'Out Vile Jelly': The Consumption of Violence in King Lear and The Winter's Tale

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‘OUT VILE JELLY’: THE CONSUMPTION OF VIOLENCE IN KING LEAR AND THE WINTER’S TALE

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‘OUT VILE JELLY’: THE CONSUMPTION OF VIOLENCE IN KING LEAR AND THE WINTER’S TALE

By

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of the Arts

English & American Literature

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

(May 2016)
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Introduction

The dying Hamlet tells Horatio, “Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / to tell my story” (5.2.321-3). Horatio implies that Hamlet’s story includes details of:

- Carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
- Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
- Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause,
- And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
- Fall’n on the‘inventors’ heads. (5.2.354-8)

Only moments ago, Horatio, one of the most seemingly stable characters in Hamlet, was an eyewitness to the events he relays to Fortinbras. Hamlet’s plea for Horatio to “absent thee from felicity awhile” (5.2.321) is in response to Horatio’s decision to commit suicide. This brief exchange in Hamlet has many significant implications, but it is seldom, if ever, discussed in terms of Horatio’s response to witnessing violence. It would seem that is likely, in part, because this is also the moment when Hamlet dies. However, Horatio’s seamless transition from suicidal witness to clearheaded chronicler says something about the treatment of violence and its aftermath in Shakespeare’s Elizabethan plays.

Horatio speaks of “carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,” most of which occur on stage for spectators to devour; this on-stage display of carnal, bloody violence is indicative of violence in Elizabethan plays. In Shakespeare’s Elizabethan plays, violence is intimately associated with justice, revenge, or political action. I am not suggesting that this is unique
to Shakespeare, nor am I the first to make this connection\(^1\), but I am suggesting that a marked shift occurs when violence is discussed in the Jacobean plays.

The circuitous and overlapping characteristics of Elizabethan and Jacobean life and entertainment include bloody spectacles, brutal torture, public theatrics, and together contribute to a culture based on the consumption of violence. I suggest that the effects of this violence are registered and considered in plays throughout Shakespeare’s career and become more nuanced throughout the Jacobean period. There is a distinct difference in the representation of violence and its aftermath in Shakespeare’s Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. In Shakespeare’s Elizabethan work, such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III* and *Hamlet*, violence is almost always corporeal, and the aftermath is measured tangibly, in possessions and titles lost or gained, flesh wounds, and body counts. Such events usually appear at the climax of the play, leaving a handful of characters alive on stage. There appears to be an obligatory role for those who remain alive at the play’s conclusion, as they are typically the ones with closing comments on the violence, or who are tasked with the role of memorializing the events. Jacobean dramas, such as *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale*, entail similar acts of violence as those depicted in Shakespeare’s Elizabethan plays, but the extent of the effects of violence go beyond what can be measured corporeally. Rather, the effects of experiential violence in *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* can be read as psychological rather than physical.

Characters witness, digest, communicate, and reflect on violent events they witness in *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale*; this seems to suggest an implied relationship between

\(^1\) For a comprehensive profile of the difference in between Elizabethan and Jacobean plays—including audience expectations, desires, and world outlooks—see Pascale Aebischer’s *Jacobean Drama* (2010)

\(^2\) The Globe and Bear Gardens were located next to one another

\(^3\) As Greenblatt and Howard document
witnessing a violent or unexplainable act and mental anguish or trauma. Where the physical body is a site upon which violence is enacted in the Elizabethan plays, the Jacobean plays represent the physical body as protean. A character can physically transform as a response to the mere spectacle of violence; I argue that in *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* an attempt is made to pathologize the effects of violence/trauma, as it is widely experienced as a cyclic mental and emotional event.

My specific argument has yet to be made as most discussions of vision and early modern theater center around the relationship between the vulnerability of one’s eyes and his/her morality. The critical conversations taking place on this topic do not focus on psychological violence or the effects of one being a spectator to violence. Many of the critical debates concern the vulnerability of a person’s senses once they enter the theater. Michael O’Connell and Stuart Clark seem to be in conversation with the belief that theater maintains a corrupting potential, and both argue that spectators are susceptible to idolatrous acts simply because they are able to see a play. Approaching the stage with a slightly different approach, Holly Crawford Pickett comments on the critical debates surrounding spectatorship and idolatry: “Such discussions suggest vision is the most dangerous of the senses because it is the most apt to be fooled into mistaking a non-deity for the true God” (19). Pickett argues, however, that olfaction is just as vulnerable to idolatrous acts due, in part, to its ability to conjure memories (19-38). David Robertson specifically examines *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* and suggests smells are able “to provide authentic, reliable experiences, which offer a basis for action and judgment” in the plays (44). Robertson argues that *The Winter’s Tale* and *King Lear*, specifically, are plays concerned with themes of cognition and “the problem of whether information provided by
the senses is to be trusted” (44), noting that the “critical consensus on the plays is that they are centrally concerned with the problem of cognition and especially the reliability of the evidence provided by sight in cognition” (46). O’Connell, Clark, Pickett, and Robertson’s articles provide beneficial insight regarding the symbolism and philosophical discussions surrounding the eyes and ears in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. However, I believe this body of criticism is at once too dismissive of the importance of cognition informed by vision, and overlooks the influence of crucial factions of violent Jacobean life: bear-baiting, public executions, and the spectacle of court trials.

Moving forward in my paper, I contextualize my argument by discussing the changing landscape of violence that occurs once James I comes into power. Specifically, I discuss how King Lear and The Winter’s Tale create self-reflexive audiences to emphasize the “defective present.” This eliminates the possibility for theater to function solely as mindless entertainment, or an escape. I then provide a brief overview of the prominent theories on sympathy circulating during the Renaissance. Since I am essentially arguing that nuanced, psychological violence can create sympathetic experiences for spectators, it is necessary to know what popular theories on sympathies exist during the Renaissance. There are three primary definitions of “violence” I will use throughout this paper. Whenever I am speaking specifically and solely about psychological violence, I will specify this. For the purposes of clarity, the three definitions are: “Vehemence or intensity of emotion; extreme fervor; passion”; “Undue constraint applied to nature, a trait, habit, etc., so as to restrict its development or use, or to alter it unnaturally”; The final definition is: “Improper treatment or use of a word or text; misinterpretation; misapplication; alteration
of meaning or intention” (OEDOnline.com). The final definition will be utilized when I discuss the generic transformation King Lear has undergone.
Self-reflexive Audiences, Psychic Violence, & The Defective Present

In the introduction to his monograph, Andrew Gurr explains the difference between an “audience” and a “spectator” (1), and also considers whether early modern playwrights favored the spectacle of theater or the textual content of the plays (3). Gurr discusses possible goals of playwrights and theater companies, and notes that the delivery of plays changed whether playwrights and theater companies desired performances to be more aurally or visually appealing. Likewise, the content of the plays, types of crowds, and, eventually, atmosphere of theaters began to change. Gurr’s scholarship sheds light on the debates surrounding the staging of early modern theatrical performances. Additionally, Gurr discusses the etymological differences between “audience” and “spectator” and notes the remarkably differing opinions on the subject held by early modern poets and playwrights. Generally speaking, “All the poets agreed that there were two kinds of playgoer divided according to the priority of eye or ear, but they did not always agree over who represented which” (Gurr 111). *Hamlet*, Gurr suggests, is one of Shakespeare’s plays that is particularly engaged with the roles of the spectator and audience; he explains that Shakespeare’s audience “was always a hearer, usually in the legal sense. The watchers who are ‘mutes or audience’ to Hamlet’s tragedy are legal witnesses...Spectators were the groundlings that Hamlet looked down on” (114). Likewise, the fourth wall in broken when the audience becomes spectators for Hermione’s trial and King Lear’s mock trial. Both plays similarly shatter the fourth wall when the violence is uncanny rather than spectacular.
King Lear and The Winter’s Tale do not have to depict much violence on stage; the plays rather brilliantly rely on violence that is familiar to the theatergoers. Stephen Greenblatt has written extensively on the role of theaters in early modern England, noting, “The whole point of anxiety in the theater is to make it give such delight that the audience will pay for it again and again. And this delight seems bound up with the marking out of theatrical anxiety as represented anxiety—not wholly real, either in the characters onstage or in the audience” (135). Complicating this point, Greenblatt discusses the high anxiety levels Englanders incurred daily as a result of economic strains, food shortages, and epidemic plague outbreaks (137). He elaborates on the role of public punishment: “Public maimings and executions were designed to arouse fear and to set the stage for the royal pardons that would demonstrate that the prince’s justice was tempered with mercy. If there were only fear, the prince, it was said, would be deemed a tyrant; if there were only mercy, it was said that the people would altogether cease to be obedient” (137). Greenblatt makes clear how the public spectacles of violence were both embraced as deterrents for crimes and as examples of the Queen or King’s mercy. Jean Howard also discusses how various spectacles are employed during this time: “The Renaissance employed spectacles—including spectacles of exemplary violence, spectacles of monarchical display, and the spectacles of the public stage—as crucial elements of social control and ideological dissemination” (4). In doing this, Greenblatt and Howard both emphasize the prevalence of violence in the daily lives of early modern theatergoers, and also highlight the theatrical nature of some of that violence.

