, end of things which is death. Tragedy and death are near synonyms.

Are the histories any less death-ridden, though? *Richard III* is theoretically a history as much as a tragedy (the "Tragedie" subtitle in the first quarto edition notwithstanding). That worthy play boasts only two deaths onstage, but if we count offstage murders and alarms, we get a whopping twelve. Before I can be accused of stacking the deck with one of Shakespeare's bloodier works, consider that *Henry V*, the patriotically feel-good antidote to *Richard III*'s depiction of tyranny, is not merely predicated upon the deaths of kings, but features executions and even the untimely death of comic foil Falstaff.

Perhaps that, too, is acceptable, even necessary. History is, like tragedy, a frequently bloody series of events. By definition, if Shakespeare is going to tread on the complete lives of his historical subjects, he must incorporate the historical fact of death in the plays.

However, romances such as *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* feature prominent deaths as well. Even the comedies involve serious threats of death, mistaken and counterfeited pseudo-deaths, and so on. Given these statistics, a character's chance of surviving a Shakespeare play look roughly equal to those of surviving a slasher flick from the 1970's.

It is not surprising to claim that Shakespeare is deadly. The interesting element is not merely that people die, but also who dies, and how they do it.

We can dispense right away with the argument that Shakespeare's bloody work is essentially mimesis. When characters die in Shakespeare, they do not seem to do so in a manner consistent with his cultural moment. Certainly audiences of Shakespeare's time, subject to rampant disease, malnutrition, and shoddy sanitation, would have been more intimately acquainted with death than would most people now living in the developed world. With an average lifespan of less than 50 years, and an infant mortality rate between 13% and 20%, it must have been significantly more frequent to encounter actual death in one's daily life in Elizabethan culture than it is in our own (Forbes 395-420).

But contemporary accounts in parish records suggest that actual deaths in Shakespeare's world were most often caused by illness and malnutrition (McMenemey 795-6). Throughout the plays mentioned above, we see hangings, stabbings, poisonings, drownings, and mauling by bears. There are remarkably few natural deaths from syphilis or plague.

Though not as at risk as the poorest of his times, Shakespeare had suffered personal losses from the plague, and his theater company was forced to move on several occasions to avoid disease. He was naturally cognizant of the massive threat of epidemic disease. "Plague" and "disease" show up as metaphorical threats – but only as metaphor – in the plays above. The reality of disease conditions is more starkly presented elsewhere in his works, but for dramatic purposes, a disproportionate number of his characters die by violence, rather than the natural causes appropriate to his historic context.

Briefly: characters in Shakespeare do not shuffle off this mortal coil. They get pushed.

It is tempting to suggest that the very reality of the threat of the plague is what kept it from Shakespeare's pen. Mimesis notwithstanding, the theater is, in part, a vehicle for escapism. Too much raw attention to an actual threat reminds the audience that they live under the shadow of actual death, not the dramatized spectacle on stage. Freud's insistence that anxieties (such as fear of plague) which are repressed will return in symbolic form (as, for instance, the series of violent deaths which crowd Shakespeare's plays). The immediacy of these deaths, their unpredictability, the way they strike young and old, rich and poor, seemingly indiscriminately, and the way in which they almost seem to flow from one victim to another (as in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Titus Andronicus*) – all of these suggest the mechanism of disease, carefully avoided as a literal killer onstage, but haunting the playwright's pen.

There is a simpler explanation which appeals to the reception-historian in me: violent death is far more entertaining. *Henry V* is played much more commonly than *Henry IV*. Reader response theory suggests that one reason is that having a character slowly perish of old age is relatively dull, compared to a few nifty battle sequences. This reading is bolstered by the degree to which audience's drive authorship, particularly in performative arts such as the theater. The designation of "tragedy" demands that an audience feel some degree of actual sorrow or horror at the conditions of the characters on stage. We are more likely to do so, certainly, if we identify or empathize with the characters, whether because they resemble us or our ideals. A character with sufficient depth of character to serve as a vehicle for

the audience's projected self is not, therefore, likely to be the type of character the audience will credibly accept as a victim of a doom so prosaic as "old age." The drama engendered by a death scene replete with struggle emphasizes that depth of character the audience desires, and reifies their investment of time and attention.