Greenblatt’s remarks connect nicely to Judith Butler’s consideration of human vulnerability when confronted with violence and loss: “When grieving is something to be
feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of
an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order,
or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly” (29-30). Although not
referring to Jacobean theaters, Butler’s remarks concerning disorder and the physicality of
mental anguish are of particular importance when considering the effects of witnessing
violence in early modern theater, as audiences were not granted the “release” from anxiety
Greenblatt talks about. In Jacobean Drama, Pascale Aebischer argues “Jacobean [plays]
point to a less than perfect past, but nonetheless one which can help us legitimise our own
defective present.” Indeed, the way Shakespeare accomplishes this is by alluding to
contemporary references of violence and violent entertainment that are familiar to
audiences. It is when audiences consider King Lear as a bear in a bear pit, or consider
themselves one of the cuckolds Leontes says are in attendance in the audience, for instance,
that the imaginary world of the play and the “defective present” link together and allow for
a discordantly clear moment of introspection to take place.

Performance Studies critic Susan Bennett has written extensively on this topic
noting, “Audiences seek in Jacobean plays more Shakespeare, but with an added twist of
psychopathic violence and deviant desires.” Bennett notes, “How often Shakespeare
performs the role which links the psychic experience of nostalgia to the possibility of
reviving an authentic, naturally better, and material past.” My argument has been
influenced by, yet departs from, Bennett’s insights regarding the performance of nostalgia.
Shakespeare’s Jacobean plays indeed link the psychic experience of audiences with their
material worlds, but it is the experience of violence that links audiences to their
participation in violent culture and, by extension, their contemporary world that *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* perform.

Violence is at the heart of *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale*, yet it is rarely staged for spectators. Instead, characters discuss violence that occurs offstage and, I argue, make use of “violence by suggestion,” which occurs when actors incorporate the surrounding entertainment (i.e. bear gardens) into their discussions of violence. This transforms audiences from passive spectators to individuals aware of their dual roles as spectators and participants in the play(s), or self-reflexive audience members. By relying on the violence that resides in the public imaginary, the audience members become incorporated into the play and the possibility of art as escape is eliminated.

This idea is not new to contemporary audiences, but it is seldom considered in relation to Shakespeare’s plays. Contemporary readers are likely familiar with the work of August Boal and his views that “a spectator must be given his full capacity for action back” (58). Boal enforces his argument by affirming that the spectator is not “a passive victim” of a spectacle, but a “liberated agent” (59). For Boal, eliminating the possibility of theater to serve as escapism forges a “liberated agent”; theater must remind audience members of their own mortality and corporeal vulnerability. The notion of corporeal vulnerability is something Butler discusses in relation to trauma. Butler asserts, “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well” (26). The psychological violence in *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* makes spectators aware of their psychical vulnerability. On the significance of one's physical autonomy, Butler writes, “It is important to claim that our bodies are in a
sense *our own* and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies” and then asks, “Is there a way in which the place of the body, and the way in which it disposes us outside ourselves or sets us beside ourselves, opens up another kind of normative aspiration within the field of politics?” (25-6). While I am not suggesting Shakespeare held such radical viewpoints of the role his audience should play, I am suggesting the nuanced approach to violence implies that psychic violence can pose as great, if not a greater, threat to an individual's corporeal vulnerability.
The role of Sympathy & The Senses

Many critical debates exist concerning theatergoing and the function of the five senses, particularly the eyes and ears, in early modern England. Michael O'Connell's *The Idolatrous Eye* and Stuart Clark's "Images: Reformation of the Eyes" are two such examples that focus on the early modern anxiety surrounding spectators being susceptible to idolatrous acts. In “The Idolatrous Nose: Incense on the Early Modern Stage,” Holly Crawford Pickett comments on the discussions surrounding spectatorship and idolatry:  
“Such discussions suggest vision is the most dangerous of the senses because it is the most apt to be fooled into mistaking a non-deity for the true God” (19). Pickett argues, however, that olfaction is just as vulnerable to idolatrous acts due, in part, to its ability to conjure memories. Specifically, the scent of incense on stage, Pickett suggests, would experientially invoke memories of Catholic mass for audiences (19-38). In David Robertson’s “Olfaction in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tragedy of King Lear*,” smells are able “to provide authentic, reliable experiences, which offer a basis for action and judgment” (44). Robertson argues that *The Winter’s Tale* and *King Lear*, specifically, are plays concerned with themes of cognition and “the problem of whether information provided by the senses is to be trusted” (44), noting that the “critical consensus on the plays is that they are centrally concerned with the problem of cognition and especially the reliability of the evidence provided by sight in cognition” (46). O’Connell, Clark, Pickett, and Robertson’s articles provide beneficial insight regarding the symbolism and philosophical discussions surrounding the eyes and ears in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. However, I believe this body of criticism is at once too dismissive of the importance of cognition and sympathy
informed by vision, as well as overlooking the influence of crucial factions of Jacobean life like bear-baiting, public executions, and the spectacle of court and witchcraft trials.

*The Winter’s Tale* and *King Lear* are rife with violent language that often depict human mortality as a type of cosmic game. The surprising juxtaposition of mindless entertainment and games with instances of extreme physical violence and psychological trauma creates a sympathetic experience for spectators of the violence and of the play(s). To modern audiences, sympathy is a virtue, but for early modern audiences, the experience of sympathy is decidedly more complicated. Beyond making audiences aware of their role as spectators and actors violence in *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale* infuse otherwise hopeless moments and obdurate characters with sympathetic possibility. Sympathy is more than pity and/or compassion; it is an observable occurrence. Joseph Ortiz writes about the belief of the physicality of sympathy in England during the Renaissance: “In Renaissance England, ‘sympathy’ denotes a correspondence of feeling between people, objects, or astral bodies” (36). Ortiz specifically explores sympathy as it relates to musical events, but it is significant for me to consider the Renaissance English beliefs surrounding sympathy Ortiz discusses. He continues, “...[T]he physically observable concord between musical instruments...was seen as an especially concrete example of this phenomenon—not simply an analogy for it” (36) and thus “musical sympathy was taken as evidence that a very real, mutual influence regularly occurred, even if it was not always perceptible” (36). I hope to supplement this interpretive field with my argument that violence serves as a catalyst for generating a sympathetic occurrence, which increasingly throughout Shakespeare’s plays, implies that the spectator will physically transform as a direct response to psychological change(s). For this reason, there is insight to be gained by
examining the theater’s representation(s) of theatricality in relation to violence in *King Lear*, specifically in moments where Lear stages a performance or draws attention to theatrical elements of his own actions. Thus, the psychological impact and physical experience of witnessing violence can be physically observed—its impact viscerally measured—on the spectator’s body, which has been transformed due to sympathy.

It is worth briefly mentioning other discussions taking place in early modern England concerning sympathy. It was widely believed that sympathy was usually associated with the occult, in early modern politics, as witchcraft and witchcraft trials were also a common spectacular occurrence. James I was known for his witch-hunts and public trials of accused “witches.” Such trials relied absolutely on witnesses to confirm the occurrence of witchcraft, and if a witnesses’ mind was changed last minute, “sympathy” was believed to be the culprit. In “The City of Witches: James I, the Unholy Sabbath, and the Homosocial Refashioning of the Witches’ Community,” Thomas G Lolis examines witchcraft and the witchcraft trials in early modern England. Lolis scrutinizes “the ways in which James selectively imported Continental theories on witchcraft to form a conception of witchcraft that was strikingly new to English and Scottish culture” (322). James utilized this authority and “new blend of occult ideology” (322) to “reshape popular perceptions of politically motivated...communities...and to simultaneously deflect suspicion away from the privileged conventions of male homosociality” (322). James’ reshaping of discourse surrounding witchcraft displays his total control over the public opinion of witchcraft and the occult. James creates and enforces the idea that witches do not “live” or “act” alone, rather, they exist in communities. This, as one might imagine, creates palpable tension during the public trials as all who knew the accused party were also under scrutiny by the
The trials in *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* successfully arouse sympathy from spectators and characters in the play, but, again, it is the violence that elicits such emotions and not witchcraft. *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* depart from staging excessive violence and instead create violence for audiences by turning the spectator into an actor, drawing from the common knowledge of daily violence, folk stories, and Elizabethan drama, and utilizing the artistic convention of self-reflexivity.
Various moments in Shakespeare’s Jacobean plays penetrate the fourth wall, effectively eradicating the illusory boundary believed to separate our world from the world of the plays. One way Shakespeare creates psychological violence is by using the public’s knowledge of violence and Elizabethan drama as an instrument to break the fourth wall. In *King Lear* this is done in subtle, yet impactful, ways: Shakespeare relies on the public knowing the Elizabethan drama *King Leir*, from which *King Lear* radically departs, and Lear and Gloucester express their psychological suffering in language suggestive of bear baiting—a widely popular blood sport in Jacobean England.