The dynamic is easily illustrated by simply considering an alternative narrative universe. Imagine: King Lear, a powerful monarch, divvies up his kingdom, his three daughters say "thanks a bunch" and then wait patiently for him to die of pneumonia at the ripe old age of 97, surrounded by loving family and friends. Curtain. Certainly afterward there might be interfamilial squabbling and bloodshed, but the play is then no longer the tale of Lear himself, but of his kingdom and the daughters who have divided it. It seems much less a personal, character driven tragedy, and more a history-channel documentary on internecine warfare...or, if the play does focus on Lear's deathbed scenes, a Hallmark Movie of the Week.

Thus, instead of reasonable (and arguably more historically accurate) deaths due to infected teeth or dysentery, we see swords plunged into breasts, poison tipped into ears, nobles drowned in wine barrels, and people served up as meat pies. Characters die young, unjustly, or for evil ends.

Is the violence which characterizes these deaths simply necessitated by the nature of tragedy as a whole, or is it particular to Shakespeare and his contemporaries who wrote bloody revenge tragedies to resounding success? There is at least one string of evidence which suggests the latter: that deaths in 21st-century tragedies do not play out as do those in Shakespeare's plays.

II - "The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch, which hurts and is desired" *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.295-96

It is always a bit dangerous to make generalizing claims about an entire oeuvre, as I have with Shakespeare's. Even more dangerous would be to make sweeping generalizations about a whole historical body of work, spanning thousands of films, by dozens of auteurs.

Nevertheless, let us consider, for the sake of argument, some representative sample of critically and popularly successful films from the past decade. Even such a limitation necessitates some arbitrary tautology in defining what it means to be "successful." In order to simplify the matter, let us consider the winners of the Best Picture category at the Academy Awards. I do not suffer under the misapprehension that this will satisfy

the objection, since this too is an arbitrary determination of merit. However, it should at least approach more closely some kind of acceptably broad, if not classically objective, categorization of potential dramatic texts.

The first observation I feel safe in making is that modern cinematic dramas have a significantly lower body count than is typical of Shakespeare's bloodbaths. In the last ten winners of the Best Picture award (*The Hurt Locker*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Departed*, *Crash*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Return of the King*, *Chicago*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *Gladiator*, from 2009 back to 2000, respectively), death is present in most (though never truly manifest in *A Beautiful Mind*), but is at times quite ancillary to the central plot (*Slumdog Millionaire*, *Chicago*, and even, in its way, *Crash*). While deaths occur, they are much more sharply limited in number; counting the crime dramas, but excluding the nameless soldiers who perish in 'war' scenes, the films average only one or two named character deaths per film. With the exceptions of *The Departed*, and *No Country for Old Men*, we do not see the bodies piled like cord wood that we encounter at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Lear*.

Ah, but what about those nameless soldiers? Three of the films in this list – *The Hurt Locker*, *The Return of the King* and *Gladiator* – could safely be termed 'war' movies, inasmuch as their primary protagonists are soldiers and they deal largely with violent conflict settled by course of arms. Like *Henry V* or *Richard III*, therefore, these films will naturally present audiences with the spectacle of death en masse, in addition to, or even in place of, the rather more personal deaths we find at the hearts of narratives like *Lear* or *Million Dollar Baby*.

Narratively, death in wartime is comparatively quick and painless. According to one counter's exhaustive index, the extended edition of *The Return of the King* features no less than 836 deaths over the course of its nearly 250 minutes (this figure includes humanoid characters such as orcs and hobbits, but not the approximately 165 slaughtered animals). This yields an average of one death every 17.95 seconds. *Gladiator* clocks in at 77 deaths over 155 minutes, or just about one death every two minutes. That's still pretty grisly compared to *Hamlet*'s 8 (9 onstage in the Franco Zeffereli film adaptation), but comparable to the film adaptations of *Henry V* by Olivier or Branagh.

I should mention at this point that I am indebted for the body counts of modern cinema to the compilers at www.moviebodycounts.com, who, like many denizens of the internet (including myself) seem to have entirely too much time on their hands. It should be noted that while the site offers guidelines for counting the cinematic dead in its FAQ, there appears to be no central guiding authority or

editorial control over the figures presented. Like many collaborative websites, it is a collective vision of reality, rather than an objective or even academically moderated one, and should be viewed with generous doses of salt. At the same time, since this section of my thesis is exploring an aggregate impression of a cultural phenomenon, this type of sketchy enumeration is perfectly valid evidence. It does not actually matter whether or not *Return of the King* features more on-screen deaths than *Richard III*. The important thing is that the web consensus is that this is so.

However, a fascinating thing happens when we turn our attention to the most recent winner of the Best Picture Award, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* which tells the story of a bomb detection and disposal squad serving in the current war in Iraq. All of the movies mentioned in the previous two paragraphs take place in pre-industrial societies, without large-scale military access to gunpowder, much less high explosives. We would assume, therefore, that given the logical manifestation of death in war narratives and the modern setting, the number of deaths in such a film would be record-setting. Instead, *The Hurt Locker* doesn't even break 40, and only a tiny fraction of those are of named characters rather than anonymous combatants. While long discussion scenes revolve around the immanence of death in a combat zone, particularly for those soldiers charged with detonating live ordinance, the reality seems to be that this modern warfare is considerably less dangerous than that of the ancient world (at least for those with the technological and military might of the United States).

Even more telling is the way people die in popular films. We see plenty of deaths by violence, from warfare in *Avatar* which resembles the 'justified' bloodshed of *Henry V* to brutal slayings in *Gangs of New York* or *Reservoir Dogs* which almost (but not quite) rival those of *Titus Andronicus*. What we also see prominently featured, however, are precisely those elements which are so oddly absent from Shakespeare's work: death by dint of disease and old age.

In *Philadelphia*, Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington explored the perception, public and corporate, of the AIDS epidemic, a film given much of its solemn weight by the lingering death of Hanks's character over the course of the film. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts was impressed enough with the performance that they awarded Hanks the Oscar for Best Actor. Just one year later, Hanks became the second actor in history to win consecutive Best Actor awards (the first being Spencer Tracy) for his title role in *Forrest Gump*, whose meandering plot is anchored by Gump's intermittent relationship with "Jenny Curran" (Robin Wright Penn), a relationship that culminates in Jenny's death from an unnamed disease.

More recently, films such as *The Bucket List* (2007) have explored the topic of death and dying through a semi-comedic lens. In this box-office success, Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson are diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, and spend the remainder of the film indulging lifelong fantasies such as skydiving and climbing the pyramids of Egypt. Some critics savaged the film for its egoism: Nicholson's character, "Edward Cole," a self-made billionaire, has led a life of selfishness which would make Ayn Rand proud, and in the moment of ultimate distress seems unwilling to significantly alter his mode. Rather than spending his fortune on the poor or reflecting seriously on his priorities in good liberal fashion, Cole takes the threat of imminent mortality as a sign that he should be even more self-indulgent, embarking on a whirlwind tour of exotic locations, complete with private jets and prostitutes. Roger Ebert, himself a cancer victim, was particularly scathing, singling out the way in which the movie treats death, not as tragedy, but as "a laugh riot followed by a dime-store epiphany." Audiences, however, seem to have decided that humor and wish-fulfillment were perfectly appropriate responses to the misery of dying from cancer, and promptly rewarded the film's makers with profits around \$160,000,000.

Comedy, of course, is often used to leaven tragedy, particularly the inescapably tragic, such as death itself. The reverse can often be true, as in the death sequence that opens *Shrek the Third* (2007). In this, the third animated film in the series, the action is precipitated by the death of the Frog King (voiced by Monty Python alum John Cleese), who perishes of an unexplained illness – possibly simply of old age, given the brief lifespan of the typical bullfrog. Like *The Bucket List*, the scene is played for both laughs and for tragic effect: in a typical punning moment for the series, a chorus of frogs sing the King's coffin (a shoe box appropriate to a pet frog) out to sea with a bluesy rendition of Paul McCartney's "Live and Let Die." But I wept right along with my two sons, ages eight and four. Perhaps that simply demonstrates that I'm a soft touch...but the audience reaction around me suggests that the dramatic, even tragic, element of the tale was successfully conveyed.