While it is impossible to say Shakespeare purposely rewrote *King Leir* to shock audiences, it is safe to say that audiences attending a performance of *King Lear* expected a significantly less tragic version of the play than they received. James Shapiro argues that Shakespeare actively relied on the audiences’ prior knowledge of the Elizabethan *Leir*. He examines the generic transformation *King Lear* undergoes under Shakespeare’s hand and notes the influence of the Elizabethan *King Leir*:

Shakespeare’s revision depended on his playgoer’s familiarity with the broad contours of the old story: the division of the kingdom, the banishment of the king’s youngest daughter, and the civil war ensuing from Frame. Those in the audience who had seen *King Leir* or had read any of the other versions of Lear’s reign in circulation already knew how the story ends...Nobody dies...and all that is lost is restored. (300-26)
It seems that in his rewriting of the play, Shakespeare toys with audiences’ expectations in an unprecedented way. In *Leir*, order is restored at the end of the play, and all characters leave the stage alive. The content and the genre of *Leir* seem out of place in the Jacobean Theater as “the Elizabethan world that had produced *King Leir* and in which the play had once thrived...was no longer” (300). Considering Shapiro’s statement alongside Bennett’s suggestion that Jacobean theatergoers craved “psychopathic violence and deviant desires” in their plays, the case is strong for Shakespeare actively relying on audiences’ prior knowledge of *Leir* as a way to heighten the “psychopathic” or psychological violence in *Lear*.

The generic of this play begins as history, widely known, that ends with a reinstatement of stability, and becomes a tragedy, shocking to audiences, that upends order and denies audiences the comfort of a resolution. Perhaps Gloucester’s words after his blinding are the best way to describe the rewritten *King Lear*, as the play is “all dark and comfortless” (3.7.103). Shapiro continues his discussion of Shakespeare’s reworking of *Leir*: “Audiences in 1606 would have expected Shakespeare’s play to end in much the same way, with Lear restored to his throne and Cordelia spared” (Shapiro). The audience expects restoration and relief from the suffering that dominates so much of *King Lear*, but instead the suffering is heightened when all but Albany and Edgar die in the closing scene. *Lear’s* absence of “comfort,” of clarity, resolution, and retribution for wrongdoings make the play psychologically and emotionally uneasy for audiences and readers alike and further infuse the drama with psychological violence. Shapiro’s claims are undoubtedly intriguing and thorough, but his argument relies wholly on an interpretation of Shakespeare’s intentions. Rather than focus on Shakespeare’s intentions for rewriting the play, I propose this generic
revision is a sound example of theatergoers’ common knowledge (i.e. popular culture) being incorporated into the play. This is seen in the generic reshaping of the play, and it is also displayed when references to bear baiting and performance occur. The result of this generic change and references to popular culture is that spectators of the play, and characters in the play, are exposed to a different form of violence. Spectators and characters see and hear violence that does not entirely occur onstage, but rather is most gruesomely found in spoken words, metaphors, mock trials, and simulated experiences. Much like the text itself, the violence in King Lear undergoes a genre change. The violence begins as staged gore and physical wounds in Leir, and is heightened and intensified—and consumed visually and aurally—in King Lear, so that the impact of violence inflicts a psychological wound—something far deeper than a physical injury.

Although it would be years before the words, “Exit, pursued by a bear” were written as stage directions in The Winter’s Tale, this scenario appears as a metaphor in King Lear. Lear turns to this scenario specifically to articulate the magnitude of his mental/emotional suffering, afterwards stating, “The body’s delicate” (3.4.15), but when he is distracted by the “tempest in [his] mind,” (3.4.15), he feels no physical pain. (3.4.15-20). This suggests that what occurs in one’s mind is momentous enough to overpower any physical afflictions an individual may have. If a contemporary audience were discussing Lear’s scenario, we would perhaps do so in terms now scientifically identified as the “Flight or Fight” response. Lear’s positioning of this autonomic human instinct suggests that the fight or flight response is overridden if the “tempest” in one’s mind is strong enough.

Lear seems to understand fight or flight as a larger metaphor for his life, rather than a subconscious response to life-threatening situations. The image of a snarling, fighting
bear was a familiar one to Jacobean audiences that frequented bull and bearbaiting
gardens, one of which was located next to The Globe Theater². It is significant that Lear
describes his life, and his ability to dictate the circumstances of his life, in terms suggestive
of this popular and spectacularly violent form of entertainment, as it paints a particularly
bleak and gruesome scene. Despite the relationship between social control and theater³, it
still maintains a subversive potential⁴. Given the intertextual connection the theater forges
with early modern life, there is a subversive awareness during moments of violence that
exists in King Lear, where popular culture is embraced as a way to express human suffering
and psychological violence, and the play seems to suggest that the effects of these
experiences do not easily heal. I first consider this in relation to Lear’s mock trial in Act 3,
then briefly discuss Gloucester’s blinding, and finally end this section by considering the
lasting impact of Gloucester’s violent punishment.

After Goneril and Regan have closed their doors to Lear, he wanders into a storm
while his few followers begin to worry for his physical and mental well-being. Concerned
for Lear’s physical health, Kent urges the king to take shelter from a raging storm: “The
tyrranny of the open night’s too rough / For nature to endure” (3.4.2-3). Kent’s use of
“tyranny” figures the storm as an oppressive, violent force that would physically harm the
king’s body if he were exposed much longer. This word choice is significant as “tyranny” is
typically associated with an oppressive ruler; thus, the language Kent uses to describe the
violence of the storm recalls the violent displays of public punishment Greenblatt and
Howard discuss. In his response to Kent, Lear explains his current physical and emotional

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² The Globe and Bear Gardens were located next to one another
³ As Greenblatt and Howard document
⁴ Greenblatt talks extensively about how subversion in theaters is sanctioned and thus it
can be considered “contained subversion”
condition—essentially as “bad” and “worse,” respectively: “Where the greater malady is fixed, / The lesser is scarce felt. Thou’dst shun a bear, / But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea, / Thou’dst meet the bear i’ the’ mouth” (3.4.10-3). If one were to find oneself face-to-face with a bear, one would flee, so long as there was a clear escape route. But if one’s escape route led to a roaring sea rather than freedom, one would choose to fight the bear. Given two less than ideal scenarios to choose from, Lear posits drowning to be the worst choice. Perhaps this is because the choice of certain death, by jumping into a roaring ocean, would imply that one views circumstances as insurmountable and lost the will to live, or perhaps more appropriately, to fight for life. If one, displaying a desire to live, chooses instead to confront the bear, there is at least a chance of surviving and overcoming, an outcome absolutely impossible for the person who drowns. Contained in Lear’s horrific metaphor is a simple point: a person whose mental state is such that he/she would choose certain death over the possibility of life, no matter how small, is a person who died as soon as the decision not to fight was made. This demonstrates the way violence functions throughout the play, as it inflicts one’s mind first and then affects one’s body, not the other way around.

King Lear stages a performance of a mock trial, presumably with the intention of enacting justice for his own misfortunes and to express his psychological unrest. I suggest the mock trial functions as a type of language—a mode of communication—for Lear because it is a visual manifestation of what currently plagues his thoughts. This staged and abbreviated performance exposes the mistreatment he feels he has endured. Lear’s lived experiences from the play’s opening are rendered into a theatrical show, which thus
transforms “history” into a dramatic—and then tragic—performance, much the way King Lear transforms King Leir.

The space of the hovel, where the mock trial takes place, is significant for both auditors and spectators of the play, as it is a site connected with much psychological violence. When Kent first tries to usher Lear into the hovel Lear responds: “Wilt break my heart?” and in doing so considers the ability of spectacle to break one’s heart. While the hovel is not particularly violent in its appearance, the connotations of entering a hovel is something psychologically violent to Lear as he worries about the ability of his heart to withstand such an experience. Lear, as king, would have once been able to avoid asking this question, but he is now incapable of not asking. His apprehension to enter a space that could be emotionally upsetting signals an awareness of the potential societal inequities that were once his responsibility as king. It is significant that the shelter—and stage for the mock trial--for Lear, the Fool, Kent, and Edgar is a “hovel,” a place traditionally used to house farm animals and agriculture tools. A “hovel” is “an open shed” (OEDOnline.com) where animals were often housed. It is seemingly the space of the hovel that pulls Lear out of his mock trial; I will discuss that in more detail below. Generically, thematically, and dramatically, this scene is often read as a generic shift from comedy to tragedy within the dramatic narrative of the play. Lear, feeling wronged by Regan and Goneril after being turned away by them stages a mock trial where he desires to interrogate his daughters and see justice enacted. Before this scene, readers and audience members witness Lear battling

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5 For more on this topic, see: Maurice Hunt’s “‘Bearing Hence’ Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, Andrew Gurr’s “The Bear, the Statue, and Hysteria In The Winter’s Tale,” Michael D. Bristol's “In Search of the Bear: Spatiotemporal Form and the Heterogeneity of Economies in The Winter's Tale.”
the elements. Seeking safety from the storm comes at a crucial time for Lear, as Kent’s response to Gloucester illustrates Lear’s deteriorating mental wellbeing: “All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience” (3.6.4).