III – "Tragedy is when I cut my finger.
Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die."
Mel Brooks

If, as our Freudian reading suggested earlier, death in narrative is the outward manifestation of a culture's anxieties, then the manner of that death should provide

some clue to the nature of those anxieties. At first glance, that seems to suggest we pay greater attention to the roles of old age and disease, since those conditions play more prominently in our dramatic texts. Theses cinematic deaths are an index, too, of our changing attitudes towards disease as a cause of mortality. If disease in Shakespeare's time was not understood, and became, perhaps, too frightening to deal with realistically, then contrarily, our culture comprehends the causes and courses of disease in a way which makes it a much more suitable topic for exploration. Shakespeare's plays, by contrast, seem to betray a disproportionate terror of violent death, regardless of the relative infrequency of violence as the actual cause of death in historical records. Again, the relationship between signifier and signified here is not mimetic, but symbolic.

To go further, deaths in Shakespeare's works are not merely violent, but often outré. Clarence is not simply drowned in *Richard III*, but specifically drowned in a barrel of wine. *Titus Andronicus* is not content to merely murder Tamora's sons, nor even to murder them and present their bodies to their mother: he cooks them and serves them to her in a pie. Hamlet's father is not merely poisoned, but poisoned through his ears. Even those threats of death which are never carried out seem sometimes ridiculously over the top; how likely is it that a successful merchant, however temporarily short of cash, might find himself paying for his debts under the sentence of being carved up in front of a courtroom by an outraged Jewish competitor? Moments such as these are partially, of course, necessitated by Shakespeare's source material, which sometimes proved that history could be stranger than any fiction. Still, the very success of these plays demonstrates an audience hunger for such grand guignol treatments of death and dying, a desire extended by virtue of the way in which the text lingers over each gruesome death, delimiting and narrating it textually, as well as visually through stage direction (Helms 558-9).

The key here is the very randomness of death in these plays, and I find its most poignant expression in what is widely considered the most ludicrous stage direction in the history of English-speaking theater: the charge in the midst of *The Winter's Tale*, "Exeunt, pursued by a bear" (3.3.61). At the moment of highest drama, as Antigonus contemplates a murder as unjust as any in Shakespeare when the tables are dramatically – well, to be honest, ridiculously – turned by the appearance of the ravening bear which presumably devours him. The moment induces giggles in us because of its interjection into a moment of drama, and it is all too easy to view it as a kind of literary hail-Mary pass. We can almost see the playwright, having written himself into a corner, throwing up his hands in despair and penning the line in a movement which

becomes the diametric opposite of a *Deus Ex Machina*: an "ursus ex machina." Yet, even as we giggle, it underscores an essential truism about death in the early modern world, a truism particularly appropriate to death by plague: it was indiscriminate. In an era before a working germ theory of disease transmission, the way in which illness moved through a community must have seemed something like the hand of providence, and something like a ravening bear. Neither money, nor social position, nor education could protect one from the threat of an invisible killer who took young, old, guilty and innocent alike. Indeed, the elderly and the young stood at disproportionate risk of death by illness, which must, to a population who believed in the literal omnipresence of divine justice, have seemed the height of caprice.

And it is just such capriciousness which guides the hand of death in Shakespeare's plays. Romeo, secretly beloved by the daughter of his family's mortal enemies, is certainly running the risk of a gruesome death on the end of some annoyed Capulet's sword. However, it is not that which kills him: he is slain, instead, by shoddy timing. I have never been able to watch the final act of *Romeo and Juliet* without rolling my eyes at the transparent contrivance of the scene. Had Juliet awoken a minute earlier, Romeo would have been spared. Had she awoken a minute later, her parents would have arrived, and she would have been spared. Instead, circumstances fall out just so, and the two perish in a scene which relies for its tragedy upon blind bad luck.

Hamlet's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern essentially die because they deliver a letter. Despite the fact that they are escorting a man they believe to be a dangerous psychotic, it apparently never occurs to them that he might actually plot against them. Their death is attributable to ignorance and arrogance, certainly, but also to that whim of fate which delivers them up to their enemies. Hamlet's mother perishes because she simply drinks from the wrong cup. Cinna the Poet is accosted by a crowd in *Julius Caesar* simply because he shares a name with one of the conspirators (3.3). Though alerted to their mistake, the crowd tears him to pieces anyway.

The message seems abundantly clear: death is waiting, not merely for the soldier on the battlefield or the noble assassination victim, but for the soldier's wife left behind, and for the noble victim's butler. Death arrives sometimes without warning, often without rationale, and almost always without justice. It is the most permanent manifestation of a paradigm which sees the natural universe as essentially hostile and uncontrollable. When King Lear decries that the human condition is comparable to that of "flies to wanton boys," (4.1.32) he is not merely decrying the God's cruelty, but their unpredictability. If there is a divinity that "shapes our ends," it is alarmingly opaque.

This is the sharpest difference between the way death is treated in Shakespeare's work and the way it most often manifests in modern cinema. When characters die in modern film, they tend to do so in ways which have been narratologically forecasted by their position or their history. Soldiers in movies such as *The Hurt Locker*, or the criminals who sling guns in *No Country for Old Men* have chosen careers which mark them for death from the moment they are first introduced to the audience. Even *Forrest Gump's* "Jenny" is not innocent when she takes to her deathbed: her demise has been inevitable since she has rejected, time and again, Gump's offers of security in order to live the wild life. Her death is a cautionary tale, certainly, but does not possess the terror engendered by the truly indiscriminate reaper who haunts Shakespeare's plays.

That haphazard threat of death destabilizes the moral universe in Shakespeare. In a universe where death visits the 'undeserving' precisely as often as the deserving, where is the impetus to behave well? As Lady Macduff explicitly notes in her one and only scene, just before she is stabbed to death for the hideous crime of marrying the wrong Scotsman: "to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly" (*Macbeth* 4.2.79-80). The attempt to avoid a violent death on the grounds that one has 'done good' is, therefore, an empty defense.

Contrarily while the deaths of the truly innocent destabilize the moral cosmos, the deaths of those who have 'brought it upon themselves' reinforce our impression of the universe as essentially benign and just (Marzabal 97). This may go a long way towards explaining those modern films which do indulge in wholesale slaughter. *The Return of the King*, as noted, offered the highest body count of any film; yet almost all of those slain were soldiers, evil, or even recognizably inhuman. The one truly good character who perishes, Theoden, provides, not coincidentally, the moment of greatest recognizable tragedy (as measured by screen-time devoted to his death scene). Narratological conventions of the war genre allow that soldiers may well die, particularly if they are far removed from us by time and space, such as those in *Return of the King* or *Gladiator* (which may explain why those films have a much higher death rate than *The Hurt Locker*, which, dealing with an ongoing war, must tread carefully around the political minefield which surrounds its topic). Somewhat like Mel Brooks' (in)famous observation about the difference between tragedy and comedy, if death strikes those who expect it, and who are distant from ourselves, then what we perceive is not tragedy, but something entirely different.

By the same token, modern audiences resent authors who violate our narratological expectations by executing the 'wrong' characters. Perhaps the most severe

example of this in recent years surrounded the marketing and release of the adolescent drama *My Girl* (1991). The movie presents the story of an 11-year-old girl (Anna Chlumsky) who must deal simultaneously with the absence of her dead mother, her father's emotional distance, and her own unpopularity as she comes of age. She is assisted primarily by her friendship with a schoolmate, played by Macaulay Culkin, who is as socially awkward as she. The film was marketed as a feel-good, coming-of-age story, and audiences flocked to the opening night bearing their intertextual awareness of Culkin's star-making turn as the goofily loveable child-protagonist of the previous year's *Home Alone* (1990). A good time was anticipated by all.