Kent, who serves as Lear’s caregiver for much of the play, alerts audience members to Lear’s deteriorating physical condition. He makes several references to the “amazed” “tired” and exposed “sinews” of Lear’s body. Once Lear has battled the elements and is safely inside the hovel, Kent emphasizes his altered physical appearance. Kent again tries to usher Lear to rest inside the hovel and emphasizes Lear’s physical condition: “How do you, sir? Stand you not so amazed. / Will you lie down and rest upon the cushions?” (3.6.35-6). Lear stands “amazed,” which implies he is in a state of shock, and his shock, a psychological response to his recent experience, begins to appear on his body. This simple question connotes that Lear has undergone a transformation. Lear responds to this question by assigning roles for his mock trial:

I’ll see their trial first. Bring in their evidence.

[To Edgar] Thou robéd man of justice, take thy place, /

[To Fool] And thou, his yokefellow of equity, / Bench by this side. [To Kent.]

You are o’th’ / commission;

Sit you, too. (3.6.37-43)

After Lear has assigned the men their roles, Edgar states the purpose of the trial will be to “deal justly” (3.6.44). Initiating the performance, Lear provides a testimony against Goneril’s crime: “Arraign her first; ’tis Goneril. I here take my oath before this honorable assembly, she kicked the poor king her father” (3.6.50-2). It is important to note that, to Lear, Goneril’s crime is violent in nature. Audiences know that while Goneril did not
actually kick Lear, she did kick him off her property. This demonstrates how Lear interprets painful actions and feelings of betrayal—inflictions of one’s mind—and when staging his mock trial translates those actions to physically violent offenses.

There is no on-stage violence during Lear’s mock trial, yet I consider this scene one of the most violent in the play. The first and last events involve Goneril and Regan, as they are identified by name. Lear’s fool, Kent, and Edgar play their parts as assigned, but stop when the performance becomes indistinguishable from reality. Lear’s fool addresses Goneril: “Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?” (3.6.53); Lear, responding for Goneril, says “She cannot deny it” (3.6.54), and the fool replies: “Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint stool” (3.6.55). When discussing Regan, Lear says: “Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds / about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that / make these hard hearts?” In the middle of his mock trial, shortly after Regan or Goneril escape Lear’s court, Lear breaks the dramatic action with a seemingly distressed realization: dogs are barking at him. Barking dogs play different roles in this play, one such role is alerting actors and audiences members that a physical transformation has taken place.

For both Edgar and Lear, dogs barking at them is distressing and an indication of an altered physical appearance. For instance, at the end of the play Edgar, in telling Albany what he has endured, describes a physical transformation he experienced, saying he “assume[d] a semblance / That very dogs disdain’d.” Indeed, Lear’s realization that dogs are barking at him seems to portend an ominous transformation to the king. In the middle of his mock trial, Lear interjects: “The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanch, and / Sweet-heart, see, they bark at me.” While there are no stage directions that suggest Lear is actually speaking to dogs, it is not outside the realm of possibilities that, given their current location
in a hovel, dogs would be present as animals, including dogs, were frequently kept in hovels. Lear identifies the dogs by name, so it seems likely given his word choice that Lear knows these dogs. While this moment is not a physically violent scene, it is worth considering the effect of staging this, as Lear would be standing on an early modern stage, in close proximity to London’s bear and bull gardens, with dogs barking at him.

The dogs begin to bark at Lear at a moment when he gets upset during the performance; he yells: “And here’s another, whose warp’d looks proclaim / What store her heart is made on. Stop her there! / Arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the place! / False justicer, why hast thou let her ‘scape? (3.6.59). Until the dogs begin barking, Lear is an actor in his own staged trial, and he is visibly upset by the staged events and actions of the “false justicer.” However, once the dogs begin barking, they seem to pull Lear out of the performance, as he begins to contemplate each of their names is sure to mention they are barking at him, not another character, but Lear. This scene is complex when considering how violence is depicted and its impact on individuals. Since the violence is off-stage, this scene relies on the public’s knowledge of both court trials and bear baiting to be effective.

This image of Lear on stage performing and being barked at by dogs is not unlike what one would expect to see at a bearbaiting pit where several dogs would be set to fight against a chained bear. While Lear does not make a specific reference to the activity, I suggest that the physical location of the theater and actors on stage in addition to what is being said, could have viably registered an association to bearbaiting activities. One would be unable to get to the theater without seeing or hearing something associated with bear baiting. For instance, theatergoers could hear the baiting activities from the Globe Theater, The Globe and bear garden were located next to one another, and, to speak to the
popularity of the sport, the bear gardens had been a fixture of early modern life longer than standing theaters.

Edgar, upset by what he sees, comments that "My tears begin to take his part so much, / They’ll mar my counterfeiting" (3.6.62-3). The reality of the suffering and violence Edgar witnesses threatens to end his performance by causing him to cry. Once the fool and Kent accompany Lear out of the hovel, Edgar reflects on the impact of the performance he has witnessed. The suffering that Edgar perceives Lear to have endured is relatable and humbling to him: “How light and portable my pain seems now, / When that which makes me bend makes the king bow” (3.7.118-9). Edgar, by virtue of being a spectator, has been transformed by witnessing the violence in Lear’s mind. Edgar is able to reevaluate his own plight by placing his emotions and responses alongside Lear’s. By bearing witness to Lear’s interpretation of and response to recent events, Edgar’s sympathy for Lear is visual and easily recognizable to audience members. Edgar witnesses, contemplates, and is deeply bothered by Lear’s suffering; this manifests physically as Edgar’s tears, or the mention of Edgar’s tears, would be an easily recognizable display of suffering or anguish.

During and immediately after the mock trial, Edgar and Kent both make comments that suggest they are bearing witness to a tragic scene. When Lear first addresses the Goneril character, Edgar responds to the king’s actions by saying: “Look, where he stands and glares!” Once Lear becomes visibly upset over someone escaping, Edgar exclaims, “Bless thy five wits!” and Kent urges Lear to exert self-control: “O pity! Sir, where is the patience now, / That thou so oft have boasted to retain?” In an aside, though, Edgar breaks his dramatic personae and explains that Lear’s actions move him to tears, which threatens to expose his true identity. Soon after this, Lear agrees to rest, using inherently theatrical
terms to describe his repose: “Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains: / so, so, so.” After Gloucester reenters, Kent tells him that Lear’s “wits are gone” but Gloucester insists that the men retreat to Dover where they will be safe.

Kent has made several references to the “amazed” “tired” and exposed “sinews” of Lear’s body, but Lear fights off rest so that he can stage the trial, a type of entertainment and embodiment of his anxiety over his vulnerability. King Lear illustrates the corporeal vulnerability and suffering endured by aging characters by placing the two oldest characters, Lear and Gloucester, in the position of a bear in a bear pit. Blurring bearbaiting with spectacular punishment, both fixtures of early modern life into the text of the play, there exists an inescapable self-awareness for audience members concerning the prevalence of violence in Renaissance life.

The other way(s) psychological violence appears in a more nuanced and heightened manner in King Lear is through audience and dramatic self-reflexivity. Throughout the play, the disguised Edgar consistently functions as a buffer between the world of the play and the world of the spectators, alerting spectators when he witnesses something so heartrending it threatens to expose his identity. Edgar speaks to himself in brief “asides” during various moments in the play, and although he is not clearly addressing the audience, the information he provides them allow audience members to partake in the dramatic irony of the situation. This effectively draws attention to Edgar’s disguised identity as a type of performance as well creates an audience that considers what they know, or can see, that all but Edgar can/do not. Several times throughout the play, Edgar underscores particularly violent moments and sympathizes with characters to the extent that his emotions threaten to expose his disguised identity. Edgar’s sympathy is perhaps depicted
differently than one might imagine when recalling Renaissance theories of sympathy. Predominant theories of sympathy included connections to music and/or the occult. However, Edgar’s sympathy is different; indeed, what causes Edgar to sympathize with the anguish of Lear and Gloucester is the violence both characters endure, and not music or witchcraft. Both the mock trial and the blinding involve violence by suggestion and demonstrate the psychological damage such violence inflicts. The impact of the violence committed against Lear and Gloucester is what threatens to transform the sympathetic Edgar and expose his identity.