Unfortunately for audience expectations, the film took a quick turn for the unacceptably tragic midway through, when Culkin's character was stung to death by bees, in full view of the audience of parents and their children. Initial trailers for the film were narrated by Culkin, and emphasized the budding pre-teen romance between him and Chlumsky's character. There was no hint of the film's central tragedy, and audiences felt perhaps understandably betrayed by the shocking twist in the narrative. Critics declared that the film's odd family-oriented marketing, but utterly family-unfriendly plot, provided a significant problem in determining the movie's genre, and its supposed target audience. Official classification of the movie was similarly troubled, as the MPAA forced a rating of PG-13, though the studio eventually appealed and had the rating lowered to PG.

The shock of such a moment is twofold. In the first place, *My Girl* violated one of the sacred laws of narratology: thou shalt not switch genres mid-narrative, upon peril of thy market share. However, even if the film had been honestly marketed as a tragedy, rather than a tween romance, I am not so sanguine that audiences would have flocked to see it. While our culture apparently accepts the deaths of soldiers and other high-risk individuals in its narratives, children fall under that protected category which is supposed to remain inviolate.

Once a narrative has established a character as outside the threatened sub-class, audiences are slow to forgive an author who violates that bond. Writer and director Joss Whedon has famously made a career out of trampling audience trust in this fashion. Over the seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the series which cemented his reputation, Whedon shocked audiences again and again by killing off usually off-limits central characters, often to the dismay of fans. He continued the practice in his treatment of his second major television and film property, *Firefly* / *Serenity*, and has become so closely associated with the practice that when he was approached about

guest-directing an episode of the comic mockumentary *The Office*, he joked that fans would worry he would alter the tone of the show entirely by murdering half the cast. Joking or not, his comments betray an awareness of the degree to which the modern audience demands that genre rules be followed, including those which determine who may acceptably become a victim in the text, and who may not.

There is a telling example of the difference between this attitude and Shakespeare's in *Macbeth*. In the second scene of act four, soldiers sent by Macbeth come upon Macduff's wife and son, and put them to the sword per their orders. The moment is typically Shakespearean: Lady Macduff and her son have been playing witty word games, and are not themselves soldiers nor threats to Macbeth's crown, but they are slaughtered anyway, without warning, and without justice. The scene is vicious enough that Coleridge singled it out as among the playwright's few excursions into true brutality. His attempts to defend it on the grounds that its very cruelty heightens the sense of tragedy ring as somewhat desperate:

This scene, dreadful as it is, is still a relief, because a variety, because domestic....The objection is that Shakespeare wounds the moral sense by the unsubdued, undisguised description of the most hateful atrocity – that he tears the feelings without mercy, and even outrages the eye itself with scenes of insupportable horror – I, omitting *Titus Andronicus* as not genuine, and excepting the scene of Gloster's blinding in *Lear*, answer boldly in the name of Shakespeare, not guilty. (Foakes 103-4)

The number of qualifications Coleridge must make in order to excuse the scene is telling. Moreover, the very fact that he felt the necessity of such an apologia reveals the degree to which post-enlightenment audiences demand that even tragic deaths in any particular narrative serve the overarching metanarrative of an essentially moral universe.

Bibliography

- Butcher, S. H. *Aristotle: The Poetics*: Translated with a Critical Text. New York: Dover, 1997.
- Foakes, R. A. *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare: a selection*. New York: Continuum, 1989.
- Forbes, Thomas R. "By What Disease or Casualty: The Changing Face of Death in London." *Journal of the History of Medicine* (October 1976).
- Helms, Lorraine. "'The High Roman Fashion': Sacrifice, Suicide, and the Shakespearean Stage." *PMLA* 107:3 (May 1992).
- Marzabal, Albaina and Alarcon, Wilson. "Medicine and the Cinema: Making Sense of Death." *Journal of Medicine and Movies* 4 (2008): 96-8.
- McMenemey, W.H. "Life and Death in Shakespeare's London." *British Medical Journal* (25 March 1972).