In Act 3 of *King Lear*, Gloucester, the oldest character after Lear, is bound and tied to a chair and torturously punished for aiding Lear. Regan asks her father why he helps smuggle Lear to Dover: “Because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister / In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs (3.7.69-72),” Gloucester responds. An enraged and sickly ironic Cornwall responds, “See’t shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair. / Upon these eyes of thine I’ll set my foot” (3.7.81-2). A servant comes to Gloucester’s defense, but is quickly overcome and killed in front of him, after which Cornwall tells Gloucester: “Lest it see more, prevent it. Out vile jelly. / Where is thy luster now?” (3.7.101). Answering Cornwall, Gloucester responds by saying, “All dark and comfortless” (3.7.102). This level of violence is not unprecedented for Jacobean audiences—particularly those who frequented bear gardens, where bears were frequently blinded before they were pitted against several dogs for a death match. This moment in the play is uniquely upsetting, however, because the “bear” is an elderly man who, unlike

6 Among many early modern writers, Thomas Dekker has written extensively about witnessing a freshly blinded bear fight in the bear garden—qtd. in Terence Hawkes’ *Shakespeare in the Present*
an actual bear, is able to articulate his betrayal, pain, and anguish. This act of violence against Gloucester is horrific, and the question “Where is thy lustre now?” reads as rhetorical, but the tragedy of this moment is heightened when Gloucester responds: “All dark and comfortless. Where’s my son / Edmund?-- / Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature, / To quit this horrid act” (3.7.103-6). Gloucester is then told that Edmund is the son who has betrayed him, and thus after being blinded, in his own home, Gloucester is thrown out and left on his own. While this is undeniably a scene of staged violence, I am examining the psychological impacts of such violence rather than the event itself. It is worth mentioning that before Cornwall blinds Gloucester, his reasoning is not phrased in terms of punishment; he tells Gloucester, “lest it [the other eye] see more, prevent it” (3.7.101). This suggests that Gloucester’s ability to witness the violence and abuse of power taking place poses a far greater threat to Cornwall than simply gouging out Gloucester’s eyes.

Gloucester’s merciless blinding is a heartrending scene. Despite our own penchant for violence, contemporary audiences usually respond to Gloucester one might imagine: with shock, horror, and sympathy. However, for an early modern theatergoer whose regular entertainment relied on violent spectacle—like bearbaiting— the violence Gloucester endures would not have been anything unusual, or unfamiliar for that matter. Gloucester is punished in front of spectators both in the play and on stage, which is similar to the spectacles of public punishment taking place outside the theater as well as the blood sports, specifically bearbaiting that took place next door to the Globe Theater, where many bears were blinded before they were placed in the bear pits to fight. This perhaps explains Gloucester’s explicit identification with a bear before his blinding when he says, “I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course.” Bears were tied to stakes during bearbaiting
events, and the pun on “course” as meaning a cycle, a corpse, and also a meal, should not be
lost here. Immediately after the blinding, Regan demands Gloucester be thrown from that
property and remarks that he can “smell his way to Dover,” likening Gloucester to a dog or
wounded bear, which further reinforces Gloucester’s identification with bearbaiting.
Gloucester’s body is discarded like a carcass of an animal after a blood sport; thrown off the
premises and left to die.

Finally, once Gloucester and Edgar encounter King Lear again, Edgar comments on
the gravity of the situation. Lear tells Gloucester: “I remember thine eyes well enough. / Dost thou squiny/ at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid! I’ll not / love. Read thou this challenge; mark but the / penning of it” (4.6.151-4). Gloucester responds, “Were all the letters suns, I could not see one” (4.6.155). Edgar witnesses this interaction take place and
comments, “I would not take this from report; it is, / And my heart breaks at it” (4.6.156-7).
Edgar informs the audience that he would not believe the interaction between Lear and
Gloucester that takes place in front of him unless he witnessed it with his own eyes. Despite
his acting, the moments of extreme suffering, such as this interaction between Lear and
Gloucester, cause Edgar to stop his performance and to consider the implications of what
he is witnessing. This scene depicts a blinded, incapacitated Gloucester reunited with King
Lear, who has increasingly deteriorated since leaving the hovel. Edgar sympathizes with
how violence has impacted his father and Lear, and, in doing so, also foreshadows
Gloucester’s response to Edgar revealing his identity; his heart, radically torn between
passion, joy and grief, cannot endure the extreme emotions and it “bursts smilingly”
(5.3.232-5).
Despite his acting, the moments of extreme suffering, such as this interaction between Lear and Gloucester, cause Edgar to stop his performance and to consider the implications of what he is witnessing: the price of growing old in a society that prizes corporeal strength, virility, and youthful prowess. The relationship between violence and entertainment is seemingly interrogated with events like Gloucester’s blinding and Lear’s comments in the hovel. Gloucester's blinding occurs on stage. The suffering that results from this act of violence is worth considering, as Gloucester is punished in front of spectators both in the play and on stage, which is not unlike the events taking place outside the theater.

We should consider what this character would look like, or what he is described to look like, on stage. When Gloucester is turned out on his own, an old man approaches him and says, “Alack, sir, you cannot see your way” to which Gloucester responds, “I have no way, and therefore want no eyes/ I stumbled when I saw......Might I but live to see [Edgar] in my touch, I’d say I had eyes again!” (4.1.19-20). Gloucester immediately begins redefining what it means to be able to see and to have eyes, a rhetorical move that could be read as shifting focus away from his blinding. However, the frequent mention of the physical absence of his eyes prevents spectators and readers from forgetting. Edgar happens upon his father soon after he is blinded and is shaken by the sight. Having disguised himself as a mad beggar for most of the play, Edgar almost looses his ability to maintain his charade in the presence of his blinded father, much they way he did with Lear in the hovel: “Poor Tom's a-cold” and then aside “I cannot daub it further.....And yet I must.—Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed” (4.1.61). Edgar draws attention to the corporeality of Gloucester’s suffering by illustrating that the holes in Gloucester’s head are
bleeding; a sight that threatens to destabilize his ability to act, to perform a role. Edgar considers the limits of dramatic representation, as well as its appropriateness, given the violence and suffering experienced by his father; this is something that is worthwhile to consider as it relates to the role, and perhaps limits of, an early modern spectator as well.

The attention placed on Gloucester’s extended suffering after his blinding should cause the viewer to pause and consider the limits of violence for entertainment. For our viewing pleasure, we are presented Gloucester with bleeding holes in his head, quite literally on the edge of suicide.

Gloucester asks Edgar to lead him to the Cliffs of Dover so that he can end his suffering. Edgar recreates the cliffs for his father in a type of verbal performance. Gloucester, aware that he is not climbing a cliff, asks: “When shall I come to the top of that same hill?” (4.6.1). Positioning his father as a type of theatergoer, Edgar narrates their fictitious journey to the cliffs: “You do climb it now: look, how we labour” (4.6.2).

Gloucester, feeling he has not labored up a cliff, responds by telling Edgar, “Methinks the ground is even” (4.6.3). The remainder of the events unfold as follows: Edgar refutes Gloucester’s claim that the “ground is even” by saying it is “Horrible steep. / Hark, do you hear the sea?” (4.6.4-5). When Gloucester says, “No, truly,” Edgar responds by telling Gloucester his blinding must be causing his other senses to dull (4.6.6-10). Gloucester questions this: “So may it be, indeed? / Methinks thy voice is alter’d; and thou speak’st / In better phrase and matter than thou didst” (4.6.9-11). Gloucester detects a change in Edgar’s voice, suggesting it is “altered,” that Edgar is now speaking “in better phrase and matter” than before. Edgar quickly dismisses Gloucester’s claims, but these comments are significant as they indicate Gloucester’s inner sight gained through trauma.
Although brief, Gloucester and the disguised Edgar had just previously encountered one another. Gloucester had spent part of the play before his blinding with Edgar and did not recognize him through his disguise. Gifted with insight now, Gloucester is more aware of Edgar’s performance and to the change in his voice and speech than he had been previously. Edgar leaves his on father what he thinks is the edge of the cliff so that he can jump; Gloucester falls over instead. Edgar, disguising himself again, runs over as Gloucester awakens; he tells Gloucester he survived the fall and that “Thy life’s a miracle” (4.6.69). Gloucester asks “But have I fall’n, or no” (4.6.70). Edgar responds “From the dread summit of this chalky bourn. / Look up a-height; the shrill-gorged lark so far / Cannot be seen or head: do but look up” (4.6.71-3). While there may have been a temporary moment of relief for readers or audiences in knowing that they did not have to witness Gloucester’s suicide, that moment is soon gone when Gloucester says, “Alack, I have no eyes. / Is wretchedness deprived that benefit, / To end itself by death?” (4.6.74-6). Not only is Gloucester suffering because of his injury, but it is because of that injury that he is unable to enact violence on his body to successfully end his own life and, by extension, that suffering.

Many of the themes involving violence are also found in The Winter’s Tale. Again, there is scarcely any violence depicted on-stage; it all happens off-stage and is relayed to audiences by other characters. The Winter’s Tale is not usually considered a violent play, or listed among Shakespeare’s most violent plays, but, as I will argue, that categorization warrants reconsideration. In The Winter’s Tale, I examine Hermione’s trial as an opportunity for sympathy to occur as a result of violence. I then turn to the infamous, “Exit, pursued by a bear” moment and closely examine the Shepherd’s son’s response to what he witnesses and hears. Both of these moments result in a character experiencing sympathy or
psychological disturbance caused by what they have witnessed; I suggest, in both cases, what they have witnessed and been transformed by is violence.

**The Winter’s Tale**

Offstage violence is the source of sympathy and an altered mental wellbeing in *The Winter’s Tale*. The Shepherd’s Son (the “Clown” in some editions) is both auditor and witness to mass casualties. Per a request he believes Hermione made in his dream the night before, Antigonus and a group of mariners travel to the shores of Bohemia where Antigonus leaves the infant Perdita in the wilderness. The ship awaits Antigonus’ return when a storm hits and devours it and the men on board; Antigonus is simultaneously being torn apart and devoured by a bear. If we consider the aforementioned debates concerning the types of playgoers many playwrights desired, the Shepherd’s son is the darkly literal embodiment of the ideal playgoer: he is both “auditor” and “spectator.” Again, the source of his sympathy for Antigonus and the mariners are violent events. Although the storm and bear mauling could arguably be considered “natural disasters,” it is safe to state, with certainty, that these characters suffered violent deaths.

*The Winter’s Tale* is widely acknowledged as a play concerned with the relationship between art and reality and the theater’s ability to construct reality for spectators. This is often discussed in tandem with the play’s ending, as Leontes and theatergoers are told to awaken their senses in preparation for Paulina’s unveiling of her statue. Indeed, *The Winter’s Tale* is very much engaged in the impact of art, but it is also concerned with the relationship between dramatic representations of violence and its ability to awaken the
senses of audiences. Art maintains the possibility to restore order and represent relief and resolution, as Hermione’s statue arguably represents, but it also contains within it a capacity for violence that threatens social stability, instills chaos, and disquiets audiences.

Rather than stage excessive violence, many moments in *The Winter’s Tale* use suggestive language to ask the audience to witness the violence with their imaginations. This is accomplished by expressing violence in suggestive language that evokes spectacles of violence that exist in the public imaginary. Thus a violent moment on stage is internalized, meditated upon, and envisioned by audiences that have been encouraged to contextualize the violence on stage with violent images already in existence in their memories. This is arguably part of what makes the violence in Shakespeare’s Jacobean plays so complex; the plays describe a violent event and then ask audience members to partake in the violence by relating their imagined violence to the violence described on stage.

Leontes aptly demonstrates how imagined violence can alter one’s physical appearance when he enlists the help of Hermione to convince Polixenes to extend his stay in Sicilia. Once he observes their interactions, however, he begins to doubt her fidelity. Hermione gives Polixenes her hand and Leontes reacts:

Too hot, too hot!

To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.

I have *tremor cordis* on me. My heart dances,

But not for joy, not joy. This entertainment

/*...*/

My bosom likes not, nor my brows.” (1.2.139-50)
While the interaction between Hermione and Polixenes is not described in even remotely violent terms, Leontes envisions Hermione's sexual betrayal unfolding in front of his eyes. Leontes interprets Hermione’s mannerisms as though they are a performance: “How she holds up the neb, the bill to him, / And arms her with the boldness of a wife / To her allowing husband!” (1.2.228-30). Hermione and Polixenes are friendly with one another, but Leontes interprets her interaction with Polixenes as reminiscent of an interaction he and Hermione would share. This is confirmed by Leontes’ assertion to Hermione after Polixenes departs: “You have mistook, my lady, / Polixenes for Leontes” (2.1.102-03). It is the reification of Hermione’s gestures and mannerisms with another man that instill rage in Leontes. By viewing Hermione in this context, Leontes imagines the sexual intimacy between Hermione and himself as a malleable performance that Hermione now shares with Polixenes.

Enraged by thoughts of infidelity, Leontes breaks the fourth wall of drama by positioning himself as one of many men present that are victims of cuckoldry. Using language specific to acting, Leontes envisages how Hermione’s alleged infidelity will harm his image, and accuses Hermione of “play[ing]” a part. Viewing himself also as a player, Leontes regards his role as “so disgraced a part” that his children will “hiss [him] to [his] grave” (1.2.235-6). In the midst of his contemplation, Leontes seamlessly incorporates the male audience members as potential and unknowing “victims” of infidelity:

There have been,/  
Or I am much deceived, cuckold ere now; /  
And many a man there is, even at this present,  
Now while I speak this, holds his wife by th’ arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in ‘s absence,
And his pond fished by his next neighbor, by
Sir Smile, his neighbor. Nay, there’s comfort in ‘t
Whiles other men have gates and those gates opened,
As mine, against their will. (1.2.238-47)

The “many a man” present “while [Leontes] speak[s]” are the male spectators in the audience. In this speech, Leontes identifies with the common man; he does not yet use the language of treason and tyranny, but instead positions himself as an average individual who has just become aware of himself as a “cuckold.” Indeed, he suggests that knowing there are men in the audience who have unfaithful wives comforts him. This moment has accomplished incorporating audiences into the narrative of the play as though they are actors and, by extension, encourages the men to sympathize with Leontes’ way of thinking and seeing. Violence is not staged, but Leontes interprets Hermione’s actions as violent offenses committed against himself as a husband and as a man, which illustrates the physical manifestation of perceived violence.

This instance of perceived violence physically alters Leontes and is described as though he is suffering an illness. Leontes’ deterioration aptly demonstrates the ability of imagined violence to transform how an individual observes events as well as how an individual appears. For instance, when Camillo warns Polixenes that his life is in danger, Polixenes responds by saying, “I do believe thee. / I saw his heart in ‘s face” (1.2.536-7). The internalized passions of Leontes have now physically changed his appearance to Polixenes who reads the hostility, anger, and perceived violence transmitted by Leontes’ facial expressions.
For Leontes, physical actions function as evidence and justification of his emotions. He imagines a violation of his authority and his wife have occurred, and rather than allowing the actions of people to inform his perception, he projects his imagined reality onto others in the play. When Leontes is told that Camillo and Polixenes escape he considers it affirmation of Hermione’s infidelity. Leontes uses an analogy to explain his current feelings:

There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected; but if one present
Th’ abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he crack his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (2.1.50-6)

Leontes’ response to Hermione and Polixenes is evidence that dramatic representations of violence in The Winter’s Tale are nuanced: either the violence occurs offstage and is relayed to characters and audiences by the spectator of the event, or the violence occurs onstage but within a character’s psyche, which makes the violent act invisible to audiences but clearly demonstrates the physical effects of such internalized violence.

To reinforce my argument that violence experienced in the mind causes a physical transformation, I now turn to Hermione’s trial. Perceived and internalized violence is the impetus for psychological and physiological metamorphoses during Hermione’s trial in The Winter’s Tale. As Leontes clearly states, the reason for Hermione’s public trial is optics: “Let
us be cleared / Of being tyrannous, since we so openly / Proceed in justice” (3.2.4-6).

Seemingly implied by this statement is the sentiment that acts of injustice happen in private; if the public is able to see Hermione’s alleged crimes—as Leontes sees them—they too will understand his way of thinking.

Beyond merely wanting a public trial, Leontes is adamant that Hermione appear in court and stand trial. This action makes her both a reminder of the violence enacted against Leontes and a physical embodiment of those actions. Leontes is unable to escape his thoughts of violence and treasonous plots as long as Hermione’s body and, by extension the performance he believes her to be enacting, stands before him. Announcing Hermione’s arrival in court, an officer proclaims: “It is his Highness’ pleasure that the Queen / Appear in person here in court” (3.2.9-10). Hermione’s physical presence in the court is a spectacle to Leontes that conjures memories and emotions he associates with betrayal, cuckoldry, and shame. As the trial progresses, the notion that one’s eyes often misinterpret spectacles is increasingly clear, so too is the performative element of Hermione’s trial.

In appealing to Leontes for sympathy, Hermione urges him to recall intimate memories of their past that only the two of them share:

You, my lord, best know

Whom least will seem to do so, my past life

Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true,

As I am now unhappy; which is more

Than history can pattern, though devised

And played to take spectators. (3.2.33-8)

7 Leontes’ reasoning for wanting a public trial is in alignment with Greenblatt’s discussion of why Kings—and Queens—enforce public trials and punishment
Hermione explains to Leontes that he is the only person familiar enough with her, in every sense of the word, to evaluate the extent of her current unhappiness and feelings of betrayal. She urges Leontes to ignore the optics of the trial that is “devised/ And played to take spectators,” and instead to see and judge her with his other senses, which would surely see beyond the staged spectacle and know she is innocent. In a move similar to Leontes incorporation of male spectators as potential “victims” of cuckoldry in Act I, in this self-reflexive moment in the play Hermione draws attention to how easily spectators are “played.” Her pun on “play” works in several ways, two of which being the way Leontes “plays” with spectators by making them part of the performance, the other being the way drama, and the courtroom “play” spectators as easily fooled into believing anything staged in front of them. Regardless of how “play” is invoked, the relationship between what one sees on stage and the ability of one’s imagination and memories to distort or enhance those imagines are interrogated by this scene.

When the trial begins, Leontes makes it known that he wants the public to participate in the trial, but as it progresses, the trial becomes an increasingly private conversation between Leontes and Hermione, and thus the public become interlopers. As Hermione’s pleas begin to prove futile, Hermione suggests that Leontes’ accusations are incomprehensible: “You speak a language that I understand not: / my life stands in the level of your dreams” (3.2.80-2). This implies Hermione almost aligns herself as a prelapsarian figure; not only is she not guilty of Leontes’ accusations, but she is not able to understand the accusations because they are scripted in Leontes’ dreams and translated with the language of betrayal and violence; a type of carnal knowledge to which Hermione is ignorant. Hermione views Leontes’ accusations as though they are communicated to her in
an incomprehensible language. On the contrary, Leontes views Hermione’s actions as the inspiration for his dreams when he tells Hermione, “Your actions are my dreams.” (3.2.88). For Leontes, the spectacle serves to justify his unexplainable feelings. This is certainly true when he first becomes suspicious of Hermione and Polixenes; it is Leontes’ meditating on his memories and sexual knowledge of Hermione that fabricates an image of adultery between Hermione and Polixenes. Just as it is the reason for Leontes’ sudden shift in perspective in Act 1, Hermione’s body will be a catalyst for a sympathetic change Leontes’ experiences after forsaking Apollo’s oracle.

As Hermione’s defense weakens, she turns over her fate to the word(s) of the oracle. The oracle reinforces Hermione’s claims of innocence, much to the dismay of Leontes: “Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, / Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant...” (3.1.143-4). Lords in the court and Hermione rejoice in the oracle and Leontes asks, “Hast thou read truth?” (3.1.149). By this response, it is not immediately clear whether Leontes is in disbelief of his own poor judgment or of the oracle’s words. An officer of the court reaffirms what should be good news, “Ay, my lord, even so as it is here set down” (3.1.150). Now firmly disbelieving the oracle, Leontes announces that, “There is no truth at all i’ th’ oracle. / The sessions shall process. This is mere falsehood” (3.1.151-2). Perhaps Leontes chooses not to believe the oracle because it does not change his image of Hermione in his mind, or perhaps he simply discounts any opinion contrary to his own. Audiences do not know the reason for Leontes’ initial rejection of the oracle because immediately after Leontes declares it false a servant interrupts the court proceedings to deliver the news: “The Prince your son, with mere conceit and fear / Of the Queen’s speed, is gone / .../ Is dead” (3.2.156-9). Although the cause of the prince’s death is said to be his
concern and fear for his mother, Leontes interprets it as divine punishment for his actions: “Apollo’s angry, and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice” (3.1.160-1). The news of his son’s anguish and death begin to shift Leontes’ perspective, as he identifies the death as a result of his own “injustice” enacted against Hermione. Much like Lear, Gloucester, and Hermione, the cause of death for the prince is not a physical wound, an external ailment, or from consuming a substance like poison, the prince’s death is caused by extreme emotions. Although not explicitly stated, it is implied that the prince died because his tormented emotions violently overpowered his physical health.

Hermione responds to the news of her son’s death by echoing the way he died; being a spectacle and auditor of these two deaths turns a tyrannical Leontes into a sympathetic victim of loss. When the news of her son’s death is announced, Leontes responds verbally, but Hermione does not express her thoughts, or feelings, with words. Instead, we are told “Hermione Falls” (3.2.SD). As readers of the play, we are asked to imagine a swooning mother responding to news that her oldest child has died out of concern for her wellbeing. As spectators of the play, we would only see Hermione fall to the ground; whether she is alive or dead would not immediately be clear. The spectacular effects of violence are once again staged in the play: Hermione faints because of words that have been spoken to her. Although we are not granted access to her mind, her physical actions encourage audience members to catalogue the grueling experiences that have led up to this moment: Hermione was asked by her husband to convince Polixenes to extend his visit, was successful, was then accused by her husband of being unfaithful, then accused of conspiring the king’s death, was then publically humiliated by her husband, the king, then imprisoned, gave birth while in prison, had her child taken away and presumably killed, and then, while on trial,
finds out her other child has died over fear for her safety. Simply put, although Hermione’s physical health is seemingly in tact, her psyche could not endure more loss and collapses when the news is delivered.

The spectacle of Hermione falling after receiving news of her son happens while Leontes is speaking, it forces him into reconsidering the alleged crimes committed by Hermione’s body. Leontes is in the midst of correlating his disobedience of the oracle with the death of his son when Hermione collapses. “How now there?” (3.2.162), Leontes asks as he shifts his focus from Apollo’s punishment to the unexpected event. Having remained silent for all of the trial thus far, Paulina rushes to the Queen’s aid and quickly demands the King focus his eyes on Hermione: “This news is mortal to the Queen. Look down / And see what death is doing” (3.2.163-4). Paulina accomplishes several significant things in this moment, two of which are affirming Hermione’s death is a response to news of her son’s death, and gaining control of the narrative of Hermione’s body. Until this moment in the play, Hermione’s body has functioned like a mirror to Leontes: he has been projecting meaning onto Hermione’s body and then interpreting those projections as proof of her guilt. Whereas Hermione’s body previously represented sexual deviation, adultery, and conspiracy to Leontes and perhaps audience members, it now represents sympathy. There is a direct causality between death and the spectacle of sympathy; this is clear when Paulina wants Leontes to see what “death is doing” (3.2.164, italics mine). In this moment, death is merely another player on the stage, as is suggested by the action verb “doing,” and while it may not be observable independently, its impact on the other players is clear.

Internal emotions are now visible on the body—and on stage—as the sympathy and pain Hermione feel transforms from being strictly internal to ailments physically inflicting
the body. Paulina is almost immediately successful in reshaping Leontes’ perception, yet Leontes still believes Hermione’s ailments are reversible. He instructs: “Her heart is but o’ercharged. She will recover. / I have too much believed mine own suspicion. / Beseech you, tenderly apply to her / Some remedies for life” (3.2.165-9). In seeming agreement with Paulina, Leontes explains that Hermione’s heart is overburdened and her body’s response to such emotional pain is to collapse. Despite his agreement with Paulina, Leontes still attempts to control the narrative of the spectacular event by saying Hermione’s heart is overtaxed but will recover. Therefore, what we have just witnessed is the spectacle of an overburdened individual responding to death, but not someone actually dying. Perhaps to reassure himself, or perhaps as a statement to Paulina and the audience, Leontes utters next, “She will recover” (3.2.166). This moment in the play is significant because Leontes begins to doubt his convictions, which, until now had remained unwavering even when in conflict with Apollo’s oracle.

Hermione is rushed out of the courtroom where she soon dies offstage, as is the case with most episodes of violence in The Winter’s Tale. When Paulina leaves the courtroom with Hermione, Leontes reneges every accusation he has made in the play. Only after witnessing the physical effects of his violent actions, indirect as they may be, does Leontes begin to perceive events as being more than spectacular in nature. In a scene eerily parallel to the announcement of the prince’s death, Paulina rushes in the courtroom and interrupts Leontes while he is attempting to mitigate his wrongdoings. Displaying a slight flare for the theatrics, Paulina declaims, “Woe the While! / O, cut my lace, lest my heart, cracking it, / Break too!” (3.2.190-2). After cataloging the multitudinous and misguided offenses Leontes has enacted against Hermione, Paulina delivers news of the Queen’s death and, again,
draws attention to the viscerally recognizable elements that accompany death: “I say she’s
dead. I’ll swear ’t. If word nor oath / Prevail not, go and see. If you can bring / Tincture or
luster in her lip, her eye, / Heat outwardly or breath within, I’ll serve you / As I would do
the gods” (3.2.224-7). In a fittingly paradoxical moment, Leontes renounces all the truths
informed by eyesight just as Paulina invokes the sense of vision as a reinforcement of truth.
After hearing Paulina’s sad news, if there is anyone present who doubts the Queen’s death,
Paulina instructs them to measure death with their eyes, by attempting to bring “tincture of
luster in [Hermione's] lip, her eye,” (3.2.226) and to touch her body to feel whether it is
warm or if she is breathing. This recalls the end of King Lear when Lear, not wanting to
accept Cordelia’s death, requests a glass with which to measure and observe her breathing.
Paulina relies on similar devices as affirmations of Hermione’s death, but it is significant
that Hermione’s death can be traced in a series of psychological responses to violence.

Paulina blames Leontes for Hermione’s death and while this is likely true, it is
important to note that several steps of the process of death are made visible to the
audience. Internal suffering is not usually something one would be able to observe, yet it is
still a form of violence extremely familiar to an early modern audience. Hermione, for
instance, is not physically harmed, but in order for her pain to be conveyed effectively, it
must culminate in an image that is universally recognizable as a response to pain, violence,
death, etc. The accusations made against her and the personal loses she endures prove too
much for her heart to bear. To illustrate the effects of this loss on Hermione’s psyche, her
physical body slowly becomes unable to endure further hardships. The culmination of this
suffering is the image of a collapsing body—indeed a familiar sight, even for contemporary
audiences—but what should make this moment particularly harrowing is Paulina
informing Leontes—and us—that a dying body looks like this. Indeed, the recognition that Hermione was in the process of dying when she was ushered out of the courtroom is harrowing to Leontes, as the trial ends with Leontes telling Paulina:

Thou didst speak but well
When most the truth, which I receive much better
Than to be pitied of thee. Prithee, bring me
To the dead bodies of my queen and son
...Upon them shall
The causes of their death appear, unto
Our shame perpetual. Once a day I'll visit
The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there
Shall be my recreation. So long as nature
Will bear up with this exercise, so long
I daily vow to use it. Come, and lead me
To these sorrows. (3.2.258-269)

As mentioned above, Shakespeare relies on familiar images of physical violence that exist in the shared imaginary of an early modern audience to express the mental anguish of the characters in his Jacobean dramas. Even once they are dead, Leontes needs an image of Hermione and his son to instill some sort of emotion in him. While she was alive, Hermione was the icon of chastity and honesty, and then quickly became representative of adultery, betrayal, and the king’s loss of control. Now, the sight of Hermione’s tomb paradoxically represents the need for Leontes to see beyond superficial spectacles, while itself existing as a superficial spectacle.
Immediately after a Shepherd finds the abandoned infant Perdita, the Shepherd’s son arrives on scene. Still pondering the circumstances of Perdita’s conception and abandonment, the Shepherd invites his son to witness what he believes to be a spectacle the two will remember even after their deaths, but quickly realizes something is amiss with his son: “If thou’lt see a thing to / talk on when thou art dead and rotten, come hither. / What ail’st thou, man?” (3.3.85-87). Although this is a minor detail, and by all means a seemingly ordinary question for one of Shakespeare’s characters to ask, the context in which it appears warrants further discussion. The Shepherd’s son enters the scene only moments after beholding two simultaneous tragedies: Antigonus’ mauling by a bear and the destruction of a ship and certain death of all aboard. At his precise moment of entrance, the Shepherd’s son is the only person with any knowledge of the events, as they happen offstage and no stage directions exist to indicate to actors, readers, or audience members any account of the events.

Although this initial exchange between the Shepherd and his son is brief, the events relayed by the Shepherd’s son are crucial to the plot of the play, and are, interestingly, rife with an incredible amount of violence enacted off-stage. Even before he begins conveying the fates of Antigonus and the mariners, something about the manner in which the Shepherd’s son enters the scene serves to instill a sense of uneasiness in the Shepherd. This prompts the Shepherd to shift his focus from Perdita to ask his son: “What ail’st thou, man?” (3.3.87). It is worth emphasizing that the Shepherd does not explicitly describe the physical appearance of his son, but immediately knows something is amiss, which would suggest the effects of witnessing violence are psychologically disturbing and thus manifest on the spectator corporeally. Throughout many of Shakespeare’s plays, variations of the
words and phrase “wan” and “tremble and look pale” appear repeatedly to describe characters’ physical transformations after recent exposure to events including, but not limited to, extreme violence, bloody spectacles, mass murders, suicides, or supernatural occurrences. Yet, when the Shepherd’s son enters the scene, not one word is directed to his physical appearance. This scene is an example of the nuanced violence of Shakespeare’s later plays. This is what distinguishes the violence in Elizabethan drama from Jacobean drama.

The Shepherd’s concise, yet loaded, question of, “What ail’st thou, man?” (3.3.87) suggests his son’s appearance is altered due to something psychological—whether it is something he is merely thinking, or something he has witnessed remains unknown to the Shepherd for the time being. The exclusion of words such as “wan,” “pale,” or “trembling” shift the effects of witnessing violence from physical to mental. Rather than witnessing a violent act and physically going pale, or shaking in terror or shock, the response to violence in The Winter’s Tale represents a nuanced exploration that occurs in King Lear and The Winter’s Tale. There is a clear difference between corporeal violence and psychological violence. This marks a departure from the way spectators to violence are characterized in Shakespeare’s Elizabethan plays.

It would be helpful here to include the description and response of the Shepherd’s son’s experience. He tells his father: “I have seen two such sights, by sea / and by land—but I am not to say it is a sea, for it is / now the sky; betwixt the firmament and it, you / cannot

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8 The words and phrase “wan” and “tremble and look pale” appear in such contexts in: Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Richard II, Richard III, Romeo and Juliet, Titus Andronicus, and Othello.
9 In many of these plays, such as, Similar words and phrases are recycled throughout many of Shakespeare’s plays, notably his tragedies, for a character to “tremble and look pale” in such situations as those involving extreme violence, supernatural occurrences, and bloody spectacles.
thrust a bodkin’s point” (3.3.3.88-91). The opening words for The Shepherd’s Son are in the present perfect tense; “I have seen” (3.3.88) implies an unspecified time has elapsed since the actual event was witnessed. This is significant because the remainder of the Son’s speech appears in present tense: “but I am not to say it is a sea, for it is / now the sky; betwixt the firmament and it, you / cannot thrust a bodkin’s point” (3.3.3.88-91, italics mine). The immediacy of his speaking can imply a sense of urgency in the telling of these events. The Son continues: “I would you did but see how it chafes, / how it rages. How it takes up the shore/.../ O, the most piteous cry of the poor/ souls! Sometimes to see ‘em, and not to see ‘em” (3.3.93-97). The sea is described as something hungry and monstrous, deaf to the cries of the mariners’ pleas for their help. It is both the sights and sounds of violent death in action that ail the Shepherd’s Son.

After describing the deaths of the mariners, the Shepherd’s son relays to the audience and his father the fate of Antigonus: “To see how the bear tore out his shoulder- / bone, how he cried to me for help, and said his / name was Antigonus, a nobleman” (3.3.100-02). The Shepherd’s son was, presumably, close enough to the bear attack that Antigonus was able to cry out to him for help. Again, the sights and sounds of violence mar the Son as he graphically describes the brutal death of a nobleman. The son continues:

But to make an

End of the ship: to see how the sea flap-dragoned it.

But, first, how the poor souls roared and the sea

Mocked them, and how the poor gentleman roared

And the bear mocked him, both roaring loud then

The sea or weather. (3.3.101-07)
The sea, as the son tells us, “flap-dragon[s]” the ship; that is, the sea treats the lives of the mariners as though they are but players in a popular parlor game. The roaring of the men, together with what he has witnessed, has instilled sympathy and seemingly abject horror in the Shepherd’s son. The Shepherd asks his son when these events occurred, the son responds: “Now, now. I have not winked since I / saw these sights. The men are not yet cold under / water, nor the bear half dined on the gentleman. / He’s at it now” (109-12).

Standing as a wide-eyed witness of violence, the Shepherd’s son effectively communicates the suddenness of death, the immediacy of violence, and the impact spectators of these events experience.

The Shepherd alerts readers that his son appears troubled, not by explicitly describing his physical appearance, but by rather abstractly asking, “What ail’st thou, man?” (3.3.87). Shakespeare’s vocabulary here is curious; for instance, how would an actor perform this moment? Why does Shakespeare choose to describe the effects of witnessing violence, pain and, suffering as an “ailment”? Returning again to the significance of this question, the word “ail’st” is, by all accounts, a vague word choice. However, when used in this context, I would argue that it pathologizes the effects of witnessing extreme violence. In early modern England, “ail” or “ailment” carried much the same meaning it does today: distress, trouble, a misfortune, affliction, illness, or disease (OEDOnline.com). Indeed, this word choice seems innocuous enough, but when used to describe the Shepherd’s altered appearance after seeing a human dismembered and eaten alive by a bear while an entire crew of men and their ship are swallowed by a storm in the sea, the implications of the Shepherd’s question are much more complex and consequential than they initially seem.
Conclusion

When involved in a violent event, Lear and Gloucester, the two oldest characters in the play, communicate their experiences as though they are bears in a bear pit. These scenes are violent by suggestion since the violence is not on stage: Lear and Gloucester rather reference bear baiting to describe psychological anguish. By relying on violent events that exist in the public imaginary, like bear baiting, Lear and Gloucester forge a connection with audiences as they share the same comprehension of violence and violence by suggestion. The references to bear baiting, again, are familiar to The effect of this violence by suggestion—and incorporation of bear baiting—is that audiences must invoke mental images of these scenes and then apply them to the play. Much like Leontes begins to see Hermione differently after he thinks she commits adultery, the audiences’ realities are beginning to be shaped by the psychological violence they experience. The blurring of bearbaiting with physical and psychological violence, there exists an inescapable self-awareness for audience members concerning the prevalence of violence in Renaissance life.

I have examined four instances of psychological violence from King Lear and The Winter’s Tale. As a method of illustrating the transformative effects of psychological violence, I argue that fixtures of early modern life are incorporated into the plays during particularly harsh moments; the result of this is an uncanny experience for audience members as they are reminded of the violence in their daily lives while they watch the play(s). Beyond being reminded of such violence, the impacts of this violence are show as the plays progress and other characters physically transform or grow sympathetic after seeing the spectacle of violence. Thus, the effects of such violence, I suggest, are corporeal
vulnerability, suffering, and uneasiness demonstrated by characters’ hearts literally breaking as their bodies become unable to endure life any longer.
Works Cited


Curriculum Vita

Evan Stapleton received her Bachelor's Degree in English and American Literature from The University of Texas at El Paso in May 2013, and her Master of the Art’s Degree in Literature in May 2016. She has taught English and Rhetoric and Writing Studies at UTEP since 2014 and co-founded the Graduate Student English Association. She has served as a Teaching Assistant, Graduate Assistant, and Research Assistant; she has also worked at the University Writing Center, and taught classes in English and American Literature. She will be pursuing a Ph.D. in Literature beginning in August 2017.

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